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Making it work in practice: how heads of quality negotiate the third space

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Abstract

Recent decades have seen increasingly complex external regulation applied to higher education providers. This has accentuated the role of heads of quality, who require considerable specialist knowledge and insight to ensure that organisational practices align with regulatory expectations. However, while the existing literature recognises that heads of quality do not perform a uniform role, it does not typically discuss the key organisational features which explain the differences in the role or necessarily position of heads of quality as third space professionals. Drawing on a comparative case study of three universities, the article extends our understanding by confirming that heads of quality can legitimately be termed third space professionals and by showing that heads of quality must navigate their environment in different ways according to the degree of access to the third space offered by their organisation. A more structurally situated explanation of third space activity is thus required. The article also reflects on the tendency to discuss a particular group of third space professionals and to characterise

their experience as though it were broadly common. It argues for a more nuanced explanation, taking account of organisational structure as a further variable which may help to explain the experience of the third space professional.

Keywords head of quality; third space; higher education; hierarchy; centralised; devolved; autonomy; organisational structure

Introduction

Since the late 1990s, the higher education sector has become a more complex and demanding space, which has resulted in the appointment of an increasing body of staff with hybrid functions (Baltaru, 2019). Whitchurch (2008) coined the term 'third space professionals' for these roles, borrowing terminology used in cultural studies to describe an environment where apparently distinct functions merge, moving beyond historic binaries and strict categories to create a hybrid 'other' (Soja, 2003).

The regulatory framework for higher education in England, introduced through the 2017 Higher Education and Research Act (legislation.gov.uk, 2017) and implemented through the establishment of the Office for Students (OfS), is an example of the requirement for higher education institutions (HEIs) to respond more directly to priorities determined by national governments (Bleiklie et al., 2017). Such systems of 'regulatory autonomy' (Enders et al., 2013: 6), using policy levers to steer action from a distance, have led to greater executive management as HEIs determine how best to respond (Ferlie et al., 2008; Marginson, 2008). It is this shift which has led to the introduction of hybrid or third space roles: staff who are employed by, and working ostensibly for, the central administrative units of universities, but in close conjunction with academic colleagues to provide greater internal coordination of management processes (Middlehurst, 2013).

The codification of national expectations in relation to quality management is one example of the changes which have required such internal coordination. Quality assurance, in the form of activities designed to assure the academic standards of awards, has been part of the UK higher education system for almost 200 years (Bloxham and Price, 2015). A focus on academic peer review was the norm across all UK universities until the 1990s, but more recently, quality assurance requirements have been codified in response to government priorities. Watson (2006) suggests that higher education reacted too slowly to increased political interest in higher education, and thereby lost the opportunity to continue with effective self-regulation, resulting in the establishment of a new national body, the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), which would oversee a single national process for quality assurance. One of the QAA's first acts was to codify the modern infrastructure and language of quality management, setting out a range of expectations for HEIs. This brought increased importance for heads of quality, as they oversaw the internal processes in response to this new regulatory framework. Since that time, national arrangements for quality assurance have changed again on several occasions, with a gradual move away from a codified framework with regular peer reviews at discipline level, through more risk-based approaches (HEFCE, 2016), to the conditions of registration set by the OfS (2018), which are designed to encourage greater competition among HEIs. The OfS (2022) issued a revised Condition B: Quality and Standards in 2022, known as the 'Quality condition', which post-dates the research undertaken for this article. The condition sets high-level expectations about course design, support for students and the maintenance of academic standards, but most attention is focused on the monitoring of performance through the review of a range of lag indicators on student performance and graduate outcomes, with the explicit intention of creating an environment in which competition flourishes. As external requirements have changed, HEIs have modified their internal academic quality assurance mechanisms to align with the developing national expectations. In England one result is that every HEI has an individual who holds operational responsibility for quality management, which includes arranging course design and approval, monitoring the achievement of academic standards and a high-quality learning experience, including student satisfaction, and ensuring that the requirements of the external regulator and any external professional accreditation bodies are met. This head of quality (HoQ) requires considerable specialist knowledge and insight to ensure that internal processes align with regulatory expectations. The increasing focus on metrics, as a proxy for measures of academic quality, represents an additional

challenge for HoQs in identifying how student outcomes might be improved through adjustments to the complex, interlocking internal quality assurance mechanisms in place.

The existing literature on HoQs recognises that they perform a variety of roles depending on HEI structure and mission (Seyfried and Pohlenz, 2018). However, it does not necessarily position them as third space professionals or typically discuss the key organisational features which explain the different approaches needed to be effective in the role. This article examines the roles of HoQs in HEIs in England, considering whether they fit the definition of third space professional (Whitchurch, 2008) and how different organisational environments affect the ways in which they operate to fulfil external quality assurance requirements.

