The characteristics and career pathways of third space research professionals: Reflections from practice

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About the authors

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Acknowledgements

Executive Summary

This report examines the role of 'third space research professionals' in universities, and particularly the career pathways open to such individuals. The term 'third space professional' was originally coined by Dr Celia Whitchurch in 2008 and is used to describe a group of university staff who can neither be described as academic nor non-academic professional staff. In the context of research, several roles fit into this definition including: technology transfer staff; scientific staff overseeing specific labs or equipment; staff that help develop citizen networks to maximise the impact of research; and staff serving external clients who are commissioning research from a university.

Drawing on recent work undertaken in various research contexts in the UK and overseas, this report explores how the previously invisible third space is beginning to be seen and the consequences of the realisation that a new approach is needed to support these staff. In so doing, we examine broader trends in employment practices and begin to develop a policy agenda that will meet the needs of this critical cohort of people supporting university research endeavours.

We conclude with two critical insights.

i.   Universities need to do more to support transitions of third space research professionals, especially those coming into higher education from other sectors.

ii. Universities need to acknowledge and develop alternative career paths that are not constrained by the current academic versus professional staff dualism.

Given the changing nature of work and the evolving social purpose of universities, we suggest that, without these changes in the near future, further strain will be put on the institution of the university but more importantly on individuals working in the third space.

Introduction

The way that research and innovation is organised, administered and delivered has been changing over the past 20 years. There has been a shift to more collaborative, multidisciplinary and open types of research, referred by some as Science 2.0, subsquently Science 3.0 and more recently Science 4.0 in the light of the emerging impact of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and other new technologies.[1] This movement combines both a shift in approaches to research – new scientific methods, research approaches and skill requirements – and how research engages with broader society through open innovation, access and data sharing, citizen science and crowdsourcing and a focus on research impact. To a degree these trends capture the ideas of 'new power', where there is a shift to 'open, participatory and peer driven' ways of working as exemplified by Airbnb, Uber and, in the context of research, InnoCentive.[2]

Concurrent, and in part because of these trends, is the professionalisation of research administration and the rise in the so called 'third space professionals' in research activity.[3] The term 'third space professional' was originally coined by Dr Celia Whitchurch in 2008 and is used to describe a group of university staff who can neither be described as academic nor non-academic professional staff, such as human resources or finance staff.[4] Here we use the definition of Stefan de Jong: 'degree holding university employees who are primarily responsible for developing, maintaining and changing the social, digital and physical infrastructures that enable education, research and knowledge exchange' – but focusing on research.[5]

In the context of research and research careers, several roles fit neatly into this definition, including: – by example – technology transfer staff; scientific staff overseeing specific labs or equipment; staff that help develop citizen networks to maximise the impact of research; and staff serving external clients who are commissioning research from a university. The core issue with this important and increasingly common group of staff is that they are often invisible to the organisational structures typically found in a university. In practice, their employment contracts are often identical to professional staff although they are likely to be operating in part in an academic space by publishing papers, engaging in thought leadership and at times raising

(research) funding. Similarly, career frameworks, performance and appraisal systems and salary structures are often inappropriately embedded in either side of the dualism of academic / professional staff and as a result do not reflect the unique roles of these third space professionals.

We further refine our scope by looking at career transitions of these third space research professionals.[6] That is, we are interested in how these people 'enter' and 'exit' the third space, and once in it how their careers progress. The characteristics and career pathways of third space professionals was explored in a recent collection of essays edited by Emily McIntosh and Diane Nutt.[7] In this excellent collection, it was notable that the vast majority of the 22 essays were focused on the education mission of the university. It is that gap in the literature – at the nexus of third space professionals, research missions and career transitions – that we hope to help fill through this practitioner inspired paper.

To inform our analysis, we draw from four case studies that cover: biomedical and health research (the Institute of Cancer Research); physical and engineering sciences (King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST) in Saudi Arabia); social sciences (the Policy Institute at King's College London); and arts and humanities (the Social Purpose Group at the University of Arts London). The cases are not selected to be representative but are a convenient sample, as we have either worked with, for or in three of the four entities.[8] (The fourth we approached for this paper resulting in a series of key informant interviews and desk research.) From this experience, we generate a conceptual model that captures the transitions and careers of third space research professionals and use this to explore some of the emerging issues and ideas.

