



‘It feels like you’ve joined the university club’: the transformative potential of fellowship recognition for professional services staff

Caroline Ball

University of Derby, UK

Chris Ribchester

University of Derby, UK

Abstract

This paper explores the impacts of engaging with fellowship professional recognition for third-space professionals within universities. The authors conducted ten semi-structured interviews with colleagues from four different professional areas: careers, library, technology-enhanced learning and technicians, after they had attained Fellowship recognition. Analysis revealed key themes around enhanced voice, confidence, reflection, and identity that resulted from successfully completing the fellowship process. However, translating these benefits into practice relies heavily on inclusive structures of encouragement, role models and support in making the language and expectations accessible. The findings indicate professional recognition schemes grounded in tailored guidance for support staff contexts offer significant untapped potential. Extending access requires critical examination of how well current cultures and systems value expertise across all university roles.

Keywords: third space; professional recognition; professional development; professional services staff; higher education; Advance HE; fellowship; UKPSF.

Introduction

This research paper investigates how professional services staff at the University of Derby engage with professional recognition through the university’s fellowship scheme, known as Pathfinder. The scheme is accredited by Advance HE and, at the time of the research, was

the transformative potential of fellowship recognition for professional services staff aligned to the 2011 version of the UK Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF) (Advance HE, 2011). Staff can apply for Associate Fellowship (D1), Fellowship (D2) and Senior Fellowship (D3) through Pathfinder. The scheme, launched in 2019, places a strong focus on providing recognition opportunities for all staff involved in facilitating student success, not just those aligned to formal teaching roles, and can claim good progress in drawing in colleagues from various university professional departments. For example, in the first three years of the scheme, 31% of all successful applicants were from professional services staff. This increasingly diverse engagement, coupled with the existing gap in research on third-space professionals' experiences of professional recognition (as outlined below), highlights the significance of this study.

The support model for Pathfinder embraces several linked components. Following participation in an induction session, applicants are provided access to an online resource base including guidance handbooks and the application templates. These asynchronous resources are supplemented by group-based sessions and individual support, all of which are typically delivered online. The former primarily consists of one-hour workshops focused on different elements of the application, e.g. learning and teaching philosophy, and writing retreats. The latter can manifest at any point throughout an applicant's Pathfinder journey from, for example, an early exploration of potential examples to be included in applications, through to formative feedback on work in progress. This pattern of support is available for all applicants but, from the inception of the Pathfinder scheme, has also been complemented by bespoke group inductions and activities for professional services staff, often targeted to specific roles, most frequently the library, careers, and the university's technician community.

This study aimed to achieve the following objectives:

- 1) Explore the motivations of professional services staff for pursuing fellowship.
- 2) Identify barriers that may prevent or inhibit application for fellowship.
- 3) Understand the impact on staff of successfully completing the fellowship process.
- 4) Examine the relationship between professional identity and the perceived value of fellowship.
- 5) Inform effective strategies to support professional services staff seeking recognition.

While the research was conducted at a single institution and participants do not represent the full spread of roles that could be considered third-space professionals, the findings nonetheless offer valuable insights for all higher education contexts and provide a springboard for wider research and new directions for practice.

By foregrounding the perspectives of third-space professionals, this study sheds light on this under-researched area and offers valuable insights for developing inclusive recognition frameworks within universities, fostering a more collaborative learning ecosystem. The findings have relevance to colleagues in the full diversity of professional services roles, including learning developers who may be considering applying for fellowship or who are supporting their peers with their professional recognition aspirations.

For the purposes of this paper, 'third-space professionals' are defined as individual professionals whose roles sit within departments classed as 'non-academic' or 'support', but who nevertheless have significant teaching commitments or significant responsibility for supporting learners.

Literature review

Existing research highlights the challenges faced by third-space professionals, such as navigating complex hierarchies and having a liminal identity within the university structure (Whitchurch, 2013). This lack of clear recognition also extends to their contributions to teaching and learning, which are often undervalued by existing frameworks like fellowship professional recognition schemes, and this is reflected in the scholarly literature.

