Research article

Crossing and dismantling boundaries: recognising the value of professional staff within higher education

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Abstract

In this article, we use the concept of the third space to explore how professional staff within UK universities experience boundaries. We focus on professional staff working in three areas of higher education that have been conceptualised differently as third spaces to date: widening participation, technical staff and academic administration. We draw on empirical research from three distinct, but related, qualitative research projects that explored contemporary issues, institutional change, professional identities, relationships and expertise within these under-researched professional contexts. We show how boundaries are experienced, crossed and sometimes dismantled. We highlight where increased collaboration has a positive effect on achieving institutional goals through improved relationships between academic and professional staff, and the recognition of diverse forms of knowledge within the university workforce. We argue for a conception

of the third space that is not a discrete or distinct space, which professionals work within or outside of, but instead conceived of as a way of working, which all higher education professionals may engage in, to greater or lesser extents. Doing so provides new insights into the existence of third space working among new professional groups and highlights the potential for all professional staff to engage in third space working to the benefit of their institutions.

Introduction

Universities are large and complex organisations where teaching and research are primary functions. Conventionally, understanding of universities has centred on the roles of academic staff and students. However, a multitude of other dedicated individuals significantly contribute to the success of these institutions, and in turn to addressing the global challenges that academic institutions seek to solve. The roles, skills and expertise of these communities, however, have often lacked visibility and recognition.

It was this observation, initially made independently, that prompted three higher education professionals and part-time doctoral students to come together to explore the collective insights from our research into our historically overlooked professional practices – in widening participation, technical work and student academic administration. The experience of boundaries, and the concept of the 'third space', was a common thread across our research areas, and we revisited our research findings, individually and collectively, to consider how our insights can extend our understanding of the third space in UK higher education.

In this article, we begin by introducing our three professional contexts. We then locate these within the existing literature on third space professionals, arguing that our three contexts represent different evolutions in third space working. We report our findings from our collective analysis of boundaries from our empirical data, showing how boundaries are experienced, crossed and sometimes dismantled at individual, institutional and sector level. We use this analysis of boundaries to make claims about how professional contexts in universities are evolving, and we conclude that third space working within universities can bring positive change at a local level. However, sector-wide, embedded change – which we argue is necessary to support, develop and learn from collaboration with professional university staff – is harder to achieve.

Three professional contexts

Widening participation

Widening participation is a UK policy-driven government strategy (Office for Students, 2023) which aims to address social inequity for those groups currently under-represented in higher education. In 2021/2 the most advantaged UK students were four times more likely to progress to a high-tariff university than the most disadvantaged UK students (Department for Education, 2023). High-tariff or 'selective' universities generally require higher A level (or equivalent) grades than low-tariff or 'recruiting' universities. High-tariff universities have traditionally had a strong research presence in the sector. Widening participation staff typically plan, design, deliver and evaluate programmes of activity that take place both on campus and in schools. This activity is related to the needs of the local school population, recruitment targets of the institution and the requirements of the Office for Students. To respond to these needs, widening participation staff need the skills to develop stakeholder relationships with schools, colleges and their local communities, and with colleagues in academic and administrative university roles. Widening participation staff are also required to have expertise, including inclusive pedagogical approaches, developing accessible sessions, and monitoring and evaluation. As such, there is a distinct overlap with academic knowledge and skills. The number of staff working in widening participation is difficult to identify through existing data sets, which focus on numbers of university professional staff as a single group.

Technical staff

Technical staff have a diverse array of roles, enabling research, teaching and innovation across higher education. Their roles range from entry-level positions to internationally recognised experts and senior strategic managers. Technicians work across various disciplines, such as science, medicine, engineering and arts, with responsibilities ranging from conducting experiments and analysing data to managing staff and ensuring health and safety compliance. There are estimated to be more than 30–50,000 technical staff working in UK universities (TALENT, 2022), including research technicians supporting research projects, teaching technicians enabling practical classes, learning technologists, and technicians providing specialised expertise and services. The distinction between these roles is not always clear-cut, as technical staff often have mixed responsibilities. Defining the roles of these staff in the context of higher education is challenging due to the breadth and depth of these roles, and not all of them include the term 'technical' or 'technician' in their titles. Existing attempts to define technical staff (TALENT, 2022) emphasise the practical skills, knowledge and experience required for the job.