In undertaking such an approach, it is important to be aware of broader trends in employment beyond higher education. This matters, as will be evident from the case studies, as a number of third space research professionals are recruited from outside the 'sector'. Clearly, there is a large literature on the future of work, but two areas worth highlighting are: debates about the concept of the career; and future demand for skills.

Typically, the concept of a career is often viewed through lenses such as 'having a clear career direction', 'building a career', 'being on a career track',

'moving up in a career' as well as 'moving on and changing careers', among other associations. However, Michael B Arthur suggests that a career is 'the evolving sequence of your work experiences over time'.[9] Prior to the global COVID pandemic, many commentators were already challenging the need to scrap the notion of a linear study-work-retire approach to a career and a 'working life' leading to the idea of *The Squiggly Career*.[10]

This suggests an environment where personal agency and choice have increased albeit at times by necessity rather than by design, an observation made by Celia Whitchurch when describing third space professions:

> *The narratives [in interviewing people] also revealed ambivalence about the concept of being a professional in the traditional sense of belonging to an exclusive group, defined by the possession of core skills, knowledges and attitudes. Key characteristics, rather, included being able to handle shifting bundles of activity, working to both long and short deadlines, with multiple partners and collaborators, in a mutable environment. Those working in Third Space were able to cope with ambiguity and to accommodate, and even use productively, the tensions that they encountered.*[11]

A separate theme in the literature, promoted in part by the pandemic, is the 'Future of Work'. Before you can imagine any notion of a career, it makes sense to understand what and where the world of work is going in the future. One of the most comprehensive reports on this theme is the work by the World Economic Forum through their *The Future of Jobs* report published in October 2020 (Table 1). In addition to identifying trends in the job roles and new clusters which are arising, the report suggested which skills were likely to increase in importance over the following five years. The links between these and the world of research are very clear, with many of those skills listed already central to the work of third space research professionals.

It is this combination of non-linear careers and an emerging set of skills that is likely to define the future work for third space research professionals. Admittedly, this is not a new debate – commentators have predicted the end of work since paid employment began – but it would be complacent to

assume that such trends are not about to manifest themselves, both across the workforce but also in academia.

Table 1 Top 15 Skills for 2025 according to the World Economic Forum[12]

1	Analytical thinking and innovation
2	Active learning and learning strategies
3	Complex problem-solving
4	Critical thinking and analysis
5	Creativity, originality and initiative
6	Leadership and social influence
7	Technology use, monitoring and control
8	Technology design and programming
9	Resilience, stress tolerance and flexibility
10	Reasoning, problem-solving and ideation
11	Emotional intelligence
12	Troubleshooting and user experience
13	Service orientation
14	Systems analysis and evaluation
15	Persuasion and negotiation

The next section provides short summaries of the four case studies. This provides the basis for the core analysis that includes a conceptual framework and a number of insights and recommendations for improving the support for third space research professionals. The conclusion reflects how the issues described in the paper are not going to go away and thus reflect the need for innovative reform in the future.

Four case studies

i. The Institute of Cancer Research (ICR)

Our first case study is the ICR, regularly identified in the top five global research centres in its field. Based in London, they undertake basic research, clinical and translational studies into different aspects of cancer in collaboration with its key partner The Royal Marsden NHS Foundation Trust. It is also a constituent college of the University of London and offers postgraduate research degrees as well as a modular postgraduate taught degree in oncology.

The 'third space' insights emerged from some initial work we undertook within the Institute to design and deliver a tailored leadership development framework for research and professional service leaders. A significant aspect of the rationale for the programme was to enhance leadership capacity building as well as contributing to succession for the future.

Rather than merely delivering a standard set of modules we engaged with senior research, clinical and professional service leaders to identify the key transition points that arise and, from this, the key capabilities which were required at these critical points of leadership transition. In Table 2, we outline those in the research leadership career pathway. A further framework was developed for those in professional service roles.