While the role and value of fellowship in professional development have been explored, research on the experiences of third-space professionals engaging with these schemes remains limited. Recent studies have focused on the challenges of embedding fellowship schemes within higher education institutions (Peat, 2015; Spowart et al., 2019); the impact (if any) that such schemes can have on teaching practice (van der Sluis et al., 2017; Botham, 2018a; Shaw, 2018; Spowart et al., 2019; Cathcart et al., 2021; van der Sluis, 2023); factors that impact on engagement (Botham, 2018b); and fellowship schemes within the context of the overall UK Professional Standards Framework (Hibbert and Semler, 2016).

Wider research on accredited professional recognition schemes in general has focused on the development of best practice (Hall, 2017); the professionalising of teaching (Brown et al., 2002; Spowart et al., 2016); the value of formal recognition of teaching practice (Thornton, 2014); and the impact on individuals and departments (Hanbury et al., 2008); and whether there is even a need for accrediting professional development in this way (Thomson et al., 1996; Luby, 1999; Warnes, 2019).

However, it is noteworthy that almost all the current research on fellowship schemes focuses on their relationships to formal teaching roles. Only two articles were identified that focused on representatives from professional services staff (George and Rowland, 2019; Savage, 2019), and a further one made mention of 'academic-related' staff in 'support services, like computing and library services' (Thornton, 2014, p.231). The language used is also indicative of this perspective: Spowart et al. (2019, p.3) refer to 'academics' motivations' for engagement; Hibbert and Semler (2016, p.582) refer to the fellowship in relation to 'the role and experience of the faculty member'; van der Sluis et al. (2017) repeatedly refer only to 'academic staff'.

The prevailing view of a university defined solely by its curriculum-based formal teaching activity dies hard, and professional services staff, including third-space professionals, have been 'largely absent from the historical discourse regarding ideas of the university' (Salisbury and Peseta, 2018, p.243). Frequently professional services staff are defined within universities by what they are not (academics), as opposed to their varied roles and specialisms (Sebalj et al., 2012; Joubert, 2024), and irrespective of the often-significant teaching and student support activities they undertake but that may not be recognised through traditional frameworks. This approach has been described as 'negative classification' or 'negative marking' (Allen-Collinson, 2010) and can have the unintended effect of devaluing individuals in those roles (Castleman and Allen, 1995; McLean, 1996).

This issue of identity, lack or diminishment thereof, among professional services staff is an area that has been increasingly focused on within academic literature (Dobson, 2000; Szekeres, 2011; Graham, 2013; Rytberg and Geschwind, 2017; Obexer, 2022), as has the value and importance these roles can play in student outcomes (Regan et al., 2014; Graham and Regan, 2016; Roberts, 2018; Baltaru, 2019). However, the focus on professional services staff has rarely strayed beyond these twin topics of identity and

the transformative potential of fellowship recognition for professional services staff value. Little has been written specifically on the involvement of such staff with teaching recognition schemes, despite the often-large amount of teaching, whether formal or otherwise, and student support delivered by staff from departments such as libraries, learning development, careers, study or academic skills, and wellbeing.

The research detailed below aligns with the recent Advance HE (2022, p.48) review that emphasises the need to address barriers faced by staff 'that teach and support learning' in engaging with professional recognition schemes. By exploring the specific case of third-space professionals, this study aims to inform strategies for creating a more inclusive approach to teaching recognition within universities.

Methods

To address the research objectives, this study employed an inductive, thematic analysis approach, prioritising participant voice and avoiding pre-determined outcomes. After one year of delivery of the Pathfinder scheme, all successful applicants fitting the criteria of third-space professionals (i.e. in professional 'non-academic' roles but with significant teaching or learning support responsibilities) were invited to participate in the research. Ten out of twelve accepted the invitation, distributed across four professional services departments (Table 1). Two of the participants had gained Associate Fellowship, seven had been awarded Fellowship, and one Senior Fellowship.

Table 1. Summary of the research participants.