Academic administration

In the UK, academic administration broadly describes the work of professional staff that supports learning, teaching and student administration, although there is no sector-wide definition. In global contexts, such work might be called student administration, student affairs, academic affairs, education administration, teaching and learning administration, and sometimes student services, although the latter is often associated with pastoral and well-being support. The UK Academic Registrar's Council (ARC, 2024), a forum for senior managers responsible for the academic administration of student matters, explicitly recognises admissions, assessment, quality assurance, student records, student casework, timetabling, and UK visa and immigration as specialist areas of academic administration. The size of this professional staff group is not easy to identify, as it can be structured and delivered in different ways across the sector. Professional staff delivering academic administration may work in central professional service teams or in academic divisions, and they typically manage policy, processes and systems. It has become commonplace for UK universities to restructure the provision of academic administration, often centralising or combining functions in a bid to deliver a more efficient and consistent service to students; such changes alter organisational boundaries and can disrupt the everyday interactions between academics and professional staff.

Third space professionals in higher education literature

There are significant gaps in our empirical understanding of each of our professional contexts, the professional work that takes place within them, and the experiences of individuals working within them. Our projects drew on a limited literature base related to each specialist area, but were unified by broader debates about the boundaries between academic and professional work, the nature and value of knowledge, and the increasing discourse on third space professionals within higher education. As the concept of the third space in the higher education context has been written about in depth by others (Livingston and Ling, 2022; McIntosh and Nutt, 2022; Veles et al., 2023; Whitchurch, 2015), our intention in this article is to briefly introduce the use of the concept, and to reflect on how the existing literature positions our professional contexts as third space.

It is recognised that as the higher education environment becomes more complex, the nature of academic work has come under pressure and is changing (Henkel, 2010), and sometimes fragmenting and expanding (Brew et al., 2018; Degn, 2018; Macfarlane, 2011; McInnis, 2000; Musselin, 2007; Rosewell and Ashwin, 2019; Siekkinen and Ylijoki, 2021; Takagi, 2018). There is now also a growing international literature base that helps us build a picture of professional staff, for example, of their role in knowledge and infrastructure development (Croucher and Woelert, 2021; De Jong, 2023; De Jong and Del Junco, 2023; Kallenberg, 2020), and perceptions of identity, careers and relationships with academic staff (Bossu and Brown, 2018; Caldwell, 2022, 2024; Gander et al., 2019; Pistilli and Gardner, 2022). This picture shows that the professional workforce is growing (Baltaru, 2019; Blümel, 2008; Hogan, 2014; Krücken et al., 2013), that it is increasingly professionalised and highly qualified (Gornitzka and Larsen, 2004; Stage and Aagaard, 2019) and that professional staff are well placed to use their existing expertise to lead new areas of practice that emerge, such as educational technology (Rhoades, 2010; Sapir, 2020; White et al., 2021).

In the UK, some of these broader trends have been recognised, particularly the emergence of new areas of professional staff work, such as research management and quality assurance (Kerridge et al., 2023; Renyard, 2024; Whitchurch, 2004), learning technologists (Fox and Sumner, 2014; White et al., 2021) and student services (Morgan, 2012). However, we lack an up-to-date sector-wide data set of the size and shape of the UK higher education professional workforce, as the national reporting of 'non-academic' staff categories was made voluntary for universities in 2015. Earlier estimates suggested professional staff represented 40 per cent of the UK higher education workforce (Hogan, 2014).

Analysing international published works since the 2000s, Veles et al. (2023) observe a shift in the approach to work by professional staff from passive invisibility to active engagement and agency, whereby professional staff mediate organisational or professional boundaries, and sometimes move into spaces that span academic and professional spheres. It is this shift that was initially observed and conceptualised as a 'third space' by Whitchurch (2008b).

In a higher education third space, workers from disparate parts of a university congregate, bringing academic expertise, professional expertise or both, to create new knowledge in an undefined, but collaborative workspace. Working in the third space can be a positive experience of working towards shared institutional goals, but it can also create sites of tension (Kallenberg, 2016; Rhoades, 2010), requiring active translation of the understandings, expectations and ways of working between individuals with different professional experiences (Veles, 2022). The concept of third space has been used interchangeably to identify and define those who work in this space and to describe and analyse the way they work (McIntosh and Nutt, 2022). Studies have produced a range of definitions for these individuals, such as 'blended professional' (Whitchurch, 2009), 'para-academic' (Macfarlane, 2011), 'policy actors' (Zahir, 2010), 'complex collaboration champions' (Veles, 2022; Veles et al., 2019), and 'integrated practitioner' (McIntosh and Nutt, 2022). The higher education contexts where third space professionals have been most widely recognised include widening participation and employability (Whitchurch, 2008b), research management and library staff (Verbaan and Cox, 2014; Yang-Yoshihara et al., 2023), and educational development (Obexer, 2022).

