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Shifting Identities and Blurring Boundaries: The Emergence of *Third Space* Professionals in UK Higher Education

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Abstract

This paper adds to earlier reviews by the author of the changing roles and identities of contemporary professional staff in UK higher education (Whitchurch, 2004; 2006a; 2006b), and builds on a categorisation of professional staff identities as having *bounded*, *cross-boundary*, and *unbounded* characteristics (Whitchurch, 2008, forthcoming). Drawing on a study of fifty-four professional managers in the United Kingdom, Australia and the United States, it describes a further category of *blended professionals*, who have mixed backgrounds and portfolios, comprising elements of both professional and academic activity. The paper goes on to introduce the concept of *third space* as an emergent territory between academic and professional domains, which is colonised primarily by less bounded forms of professional. The implications of these developments for institutions and for individuals are considered, and some international comparisons drawn. Finally, it is suggested that *third space* working may be indicative of future trends in professional identities, which may increasingly coalesce with those of academic colleagues who undertake project- and management-oriented roles, so that new forms of *third space* professional are likely to continue to emerge.

Introduction

As higher education institutions have expanded and diversified to meet the demands of contemporary environments, so too have their workforces, and in particular their professional staff (Gordon and Whitchurch, 2007). Traditionally, activity in higher education institutions has been viewed in binary terms: of an academic domain, and an administrative or management domain that supports this. In the pre-1992 sector, management roles have been undertaken by academic staff on a rotational and part-time basis, in positions such as head of department, dean or pro-vice-chancellor. While some academic staff retain a balanced teaching and research portfolio, others focus on one or the other, and the emergence of the full-time manager academic has also been noted, with consequences for academic careers (Deem and Johnson, 2000). The 'support' side has consisted traditionally of full-time professional staff in both specialist and generalist roles, the specialists in functions such as finance, human resources and estates, and the generalists primarily in student services and secretariat roles. However, this division, reflected in language such as 'academic' and 'non-academic' staff, and 'us' and 'them' attitudes (Dobson, 2000; Prichard, 2000; Szekeres, 2004; McInnis, 1998), is no longer clear-cut. Although there has begun to be recognition in the literature of movements within and across academic and management domains (Rhoades, 1996; 1998; 2005; Rhoades and Sporn; 2002; Gornitzka and Larsen, 2004; Stensaker, Kyvik and Gornitzka, 2005; Whitchurch 2006b), there has, hitherto, been little empirical work on crossovers that are occurring, the coalescence of activity that is taking place, or new forms of institutional space that are being created.

The blurring of boundaries between, for instance, functional areas, professional and academic activity, and internal and external constituencies has been fostered by the emergence of broadly based, extended projects such as student transitions, community partnership, and professional practice (Whitchurch, 2006a). These have contributed to the creation of a *third space* between professional and academic domains, requiring contributions from a range of staff. In this space, the concept of administrative service has become re-oriented towards one of partnership with academic colleagues and the multiple constituencies with whom institutions interact. However, while considerable attention has been paid to the implications of a changing environment for academic identities (Henkel, 2000; 2007; Becher and Trowler, 2001; Barnett, 2005; Barnett and di Napoli, 2008; Kogan and Teichler, 2008), there has been less recognition of the impact on professional staff, or of the emergence of increasingly mixed identities. The aim of the study described in this paper, therefore, was to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of these identities, and of the topology of the newly emerging landscape of activity.

As noted in Whitchurch (2006b), the terms ‘administration’ and ‘management’ not only lack precision as descriptors of the activities of professional staff, but have been contested in an academic environment, administration for its association with unwanted bureaucracy, and management for its association with what is perceived as an erosion of academic autonomy as institutions respond to competitive markets and government accountability requirements (Halsey, 1992; Parker and Jary, 1995; Deem, 1998; Trowler, 2002; Peters, 2004). Moreover, as the capacity of staff expands and diversifies to cope with the ongoing demands on institutions, professional roles and identities are subject to continual revision. The situation is, therefore, more dynamic and complex than organisation charts and job descriptions might suggest.