Participant label	Professional Services	Category of Fellowship achieved
TEL1	Technology-Enhanced Learning	Fellow
LIB1	Library	Fellow
CAE1	Careers and Employability	Fellow
TEL2	Technology-Enhanced Learning	Fellow
CAE2	Careers and Employability	Fellow
CAE3	Careers and Employability	Fellow
TEL3	Technology-Enhanced Learning	Senior Fellow
TEL4	Technology-Enhanced Learning	Associate Fellow
TEC1	Technician	Fellow
TEL5	Technology-Enhanced Learning	Associate Fellow

Data was gathered through semi-structured interviews lasting up to 60 minutes, informed by a flexible question guide closely aligned to the five research objectives. This approach allowed participants to share their experiences in detail and explore topics related to collaboration with academic colleagues, power dynamics within the university structure, and the potential for fellowship to contribute to their professional empowerment.

Interviews were recorded and transcribed. Framed by the five research objectives, an inductive analysis of the transcripts was undertaken in three stages: data familiarisation, emergent coding, and then the identification of categories (Cousins, 2009). Commonly occurring categories are reflected in the themes discussed in the Results and Discussion section below.

The study was reviewed and approved through the university's research ethics procedures (ETH1920-1759). Participants were provided with information sheets and gave informed consent. Anonymity and confidentiality were assured, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any point prior to final analysis and dissemination. Anonymised labels (see Table 1) have been used as identifiers for any quotations included in the narrative below. These ethical considerations were particularly important to ensure a safe space for third-space professionals to openly share their perspectives, given the power dynamics and potential for marginalisation within university structures.

Results and Discussion

This section explores the key themes identified through the interview analysis. The findings reveal a range of motivations driving these third-space professionals to pursue fellowship, alongside the challenges they encountered and the multifaceted impacts the process had on their professional lives.

Motivations for Fellowship

Participants' motivations for pursuing fellowship fell into two main categories: career advancement and personal development. Six participants expressed a desire to enhance their future job prospects, e.g. 'I've been looking for opportunities to develop my career for some time' (TEL3) or add to or reinforce their qualifications, 'I need to have that kind of

the transformative potential of fellowship recognition for professional services staff stamp of approval that I do know what I'm talking about. I've got the careers bit, I've got the practice knowledge, but what I haven't got is that [teaching] side' (CAE1).

Awareness of the increasing demand for fellowship in job advertisements was a contributing factor. However, personal development was also a significant motivator. Participants expressed a genuine interest in learning more about higher education, e.g. 'I was like, this is kind of quite nice, of how it would fit in alongside [my MA Education] and what I am doing as bringing up my professional recognition of things and my development in all of that, my personal development' (TEL3).

Others saw fellowship as an opportunity to gain recognition for their teaching skills and establish themselves as legitimate contributors to the student learning experience, something not always recognised within higher education (Silvey et al., 2018; McIntosh and Nutt, 2022): 'I did want to have some professional recognition for that side of the role [teaching] and also to further develop my own knowledge and skills. So the HEA fellowship seemed like the most logical way to do that' (LIB1).

Barriers and Challenges

Participants encountered several challenges throughout the Fellowship application process. A recurring theme was the lack of familiarity with academic underpinnings, literature, and theory. 'Really understanding the whole teaching process and that philosophy kind of stuff behind. Because being professional services and not academic, not teaching, I think that's the kind of gap in some way' (TEL3).

The complexity of the UKPSF criteria and its academic language further reinforced a sense of self-doubt and disconnect:

I think that's what turns people off because they, they look at that [UKPSF] and go "I can't see how I would fit that criteria" ... And I think when we sat down ... they can see how they could fit the criteria. But I think they can only do that with support ... I think it's quite, quite off-putting the language that's used. (TEC1)

These comments emphasised the prevalence of 'imposter syndrome' frequently referred to within third-space literature (Akerman, 2022; McIntosh and Nutt, 2022; Campbell, 2023). Interviewees expressed their unease via the concept of things being 'lost in translation':

a lot of the language can feel a bit like it's going over your head. It takes a bit of getting into the nitty-gritty of the language, just to understand that actually, what they're asking for is pretty straightforward. But it's just, it can look quite intimidating. (CAE3)

Another significant challenge was aligning their professional experience to the UKPSF, particularly when it came to demonstrating specific evidence of impact:

It was a lot of trying to get that kind of impact and how am I going to find this out or how does it work? And what have I done? And how has this impacted? It was hard and I think that that does become more difficult as a professional service rather than an academic. (TEL3)

While mapping materials exist to align some activities and learning opportunities with the UKPSF, like ALDinHE's LD-Maps (2015) and Sigma's MS-Maps (Bowers et al., 2017), many professional roles and disciplines lack such resources, especially those with established recognition paths such as librarian chartership.

