



A pan-European perspective of third space professionals located in learning and teaching centres

Graham W Scott

University of Hull, UK

Manuel Joao Costa

University of Minho, Portugal

Mike Ewen

University of Hull, UK

Catherine Lillie

University of Hull, UK

Helene Peterbauer

European University Association, Belgium

Oliver Vettori

Vienna University of Economics and Business, Austria

Carina Weiß

Vienna University of Economics and Business, Austria

Johanna Warm

Vienna University of Economics and Business, Austria

Aune Valk

University of Tartu, Estonia

Mari Karm

University of Tartu, Estonia

Hanna Britt Soots

University of Tartu, Estonia

Guðrún Geirsdóttir

University of Iceland, Iceland

Francesco Magni

University of Bergamo, Italy

Laura Sara Agrati

University of Bergamo, Italy

Nikos Basbas

Tilburg University, Netherlands

Daniela Căprioară

Ovidius University of Constanta, Romania

Mihai Girtu

Ovidius University of Constanta, Romania

Gunvor Larsson Torstensdotter

Linköping University, Sweden

Peter Dalenius

Linköping University, Sweden

Josefine Kilborn

Linköping University, Sweden

Berrin Yanıkkaya

Yeditepe University, Türkiye

Mehmet Korman

Yeditepe University, Türkiye

Denizalp Şimşek

Yeditepe University, Türkiye

Toprak Cem Savaş

Yeditepe University, Türkiye

Abstract

During 2023, the European University Association brought together members of 10 Learning and Teaching Centres from 10 European countries to explore the development and strategic benefits of Learning and Teaching Centres. Through critical self-reflection and active dialogue, the group developed a consensus on the positive value of active collaboration between academic, administrative, and third space professional staff in the effective functioning of Learning and Teaching Centres. They also recognised two pan-European challenges faced by centres and those working within them, namely institutional position and trust and credibility, in light of which they proposed two lines of enquiry that should be the focus of further pan-European discourse and action.

Keywords: learning and teaching centres; learning development; institutional position; trust and credibility.

Introduction

During 2023, the European University Association (EUA) established a Thematic Peer Group (TPG) to explore the development and strategic benefits of Learning and Teaching Centres. The objectives of EUA TPGs are:

- To discuss and explore practices and lessons learnt in organising and implementing learning and teaching in European Universities.
- To contribute to the enhancement of learning and teaching by identifying key considerations on selected themes.

A main objective of the development and strategic benefits of Learning and Teaching Centres TPG was to explore common challenges experienced by European centres supporting the development of staff involved in teaching and learning and of university teaching practice.

The group represented 10 universities from 10 European countries (Austria, Estonia, Iceland, Italy, Netherlands, Portugal, Romania, Sweden, Turkey, and the United Kingdom). Details of participating centres and the group's work is available from the EUA website (EUA, 2024) but in brief, the centres were staffed by varying combinations of academic, administrative, and academic development staff (who understood that because their roles spanned the academic and non-academic dichotomy, they could be defined as being third space professionals). The centres were structured in a range of ways and occupied a variety of positions within their respective institutions. They did, however, all serve the same core function which was to support the scholarship-based development of learning and teaching within their institution, a characteristic of third space professionals and centres previously identified by Geertsema (2016).

Through critical self-reflection and active dialogue, the group developed a consensus on the positive value of active collaboration between academic, administrative, and third space professional staff in the effective functioning of Learning and Teaching Centres, and in the context of this special issue of JLDHE, identified two common interacting challenges facing third-space academic developers, namely institutional position and trust and credibility.

Institutional position

A Learning and Teaching Centre's position within the institution has a significant bearing upon the 'position' of the academic development community within that institution. Across the group, Learning and Teaching Centres varied: teams within an academic (pedagogic) department; discrete service-oriented units providing bottom-up support to academic staff; strategic development units led by senior members of the academic community; and relatively informal communities of academic and third-space professionals carrying out academic development activity alongside another substantive role. Where on this continuum a centre is positioned has a significant bearing upon both the ease with which it can access/direct resources and influence strategic operations, and the ability of academic developers within it to influence practice and shift institutional culture around teaching and learning. The position of the centre is key to the value/esteem attributed to it by the wider university community. Considering this, the group suggest that a key question for Learning and Teaching Centres across Europe should be:

- How can a Learning and Teaching Centre be best positioned within an institution to maximise their impact upon learning and teaching development?

Trust and credibility

The group recognised the potential tension existing between third-space professionals and the academic community that they support if there is a lack of recognition by the latter of the academic and professional specialism of the former. This can lead to a lack of trust in academic developers and a perception of a lack of credibility in the work that they do. An under-valuing that has been explored by Denney (2022). This situation becomes more likely if academic development is seen as a challenge to disciplinary teaching expertise or, in the words of one group member, if academic developers are considered members of 'an upstart centre who meddles with everything that has been going on for years without it'. Across the group there was a consensus that the trust and credibility 'gap' is most prevalent where the work of Learning and Teaching Centres is not visible, not understood, or not seen as relevant at a discipline/subject teaching or individual academic level. In this

context, Chabaya (2020) has suggested that it is essential that Learning and Teaching Centres are valued and championed by senior leaders at a strategic level.

Considering this, the group suggest that a key question for Learning and Teaching centres across Europe should be:

How can a Learning and Teaching Centre define, evidence, and communicate its impact and added value within the institution?

Conclusion

We acknowledge that these challenges have been identified in the past and written about in journals including JLDHE (e.g. Kukhareva and Buckley, 2023). But here we present evidence that despite the attention they have received, they persist and are experienced by third space professionals at a pan-European scale. We suggest, therefore, that an international discussion and call to action is urgently needed to address them.

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Author details

The 24 authors of the paper hold a variety of academic and non-academic/academic related roles at their institutions, and some are students. Details can be found in the published report of the EUA project that stimulated this paper at: <https://www.eua.eu/publications/reports/development-and-strategic-benefits-of-learning-and-teaching-centres.html>

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