Whitchurch (2008b) proposes a map of the higher education workforce that centres on this emerging third space, where professionals actively work across organisational boundaries, which we have simplified in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Higher education workforce map (Source: adapted from Whitchurch, 2008b)
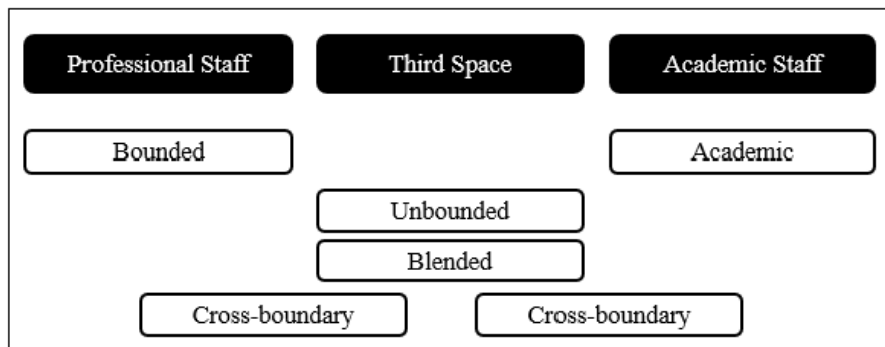
'Bounded professionals', typically professional services staff and academic staff, are positioned on either side of an emerging third space, predominantly occupied by professionals who could be conceived to have unbounded or blended identities. According to Whitchurch (2008a), professionals with bounded identities may cross into the third space, but only 'on the basis of clear temporal and spatial parameters', whereas cross-boundary professionals may move in and out of the third space on an ongoing basis.

We are interested in the third space to describe and understand the work that takes place at the intersections of academic and professional spaces, which may be overlapping and in-between spaces. We adopt Whitchurch's categorisation of professional identities (bounded, cross-boundary, unbounded), and examine the literature to see how our three professional contexts have been conceptualised in relation to the third space.

Widening participation – characterised by third space professionals

The widening participation professional context, which we consider includes outreach activities and learning support, has been acknowledged as an exemplar of an evolving third space, where there is a commitment to a project that transcends disciplines and organisational functions (Whitchurch, 2012). As such, this was the most evolved professional context representing a third space.

Widening participation is a space where there is a need for collaboration, bringing together professional and academic knowledge. However, widening participation activity is often 'treated largely as an administrative issue' (McLellan et al., 2016), rather than as a central academic concern. This can impose a barrier to cross-boundary work between widening participation staff and academics, and can lead to a perception that widening participation work is only carried out by staff with specialist roles (Demb and Wade, 2012). This perception creates a divide between academic and administrative or professional staff, and the perceived hierarchies make for collaborative constraints, which can create historical institutional barriers (Johnson et al., 2019). This can mean that the practice-based knowledge and voice of widening participation university staff is overlooked (Burke, 2013; Gazeley et al., 2018; Hudson, 2019). However, there is evidence that when collaboration happens, it can have a positive impact on academic widening participation work, and on staff perspectives on the impact of this work (Greenhalgh et al., 2006; Hayton et al., 2015; McLellan et al., 2016).

Technical staff – characterised by emerging third space

There is some evidence from the literature that technical staff could be conceptualised as an emerging third space; however, there remain persistent boundaries between roles and perceived responsibilities, and a lack of recognition of the value that technical colleagues can bring to academic work.

Emerging third space working can be seen in arts disciplines, where technicians are taking on increasing teaching responsibilities and transitioning to academic careers (Savage, 2019), and wider groups of technical staff in higher education are increasingly contributing to the quality of education provision through designing, planning and delivering teaching activity (Wragg et al., 2023). However, in science disciplines, there has been a stronger emphasis on boundaries between different professionals, which is exemplified in everyday acts that highlight difference, for example, requiring different colour lab coats for scientists and technicians, or different privileges such as library access (Tansey, 2008). The work of technicians has been described as 'brokers' and 'buffers' (Barley and Bechky, 1994), where brokers create an environment that is required for other occupations to carry out their work, and buffers mediate the use of empirical data to inform theories and concepts. Both brokers and buffers are conceptualised as distinct from academic/scientist roles. Such boundaries are gradually softening, as technical staff have been increasingly recognised as collaborators in research projects, yet there remains a need for increased visibility, recognition and status of technical staff within higher education (Royal Society, 1998; Smith et al., 2004; The Technician Commitment, 2017; White et al., 2021).

Academic administration – characterised by niche third space working

Academic administration managers have rarely been the sole subject of research, although they have been represented in participant samples for higher education professional work more broadly. Typically, in a UK context, they are not conceptualised as third space professionals; instead, they are positioned as bounded professionals, who use codified knowledge, such as process, technical and regulatory knowledge, to support their institution. They are often individuals who know the answer (Whitchurch, 2008a) – for example, departmental administrators (Caldwell, 2022; Whitchurch, 2008a) and registry and secretariat staff, who are perceived as 'guardians of the regulations' (Barnett, 2000).