Additionally, the time commitment required for application writing posed a challenge for some, with six participants struggling to dedicate time amidst their existing workload and ensuring that time was respected, e.g. 'Putting that [calendar blocks for time] in and making others realise the importance of that' (TEL3).

Impacts of Fellowship

Despite the challenges, participants reported a range of positive impacts resulting from their engagement with the fellowship process. A significant finding was the encouragement for deep reflection on past and current practices: 'Reflection is what makes an experience transformational and not transactional' (CAE3). This reflection led to a greater understanding of the rationale behind their approaches to supporting learning, the details and specificities of their work, and the scale and range of impacts they achieve.

Furthermore, the fellowship process fostered a greater appreciation for the importance of evaluating their impact and the value of 'following up' to assess the effectiveness of their work: 'the more you write, the more comes out, and the more you think, hang on a minute, that's that thing that I've done there has influenced the assessment, or that thing there has influenced the curriculum design' (CAE3).

Eight participants also reported a heightened sense of self-awareness regarding their career journeys and the specific impacts they have had on students and colleagues: ‘It’s made me realise, actually, I am making some kind of impact. I’m not just sat here doing nothing. I am making an impact on it. And that has built my confidence up more’ (TEL3).

Interestingly, the impacts extended beyond those anticipated when articulating the initial motivations for seeking professional recognition. For example, engagement with pedagogical literature and the development of academic writing skills emerged as potential pathways for further professional development, encouraging further academic study, e.g. ‘one real positive for me is that it’s kind of almost whet my appetite a little bit more for a bit more in terms of academic achievement and learning’ (TEL5) and participation in conferences: ‘I’ve realised I needed to push myself a bit further afield, the whole university wide and a bit further. So doing conferences, more about discussing the work I’ve done and sharing that practice with others’ (TEL3).

All the participants reported a boost in confidence and job satisfaction. ‘It did give a bit more confidence... it validated my experience. It was useful to show that I actually did have the experience and knowledge to be at a certain level of my abilities as a teacher’ (TEL2).

Fellowship recognition also provided a sense of validation and established participants as legitimate contributors within the university environment. This issue of credibility and legitimacy is one that echoes through much of the literature on third-space professionals (Enders and Naidoo, 2022; Hunt and Rhodes, 2023; Joubert, 2024), frequently leading to uncertainty around individuals’ sense of professional identity, position within the institution and future career directions (Obexer, 2022). One participant succinctly summed this up: ‘It feels like you’ve joined the university club, even though you perhaps worked in the university for years’ (LIB1).

Improved communication and collaboration with academics was another reported benefit, fostering a sense of shared purpose and breaking down perceived divides, e.g. ‘it’s given me more confidence to kind of talk at a level with academics, which has then evolved into these further projects’ (CAE3). Again, this notion of division or hierarchy within HE is another common theme found within third-space literature (Whitchurch, 2008, 2012, 2013,

the transformative potential of fellowship recognition for professional services staff (2018; McKay and Robson, 2022; Joubert, 2024) and was mentioned by every single participant of this study.

Importance of Support

A key theme emerging from the data is the crucial importance of effective, inclusive and widely promoted support structures in enabling professional services staff to successfully engage with fellowship. The interviews suggest both general encouragement and specific forms of support are valued by fellowship applicants from professional services backgrounds.