More recently, the ICR has embarked on a major initiative to extend this work, following a successful £1 million funding bid to the Wellcome Trust to strengthen career pathways for technicians. The leadership role of senior technicians is recognised through collaborative programmes with leading UK research institutes, the Royal Society of Chemistry and the Institute of Technical Skills and Strategy.

This provides development for technicians in collaborating institutes, developing their ability to lead 'team science', run core research facilities and train and mentor apprentices – and so help secure the future technician talent pipeline.

Table 2 Core Capabilities at Critical Research Leadership Transitions

Research Leadership Roles and Transitions	Personal	Team	Institute
Leading as a Research Scientist or Clinician-Researcher	Building your research credibility Developing your grant writing and profile	Being an effective team member	Being aware of the research centre and divisional projects and priorities
Leading 'Your Grant and Your Research Team'	Growing recognition as a research leader Delegating and motivating others; clarifying priorities Recruiting new researchers	Moving from having a 'research group' to developing a 'research team'	Becoming an active member of a Centre, Clinical and / or Research Team
Leading a 'Centre or Research Area'	Dealing informally, and more formally, with performance issues Understanding Institute / NHS policies	Developing a financially sustainable research plan Navigating through matrix structures involving funders and partners	Contributing to the shaping of the Divisional strategy and where relevant hospital / NHS strategy
Leading a 'Research Division'	Engaging with and supporting your team leaders Appointing new research leaders	Building a Divisional leadership team Leading and influencing work with research partners	Representing the Division and leading strategically internally and with partners
Leading Key Partnerships and Collaborations	Mentoring others to extend their external networks with industry, funders and the NHS	Building team based collaborations across and beyond the Institute	Contributing to understanding key partnerships / stakeholders
Leading the Institute as a Member of the Senior Leadership Team	Balancing your strategic: operational and internal: external contributions and leading change	Developing your pipeline of future leaders Shaping the organisational culture	Leading cross-Institute projects Role modelling values Working with Trustees
Leading Beyond the Institute	Developing your strategic networking and influencing skills	Shaping the national agenda through learned societies and bodies.	Shaping and developing new strategic partnerships

ii. King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST)

Our second case study is based on a joint project we undertook with senior leaders at KAUST, Saudi Arabia. The University was founded in 2009 following an extensive period gaining insights into what characterised a world-leading graduate level science and technology university. Over the past 14 years, a unique university has been created for conducting leading research and doctoral and post-doctoral training with staff of over 100 different nationalities. Central to the success has been the work of the Core Labs ecosystem of 12 multidisciplinary interconnected laboratories, equipped with state-of-the-art technologies led by over 200 highly qualified science, engineering and technology professionals.

Attracting, developing and retaining staff has proved to be central to building the University's reputation and success. Partly influenced by the impact of the COVID pandemic, the University – even with its substantial financial resources and in common with many other institutions – was facing challenges on all three of the issues identified above. Based on a range of sources, the issue of career pathways was identified as a matter of significant importance.

Table 3 Characteristics of 'I' versus 'T' shaped profiles for third space research professionals

'I' Shaped SRT Professionals Career Development	'T' Shaped SRT Professionals Career Development
Highly focused technical role working in a well-defined SRT field	More broad-based role with depth across a broader range of SRT disciplines
Considered as a leading expert in one field – and likely to be well networked with other experts globally	Retains in-depth technical expertise in several SRT areas and transitions into leading teams of experts across several disciplines, some multidisciplinary
CPD largely highly technically focused	CPD increasingly focused on leadership and management development
At highest levels likely to be a joint Principal Investigator (PI) and co-author with research leaders	At highest levels a global leader in innovative service delivery

Over a 12-month period we worked (remotely) with the project team to strengthen KAUST's ability to attract, retain, motivate and support the growth and career development of what became recognised as 'Third Space' Science, Research and Technology Professionals (SRT). Building on the concept of an 'I' shaped approach to career development and a more 'T' shaped development route, we characterised these options as shown in Table 3.[13]

Building on this we developed a typology of alternative SRT development routes – Figure 1 includes one example of the balance for one of the types we identified. This also provided a framework to capture the different ways in which SRT professionals careers evolved over time.