Some niche elements of academic administration have begun to be conceptualised as emerging third spaces, typically where there is a strong policy or curriculum aspect to the work, such as quality assurance and enhancement professionals (McKay and Robson, 2023; Renyard, 2024). For example, Akerman (2022) suggests that revising academic regulations, and specifying the language of learning outcomes or assessment criteria, are activities that were previously within the purview of academics and now draw quality professionals into third space working. In a European context, some academic administration professionals have been described as 'policy actors' (Zahir, 2010) and recognised as managers who 'establish services and actively shape the core functions of research and teaching' (Schneijderberg and Merkator, 2013).

The literature examining this professional group suggests that academic administration staff should not be conceptualised as third space professionals, but that there may be elements of their work where third space working occurs.

Are our professional contexts third space?

Taken collectively, the literature suggests that our three realms are currently positioned differently in relation to the third space, as set out in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Positioning our professional contexts within the higher education workforce map from the literature
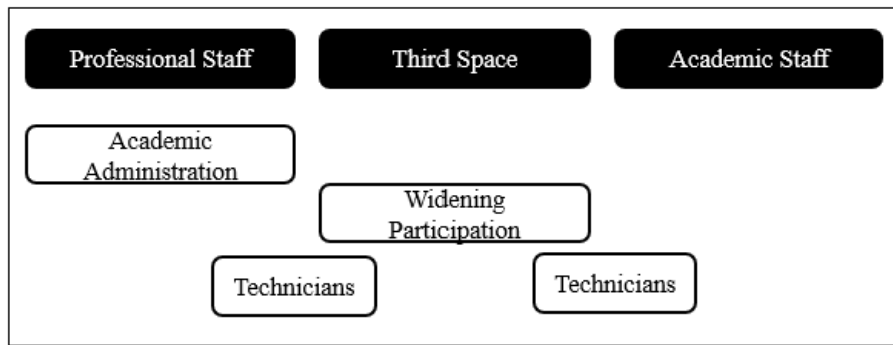
Widening participation professionals are the archetypal third space practitioners, although there remains a gap in our understanding of how to effectively and consistently bring together academic and professional expertise in this space. Technical staff are increasingly becoming third space practitioners as they expand their reach into research and teaching activities – although their contributions are not always visible, and there is a dearth of research into the lived experiences of technicians and their work; niche areas of academic administration such as quality assurance could be considered third spaces, but the typical areas of academic administration are not considered to represent third space working.

Having reflected on our own professional contexts, and located them in the literature, we revisited our research projects (Vere, 2022; Verney, 2022; Webster-Deakin, 2022), individually and collectively, to examine the role of boundaries in our empirical data, and to explore what our data reveal about third space working in these under-researched contexts. While there is a growing literature on the contributions of professional staff in higher education, there remain gaps about our professional contexts, and no studies that enable both the depth of insight into a particular professional context that our individual projects bring, or a comparative lens on our collective insights. This enables us to make a unique contribution to our understanding of how third space working is evolving, allowing us to consider both impact and development at the individual, institutional and sector level.

Individual, institutional and sector-level third space working

We each undertook research to explore the experiences and impact of professional staff in higher education from widening participation (Webster-Deakin, 2022), technical (Vere, 2022) and administrative (Verney, 2022) backgrounds to respond to this gap and to give voice to professional staff. Drawing on the empirical data from across these discrete but related projects, we show that professional staff engage fluidly with boundaries in their professional contexts, through relationships, responsibilities, remit and roles. We found that professional staff experienced, crossed and tried to dismantle boundaries. We argue that our empirical findings indicate evidence of a boundary shift for two of our professional staff categories (administrative and technical staff), and show how there can be mutual benefits gained through opportunities for cross-boundary collaboration for the third category (widening participation staff). The boundary shift can be seen in Figure 3.

Each set of data illuminates third space working from a different angle: a single academic school, a range of UK institutions, and sector wide. We draw on empirical data from our research projects, using pseudonyms when direct quotations are used.

