



## **Education-focused academics in pursuit of third-space visibility: a five-step process**

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### ***Abstract***

Education-focused academics were introduced to enhance the quality of education and assist universities in addressing sector metrics that would place them favourably within an increasingly competitive environment. We argue that they form part of third-space staff in universities as their work remains mostly hidden as part of a ‘taken-for-granted’ infrastructure. Following the infrastructure metaphor, we propose a five-step process in the career development of education-focused academics, from early career to educational leaders, that would bring visibility to their work and that of other third-space occupants. Making third-space work visible on the personal, organisational, and sectoral levels will ensure real impact and fulfilment of its disruptive and transformative potential for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs).

**Keywords:** third space; education-focused academics; visibility; infrastructure.

### ***Introduction***

The education-focused academic job family is a relatively recent type of academic category, introduced to enhance the quality of education in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) (Hulme, 2022) and to help them withstand economic and societal pressures (Veles, Carter and Boon, 2019). Such pressures have emerged from wider developments in the UK higher education landscape in the past decade, requiring HEIs to demonstrate value for money and position themselves favourably within an emerging competitive, sectoral environment.

The change in higher education funding, with the introduction of student fees of over £9000 per year (Hillman, 2016), has, for example, shifted the cost of higher education from taxpayers to students, who are now given much more choice to decide where and what to study. This decision is now made in market terms and students receive much more information comparing courses and HEIs. Indeed, courses are increasingly evaluated by students and their families in terms of their employability potential upon graduation, while the quality of education standards has been expanded to include various support mechanisms and services catered to improvements in student experience, e.g. campus life, employability, and access to library resources (Temple et al., 2014).

Various sector metrics have come to be associated with these changing dynamics, including the National Student Survey (NSS)—now seen as a decision-making tool for prospective students to select the most suitable course. The type of data the survey collects, such as quality of teaching, learning opportunities given, assessment process, academic support, resources, mental wellbeing, and course management, have driven areas of innovative focus and improvements in HEIs. The introduction of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) in 2017 to assess and recognise excellent teaching in HEIs was another policy instrument envisaged to improve the quality of educational provision, while providing information to help students make choices on where to study (Kagan and Diamond, 2019).

The above changes have therefore driven a much greater focus on the teaching role of universities, and HEIs have subsequently invested in education-focused academics<sup>1</sup> to improve educational standards. These academics have been introduced across the sector as expert teachers and scholars of teaching and learning who go beyond their disciplinary boundaries to enhance teaching and learning (Godbold, Matthews and Gannaway, 2023). Although this has signalled commitment by HEIs to improve educational provisions and graduate outcomes, it has not been clear where these academics fit within existing institutional structures and cultures. As a result, their expertise remains undervalued and their contributions invisible, when compared to research-focused academics. This may lead to difficulties with career progression, poor mental health and wellbeing, and

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<sup>1</sup> We prefer the term 'education-focused' to 'teaching-only' (Nyamapfene, 2014) or 'teaching-focused' (Smith and Walker, 2024), as the former is more encompassing of the role of such practitioners in a higher education setting.

ultimately a self-fulfilling prophecy of failure (Randel et al., 2018; Denney 2022a). Within research-intensive HEIs in particular, the role of education-focused academics appears to be assuming the status of a 'spoiled identity', that is, the wrong type of identity to have in this setting (Nyamapfene, 2014).

Given the above, we argue that education-focused academics experience similar challenges to those referred to as third-space professionals, i.e. educational and learning developers, learning technology experts, and so on. In this paper, we explore the role of education-focused academics within the third space. We argue that embracing the third space will allow education-focused academics to craft and pursue unique academic identities for themselves and become more visible within and beyond their own institutions.

### ***What is the third space?***

The third space in a higher education setting has been defined as the liminal space between academic work and professional services (Whitchurch, 2013). Its main characteristic is hybridity, where multiple expertise and backgrounds can be assembled and meaningfully interact (Hall, 2022). Occupants of the third space are usually learning developers, e-learning experts, librarians, quality and student-support professionals, and collectively they could be termed as blended professionals (Whitchurch, 2008).

As a spatial metaphor, the third space is a positive picture of work that crosses boundaries, opens new frontiers, and offers hope of transdisciplinary connections and relationships (Hall, 2022). It has even been described as a political act of disrupting existing binary ways of understanding the university and higher education, because third-space occupants are well placed to observe and 'critique dominant practices and disrupt cultures that inhibit change or effective student learning' (Hall, 2022, p.28). Third-space professionals, therefore, have the ability to serve as activist advocates within universities, 'to model leadership, to advocate for sustainable innovations, to be strategic, to be politically aware, aware of values, of power and positioning within the organisation' (Sugrue et al., 2018, p.2346).