This lack of understanding about the roles and identities of professional staff has been fostered by the absence of a precise vocabulary to describe staff who increasingly, for instance:

- have academic credentials such as master’s and doctoral level qualifications, or a teaching or research background in the college sector;
- work in teams dealing with institutional initiatives that require a range of specialist, academic, and policy contributions, from bids for one-off infrastructure funding to the establishment of longer-term regional partnerships;
- undertake quasi-academic functions such as conducting study-skill sessions for access students, speaking at outreach events, or conducting overseas recruitment visits;
- have the possibility of moving into an academic management role, for instance, a pro-vice-chancellor post with a portfolio such as quality, staffing, or institutional development (Whitchurch, 2006b).

To address this shortfall in understanding, the study used the concept of identity to theorise empirical work in the United Kingdom (UK), Australia and the United States (US), and to explore the increasingly diverse forms of professional that are emerging in higher education. It builds on contemporary ideas about the fluidity of identity

(Delanty, 2007; Taylor, 2007) to describe ways in which individuals are not only interpreting their given roles more actively (Whitchurch, 2004) but are also moving laterally across functional and organisational boundaries to create new professional spaces, knowledges and relationships (Whitchurch, 2008, forthcoming).

Definitions and methodology

For the purposes of the project, ‘professional staff’ were defined as individuals having management roles but not an academic contract, and included, for instance: general managers in faculties, schools and departments, and functional areas such as student services; specialist professionals with accredited qualifications such as those in finance and human resources offices; ‘niche’ specialists who have developed functions such as research management and quality audit specifically in a higher education context.

Because no dedicated study existed of these groups of staff, and in order to give the project a clear focus, it was restricted to the professionals described above and did not, therefore, include academic managers such as deans and pro-vice-chancellors (the subject of other Leadership Foundation projects described in this issue of *Higher Education Quarterly*), staff in academic practice or professional development roles (on which see Land, 2004; 2008), or staff in library and information management roles (Corrall and Lester, 1996).

The study was conducted in two stages. First, interviews were conducted with twenty-four respondents in three different types of UK university: a multi-faculty, research-intensive Russell Group institution; a green field, campus university; and a post-1992, inner city institution serving a mass higher education market. In Table 1 these are represented as ‘Multi-faculty’, ‘Green-field’ and ‘Post-1992’. The institutions were selected on the basis that they occupied different positions in the higher education system in relation to their missions, size, history, and teaching and research orientation. These interviews involved senior and middle managers on grades 3 to 6 of the former academic-related staff pay scale in the pre-1992 sector, and on management or senior management grades in the post-1992 sector. They worked in a range of functional areas including finance, human resources, student support, external relations, planning and enterprise.

During the first set of interviews it emerged that not only were individuals interpreting their roles more actively, but also that institutions were recruiting individuals who could perform, on a dedicated basis, roles that crossed between professional and academic domains. A second set of interviews, therefore, was conducted in the UK with professional managers who were undertaking *blended*, or quasi-academic roles, such as managing student transitions or research partnerships. Interviews were also conducted overseas: in Australia with ten respondents from a research-intensive, sandstone institution (‘Sandstone’ in Table 1), and a teaching-oriented, post-merger institution, the latter created from a number of colleges of technical and further education (TAFE), (‘Post-merger’ in Table 1); and in the United States with fifteen respondents from two public, state universities. One of the latter

two institutions was a state university with a balanced teaching and research profile ('Public 1' in Table 1), and the other a world-class, research-intensive institution ('Public 2' in Table 1). In the overseas institutions, an attempt was made, via the 'gatekeepers' in each institution, to target individuals with mixed backgrounds and roles that crossed academic and professional boundaries, to see whether there were any lessons to be learned for the UK about possible future trends in professional identities.

A qualitative approach was adopted, using semi-structured questions, to explore ways in which staff constructed their identities, and to understand the professional spaces that they occupied, the types of knowledges and relationships that they built, and the sources of their authority. Although consideration was given to whether the relationships between, for instance, academic managers (such as pro-vice-chancellors and deans) and professional staff could be explored more fully through additional interviews with academic managers, it was decided that, since this was the first study of its type, and there was no earlier empirical work on which to build, its scope would be restricted to the understandings that professional staff had of their own identities. The study was, therefore, based on a total of fifty-four interviews (Table 1).