The roles of HoQ in HEIs in England

Head of quality is a role which is often contested. Its status is not always accepted by academic staff, who may question the legitimacy of decisions which were once the sole preserve of academics now being taken by staff who are not employed on an academic contract (Shattock, 2017). For example, decisions concerning course design, assessment strategies, learning and teaching, or course performance indicators may now be taken by the HoQ, possibly in more or less formal consultation with academics. HoQs decide whether internal practices meet the demands of external regulation, and whether they will enable regulatory conditions to be met. This can only be achieved successfully by understanding these external demands, and translating them into policy and practice within each HEI. Despite this contestation and complexity, there has been very limited research into the role played by HoQs, who are increasingly charged with leading responses to regulatory requirements.

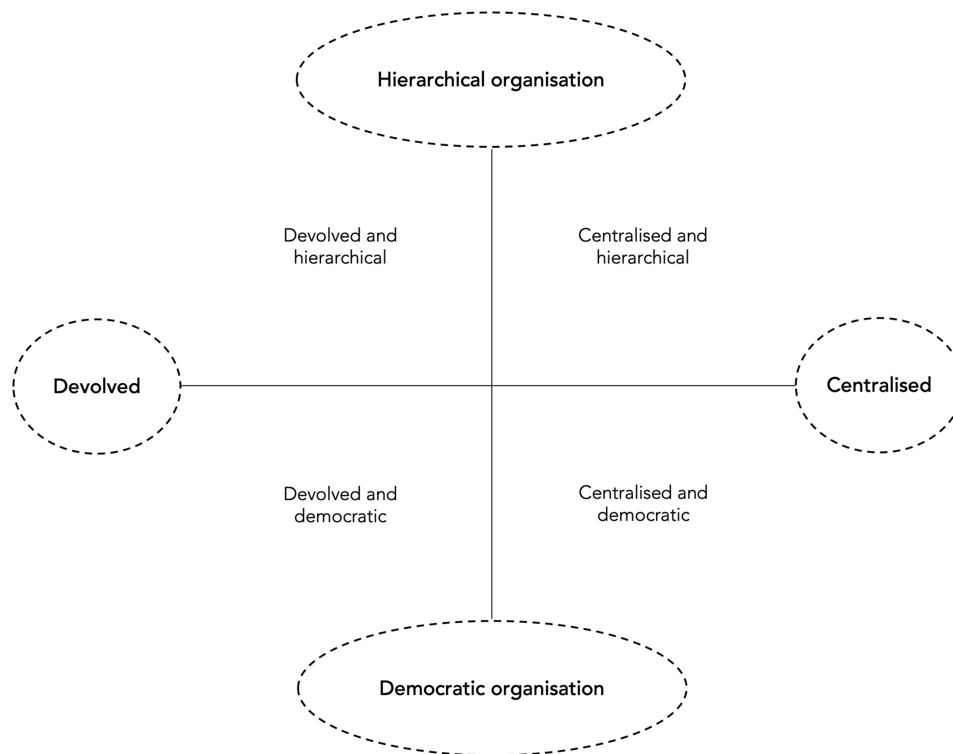
HoQs typically need to act through others to effect change. This is an exercise of social power – the ability of an actor to change another actor's incentive structures to bring about preferred outcomes (Dowding, 2006; Raven, 2008). Social power is ultimately based on relationships between people (Foss Hansen et al., 2019; Gibbs, 2019; Janss et al., 2012). Raven (2008) identifies six primary bases (or sources) of social power, while recognising that, in most cases, more than one base of power will be involved. The most relevant bases for HoQs are legitimate position power (deriving from their senior position within an organisation), expert power (acceptance of their 'superior' knowledge or insight about a specific topic) and referent power (based on their personal ability to inspire and influence colleagues). There may also be the occasional use of reward power, although for HoQs this is likely to be limited, since they are not usually in a position to offer promotion or privileges. Rank within an organisation may be one determinant of the level of social power available to an individual (Berg et al., 2010; Cilliers and Greyvenstein, 2012), but the use of expert or referent power may also provide a degree of influence which is unrelated to formal position.