The work of third-space professionals was especially important during the Covid-19 pandemic. During this time of unprecedented crisis, it was e-learning specialists and

learning developers who carried most of the weight of trying to rescue universities and keep them afloat during lockdowns and transition towards remote and hybrid teaching delivery. It was at this point that education-focused professionals became most clearly associated with third-space work, as they stepped forward and, together with third-space professionals, demonstrated their positive impact on the transition to online/blended delivery (Hulme, 2022). During this time of crisis, then, third-space professionals, including education-focused academics, took on a more strategic role and became pivotal to the survival of universities (Hall, 2022).

Despite its importance at that point, from our experience, post-pandemic, third-space work has returned to being largely anonymous and invisible (Hall, 2022). The reason for this may be attributed to the institutional and organisational bifurcation in higher education between academic and non-academic work, resulting in 'institutional blindness' (Akerman, 2020, p.128) for third-space professionals and their work. We propose that it is possible for the third space to become more visible and accessible so that it continues to positively influence teaching and learning innovations in the long term. Moreover, education-focused academics and other third-space professionals should make third-space visibility a central part of their professional and career development.

### ***The third space as an infrastructure***

The importance of third-space work makes it resemble an infrastructure, defined as something upon which something else operates. To become an effective infrastructure, an entity usually sinks into the background and invisibly supports operations (Star and Ruhleder, 1996). Invisibility is based on the notion that an infrastructure is usually taken for granted, it is 'just there', and it becomes visible only at moments of breakdown (Star and Ruhleder, 1996) or at times of crisis (Kaniadakis and Elbanna, 2019), e.g. the Covid-19 pandemic. As a result, a lot of critical work may be lumped in with infrastructural work (Star and Strauss, 1999) that does not need to be seen and, thus, placed into a black box (Latour, 1999). As a result, the knowledge, skills, and contributions of certain professionals can go unnoticed and unrecognised, which is certainly true for education-focused academics. This seems paradoxical, given that these roles were allegedly introduced to challenge and improve existing teaching and learning approaches and enhance performance against sector-specific metrics (NSS, TEF).

Though an invisible infrastructure is usually taken as a sign that it has been widely accepted by its users, some argue that the concept of an invisible infrastructure is fundamentally inaccurate (Larkin, 2013). Invisibility, as Larkin argues, 'is certainly one aspect of infrastructure, but it is only one and at the extreme edge of a range of visibilities that move from unseen to grand spectacles and everything in between' (Larkin, 2013, p.336). We therefore argue that third-space work, although it may manifest infrastructure qualities for HEIs, does not have to remain in the background. In fact, we suggest that it must become more visible to increase its impact. In the following section, we propose that education-focused academics should actively pursue visibility of the third space while they develop their careers.

### ***Education-focused academics in pursuit of third-space visibility***

We propose here a five-step approach that education-focused academics, as third-space professionals themselves, can follow to pursue visibility of their work at various levels: personal, organisational, and sectoral. The first two steps involve crafting unique academic identities, aligned to institutional strategies and sectoral challenges and positioning them within the third space. The next two steps involve visibility pursuit through mentoring others and scholarship of teaching and learning. The final step involves visibility via senior leadership roles. The order of the steps is not prescriptive—e.g. a senior academic leader could go back and revisit their 'purpose'—and it is not meant to be a well-defined, professional-development approach to be implemented at an institutional level. Its purpose is to inspire education-focused academics to engage with third-space work and community, and to make third-space visibility an active pursuit of their professional and career development.

#### **1) Search for purpose**

Education-focused academics, upon their appointment, will almost certainly need to search for legitimacy, recognition, and purpose (Godbold, Matthews and Gannaway, 2023). Given the sectoral ambiguity surrounding such roles, and to overcome institutional blindness that would render their work invisible, their aim should not necessarily be to fit within existing research/teaching/support divides. Instead, they should focus on crafting

unique and authentic identities and careers for themselves (Black, 2024) that stand out and align with the strategic position of the home HEI within the sector. Framing academic identities around equality, diversity, and inclusivity, for example, which is increasingly becoming of strategic importance to many HEIs (Scott, 2020), offers opportunities for education-focused academics to gain visibility.