Table 1: Summary of interviews of professional staff undertaken for the project

Type of inst'n Country	Multi-faculty	Green-field	Post-1992	Sandstone	Post-merger	Public (1)	Public (2)	Totals
UK	8	11	10					29
Australia				5	5			10
US						7	8	15
Totals	8	11	10	5	5	7	8	54

Re-defining professional identities

From the first set of interviews it became apparent that respondents could be distinguished by their approach to the structures and boundaries that they encountered. They were categorised into three broad groupings:

- Individuals who located themselves within the boundaries of a function or organisational location that they had either constructed for themselves, or which had been imposed upon them. These people were characterised by their concern for continuity and the maintenance of processes and standards, and by the performance of roles that were relatively prescribed. They were categorised as *bounded professionals*.
- Individuals who recognised, and actively used boundaries to build strategic advantage and institutional capacity, capitalising on their knowledge of territories on either side of the boundaries that they encountered. They were

likely to display negotiating and political skills, and also to interact with the external environment. These were categorised as *cross-boundary professionals* and, as in the case of *bounded professionals*, boundaries were a defining mechanism for them.

- Individuals who displayed a disregard for boundaries, focusing on broadly-based projects across the university such as widening participation and student transitions, and on the development of their institutions for the future. These people undertook work that might be described as institutional research and development, drawing on external experience and contacts, and were as likely to see their futures outside higher education as within the sector. They were categorised as *unbounded professionals*.

Of the twenty-four individuals, twelve (50%) were categorised as *bounded*, eight (33%) as *cross-boundary*, and four (17%) as *unbounded*. (Whitchurch, 2008 (forthcoming) gives a more detailed account of the first part of the study, and of the characteristics of the *bounded*, *cross-boundary* and *unbounded* categories of professionals).

Bounded professionals might be said to be “social subjects of particular discourses” (Hall, 1996: 6), with identities that comprise essential elements “‘taken on’ through shared practices” (Taylor, 2008, p. 29), while the other two categories demonstrate, as Delanty (2008) suggests, that identity construction may also be contingent upon the position that an individual adopts in relation to variables such as organisational structures and work teams. In the latter situation, individuals are not simply enacting roles, for instance vis-à-vis institutional processes and policies, but become active agents so that, in Archer’s terms, they “personify” as well as “animate” their roles (Archer, 2000, p. 288). For them, therefore, identity is a “project”, with both temporal and spatial dimensions, as opposed to an “essence” (Henkel, 2000, pp. 13–14). While *bounded professionals* might be said to represent Friedson’s “standard” group of professionals (Friedson, 2001, p. 212), undertaking tasks that, although requiring specialised expertise, are geared to “standardised production” that is pre-determined, the other categories represent different forms of “elite” professional, who apply their expertise to more complex, individuated tasks (Friedson, 2001, p. 111).

While *cross-boundary* and *unbounded professionals* were active in extending their roles beyond their given job descriptions, and were likely to operate on the borders of academic space, they nevertheless originated in mainstream professional roles, for instance in a student services or enterprise office. A fourth category, of *blended professionals*, who were being recruited to dedicated appointments that spanned both professional and academic domains, were explored in greater detail in the second set of interviews. They worked in areas such as regional partnership, learning support, outreach and offshore provision, and were likely to have mixed backgrounds and portfolios, as well as external experience in a contiguous environment such as regional development or the charitable sector. The four identity categories are summarised in Table 2, the last three reflecting the concept of “borderlessness” (Ohmae, 1990; Bjarnason et al, 2000).