Figure 1 Directions for SRT growth and development
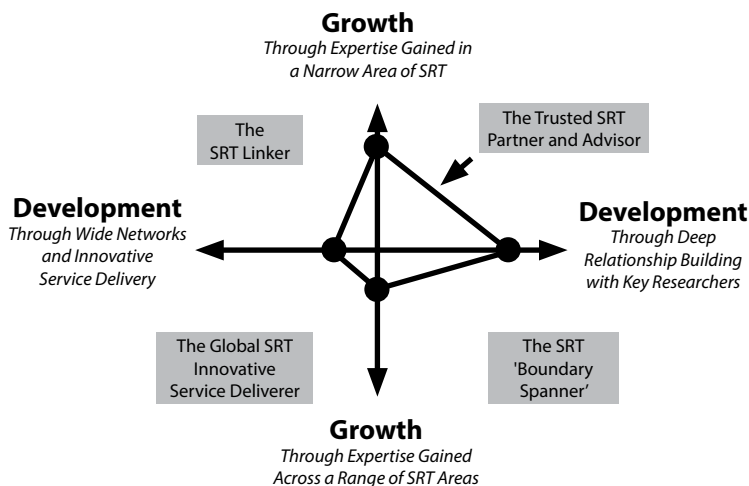
In addition with the SRT professionals we co-created a suite of new policies to recognise and value better this important community of third space leaders, based on five principles: transparency; career identity, support and guidance; responsibility; flexibility; and mobility. A small sample of the range of policy ideas which emerged and are being developed are summarised.

While our case is specific to one research-intensive university that is considerably well resourced, the concepts and approach may well be transferable to other contexts. One final outcome of the work was a desire

to develop a global community of those seeking to address the challenges of recognising this growing third space community.

Table 4 Policy suggestions for third space research professionals

Transparency

- Publicly promote a clear commitment to support employee growth and development as a key value for research, science and technology staff within the university including full acknowledgement of scientific and technology professional staff contribution and the importance of team science.
- Ensure all opportunities for career development are widely known and understood across the wider SRT community.
- Establish a Scientific and Technology Professionals Forum / Network Body.

Career identity, support and guidance

- Creating a clearer shared identity for staff developing a career in the evolving field which combines a focus on research, science and technology.
- Provide more (independent) support to staff on their career development within and external to the university.
- To build on the work to develop a typology and adapted terminology which captures the diversity of roles and career pathways and transitions between various roles.
- Develop a career planning framework for Core Labs and other university research scientists and engineers and within this emphasise the idea of 'T' vs 'I' roles and pluralistic career trajectories.

Responsibility

- Place increased emphasis on individuals taking ownership of their own career development, while also emphasising the university is responsible for providing opportunities for growth and development.

Flexibility

- To loosen existing structures, to allow more bespoke and personal approaches to career development across academic and research professional career pathways.
- Reduce (perceived) siloes between different labs through increased collaboration (both formal and informal), mobility (discussed below) and sharing of practice to blur boundaries as much as possible through promoting a 'One Lab' approach.[14]

Mobility

- Increase opportunities for SRT professionals to broaden their experiences through short-term secondments, sabbaticals and visiting roles at other institutions.
- Create a new career role for a cadre of world leading external experts who become formally connected to the university and act as career role models (as well as contributing to research activities).

iii. The Policy Institute at King's College London

The Policy Institute at King's College London aims to 'combine the rigour of academia with the agility of a consultancy and the connectedness of a think tank'. Its mission is to 'solve society's challenges with evidence and expertise'.[15] One of us (Jonathan Grant) was its Director between 2014 and 2017, which can be characterised as its 'start-up' phase, with the other (Tom Kennie) supporting its team and leadership development at that time.

Although the Institute was founded before 2014, its vision, approach and work practices changed significantly through a strategic refresh providing a 'blank sheet of paper' moment. The intellectual rationale for the Policy Institute was the well-rehearsed observation that translating thoughtful research into actionable policy is a 'wicked problem'.[16] Different agendas, timeframes and communication styles create obstacles.