In addition to social power, there is considerable evidence in the literature that organisational structure may affect the ways in which managers operate (Maus, 2018). All organisational actors are subject to internal rationality and rules which reduce the level of flexibility actually in play (March, 1991). Michel (2011: 355) argues, 'Unobtrusive controls regulate behaviour.' As an organisation, the HEI is not completely unique, but it is also not completely the same as anything else (Ruben and Gigliotti, 2017). Organisational form is dependent on a wide range of factors, including history, strategic priorities and the need to engage with external regulation (Cooper et al., 1996). While some HEIs might be described as loosely coupled (Bleiklie et al., 2015; Gore, 2018) – whereby individual academic faculties have a level of autonomy in their activities within broad parameters or against performance targets set and monitored by the centre – others demonstrate much greater coordination (Clark, 2001; Maassen and Stensaker, 2019; Shields and Watermeyer, 2020). Thus, to understand the role played by HoQs, it is important to consider the ways in which organisational structure and control affect the ways in which actors operate.

A typology of organisational structure for HEIs in England

There are several ways of categorising English HEIs into types (for example, Drori et al., 2016; Paradeise and Thoenig, 2013), but these typologies typically focus on differences in mission, strategy and its implications, rather than on organisational structure. For the purposes of analysing the roles of HoQs, the most useful typology is that developed by Barbato et al. (2019), which is based on the twin axes of centralisation of operations, and hierarchy in decision-making, creating four broad quadrants (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Organisational typology of HEIs (Source: derived from Barbato et al., 2019)



According to Maus (2018), the locus of authority, and the scope of individual actors to act autonomously, will be strongly influenced by organisational type as categorised above: whether the HEI centralises authority and/or operates hierarchical decision-making. This typology was used in this study as the basis for selecting cases of HEIs with different organisational structures and exploring the role of the HoQ in each case, their sources of social power and whether they could be considered to act as third space professionals. The research questions were:

- How does organisational structure affect the roles played by HoQs and the bases of social power they deploy:
    - in relation to the strength of hierarchical control?
    - in relation to centralisation or devolution of organisational structure?
- Can HoQs be categorised as third space professionals in terms of the roles they perform?

Methodology

My research adopted a comparative multiple case study design (Hunziker and Blankenagel, 2021) which considered the role of the HoQ in three of the putative 'types' represented by the quadrants in Figure 1. A mixed methods approach was adopted, whereby initial quantitative survey data analysis was used to select HEI cases for qualitative interviews (Eisenhardt, 2021; Silverman, 2005). This use of explanatory sequential design (Ivankova and Creswell, 2009), with the two methods integrated through connecting (Fetters et al., 2013), enabled the collection of rich data, with the qualitative element elaborating on the results from the quantitative (Migiro and Magangi, 2011; Seaman, 2012). HoQs from English HEIs were invited to identify the levels of centralisation and hierarchical control within their organisation and to position the HEI according to Laloux's (2014) organisational typology to verify this identification. The initial survey generated a range of possible cases. The primary criterion for selection was to identify an HEI in each quadrant where the survey responses matched the identification; where necessary, secondary criteria were used, including the exclusion of smaller providers (Barbato et al., 2019), and

the selection of HEIs which were primarily campus-based. No suitable HEI candidate was identified from the bottom-right quadrant (centralised and democratic), so cases were selected only from the other three quadrants. Semi-structured interviews (Alsaawi, 2014) were conducted with each case HoQ, but also with their line manager, a direct report, and one other senior academic. The interview questions were designed to focus on perceptions, opinions, beliefs and attitudes concerning the role and modes of operation of the HoQ (Puchta and Potter, 2004).

Cross-case applied thematic analysis was used to code and analyse the data (Braun and Clarke, 2014; Guest et al., 2014; Kiger and Varpio, 2020). While the coding was informed by the research questions, there were no predetermined categories (Pillow, 2003; Reichertz, 2010). This was not insider research (Greene, 2014), and the researcher's home HEI was consciously not selected. However, an element of pre-understanding informed the analysis through a close familiarity with the broad operational context (Alvesson and Sandberg, 2022).

Findings

The research interviews were conducted at three case study HEIs, the key characteristics of which are set out in Table 1. The colours for the pseudonyms are drawn from the 'levels of consciousness' described by Laloux (2014).