Table 2: Categories of professional identity

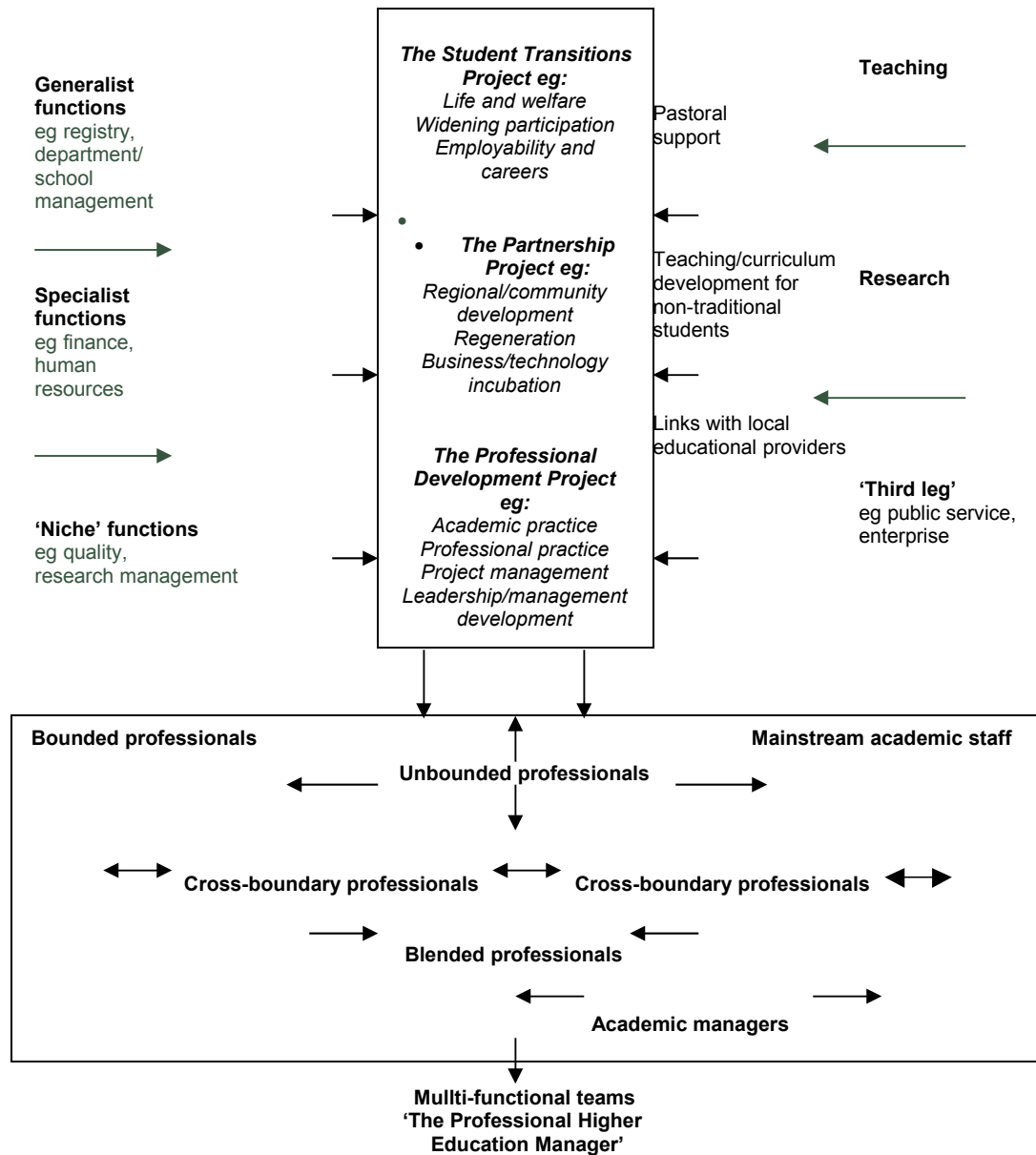
<i>Categories of identity</i>	<i>Characteristics</i>
<i>Bounded professionals</i>	Work within clear structural boundaries (e.g., function, job description)
<i>Cross-boundary professionals</i>	Actively use boundaries for strategic advantage and institutional capacity building
<i>Unbounded professionals</i>	Disregard boundaries to focus on broadly-based projects and institutional development
<i>Blended professionals</i>	Dedicated appointments spanning professional and academic domains