Yet the economic and social benefits of innovative and evidence-based policymaking are potentially immense, as widely shown not least through impact cases studies submitted for the Research Excellence Framework.[17] Given these benefits, and the emergence of the 'impact agenda' in the UK and elsewhere, King's saw this as a worthwhile strategic investment at the time.[18]

However, it was clear during the start-up phase that there were a number of well-entrenched challenges to the successful implementation of such an entity within a research-intensive university. Some of these are outside the scope of this current paper but include pressure to produce 'REF-able' outputs (that is, peer-reviewed academic papers) despite a focus on policymakers who neither have the time to digest, nor access to, such publications.[19]

However, the single biggest challenge was around recruitment, advancement and retention of staff. The people working in the Policy Institute could largely be described as third space professionals. They neither fitted a classic academic profile nor a professional services one. They had a mix of skills that would be commonly seen in consultancy companies and think tanks – problem framing, evidence synthesis, business development and communications. They came with a set of values that

were often shared between consultancy companies and academia. For example, working at pace on short timelines (from consultancy) but with a passionate commitment to social good (academia). One difference (to some think tanks) was that they were largely impartial in their political views, at least when working on projects.

The combination of this specific third space professional profile, along with the rigid HR practices of universities, generated specific challenges. For example, in recruitment it was often necessary to offer salaries beyond existing pay grades (even though it made economic sense in terms of the revenues generated). Sometimes, there were concerns that researchers did not have PhDs, despite having a track record of delivering impactful policy analysis.

This meant that some new staff would be placed on academic contracts, and others on professional services contracts, despite them effectively doing the same roles. These issues would then impact on advancement and retention. Challenges here included inappropriate promotion criteria for those on academic contracts, and unclear career pathways for those on professional services routes. It was also hard (if not impossible) to make the case for salary increases or bonuses (a common practice in consultancy) to retain people.

Despite these challenges, it is worth noting that the Policy Institute has a unique set of convening powers that are characterised by the neutral perception of universities, especially when contrasted with consultancies and think tanks. This makes it a very attractive place to work for those individuals who are interested in evidence-based policymaking, as evidenced by the impact the Policy Institute has had since its foundation.

It should be stressed that these issues are not unique to King's, with anecdotal evidence and experiences being recounted to us from other 'brokering institutes'.[20] The key point being that the current dualism of university HR systems is not fit for purpose for the third space professionals who work in these types of institutes. The consequences over time is that such institutes are likely to work suboptimally, undermining the ability of universities to translate academic research into social benefit.

iv. UAL Social Purpose Group

University of the Arts London (UAL) has committed to becoming what it describes as a 'social purpose university', building on its belief that 'the world needs creativity'. One of the three guiding policies in its 2022 to 2032 *Strategy* is 'to change the world through creative endeavour'.[21] To facilitate the delivery of this policy, UAL established a new executive level role of Chief Social Purpose Officer and a Social Purpose Group. In a blog in 2023, Chief Social Purpose Officer, Polly Mackenzie, set out what a social purpose university could be:

> *From one point of view, universities are already social purpose organisations. They exist to educate and enrich students. They produce and share knowledge that might help society address problems, and which allows learners to participate more fully in the economy and in their communities. But we believe that the old model is not enough.*
>
> *By becoming a social purpose university, UAL is acknowledging that the context for universities has changed. Environmentally, socially and economically, we're facing an emergency. And as socially purposed organisations, universities need to step up in a leadership role.*
>
> *A social purpose university is one that harnesses a broader vision of the value of higher education in society. A social purpose university views teaching, research and operations as opportunities to push the boundaries of what a university can be, and have a positive impact on the long-term wellbeing of both people and the planet.*[22]

To focus these aspirations, UAL managed an internal listening exercise with staff and students from which social purpose was defined as having four goals:

i.   bring joy, meaning and purpose to our lives;

ii. celebrate differences of all kinds;

iii. regenerate our environment; and

iv. build more equitable prosperity.[23]

The Social Purpose Group is currently made of four units: Communications and Brand; Development; the Social Purpose Lab; and the AKO Storytelling Institute. The latter two are the focus of this case study.