## **2) Embrace the third-space approach**

Positioning oneself within the third-space community and embracing its critical lens are central to the identity work described above (Hulme, 2022). This may allow education-focused academics to navigate complex institutional structures, challenge cultural stereotypes, and develop knowledge and skills beyond their discipline. Building networks within their own organisation and beyond with those in similar positions and others in third-space roles (such as academic and learning developers) is crucial to this. Bottom-up initiatives in the authors' home institution, which strengthen the teaching and learning community and expose education-focused academics to the third space, have been widely popular and gained visibility and (financial) support of senior management (i.e. Deans of College, Vice Dean—Education).

## **3) Become academic developers**

Education-focused academics—in partnership with the other third-space professionals with whom they have built relationships in step two—have the opportunity to engage with colleagues in their discipline and help those colleagues bring their own research into the classroom. Education-focused academics may act as mentors and help curate spaces to support teaching and learning for their research-oriented colleagues (Godbold, Matthews and Gannaway, 2023). This academic-developer role will help add visibility to their work within the organisation/discipline, while helping colleagues with their professional and career development. Close alliances with those in central academic-development units will be of mutual benefit at this point.

## **4) Engage in SoTL activities**

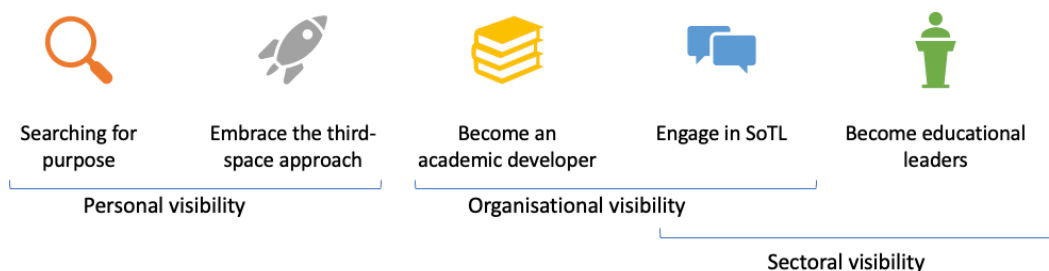
Reflections on academic practice and institutional approaches to teaching and learning, as well as academic development projects, will generate interesting innovations and

scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) activities. These can be in the form of educational interventions (see Kaniadakis and Padumadasa, 2022 for e-learning intervention to support transitions to university) and/or SoTL dissemination via conference presentations and journal publications (Smith and Walker, 2024). This will create opportunities for visibility within the HE sector both nationally and internationally. Again, these are not activities that are best undertaken individually. Indeed, one of the responsibilities, as well as opportunities, of being in the third space is to act collegiately and to build effective bridges and networks to support educational enhancement (Denney 2022b).

### 5) Become educational leaders

Provided that—through steps one to four—education-focused academics have gained relevant experience and may evidence transformative impact within their home HEI and beyond, progressing to senior leadership roles is certainly an option for those wishing to pursue it. In our home HEI, such roles could include Director of Teaching and Learning, Associate and Vice Dean (Education), Deputy Dean, Dean, and Pro-Vice Chancellor (Education). The increased visibility accompanying such roles can allow education-focused academics who have gone through steps one to four and have embedded the third space within their professional identity to influence strategic leadership of HEIs on how to support and utilise the third space. We have started to see the progression of those on education-academic contracts to the top of our home institution, as well as gaining national reputations, but this is still a minority at the time of writing. Ideally, more educational leaders in universities would provide better role models for those considering options and identities further along in their careers.

**Figure 1. Education-focused academics pursuing third-space visibility.**



## **Conclusion**

Education-focused academics were introduced in HEIs to enhance teaching and learning, addressing some of the key sector metrics as represented in the TEF and NSS. Furthermore, improvements in aspects such as student attainment, inclusion, satisfaction, and graduate employability require disruptive and critical interventions which challenge the status quo and existing institutional arrangements and organisational culture. Excepting the pandemic period, however, education-focused academics have largely remained invisible as they occupy the contested middle ground in the same way that other third-space professionals do. For education-focused professionals to achieve the desired impact, engagement with the third-space community is essential and beneficial for both parties, as it will enhance the visibility of the contributions that both are making. In the modern era of marketisation and student choice, education-focused academics and other education-focused, third-space professionals can no longer remain as invisible struts in the HEI infrastructure. Their visibility is what will change the dynamics of the game in the future.

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