Figure 3. Positioning our professional contexts within the higher education workforce map from our research
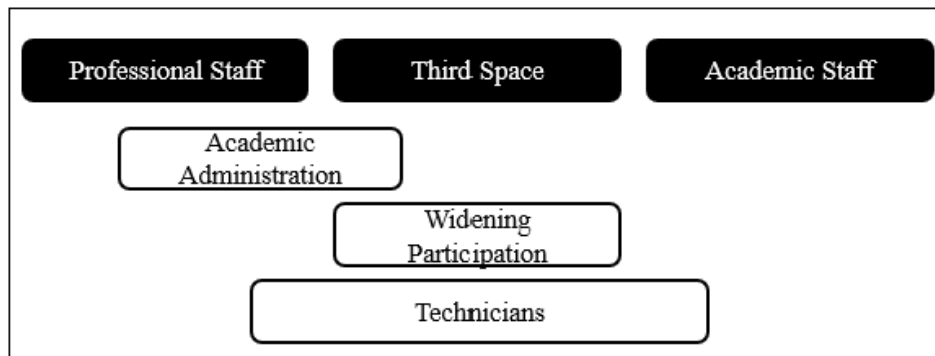
Widening participation – individual-level focus

Webster-Deakin (2022) has explored the process of designing and delivering accessible and engaging academic outreach sessions using collaborative action research. Action research aims to address an issue or a concern in equitable collaboration with the community or individuals affected (Kindon et al., 2007; Lewin, 1946). Data were generated through an iterative process of designing, delivering and reviewing outreach sessions for school students, undertaken collaboratively by Webster-Deakin (Tara) as a widening participation researcher, with three academic colleagues or co-researchers. Research occurred over six months and focused on understanding and addressing the barriers the co-researchers faced when planning and delivering outreach for schools. This research project was in a single academic school in one university, and it provides insight into boundaries at an individual level. It is through the shared research activity and co-construction of knowledge that we can draw conclusions about the opportunities offered through a time-rich and collaborative approach to developing inclusive pedagogies, both for access and success.

Struggling with the firm boundary

Widening participation professional staff work in an unbounded way, in that their agenda requires responsive innovation, including the building of external networks and internal relationships. At the same time, widening participation professional staff have a relatively unseen remit that focuses on students before they join the university; once students begin university, widening participation staff expertise is not usually required. This situates their knowledge on the periphery of student participation at university, and the literature on professional staff in universities offers little in the way of guidance on how to foster mutually beneficial cross-boundary relationships with academic staff.

The start of the research process identified a chasm of understanding between widening participation and academic staff, evidenced by the use of academic language:

> I was unprepared for … the use of the language, the academic references and the confidence with which challenges were made. (Tara, Widening Participation Researcher)

A collaborative research team comprising widening participation and academic staff was a venture into a new, notional, university space in which the research team had to actively work with the tensions created by their roles, institutional structures and hierarchies. This was uncomfortable, and it often led to dissension, and even to an ideological impasse at times:

> I think what young people don't do enough of is listen. They need to learn to listen. (Paul, Academic Co-researcher)

A bridge to cross the boundary

Applying a collaborative action research approach to widening participation work challenged the conflicting agendas of academic and widening participation practitioners, and offered an alternative space in which the co-researchers were able to reflect on the benefits of working together across their professional boundaries:

> These subsequent discussions that we have about what we do, how we do it, why we do it – is something that we don't have any opportunity to do. (Howard, Academic Co-researcher)

> These kinds of conversations they are a space where you can talk about … address important issues of teaching that are practical but also social and political. (Howard, Academic Co-researcher)

A space for cross-boundary dialogue or activity around a shared concern provided the opportunity for collegiality between academic and professional staff, showing the importance of creating alternative spaces in which status and hierarchy are replaced with a valuing of the contributions and knowledge of all stakeholders, regardless of their job family.

Dismantling boundaries via co-construction of knowledge

A co-constructive approach ensured that the competing agendas of the academic and professional staff were slowly diffused through debate, dissension and, eventually, a shared goal and language. Pedagogical knowledge was found to be as necessary to the academic co-researchers in widening participation work as was their disciplinary knowledge, and this led to insights for the co-researchers:

> These sessions have challenged my assumption that I need to significantly alter how I structure tasks for different year groups and that there has to be radical differentiation when teaching the same material to undergraduate and secondary school audiences. (Sarah, Academic Co-researcher)

Sarah had previously seen her undergraduate teaching as completely distinct from any schools' outreach work, yet it was when working through the design and delivery process in partnership with a widening participation professional that she understood how pedagogical approaches that worked for 14-year-olds could be equally successfully applied to undergraduate students:

> I had tried teaching about diversity and colonialism in an earlier unit … but it fell completely flat. This time, however, I was able to deliver unfamiliar and complex material more successfully precisely because I found ways to connect it to the students' lived experience. (Sarah, Academic Co-researcher)

In this instance, the boundaries were dismantled almost entirely, with new and supportive relationships forged between the academic and widening participation staff co-researchers. The boundaries, while dissolved for the individuals involved in the research, did not have an immediate impact beyond this group. The insights gained, however, have led to the co-development of a professional accreditation scheme for widening participation staff in England, in partnership with colleagues in Scotland (Scottish Framework for Fair Access, 2024). This scheme accredits the knowledge, expertise, skills and experience of this group of staff in the higher education sector, offering widening participation staff in universities the visibility and recognition they have been historically lacking.