The Lab has an internal transformation function that works with teams to build the four social purpose goals into their plans and strategies and an externally facing policy and advocacy function that aims to influence government and the creative industries for a positive social impact.

The AKO Storytelling Institute works at the 'intersection of storytelling and social change'. It aims to enable storytellers to have a greater positive impact through experimentation and collaboration.

The Social Purpose Group was only established following the appointment of the Chief Social Purpose Officer in July 2022. As a result, it has been in a 'start-up' phase, recruiting staff from within UAL, the higher education sector and beyond.

From interviewing staff, it was clear that the concept of the third space was recognised and valued, that transitions into an academic environment were challenging and that there was concern about future career tracks. It was also interesting to observe the 'squiggly careers' that a number of interviewees had followed – that is, working in a range of sectors before coming to their roles in the higher education sector.

In terms of functions, it was noted that there is no settled business model for third space activities, which are often funded through the margins of grant-based research activities or regeneration projects, fee-based curriculum activities, public programming budgets, Higher Education Innovation Funding (HEIF) or philanthropy, none of which provide long-term security. There was a clear recognition that activities such as knowledge exchange, policy influencing and place-making are likely to increase in higher education, all requiring unique skills than that are often not found or valued in the sector.

Insights from cases on the future of third space research professionals

Based on our experiences of working with the four-case studies and other institutions, there are two key insights or challenges facing third space research professionals. The first is that there are a number of different types (or routes) of transition to and from the third space, and individuals navigating these routes need active support.

The second is that career progression, once in the third space, is often uncharted. At the core of both of these observations is an increased need for 'wayfinding'; that is helping research (and other) third space professionals find and fulfil a productive, recognised and valued career.

In Figure 2 we have tried to conceptualise these two issues. While the focus of this paper is on the research third space – and as a result is likely to be more relevant to research-intensive universities than others – we suggest this model may be applicable to other third spaces too. For that reason, we have put the three generic missions of a university – education, research and social responsibility – in the centre of the figure. Different universities will emphasise different elements of these three missions, but for the purpose of the current analysis, this (over)simplification provides a way to understand third space career transitions and progression.

Helping to deliver the university missions are a number of third space roles (the outer circles in the figure) – clearly there are more than we have listed but the point is that often these roles align to different missions in the university (although it should be stressed that this is not exclusively so).

Individuals who move into these third spaces either come from academia, professional staff within higher education or from outside the sector. These routes 'in' are captured in the lower part of the figure while, at the top, is the 'exit' from higher education to other sectors.

In the next section we unpack the issues of transitions and progression in more depth, drawing out a number of policy suggestions for universities to help third space professionals in wayfinding. While we focus on research third space professionals, we also conclude that these issues are likely to be common to education and social responsibility.

Figure 2 Transitions into and out of third space research professionals in higher education
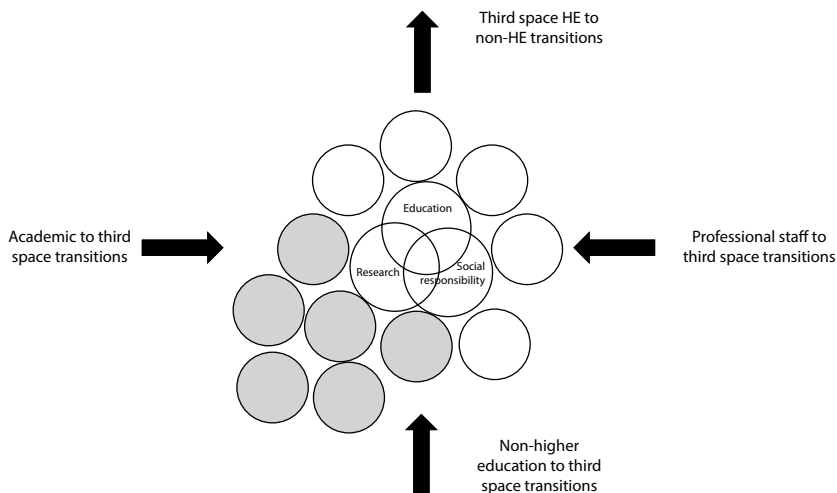
Non-exhaustive examples of 3rd space roles, by mission