Characteristics of *third space*

As a result of blurring boundaries between activities, what might be described as *third space* has emerged between professional and academic domains (see Figure 1). On the left and right hand sides of the diagram respectively are professional and academic staff, performing their traditional roles, professional staff in generalist, specialist and ‘niche’ functions, and academic staff undertaking teaching, research and ‘third-leg’ activity. Alongside these roles, ‘perimeter’ roles have grown up around, for instance, in the case of professional staff, outreach and study skills, access and equity, community and regional partnership; and in the case of academic staff, pastoral support, curriculum development for non-traditional participants, and links with local educational providers. Over time, these ‘perimeter’ roles have increasingly converged in *third space* around broadly based projects such as student transitions, community partnership and professional development. *Bounded professionals*, voluntarily or involuntarily, tend to be clustered on the left hand side of the diagram, within a well-defined organisational or functional location. If they cross into *third space*, this is likely to be on the basis of clear temporal and spatial parameters. Likewise, mainstream academic staff, who are primarily concerned with teaching and research, would be located predominantly at the right hand side of the diagram. *Third space* between professional and academic domains, however, is colonised primarily by *unbounded* and *blended professionals*, as well as by academic staff undertaking project-oriented activities, and these groups actively expand and develop the space between the two. By contrast, *cross-boundary professionals* move in and out on an ongoing basis, actively using the boundaries between *third space* and professional and academic domains for superordinate purposes.

Figure 1: A Changing Higher Education Workforce Map: The Emergence of *Third Space* between Professional and Academic Domains





It should be noted that, as with the categorisation of the four forms of professional, this typology is offered as a heuristic device to illustrate a disposition towards one spatial location or another, and comes with the 'health warning' that individual positionings are not necessarily fixed or immutable, in that individuals may, for instance, occupy different forms of space at different stages of their career, or move between these according to circumstances.

Third space, therefore, is characterised by mixed teams of staff who work on short-term projects such as bids for external funding and quality initiatives, as well as the longer-term projects noted above. These teams are not necessarily co-located geographically, and may even be virtual. A number of respondents used organic imagery to describe this process of joint working, seeing the building of

communicative relationships and networks as more significant than the observance of organisational boundaries, so much so that *third space* work may occur in spite of, rather than because of, formal structures.

Respondents in the study also suggested that an entrée to, and understanding of, academic space was essential to ‘growing’ new forms of activity and integrating them within the institutional portfolio, for instance, collaborating with staff from further education providers, or incorporating foundation-degree students. A key element was developing an appropriate language, for instance about partnership activity, that ‘spoke to’ both academic and professional world-views. This required being able to use language that resonated with academic colleagues, appreciating the disinterested nature of academic debate, and being able to hold their own in such an arena. Individuals, therefore, worked backwards and forwards across internal and external boundaries, translating and interpreting between different constituencies, and creating new institutional spaces, knowledges and relationships. Where such joint working occurs, it becomes difficult to pinpoint, for instance in a discussion about an academic development and how it relates to institutional strategy, where ideas emerge from, or whether they are attributable to a manager from an academic or a professional background. The emergence of such activity in *third space* exemplifies Mode 2 forms of working (Gibbons et al, 1994), confirming the suggestion in Whitchurch (2006b) that these may be applicable to professional, as well as to academic staff, mirroring the process by which disciplinary boundaries have broken down in interdisciplinary forms of knowledge production.

The activities in *third space* also reflect Taylor’s suggestion that the development of a “creative commons”, involving “networking, laterality, hybridity, flexibility, multi-tasking and media capability” would assist universities to “identify continuities between the beliefs and allegiances of the ... ‘golden era’ and the current era of ‘super-complexity’” (Taylor, 2008, p. 38). The study also suggests that growing numbers of professional staff are well placed to contribute to a “re-interpretation of collegiality” (Taylor, 2008, p. 38), in a “community of professionals” (AUT, 2001), in which there is a “...reconsideration of the nature of the academic (and non-academic) professions” (Pratt, 1997, p. 320). *Third space* working may, therefore, be suggestive of future trends in professional identities, whereby they increasingly coalesce with those of academic colleagues who undertake project- and management-oriented roles to create a new, generic form of *third space* professional.

Implications for individuals

A sense of belonging to a particular project or team, as opposed to a specific organisational or professional location, has implications for the credibility of individuals in their current roles and for their future career paths. Thus, one individual commented that “There’s no kind of authority that you come with”, and another that her relationship with her academic colleagues was characterised by an unspoken contract that: “If you solve a problem for us, we’ll come back and work with you again”. At the same time as legitimacies associated with administration and management are contested in the literature, there is evidence that staff are

constructing new forms of authority via the institutional knowledges and relationships that they create on a personal, day-to-day basis.