Academic administration – institutional-level focus

Verney (2022) explored academic administration within multiple UK universities, using qualitative methods to give a voice to professional staff working as middle and senior managers supporting a core element of academic administration, student assessment. Thirteen administrative managers contributed to this research, selected to represent different institutional contexts (mission, size, shape) and to provide expert commentary on a specialist aspect of assessment administration, such as regulations, systems and examinations. Data were generated in autumn 2019 through semi-structured interviews and creative role maps to understand the organisational context, interactions of managers with their peers, nature of the work, and administrative contributions to decision making. This project provided insights into organisational boundaries experienced by individual managers within their institution.

A concrete boundary for middle managers

The academic–administrative boundary was a site of tension and isolation, particularly for middle managers. This boundary was often perceived as concrete, set out in the policy documents or committee structures, and although administrators were often invited into an academic space such as a committee, Carol reported that she felt like a 'lone wolf' in those spaces, and others felt that the administrative voice was not heard or valued:

> … like all committees, it's academically led, and if we highlight issues like this, it takes a lot of convincing that it really is an issue. (Hayley, Academic Administration Manager)

Administrators felt undervalued when their advice was disregarded, one participant relaying what a more junior colleague had told them:

> They asked this, I told them this, but then they did this anyway. (George, Academic Administration Manager)

Another described the exclusion and frustration they felt from decisions that impacted their work:

> We will get decisions that are just made, and done, and the attitude is 'just make it happen'. Which is often more expensive, more time consuming, more stressful. (Hayley, Academic Administration Manager)

Crossing the boundary as senior managers

Senior managers had a more positive and fluid experience of boundaries, and they could be characterised as cross-boundary professionals in how they worked with policy, operations and academic strategy. Reinforcing claims that third space working occurs when academic policy and curriculum are being crafted (Akerman, 2022), administrative managers were increasingly shaping the rules they had traditionally only enforced, and were providing expert advice and recommendations on complex issues. Such boundary-crossing work appeared to be most positively received by their academic colleagues in areas of potential high risk to the institution, such as the outcomes of appeals and complaints, where:

> Academics are much more aware of the risks of getting it wrong, and they're much more open to advice. (Anna, Academic Administration Manager)

In addition to policy work, senior administrative managers were crossing boundaries to manage operationally complex areas or to deliver strategic change. Managing these activities required them to draw on knowledge from multiple spheres of university operations or from external sources, such as sector practice or regulators, and it was administration managers rather than academics who held and curated this knowledge.

While crossing boundaries to contribute to change, senior administrative managers remained aware of the boundaries of their own authority to make decisions in academic spaces, often leading the analysis of issues and generating potential solutions, which were then consulted or recommended to academic bodies. Senior administrative managers recognised their own expertise in particular elements of university management, sometimes articulating a clear division of labour between an academic lead and an administrative lead on the complex matter. In contrast, middle managers appeared more cautious of the value of their own contributions, positioning their work as more of a supportive contribution.

Dismantling hierarchical boundaries

Although there was strong evidence of boundary crossing by virtue of holding a formal senior role, there remained a clear sense of academic versus administrative matters. One senior administrative manager, Brian, described the perception that pedagogic leadership 'felt their job had been done' once policy was approved, and that the 'hardcore delivery of a change' fell to the professional staff team.

Furthermore, middle managers felt that boundary-crossing senior professional colleagues did not always understand the operational complexities sufficiently, and instead called for greater dialogue with middle managers:

> Had there been a discussion between the people who it affects at the start [middle managers], you know, about 'what is it that you are trying to achieve?', and then opening it up to practitioners to say right, if you do it this way, then you will achieve your aims and we'll be able to manage it for you. (Hayley, Academic Administration Manager)

Verney's research shows that cross-boundary working is becoming more common for senior administrative managers in the delivery of academic administration, and that it is expanding beyond policy work. However, hierarchal boundaries limit the expansion of cross-boundary working to middle managers. These hierarchical boundaries could be dismantled by creating inclusive consultative and decision-making spaces, thereby ensuring that staff who hold the practical knowledge of policy, process and technology, which is essential to solve complex challenges and deliver change in a modern institution, are part of the design of a solution.