Table 1. Key characteristics of case study HEIs

	Amberville University	Orangetown University	Tealborough University
Organisational quadrant (Figure 1)	Top-right	Top-left	Bottom-left
Description of quadrant	High degree of centralisation and hierarchy	Low degree of centralisation, but high degree of hierarchy	Low degree of centralisation and hierarchy; more democratic
Total student population	13,500	17,500	25,000
Overseas students	18%	20%	38%
Proportion of PG (PGR)	40% (3%)	23% (4%)	34% (6%)
Typical UCAS offer	120 points	120 points	150 points
Subject coverage	Comprehensive	Comprehensive	Comprehensive
Location	Urban (several sites)	Largely campus-based	Largely campus-based

Table 1 may give the impression that organisational type is simply a function of the size of HEI by student population; however, the results of the scoping survey showed that this is not the case, with larger providers identified in all three quadrants under discussion. It was proposed to interview four members of staff at each HEI, but the position of line manager was vacant at Amberville at the time of the interviews. The final list of interviewees was therefore as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Summary of interviewees and code used when cited

HEIs	Interviewees	Codes used
Amberville	HoQ Academic working regularly with HoQ Direct report	HQ/A AC/A DR/A
Orangetown	HoQ Academic working regularly with HoQ Line manager Direct report	HQ/O AC/O LM/O DR/O
Tealborough	HoQ Academic working regularly with HoQ Line manager Direct report	HQ/T AC/T LM/T DR/T

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Case Study 1: Amberville University

From analysis of the survey data, Amberville University was classified as a centralised, hierarchical organisation (top-right quadrant in Figure 1). There is a large central quality unit which undertakes all quality management work; faculties do not have dedicated quality teams. Similarly, the academic framework does not permit much flexibility. Exceptions or variations can be approved by the HoQ, but there is no freedom for local variation in implementation without this approval. While the faculties are represented within the deliberative committee structure, there is little expectation that members will dissent: 'That's … kind of the culture of the institution, I think … I mean, policy decisions are made at the top and filter down' (HQ/A). Committee members generally make limited contributions because 'something is just going to be imposed anyway, so what's the point in … you know, inputting into it?' (HQ/A). In a formal sense, policy is agreed by a committee with cross-university representation, but there is little expectation that central proposals for changes to the quality management framework will be significantly altered by this body.

Similarly, while proposals relating to quality assurance or enhancement might in principle originate from any part of Amberville University, in practice they are most likely to be developed by the central quality team, especially if they are in response to external requirements. Proposals from faculties are in a minority: 'I'm not sure I can think of something that I would say directly arose from a suggestion from academic staff' (DR/A). Similarly, all interviewees agreed that, when proposals are circulated for consultation, it is unusual for substantive changes to be suggested. This makes certain aspects of the HoQ's role more straightforward, as there is rarely a need to justify major changes once the initial proposal has been made; the HoQ can exercise their professional autonomy to develop responses to quality management matters, and can hold sufficient legitimate position power to implement these solutions. 'Once the process has been designed, really, it's down to [the HoQ] to say … this is what you have to do' (DR/A). Their authority is, however, constrained in those areas where other parts of the university might also have an interest, such as processes for external examiners.

Despite not holding the power of overrule or veto, the HoQ at Amberville is thus in a strong position. At least half of the faculties would have to be opposed to a proposal to prevent it being implemented; if it is a proposal which has to be implemented by the quality team, even this may not be sufficient. The centralised and hierarchical nature of the HEI attaches greater weight to the view from this central service. However, while they hold sufficient legitimate position power for their proposals on quality management matters to be agreed, the HoQ is also aware of the limitations to this power:

> tell people that you're not going to have to write an annual report on everything, suddenly, you know, everyone's on board with it … if I went and said, 'well, you know, we need to introduce this, it will result in more, not less, work for people', I would expect to have to justify that very, very carefully. (HQ/A)

Indeed, the HoQ has been overruled on some recent occasions: 'There have been cases … in the past years where … we've not thought something was a good idea, but it has gone ahead regardless' (DR/A).

The structure in which the HoQ operates is quite stable. They have a good working relationship with senior staff, although some of the deans are relatively new in post and the relationships have 'not really been tested very much' (HQ/A). However, they have few links with other academic staff, and they are only engaged in wider university issues when they are invited to be, which will usually arise when the group organiser sees a natural link between the group remit and the HoQ's role. Thus, the HoQ holds authority within the quality realm, but this does not extend to other areas of the HEI's work, where they are equally subject to the restrictions imposed by the legitimate position power of other heads or of more senior figures within the hierarchy.