Credibility within an institution, therefore, would appear to depend increasingly on building a profile in the local situation. In turn, this is likely to be facilitated by, for instance:

- gaining the support of a key individual such as a pro-vice-chancellor;
- obtaining academic credentials such as a master's or doctoral degree;
- finding 'safe space' in which to experiment with new forms of activity and relationships;
- being comfortable with organisational "messiness" (de Rond, 2003) and projects that may be unfinished and unfinishable;
- being able to use ambiguity to advantage; for instance, an individual might use the fact that they do not have a clear association with a specific organisational or professional location to build common ground with different constituencies.

It may be, therefore, that not only will *third space* experience be increasingly attractive to staff, but also that it may become a pre-requisite for career development. It may also be that the concept of the generalist professional manager is being superseded by the idea of the project manager, who carries generic experience from project to project. Individuals may increasingly see themselves as building such identities, rather than as being associated with a particular function or institution. Other respondents spoke of marketing themselves, for instance to headhunters, as a 'higher education manager', suggesting that the contemporary professional is less concerned with a fixed body of knowledge than on maintaining an up-to-the-minute portfolio of experience, reflecting Bauman's contention that "You are only as good as your last successful project" (Bauman, 2005, p. 44). Thus, one respondent saw moving laterally as being as important for career progression as moving up a hierarchical career ladder:

I've always tried to take the next step in another area, so that it moves you forward.

In this scenario, professional credibility is likely to depend increasingly, to quote another respondent, on "What you are and not what you represent".

A number of respondents, therefore, had a sense of constructing a unique professional profile at the same time as making an innovative contribution to the development of their institution. As one of them remarked: "I really get off on creativity". *Unbounded* and *blended professionals*, in particular, resemble the "creative professionals" described by Florida (2002), who wish to work in "stimulating, creative environments – [in] places that not only offer opportunities ... but openness to diversity, where they feel they can express themselves and validate their identities" (Florida, 2002, p. 11). Although Florida's study refers to geographical locations, the same is likely to be true of institutional settings.

Such developments also raise issues about the balance and type of experience that individuals might wish to obtain when planning their careers and career moves, and

how institutions might assist them to do this. For instance, despite the fact that individuals working in *third space* were characterised by strong lateral relationships and networks, they appeared to find hierarchical relationships, and line-management responsibility for their own staff, more challenging. While there was emphasis on enabling their staff to operate as autonomous professionals, there was less confidence about occasions when staff might need to be given a steer in a particular direction. This suggests that it may be appropriate for individuals who spend time on project-oriented activity to consider how they might also gain mainstream line-management experience, and also budgetary responsibility, especially if they wish to achieve a post at top management level. Thus, different approaches may be required at different stages of a career.

While management and/or higher-level qualifications were seen as an increasingly significant element in career development, bespoke opportunities that were timely and appropriate, such as secondments, mentoring and study leave, tended to be favoured over formal programmes that did not lead to a qualification. While the majority of respondents preferred programmes that also included academic colleagues, it appeared that this could lead to difficulties if there were too much variation in levels of seniority and experience between the individual members of a group, for instance between middle level professional managers and senior academic managers. Issues arise, therefore, about how such opportunities might be integrated with formal programmes, how professional staff development relates to the opportunities available for academic staff, and about ways in which the two might be integrated.

Implications for institutions

Although organisational restructuring is likely to remain a feature of institutional life, the study suggests that this might be usefully informed by consideration of the nature of boundaries, and the way that individuals operate around them, particularly when they are being reconfigured or functions relocated. While bounded approaches to institutional activity are likely to continue to be required to maintain processes and systems, to safeguard academic and regulatory standards, and to ensure organisational continuity, it may also be helpful for institutions to consider how these might be balanced with less bounded approaches. Senior institutional managers may wish, therefore, in reviewing recruitment policies and the construction of job descriptions, to consider the balance of professional staff that is appropriate for their particular mission and direction. Discussion about the shape of the professional workforce might include, for instance, whether more project-oriented individuals might assist in stimulating new thinking and ways of working, bearing in mind that too many such people could be a liability if, for instance, they did not attach sufficient priority to audit requirements or time deadlines. There are also issues about when and how *third space* activity might be mainstreamed, in order to make way for new projects that come along. It may be helpful, therefore, for senior managers to maintain an overview of:

- how those characterised as *bounded professionals* might obtain experience of less prescribed ways of working and also how other forms of professional might obtain mainstream experience;

- how the four categories of staff might, in their own ways, most effectively support institutional objectives;
- how the different categories of staff might interact with each other most productively.