Technical staff – sector-level focus

Vere (2022) has explored the emergence, enactment and impact of a sector-wide intervention to improve the culture and environment for technicians working in UK higher education and research – the 'Technician Commitment' (2017). Introduced and widely adopted in 2017, the Commitment aims to enhance visibility, recognition, career development and sustainability for technicians, technologists and skills specialists in teaching and research. Vere's (2022) study examines the positioning of technicians within universities before the Technician Commitment, and explores institutional motivations for engagement. It also investigates the initial impact of the Commitment, and analyses how various enabling factors and practices have led to positive changes for the technical community.

Upon becoming a signatory of the Technician Commitment, an organisation nominates a lead individual to progress action on behalf of the university or research institution. To understand technicians' positions in universities, and the experiences and perceived impact of the Technician Commitment, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a sample of institutional signatory leads. Seven institutional leads from across the UK were interviewed between April and December 2019. Institutions and interviewees were selected based on several factors to ensure maximal variation. All institutions were early adopters of the Technician Commitment, and were announced as signatories in either the first or second phase (May 2017 and September 2017, respectively). The diversity of institutions included variations in size, type, geography and the role of the Technician Commitment lead (for example, Technical Manager, Organisational Development staff, Professional Development staff).

A historical boundary

Historically, technicians have faced significant boundaries in their interactions with academic staff. Interviewees reported a deep-rooted division characterised by concepts of status and hierarchy:

> It was definitely an us [technicians] and them [academics]. (Andy, Technician Commitment Lead)

> You are academic, or you are non-academic. (Denise, Technician Commitment Lead)

These quotations reflect a high power-distance relationship, and a lack of engagement, illustrating the hard boundaries between the two staff groups.

An intervention to soften the boundary

There was evidence that the advent of the Technician Commitment had begun to soften these boundaries. Interviewees reported that technicians were beginning to be more included and engaged in activities that foster a more collaborative and mutually respectful environment. This transition suggests the emergence of a third space where traditional roles overlap:

> I was allowed to mix with the students, so I could show how equipment worked. Slowly, this was recognised, and I was then encouraged to go out and help. So, it did slowly change. (Andy, Technician Commitment Lead)

> For some people, if you ask them, 'How do you see your technician?', they would say, 'I didn't even know they were a technician. To me, they're just part of the team.' (Grace, Technician Commitment Lead)

Crossing the boundary – enabling a collegiate culture

Where the Technician Commitment was fully embedded, interviewees reported technicians experiencing increased parity of esteem and a more collegiate culture that recognised all colleagues involved. There was evidence that the Technician Commitment dismantled traditional boundaries between academic and technical staff, promoting a more cohesive and productive academic environment:

> People have been to conferences, all sorts of things that they just wouldn't have been able to before. (Fiona, Technician Commitment Lead)

> Technicians are now going to be involved in the graduation ceremonies and involved in diversity and inclusion. (Andy, Technician Commitment Lead)

This shift reflects a significant cultural change, allowing technicians to be seen as partners rather than support staff, and giving them voice and visibility in their institutions.

The Technician Commitment (2017) has facilitated the transition of technical staff into the third space, as evidenced by their increased integration into student-facing roles and recognition in research contributions. This aligns with Whitchurch's concept of university staff crossing visible and invisible boundaries. Technical staff now play a more prominent role in teaching environments, receive recognition as co-authors on research outputs, and participate in decision-making processes.

Vere's research provides insights into dismantling boundaries at sector level, identifying patterns of sector-wide change in the work and experiences of technical staff in universities. The Technician Commitment has significantly altered the landscape for technical staff in the UK and internationally. Technicians' personal experiences revealed a previous lack of support and recognition, underscoring the need for positive change. The initiative has blurred the traditional boundaries between academic and technical staff, with much work by technical staff now taking place in the third space:

> Our visibility has increased. I wouldn't, I don't know how to put figures around it, but, you know, really our visibility has increased enormously. (Fiona, Technician Commitment Lead)

As a result of the Technician Commitment, technical staff are now more visible and included in higher education, gaining teaching accreditation, leading research grants and authoring research articles. This increased visibility and inclusion highlights the importance of recognising the knowledge and skills that technical staff bring to the academic environment, and creates a positive research environment, thereby retaining and attracting technical colleagues to the research and innovation ecosystem.

Discussion – evolutions in third space working

At the outset of our research projects, our three professional contexts could be conceived differently in relation to the concept of a third space: widening participation professionals being discussed as typical third space professionals; scant literature on technical professionals, but some acknowledgement that they were making contributions in academic spaces; and academic administration managers representing a typical bounded professional. By exploring boundaries examined through our research, we have shown how these three areas are evolving, albeit on different timescales, and dependent on institutional commitment.