Education:
- Service learning
- Access/widening participation

Social responsibility:
- Civic engagement
- Sustainability

Research:
- Citizen science
- Statistical support & advice
- Social enterprises
- Laboratory technician
- Industry liaison
- Curations of museums and other cultural spaces

Third space research transitions

Transitions, by definition, have beginnings and endings and involve multiple changes in work and life.[24] Transitions are both situational – such as a change in role, organisation or office – but are also psychological, requiring institutional empathy, understanding and support as well as individual courage, resilience and reflection. The combination of the situational and physiological may determine the success of a transition.

For example, it is often the case that technical research third space staff are highly qualified (for example have a PhD) with deep expertise in their

specialism but, for whatever reason, have not followed an academic route. In this case, there is often an issue of identity with highly qualified research technicians feeling 'othered' by academic staff. This perception arises from the dualism of 'academic apartheid' that intentionally excludes people from the 'academy'.[25] The fact they sometimes feel 'second class citizens' or 'failed academics' gets to a broader issue of research culture, academic research incentives and hyper competitivity in research.[26]

This sentiment of feeling like an outsider is also evident for people entering from outside higher education. However, the issues are somewhat different. There is often a lack of understanding – and indeed at time incredulity – about how universities function. Part of this is culture but also involves structure and processes. The apparent lack of pace, limited or non-existent support (often expressed as 'sink or swim') and ambiguous personal goals and objectives all contribute to a sense of confusion potentially undermining self-confidence and self-esteem.

There is an increasing group of 'third spacers' who are well versed with academic structures, processes and cultures and these are professors of practice coming from former government agencies often with a remit for universities and university funding. While we did not come across any of these individuals in our case studies, it is worth noting their unique pathway into universities.

Another group that seem to fare relatively well in these transitions are those who come from a traditional professional services background within higher education moving into a third space. It is perhaps because this group understands the workings and cultures of universities and are aware of the dualistic career structures. In our case studies, this group were often very evidence-based in their practice, being interested in what works and engaging in the latest academic evidence.

A good example of this is the Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education (TASO) which was originally conceived and founded by such practitioners along with King's College London and Nottingham Trent University. Nevertheless, as discussed below, they face similar challenges when it comes to career progression.[27]

The final transition is exiting the third space. This typically has two routes; one is within the higher education sector, principally moving to a similar (or different) role at another university, and the other is leaving higher education altogether. Some third space professionals have highly transferable skills, be that in industry, consultancy, policy or elsewhere, while others may get stuck because of their unique and often deep technical specialism.

Irrespective of the routes in and out of these third spaces, based on our experience we would argue that universities are pretty poor at supporting individuals as they make these transitions. We suggest universities place increased emphasis on recognising the many transition challenges that exist and find approaches to accelerate entry and reduce risks of demotivation, derailment at an early stage or even a decision to exit. For example, explicit onboarding policies and programmes for third space research staff who come from outside the sector could include an exploration of the history of universities, their unique governance structures, the consequential cultures and current trends in the policy environment for higher education. Similarly, supporting individuals who are transitioning into third spaces from within the sector are likely to pay dividends in ensuring these individuals maximise the potential of their chosen path.

The challenge of creating more flexible career routes and role models is not confined solely to the third space research career roles we have been exploring. As recently as 2018, Julie Hulme and Deborah Lock Hulme raised the flag for 'Professors in Preparation: Supporting 21st century professorial leaders', creating a network for those seeking guidance on how to progress through to a senior academic role as an education focused professor.[28] The weblink in the blog seems to be discontinued albeit the case continues, with a more recent contribution from a team at the University of Bristol, 'The "third way" academic: becoming an education-focused professor'.[29] While the flag has been raised and the way forward is recognised, the need for a range of career routes beyond the more conventional ones remains a challenge. Surely it is time for a more strategic policy agenda for change to be promoted by sector leaders?