Furthermore, some institutions are more boundary-driven than others. At one of the case institutions, where there was a clear demarcation between professional and academic domains, and between institutional management at the centre and local management in academic departments, all but one of the respondents were categorised as *bounded professionals*, and a number of them expressed frustration that they were unable to move beyond their functional or organisational ‘silos’. Moreover, the fact that, overall, the majority of respondents categorised as *bounded professionals* were in their fifties, suggests that there may also be a generational effect. Although more flexible working practices appear to be associated with younger staff, as might be expected, it may be that less bounded forms of professional become more bounded if they remain for a long period in the same field, in turn creating their own boundaries.

It may also be significant that at the institution with the most permeable boundaries, and the greatest movement of professional staff around them, senior managers were seeking to implement directional change in the form of local partnership and outreach activity. The fact that *bounded professionals* represented a small minority of the staff interviewed at this institution suggests that senior managers may have appointed, consciously or unconsciously, less bounded forms of professional, who were likely to facilitate new forms of activity. It also suggests that there was recognition that such professionals, having been recruited, would be likely to be frustrated if they were then overly restricted by boundary considerations.

Organisational positionings of staff may also be more complex than, for instance, Clark’s (1998) distinctions suggest, in that professional staff are not only operating at the “centre” (in the central “Administration”) and the “periphery” (for instance, in academic departments), but are also creating new locales in *third space*. As a result, Clark’s distinctions between the “strengthened steering core” and the “stimulated academic heartland” (Clark, 1998) may begin to be re-conceptualised. Furthermore, *third space* working may assist in overcoming the “systemic problem” (Clark, 1995) of reconciling professional and academic agendas. It might also offer some answers to questions about ways in which institutions can “sustain change” as they “lean towards the future” (Clark, 2004, pp. 92–93):

What critical features of university organisation compose these capacities [for adaptation]? How are these elements developed? How are they sustained and made into a platform for further change? (Clark, 2004, p. 115)

The study also demonstrated that movement by professional staff between institutions, and in and out of the sector, has been fostered by institutions seeking to recruit people with experience from other contiguous sectors, such as regional development or fundraising. To quote one respondent working in research partnership, who was “increasingly [recruiting] people with doctorates”:

... somebody who's got a PhD in a relevant academic subject like biotechnology, who may have sat on the board of a spin-out company at some point... they look sexy in that way, because they've got an academic background ... but they also have some experience of harsh and brutal business realities.

The appointment of such individuals is likely to swell the pool of *blended professionals*, and there are issues about how they might be incorporated into the institutional community. A number of respondents in this category expressed a sense of having outsider status with respect to both professional and academic domains, although they had been appointed to take forward a specific project area on the basis of their mixed backgrounds and portfolios.

Furthermore, greater mobility among professional staff can, on the one hand, generate a view of them as a:

national (and international) cadre of mobile and unattached senior managers without loyalty but with their own (not an institutional) portfolio—the new portfolio successional career managers... (Duke, 2002, p. 146)

On the other hand, the study suggests that it may be helpful for institutions to modify a belief that such mobility represents 'disloyalty', in that such individuals may make a more significant contribution to an institution in the period that they are there than longer-serving staff. There may need to be, therefore, a revision of the value accorded to professional staff who bring expertise from elsewhere, but also have the potential to move on when they have completed a specific project.

The introduction of a common National Framework Agreement for staff in UK higher education in 2006, permitting institutions to design and customise their employment structures around a single pay spine, could give greater latitude for rewarding individuals who extend their roles outwith the precise parameters of a job description (Strike, 2005). However, the emphasis of the Framework on a job evaluation process may, at the same time, restrict the ability of individuals to interpret and develop their roles. Institutions will be obliged to address such issues if they wish to encourage more extended ways of working.