Case Study 2: Orangetown University

Orangetown University was classified by the survey as a hierarchical but devolved HEI (top-left quadrant in Figure 1). Most of the staff responsible for the implementation of policy and process are based within the faculties, with faculty arrangements largely dependent on how each dean chooses to organise them. The academic framework at Orangetown is more flexible than at Amberville: 'it is more principles … how those aspects might be interpreted by colleagues and course teams will, could and probably should vary course to course' (AC/O). Nevertheless, there is a degree of central oversight, ensuring that the principles

are adhered to. There is also a strong sense of hierarchy at Orangetown; the most important decisions are made by the senior leadership, without whose agreement proposals are unlikely to be approved. One interviewee summarised the position thus: 'The senior leadership come up with ideas, and we have to try and make them work or pour cold water on them' (DR/O). This interviewee had worked at several HEIs, and characterised Orangetown as the one which is most:

> led from the top … Sometimes you get the top saying, 'go off and do this' to the faculties … and the faculties then have to then go off and do it, without knowing why … you don't tend to challenge the seniority of people within there … it's almost a 'know your place' culture. (DR/O)

The HoQ shared this view, commenting that 'It's a bit like a politburo, the very senior Vice Chancellor's Group' (HQ/O).

The HoQ at Orangetown has less legitimate position power than the HoQ in a centralised organisation such as Amberville, as they are required to consult more widely on proposals, and they also have limited control over implementation. The HoQ described themselves as a 'very influential stakeholder' (HQ/O); however, faculties hold greater responsibility than at Amberville, and this necessarily curtails the HoQ's 'power to act' independently within the quality management sphere. In consequence, the HoQ needs to develop good working relationships with key individuals (referent power), or establish their expertise and thereby secure a stronger voice than their position would otherwise allow (expert power). Despite this limitation, there was some scepticism from the two quality professionals interviewed that the faculties would use the power they hold, either by bringing forward proposals or by exercising the opportunity to object at a committee meeting.

Policy development is usually undertaken by a working group, led by the HoQ and comprising members from across the community. Once a policy or process has been agreed, the HoQ (and their team) is responsible for ensuring that it is implemented across the university. In a devolved but hierarchical organisation, this auditing responsibility takes on a particular character. As faculties have the autonomy to respond to principles or frameworks rather than rules, implementation is not always consistent. Faculties are required to provide checklists to demonstrate how the principles have been adhered to, but there is also recognition that offering this flexibility entails a risk that some interpretations might fall outside university expectations. As a result, the HoQ must audit practice or review other sources of evidence such as the checklists to assure compliance with the framework; it is not uncommon for faculty staff to contact the HoQ to seek advice or guidance on specific issues to ensure that they have understood the policy implications correctly.

The HoQ at Orangetown has built positive working relationships with senior staff, although 'if you've done something that they like, you're flavour of the month. If you've had to tell them off because they're not compliant with something … then, of course, you're all, all things bad' (HQ/O). Engagement with other academic staff is more limited, although relationships are described as professional and respectful. To counteract the strong hierarchy, the HoQ has established ways of taking actions forward without making a direct challenge to senior staff, especially when the actions will not be universally popular. 'What I would do in that situation is work with others' (HQ/O); this might include securing support from those senior staff who are in favour of a proposal, and using this as a base to achieve results, or working together with other professional services heads, who can together form quite a powerful alliance to drive forward specific actions. Creating alliances can be valuable as a way for the HoQ to negotiate ways through the hierarchical structure: 'we can get stuff done by joining together, and … that can be quite powerful' (HQ/O). This also provides some opportunities to engage more broadly across the HEI, by joining working groups and making a contribution outside the formal scope of the role – an example of the deployment of referent power.

Case Study 3: Tealborough University

Tealborough University was classified by the survey as a democratic, devolved HEI (bottom-left quadrant in Figure 1). There is a small central quality team, but responsibility for the implementation of policy is devolved to faculties, and the internal quality assurance framework includes flexibility to allow for disciplinary differences and the requirements of external professional bodies. This can result in very different interpretations across the university, so the HoQ is required to ensure that local practices are consistent with the agreed policy. While there is inevitably an element of hierarchy, this is not pronounced, and there is no individual who has a dominant voice (not even the Vice-Chancellor):

'Tealborough is highly devolved … it's really impossible, I think, to have command and control at Tealborough' (HQ/T). The ethos at Tealborough is democratic, based on shared values and a need to build consensus in favour of proposals. This is often time-consuming, as progress will not be made without considerable engagement with the academic community. Senate is ultimately responsible for approving significant policy changes; there is a very definite sense that this academic body is independent-minded, and will vote down proposals with which it does not agree.