Despite the differences in our research designs, we have demonstrated that there is much commonality in the experiences of our professional staff groupings, and in their historical and current positioning as 'other' or secondary employees to academics, and we suggest that we should acknowledge this within our institutions. We have also shown how the role of professional university staff has evolved and grown over time, in response to sector and institutional need, which we argue underlines the need for visibility and recognition of their skills, knowledge and experience.

Typically, of the three areas we represent, widening participation staff are exemplified as third space professionals, but Webster-Deakin's experiences in her everyday work interactions were at odds

with this view, and her experiences are, in fact, borne out in the widening participation literature (Burke, 2013; Johnson et al., 2019). In her study, it was only through a sustained, collaborative activity that boundaries were dismantled for the co-researchers involved. Verney's evidence highlights that administrative managers can influence and lead institutional policy, operations and strategic change, but usually only those at a senior level. This suggests an evolution from a bounded space into a third space, although this may be sporadic, not permanent, and influenced by hierarchical structures. Hierarchy also plays a role in Vere's findings, where she now has status, and therefore a voice, due to her strategic intervention on behalf of technical staff across the higher education sector, showing that even those most bounded spaces can evolve with sector-wide support and signalling.

Based on our findings, we suggest that the third space should not be conceived as a discrete or distinct space, which professionals work within or outside of; instead, we suggest that the 'third space' is better conceptualised as a way of working, which all higher education professionals may engage in, to greater or lesser extents. We argue that all professional staff have the capacity to inform, shape and enhance the work of universities, and that this can be done at individual, institutional or sector level. However, the knowledge that professional staff hold needs to be acknowledged, invited and welcomed, to help universities solve some of the complex issues they are now facing.

Our findings reinforce arguments made by Rhoades (2010) that there is intellectual capital in parts of the higher education workforce outside the academic community, and the call from Veles (2022) that we need to find ways to harness collaborative working that recognises the experience and knowledge contributed by all parts of the workforce. Our research shows that such collaboration is possible, and it offers tangible benefits to academic staff, to professional staff, and to students. Vere's work to develop the Technician Commitment is an example of sector-wide recognition of, and investment in, a particular group of university staff who can now attest to their increased visibility and resultant professional status. However, in the absence of a similar commitment for each professional staff area of work, what can be done to challenge, cross and dismantle these historic and, often, limiting boundaries? We suggest that there is a role for sector organisations to help with this, for example, through the Association for Higher Education Professionals and AdvanceHE, who have recently begun to explore professional services leadership boundaries (Harrison, 2023).

We argue that there are multiple opportunities to review and expand the contribution made by professional university staff to what have been, traditionally, solely academic spaces. In an increasingly regulated sector, the expertise of academic administrators is key to ensuring a positive student experience of teaching and learning processes. In laboratories, workshops and studios, technical staff contribute to activity assessed by the Teaching and Research Excellence Frameworks. Looking outward, widening participation staff provide a bridge between school and university, embedding the principles of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion, and supporting and shaping the Access and Participation Plan. Drawing on the experience, knowledge and skills of these, and other groups of professional staff, and inviting them into wider university conversations, will strengthen an institution's delivery of their strategy and goals.

It therefore becomes less important to think about whether third space professionals exist, or whether particular staff groups are third space professionals, but rather to observe when and where professional staff groups are successfully working in collaborative spaces, to learn from these approaches, and to allow the time and space to dismantle the boundaries that prevent collaboration in our universities.

Conclusion

In this article, we set out to demonstrate how the lens of the third space can be used to unify the collective findings of three research projects that explored the boundaries between professional and academic work. The third space concept has helped us bring together three distinct research activities, which had different methodologies and approaches; the concept acts as a framework through which to compare, contrast and draw out wider themes and implications for the higher education sector.

Each of us was able to provide examples of third space working where boundaries between academic and professional staff were being crossed, or, in some cases, being dismantled. However, we are still having to qualify our position, both in this article and in our thinking, using the language of boundaries, which signals that there is still much to be done to remove the 'them and us' mentality.

We do not suggest that this mentality is solely the purview of academic staff. On the contrary, it is the wider structure of higher education which has created and sustained parameters and boundaries around university work at all levels and in all job families.

Higher education continues to face challenges of multiple types and increasing scale. We have shown how, in each of our realms, third space working regularly occurs, and that the central university mission of research and teaching is directly underpinned by our work. A sector in which combined knowledge and expertise is directed to address these challenges through enabling professional and academic staff to step into a third, or other, university space to find shared solutions seems a sensible, if not necessary, next step. Activating such collaboration requires investment of time, space and, in some cases, resource. We argue that a long-term investment such as this would lead to a more motivated workforce, a kinder culture and, ultimately, a more successful sector, in which staff and students can thrive.

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Research ethics statement

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Consent for publication statement

The authors declare 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

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