The characteristics and career pathways of third space research professionals

Third space career progression

As described in the Introduction, the concept of a 'career' is changing and this change has likely been accelerated by the pandemic, with more people taking on portfolio roles, working part-time and choosing to retire early.[30] However, to date, these societal trends have not had a major impact on universities. While most will offer some form of flexible working, it is still the case that contracts are largely standard agreements for either academics or professional staff, that promotion criteria are (for academics) still narrowly focused on a small number of performance criteria and that career pathways are linear.

The rise of the third space research professional theoretically challenges these traditional structures and processes but largely, to date, in practice the university system has worked round them. For example, in recruiting third space professionals from outside the sector there is often a discussion about what contract to put them on – usually an academic contract or a professional staff contract. It is challenging for academic staff to take time out to work in different sectors – such as industry or policy – as they are likely to see a consequential impact on their publication records and such like. This is particularly the case for early career researchers.

It is therefore important that universities think beyond the current career pathways and consider new alternatives which provide opportunities for the many areas of work within and across the university that do not fall into neat linear career notions. To do this, they could be more outward as well as inward looking when considering 'career tracks', including with other organisations and also shared university / partner career routes. In short, universities might wish to think beyond linear career progression to more comprehensive multiple career pathways. In doing so, it is important to acknowledge that not all staff are motivated by progressing along career pathways, and those that are content, and indeed wish, to stay in a role should also be supported through training and development.

This will require increased opportunities for processes to encourage and enable more flexibility and movement across traditional career pathways, more formal employer development programmes and employer and informal-employee development experiences through short shadowing,

secondment and shared roles. The need to extend from mid-career development to senior-level professional development and beyond. An example of interesting practice in the sciences is the *Technician Commitment* and the Institute for Technical Skills and Strategy in the UK, with a focus on visibility, recognition and career development.[31] As the role of the third space research professional develops, it may be the time is right for a similar sector-wide initiative akin to the *Technician Commitment* that has a wider remit, but with a similar focus on visibility, recognition and career development. Clearly, such a national policy will need to be crafted in a way that respects the diversity of third space research roles.

Finally, it will also be important to anticipate and conduct more collective horizon-scanning thinking about the workforce of tomorrow. We are in the very early stages of understanding how Artificial Intelligence (AI) is going to influence the skills and capabilities required across the university of, say, 2035. Should we not be doing more collective thinking to shape the university workforce of the future?

Closing reflections

In selecting our case studies, we chose examples of groups seeking to find ways to think differently about the development and career options for a range of different third space research professionals. We could have supplemented these with other places which have also been grappling with this agenda over many years since their inception: for example, the Warwick Manufacturing Group (WMG), a large and highly autonomous department of over 800 staff within Warwick University founded over 40 years ago, or the Advanced Manufacturing Research Centre, which is part of the University of Sheffield and was formed over 20 years ago, among others.

The cases we have documented, and others, reflect ways in which the focus and to some extent missions of many universities are and will continue to evolve while the internal structures remain largely unchanged and reflect, as highlighted in our introduction, a much more traditional view of what an academic or professional service career involves. Tensions are growing for many joining higher education. Some make the transition successfully while others see limited opportunities for advancement. Others find they are part of spaces that do not reflect the roles a growing number of staff in higher education are playing. Third and other spaces are seen as 'non-traditional'; indeed, the concept of third space has an implied sense of hierarchy associated with it.

Is it timely for a broad-ranging exploration of what the higher education workforce of 2035 might look like, what roles and routes across the landscape might evolve and what might characterise the new developmental pathways that will be required. We would suggest such an exercise is overdue. It is also critical to involve and engage key external stakeholder groups in the process. In time, perhaps the non-traditional sobriquet will become a term from another era?

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The third space describes a group of university staff who can neither be described as academic nor non-academic professional staff, such as technology transfer staff, those overseeing specific labs or equipment and people serving external clients who are commissioning research from a university.

This report draws on recent work undertaken in various research contexts in the UK and overseas and explores how the invisible third space is beginning to be seen. It finds universities could do more to support transitions of third-space professionals, especially those coming into higher education from other sectors. Furthermore, it recommends universities should acknowledge and develop alternative career pathways that are unconstrained by the current academic versus professional staff dualism.

Without such changes, further strain will be put on the institution of the university but more importantly on individuals working in the third space.

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