Tealborough demonstrates a strong commitment to collegial working and the development of a shared vision of quality across the institution, with the focus shifting 'from inputs and means to outputs and ends' (LM/T). The quality team attempts to partner with academic faculties, rather than being 'a team that sits in an ivory tower or sits in university house … that sends out templates' (LM/T); working in tandem, 'rather than them feel it's being done to them' (HQ/T). The team has to be 'enthusiastic and excited about higher education and the student experience … it's about really genuinely improving the learning experience in the classroom' (LM/T). At Tealborough, 'Quality is managed through people' (LM/T); this places emphasis on the need for the HoQ to demonstrate both credibility and integrity: 'If you have somebody who's just simply very directive but quite remote from the teaching experience and wasn't able to communicate effectively with academics … it would be very, very difficult to get things done' (LM/T). As the head of the quality team, the HoQ has considerable respect across the HEI: 'Nothing would be decided without [the HoQ]'s input … Everyone trusts them explicitly' (AC/T). The HoQ's 'view would be taken very, very seriously in that ... the strength of the opinion is respected very, very strongly' (LM/T).

However, this recognition of expertise does not translate into authority to act. In terms of policy approval, theirs is a view to be taken seriously, rather than a casting vote; this includes when responding to proposals from faculties, which are not uncommon. A small group of senior academic and professional staff, including the HoQ, will review any initial proposal, after which there will be an extensive consultation period at both faculty and central university level, with the whole approval process likely to take a full academic year. 'It's not something we can just develop and roll out centrally and expect everyone to follow' (DR/T); final decisions are always collective.

At a democratic and devolved HEI such as Tealborough, the process of ensuring compliance with the framework at faculty level is complex. The HoQ will work 'very carefully with them to help them understand why we need to do this in the way that we need to do it' (HQ/T). The HoQ is expected to seek solutions through difficult, honest conversations, and: 'That's really what I see the role as. I'm not necessarily taking the load off them; I'm explaining why it should be important to them too … I try to find ways to allow our colleagues to see where their responsibility kicks in' (HQ/T).

How the role is performed is of central importance to effectiveness: the HoQ must engage regularly and effectively with academic staff across the HEI, deploying referent power through the strength of the relationships they establish, and expert power through their insight and expertise. The HoQ has built a strong network of allies across the HEI, so their success in building both referent power and expert power also affords them the opportunity to engage in activities which are clearly outside the scope of the formal role, informing or shaping university policy across a range of areas.

Discussion

The HoQs in this study all share a similar set of institutional responsibilities: they are responsible for oversight and effective operation of the quality management framework within their HEI. In part, therefore, the HoQ's role is to identify where existing practices do not comply with national expectations; to devise revisions to policy or process which will address the weakness; and to implement these, in liaison with academic staff as required. These individuals are heavily involved in decision-making around matters of academic governance; the HoQ could therefore be regarded as a para-academic role (Macfarlane, 2011). It is a role with a specialist higher education identity which is *de jure* and not *de facto* (Macfarlane, 2011); HoQs need to make judgements – or, as a minimum, to define the infrastructure through which judgement will be reached – about whether (for example) institutional practice meets national expectations on academic matters, drawing on a range of specialist knowledge. The role is also contested, since academic staff may be critical of those who have invaded decision areas which were once their 'secret garden' (Shattock, 2017: 390; see also Rowlands, 2018; Seyfried and Reith, 2019). In an organisation where management structure may not be aligned to current or prospective needs (Campbell-Perry, 2022), there is a greater need for boundary-spanning roles (Zahir, 2010), so the HoQ

is an agent of multiple principals, including senior management, academic staff, students and others within the central administration (Seyfried and Reith, 2021).

This positions the HoQ as operating in 'an in-between space' between different knowledge and practice domains (Lock, 2022: 94; see also Croft et al., 2015). However, simply operating within the third space is not sufficient to be considered a third space professional. A professional must have agency; they are bringing about results which are more than simply the application of pre-existing rules (Faulconbridge and Muzio, 2008; Macheridis and Paulsson, 2019). Third space professionals often become specialists in their own right, with expertise in a complex area of work – they are not just 'interchangeable extras from "Universal Casting"' (Graham and Regan, 2016: 601). Manoharan (2020: 57) describes the importance of these staff being 'polymaths' who are skilled at 'creating connections between specialist areas, building common understanding and driving inter-disciplinary solutions' (see also Denney, 2022). Each of the HoQs in my study navigates their environment in different ways, according to the degree of access to the third space offered by the organisational type. Each organisational type provides its own specific quality assurance third space, and its own key requirements for successful navigation (McIntosh and Nutt, 2022). The HoQs navigating these spaces can therefore be legitimately identified as third space professionals, who are required to operate effectively at the interface between national regulation and associated expectations on the one hand, and organisational policy and practice on the other. An important component of their role is to translate national regulatory requirements and expectations about quality management into both language and practice which meet the needs of their organisation, using their expert judgement to bring about change.