An international dimension

In the interviews outside the UK, respondents were sought who had mixed backgrounds and roles that crossed professional and academic boundaries. They were, therefore, skewed towards the less bounded categories, although it was significant that of the fifteen respondents in the US, nine (60%) were categorised as *blended*, whereas only three of the ten respondents in Australia (30%) fell into this category. In both cases, and in contrast to the UK, these were clustered in research-intensive institutions that were high in the international rankings. It would appear, therefore, that institutions both the UK and Australia might wish to understand in more detail how *blended professionals* in the US contribute to the development of activity in *third space*.

It was also apparent that in Australia professional staff were more strongly positioned as ‘managers’, with a greater polarisation of ‘management’ and ‘academic’ identities, which could create ‘us’ and ‘them’ attitudes, affirming the views of Dobson (2000) and Dobson and Conway (2001). This was in contrast to the UK, where a significant proportion of respondents said that they used the term ‘administrator’ rather than ‘manager’ if this were more acceptable to academic colleagues. Furthermore, in Australia there was a greater sense of marginalisation among individuals with mixed backgrounds, although the fact that many professional staff in Australia were employed on fixed-term contracts, albeit renewable, may have contributed to this. Possibly as a result of these factors, there was less evidence of the development of *third space* in either of the institutions visited.

It was also striking that a high proportion of respondents in the US and Australia had higher degrees. In the US, where entrants to university administration would be expected to have completed a master’s programme in, for instance, student affairs, 93% of respondents had master’s degrees and 60% had doctorates. In Australia, where there was generous support for advanced study, and in-state students were able to gain exemption from tuition fees, 80% had master’s degrees and 60% had doctorates. The comparable percentages for the UK were 27% and 8%. In the US particularly, this picture reflects a well-established higher education knowledge base for professional staff, which might be seen as an academic, or at least a professional, discipline in its own right. Individuals were more likely than in the UK to be involved in contributing to professional networks, publications, journals and conferences. Furthermore, the concept of ‘academic administration’ had different connotations from the way it was understood in the UK, in that the most senior institutional managers, including presidents, were referred to as ‘academic administrators’.

Possibly for the reasons outlined above, a majority of respondents in the US referred to having the respect and trust of academic colleagues on the basis of their professional knowledge or of their institutional position. Thus, in the US, professional staff appeared to have a both a stronger profile and greater autonomy than in the UK or Australia. People involved in more project-oriented, developmental activity tended to be mainstreamed in, for instance, offices of institutional research or student life. It appeared, however, to be a more political environment, and professional staff were expected to be able to negotiate their position, and that of their function or project, within this.

Thus, while the results of the second part of the study are not directly comparable with the first, because the overseas interviews focused on less bounded forms of professional, they are of interest in providing possible indicators of future directions in the UK. A longitudinal study would be required to find out if less bounded forms are on the increase, at what rate this is occurring, and whether new boundaries may in turn be created, particularly by *blended professionals*, who are dedicated to embedding mixed forms of activity that will assist the university in linking with its multiple constituencies.

Conclusion

The study is suggestive of trends in UK professional staff identities, of which the implications have not been fully recognised. Not only are individuals interpreting their given roles more actively, but they are also moving laterally across boundaries and contributing to the development of a *third space* between professional and academic domains. Rather than drawing their authority solely from established roles and structures, they increasingly build their credibility on a personal basis, via lateral relationships with colleagues inside and outside the university. In particular, new forms of *blended professional* are emerging, with mixed backgrounds and portfolios, dedicated to progressing activity comprising elements of both professional and academic domains. However, although *third space* activity assists institutions both to build capacity and to develop for the future, it may reduce opportunities for professional staff to obtain mainstream ‘management’ experience.

As professional staff work across and beyond boundaries, they are re-defining the nature of their work. It may be that the most mature institutions will be those that are able to incorporate, and facilitate, a balance of professional staff that is appropriate for their shape and direction of travel, taking a view of where and how these might be clustered. It may also be that those institutions that are able to give recognition to more extended ways of working will be the most likely to maximise the contribution of their staff, and to achieve an effective accommodation with their current and future environments. It is suggested, therefore, that new forms of *third space* professional will continue to emerge.

Notes:

1. This paper is a fuller version of a conference paper delivered at the Society for Research into Higher Education Conference at Brighton on 11–13 December 2007 (www.srhe.ac.uk). An earlier version also appears at www.cshe.berkeley.edu/publications/publications.php?s=1.
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