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Working thematically: changing the path to leadership for the third space

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Abstract

What does leadership mean in our universities, and how is it changing? This opinion piece offers a perspective on the role of third space leadership, through embracing thematic working and drawing together often disparate elements of the academy. The paper argues that the future workforce of higher education (HE) depends on third space leadership and that the skills, attributes, and opportunities, such as managing 'supercomplexity' (Barnett, 2000) and 'complex collaboration' (Veles et al., 2019) must be leveraged to support and encourage those who already work in this space. It offers two proposals that would affect the changes necessary to realise this, including looking at different HE contracts and criteria necessary for senior leadership.

Keywords: leadership; career progression; thematic working; academic contracts.

Introduction

'Student-staff ratios may not have an impact on the student experience after all' states WonkHE's Monday weekly briefing on 5th February 2024 (Kernohan, 2024). Digging below the headline, we find that the article identifies a lack of relationship between National Student Survey (NSS) student satisfaction data and 'staff' numbers, thus concluding that increasing the numbers of academics does not impact positively (nor negatively) on student satisfaction. Examining this further, however, we find that the staff numbers referred to are academic staff mapped to subject areas via cost centre, using the Higher

Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data[1]. This is unsurprising, perhaps, given that this is the common method in the sector of calculating student staff ratios (SSRs), but this provides yet another example of the missing contribution of the important leadership provided by third space professionals. Crucially, given the current complexity of the higher education sector, the importance of working thematically is still overlooked, particularly with regards to supporting and enabling the student experience. Furthermore, this inhibits the progression to senior leadership roles from those in the third space, and therefore denies our universities of some of the best expertise we have.

Working thematically refers to structures which focus on projects and are therefore more able to flex and respond rapidly to change. In the 'supercomplex' world of global and hyper-connected higher education, agility is likely to be key for future survival. The ability of organisations, therefore, to reconfigure their structures to respond to urgent challenge is crucial, but also goes against the tradition of hierarchical universities with established academic departments. Universities increasingly need to bring people from all areas of the institution together to work thematically on projects. Third space professionals are key to this, and Jonathan Grant predicts that the third space will continue to expand in the future to accommodate the increased desire for collaboration and to form agile responses to ongoing challenges such as the student experience. Indeed, Grant states that potentially third space professionals may become the largest staff group in future universities. This is where important leadership opportunities, and challenges, will emerge (Grant, 2021).

In recent years, literature on higher education has included discussions on the third space amidst a shifting working environment, where academic and professional expertise is often fused to shape connections between more disparate elements of the academy (Whitchurch and Gordon, 2013; Whitchurch, 2019; Grant, 2021; McIntosh and Nutt, 2022). Macfarlane (2011b) characterised this major change as the 'unbundling' of academic work to 'para-academic' staff who specialise in one aspect of the academic work. In this opinion piece, we draw further on the significant work of Celia Whitchurch (see also Whitchurch, 2006; 2008; 2009; 2012; 2015; 2019; Whitchurch and Gordon, 2013) and others (see also the edited collection by McIntosh and Nutt, 2022 and the work by Grant, 2021) who have recognised that what previously lay in the academic domain is now much more dispersed

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[1] Kernohan provides the data he refers to here:
https://public.tableau.com/shared/F7GZNRS93?:display_count=n&:origin=viz_share_link

throughout the academy where there is an ongoing imperative to work thematically, rather than be bounded by rigorous structures.

In particular, we argue that continuing invisibility of third space professionals limits not only recognition of their vital contributions in areas such as student experience, but also serves as a form of discrimination, restricting career progression of these key professional staff in the academy. This is particularly problematic given the need for an increasing third space in the future (Grant, 2021).

We also need to recognise the risk, however, that the third space is in danger of being no space at all if we do not acknowledge the legitimacy of important boundary-crossing professionals (Hall, 2022). Leaders of the future will have to work deftly in the hinterlands of HE structures, 'joining the dots', connecting disparate strands of work thematically, contributing to sense-making, and building HE coalitions to support change. We suggest here, therefore, that the leadership of the HE workforce of the future will rely on the skills developed in the third space, where colleagues are required to embrace matrix working, dealing adeptly with the concept of 'supercomplexity' (Barnett, 2000) and championing 'complex collaboration' (Veles et al., 2019).

Context

Kernohan's (2024) February article in WonkHE continues to highlight the issue that we only look at contributions of staff who can be defined as academic because we can measure them easily, and we therefore risk missing the value of the work of third space professionals altogether. This is especially challenging if future leadership opportunities are largely going to be placed in this sphere. In a neoliberal environment where quantification is equated with value, we cannot measure the work of third space professionals if we do not even begin to recognise formally their existence and enable their development. Given this current blind spot, we therefore consistently fail to recognise the significance of their contribution to the things that can be measured (albeit unsatisfactorily) such as student satisfaction via the NSS. Using Whitchurch's (2015) definition, there are more university staff working in the third space than ever before, and this will continue to expand (Grant, 2021; McIntosh and Nutt, 2022). If we cannot identify their contributions in a way that is measured, then we risk diminishing their value in higher education altogether.