Beyond the autonomy bestowed by leading a team and operating at a sufficiently senior level, the engagement of each of the HoQs with the HEI demonstrates the fluidity of third space professional roles. In a centralised, hierarchical university such as Amberville, the HoQ has sufficient legitimate position power to be a rule maker within the quality management field. However, this authority is constrained in two ways. First, as discussed by Reith and Seyfried (2019), the HoQ engages in balancing external demands against internal interests, and is unlikely to introduce policies or procedures which will demand more from academic staff. There are those at a more senior place in the hierarchy, such as deans, who may hold a power of veto over proposals which require additional resources, or which make unreasonable demands (Gawley, 2008). This additional factor may move some decisions outside of the effective 'Overton window' (Mackinac Center for Public Policy, 2019) of options (and where the collective decision-making process would give greater authority to those in more senior roles within the hierarchy, who had indeed sometimes imposed solutions against advice). The second constraint is one of scope. While the HoQ has the authority to make decisions within the quality management field, this is constrained by their functional role within the organisation (Savolainen, 2021). They have little opportunity to engage outside of this functional area, as other senior managers have similar legitimate position power within their own areas of responsibility.

In a hierarchical HEI with a devolved structure, such as Orangetown, the HoQ has significant influence over the rules, but this is less absolute than in a centralised institution. The devolved nature of authority for decision-making within the organisation means that proposals must be co-designed with other stakeholders. The HoQ has a place within the hierarchy which gives them a strong voice; they do not have the legitimate position power to overrule or ignore areas proposed by others, but they can make their case, and they are likely to be successful within the quality management field. As described by Reith and Seyfried (2019), they may engage in pacifying – engaging proactively with other organisational actors to explain the importance or merit of proposals. Proposals remain subject to veto by more senior figures within the hierarchy, but as authority is more distributed, there is also the opportunity to work across the organisation to build a network of support through referent power: 'an accurate cognition of informal networks' (Krackhardt, 1990: 342; Pfeffer, 1992), which might counteract some of the hierarchical force.

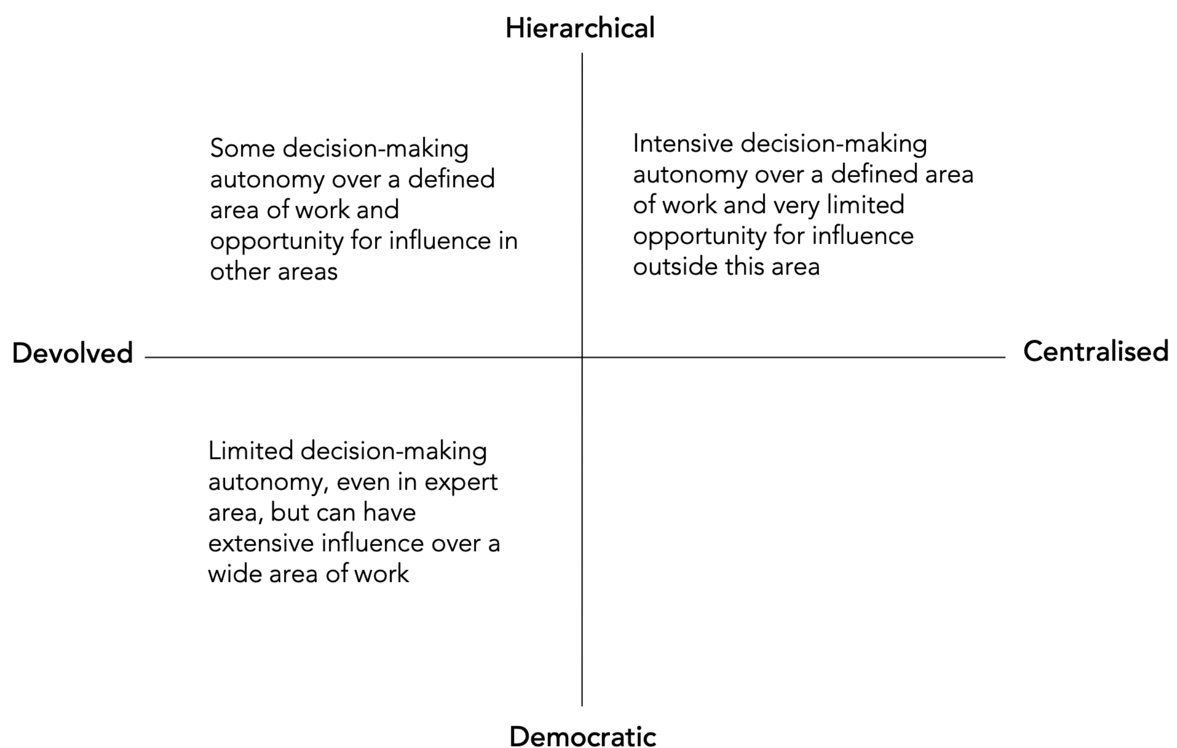
In a devolved and democratic university such as Tealborough, it is hard to identify any individual as the rule maker, even within the specific field of quality management. Even though the HoQ is recognised and respected as the expert within their field, this does not give them the authority to impose their view; such organisations operate through consensus, and extensive consultation may be required to achieve this. To be successful in a democratic organisation with a devolved structure, an actor will need to establish strong personal networks (Gibbs, 2019), and to collaborate across internal boundaries (Prysor and Henley, 2018). Importantly, the lack of a dominant hierarchy of authority offers the opportunity to develop and deploy considerable expert power (Clauss and Bouncken, 2019; Savolainen, 2021); there is recognition that all have expertise within their specialist area. If an actor can demonstrate that they hold

expert knowledge and are also able to translate this effectively through a deep understanding of the HEI, they will accrue considerable influence in support of their cause (Enders and Naidoo, 2019). The HoQ in this situation engages in bargaining, showing how they can assist local actors in reaching a compromise (Reith and Seyfried, 2019); this may include using a weak form of reward power. In consequence, while such an actor holds very limited legitimate position power, there is an opportunity for the HoQ to be a strong influence in rule making: if they are successful in building expert and referent power, they can have a powerful voice in decision-making. Timms and Heimans (2018) argue that within an overall societal model of greater flexibility and change, where contributions are invited from all, and not just from the traditional experts, success is likely to be achieved by those who are able to navigate complex community dynamics. If an actor has already gained legitimacy, they may be well placed to influence across a far broader area, as suggested in this study; the establishment of expert power may offer a pathway to positive engagement in a wide range of contexts.

Conclusions

Heads of quality in English HEIs operate as third space professionals, although the spaces they occupy will in part be determined by the organisation in which they work. Third space professionals build legitimacy through their knowledge and delivery (Moran and Misra, 2018). However, their effectiveness will depend on how they navigate the community in which they are working, and how successful they are in developing and deploying one or more bases of social power; if they fail to do so, they risk being marginalised (McIntosh and Nutt, 2022; Whitchurch, 2007). The significance of organisational type is not generally discussed within the literature about third space professionals. However, the findings of this research suggest the explanatory model given in Figure 2, which notes the differences in decision-making autonomy according to organisational type. This is an exploratory model which would require further testing through wider research, which might also enable a consideration of the fourth quadrant.

Figure 2. Typology of autonomy and decision-making



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There is a tendency to discuss the experience of a particular group of third space professionals within higher education, such as educational developers or research administrators, and to characterise their experience as though it were broadly common. This research demonstrates a clear link between organisational type and the role played by HoQs as examples of third space professionals. While there is existing literature on organisational type, including some which is higher education-specific, this focuses on the implications for the organisation itself or the sector as a whole, rather than on the effect on those working within the organisation. For the third space professional, whose role crosses discipline boundaries and cannot remain unaffected by organisational structure, these typological differences are substantial. My findings show that there is a need for a more structurally embedded perspective on the work of third space professionals which provides a more nuanced explanation, taking account of organisational structure as a further variable which affects the nature of their third space and how it must be negotiated, and may help to explain their experience.

This research has a number of boundary conditions, which offer opportunities for further research in this field which could extend the understanding of higher education management, and the particular roles played by third space professionals. The fact that only three HEIs were selected for case study suggests that a wider sample could be required for validation of findings. These three HEIs were selected as representatives of their type/quadrant, but the application of this typology was exploratory; it cannot be inferred that other providers within the same quadrant would necessarily share all of the same organisational features, or that their HoQs would operate in similar ways. While care was taken to establish trustworthiness (Lincoln and Guba, 1996), further cases or a wider survey of quality-related staff would yield further insights. This research focused exclusively on heads of quality, as a specific category of third space professional. It could be fruitful to conduct similar research with other categories of third space professional to understand whether the organisational typology developed for this study has similar explanatory power in relation to the social power available to such staff.

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Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

The author declares that research ethics approval for this research project was provided by the University of Bath ethics board.

Consent for publication statement

The author declares that research participants' informed consent to publication of findings – including photos, videos and any personal or identifiable information – was secured prior to publication.

Conflicts of interest statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the author during peer review of this article have been made. The author declares no further conflicts with this article.

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