To navigate leadership successfully in this space, there are both challenges and opportunities. The systems that exist within contemporary HE have often posed a challenge to professional or academic-related staff and impeded effective collaboration and partnership working between colleagues. This is because the hierarchies that have traditionally existed across the academy have not always promoted the importance of cross-boundary leadership, and/or have had structures and processes in place that can impact the effectiveness of co-creative approaches.

Recent scholarship suggests that things are changing and evolving, partly in response to the volatile and 'supercomplex' environment where fluidity and flexibility of working is critical. Indeed, the work of Abegglen et al. (2023) demonstrates opportunities creating personal and professional growth for third space colleagues which have evolved into a set of distinct leadership skills, attributes, and ways of working to support their adaptation to this environment. Veles et al. (2023) recently traced this gradual evolution of HE professional staff roles, identities, and interaction in spaces over the last 20 years. They provide evidence of changes in professional identity construction, and highlight a growing sense of agency amongst professional staff, notably around increasing the visibility of their contributions to university work and developing collaborations with academic staff (Veles et al., 2023).

So why have we framed this as a challenge for leadership in higher education? Senior leadership in universities is usually formed of both academic staff and 'non-academic' staff, i.e. those who have progressed almost exclusively via an academic route, and those who are from professional-only backgrounds such as chief operating officers, directors of human resources, finance, etc. Senior leadership therefore tends to be binary in its make-up and its outlook - things are either academic or 'non-academic'. Often, activities that span the third space are overlooked - such as academic skills support for students and academic practice/development for staff. This exacerbates an already bifurcated environment and limits the ability of the university to reflect a wider perspective on challenges and how these might be addressed. In turn, this risks narrowing leadership viewpoints thus impacting on decision-making in the 'supercomplex' environment which universities now have to survive and thrive in.

Leadership

For some years, work has been conducted into the leadership and management experiences of academics who usually have no preparation or training for the roles and responsibilities that they progress to (Denney et al., 2015). Often promoted on the basis of their good academic qualities or 'prestige' (Blackmore and Kandiko, 2011), they find themselves adrift in a sea of management expectations that they had no adequate preparation for and those who do a 'good job' seem to do so more by luck than judgement. Although more recent research is identifying the need for additional investment in leadership training and development for academic managers now than before (Budjanovcanin and Denney, 2021), this still does not address the gap of how third space professionals can progress to leadership roles, and it continues to overlook the fact that they might be highly equipped to do the job well. Furthermore, the inherent bifurcation in higher education restricts an adequate exposure to leadership development early on in a third space career to enable people to identify whether this is a route that they want to take and for the organisation to have a wider pool of people to choose from. Currently, we risk restricting leadership to those who opt for it (for whatever reason), have academic credibility, or who are willing to put their research aside for a period. This is probably not the ideal set of characteristics for leaders needing to deal with the current challenges facing higher education.

Below, we discuss two changes that, if made, would support third space professionals to play a more integrated role and progress to higher leadership positions.

Where next?

Contract changes

Our first proposal is that universities work harder to ensure that the different types of contracts they have accurately reflect the diversity of the work that is carried out across the institution. Most universities in the UK now have at least four types of staff contracts, roughly categorised as: professional services; academic (research and teaching); academic (teaching only, or education/education and scholarship); academic (research only) (Macfarlane, 2011a; Daumiller et al., 2020; Szromek and Wolniak, 2020; Smith and Walker, 2024). Despite the three different types of academic contract, those working in

third space roles are often put on professional services contracts (usually due to reporting lines), which restricts access to promotion and to academic leadership positions. We therefore argue that universities should look at introducing academic-strategic contracts, where those working in the third space could gain recognition for their contributions to the academic work of the university and have a route for development and promotion.

Criteria for routes to leadership

Following on from contract changes and access to promotion, routes to leadership need to be considered. Senior leadership roles in the university (vice-chancellor, deputy vice chancellor) are academic roles and usually require significant research outputs and academic contributions. We argue here that a stellar research career is not necessarily the best qualification for leading in times of supercomplexity, and this is an area where the abilities and expertise of third space professionals could be enormously useful. Third space professionals, however, are excluded from routes to leadership due to their lack of research outputs. We therefore urge headhunters and university councils to consider whether this is a genuine requirement for effective leadership in the modern era. Instead, we argue that a highly-regarded research career could be substituted for strategic leadership, boundary-crossing expertise, and effective matrix working, with demonstrable impact on the academic work of the institution and sector. National and international recognition can be demonstrated by the awards of Principal Fellow of AdvanceHE (PFHEA), National Teaching Fellow (NTF), and Collaborative Award for Teaching Excellence (CATE), but these are often dismissed as simply being 'teaching excellence awards'. This indicates a lack of understanding that these awards recognise the specific skills outlined above that make third space professionals so appropriate for senior academic leadership roles.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have argued that the time has come to take a different approach to the recognition and progression of third spacers to senior leadership roles in our universities, and that our ability to respond rapidly to challenges presented by 'supercomplex' macro-environments relies on thematic working, in which third space professionals play a crucial role. We must see down the arguments that only academic staff are 'counted' and able to

lead our universities. We ignore the valuable contributions and expertise of our third space staff in the modern era at our peril. We will continue to get the leadership in higher education we deserve if we do not address this matter urgently.

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