One participant highlighted the distinction between simply knowing support exists and feeling supported. They emphasised that Pathfinder's strength compared to other programmes they had experienced was the feeling of genuine support it provided:

I think when you do professional development programmes in whatever guise that might be, a lot of the time it's very easy to say on paper "Yes, there is support available, ask us if you need anything", but there's a difference between knowing that support is there and feeling supported. And I think that's the difference that I found with Pathfinder from other programmes that I might have done, is that feeling supported (CAE3).

Participants emphasised the value of ongoing encouragement and morale-boosting when undertaking the demanding fellowship application process. As one recalled:

I think just having someone for those difficult times when you're struggling, but also someone right at the beginning, to really help you formulate some kind of a plan. I think if you do that well to begin with, I think you need less support down the line (CAE3).

Participants also highlighted the motivating influence of having visible role models who had already successfully achieved fellowship recognition:

Particularly the professional support staff, if you are first in department to say that you're going to go and do this [fellowship], they're probably going to get that reaction of "Oh, why are you doing that? Is that for us?" ... So, to have people who have done it, as role models... I think it's important (TEL4).

Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory highlights the importance of addressing both the cognitive and affective aspects of support systems: as the above participant put it,

the transformative potential of fellowship recognition for professional services staff 'knowing that support is there' (cognitive) and 'feeling supported' (affective). Discrepancies between cognitive knowledge and affective experience can lead to what Bandura calls 'lower self-efficacy' – for example, if individuals doubt their ability to navigate support systems effectively or do not believe that the support offered will be helpful. This is of particular relevance for professional services staff pursuing fellowship, who already exist in the relatively uncertain and ambiguous 'third space' and must grapple with the barriers mentioned above.

Conversely, if staff members not only know that support exists but also feel genuinely supported through positive interactions and experiences, their self-efficacy is likely to be enhanced.

This strongly emphasises the importance of support, encouragement, and role models and suggests a vital need for stronger connections between academic and professional services staff. Whilst peer support is currently a key part of the support offered within the Pathfinder scheme, enhanced opportunities for individual and/or group peer support and/or mentorship programmes could further facilitate collaboration and empower third-space professionals to navigate the fellowship process.

Implications

The findings presented here paint a nuanced picture of the motivations, challenges, and impacts experienced by third-space professionals pursuing fellowship. While career advancement was a driving force for some, the process itself yielded a wider range of benefits. The encouragement for self-reflection, the development of new skills, and the enhanced sense of self-efficacy all served to contribute to a more empowered and confident professional identity. This is particularly significant for third-space professionals as their expertise is not always fully appreciated (Silvey et al., 2018; Enders and Naidoo, 2022; McIntosh and Nutt, 2022; Joubert, 2024).

Formal recognition can challenge existing hierarchies and contribute to a more inclusive learning environment (Webster, 2022). There is also the additional benefit highlighted by Silvey et al. (2018) of achieving a shared language via professional development.

Third-space professional roles often lie outside of traditional teaching structures and provide fewer options for the formal feedback and reflection that is an integral part of academic quality processes such as module evaluation questionnaires, end-of-year reviews, or peer review of teaching (McIntosh and Nutt, 2022). For these individuals, the fellowship process provides a rare opportunity for productive self-appraisal of contributions to teaching and learning, and they recognise the value. In contrast, previous research has shown that academic applicants can sometimes see the process as a hoop to jump through or a box to tick (Goodall and Rich, 2023; van der Sluis, 2023).

However, realising these various benefits for professional services staff relies heavily on appropriate structures of encouragement and guidance. Participants emphasised the difference between nominal and authentic support. The importance of role models and tailored support highlights the challenges faced by third-space professionals in navigating a framework designed primarily for academics. Mentorship programs that connect them with experienced fellows from both academic and professional-service backgrounds can facilitate collaboration and address the unique challenges faced by third-space professionals.

The challenges identified with 'translating' the formal academic language of the framework highlight the potential exclusion of third-space professionals operating outside of traditional teaching roles. Tailoring the framework to acknowledge and value their diverse contributions can help them feel more included within the university's teaching and learning community.

Extending access to fellowship therefore requires careful thought about tailoring support to third-space contexts. Those leading professional recognition schemes should consider how to make their application structures, support activities, communications and events welcoming and relevant to the full range of university roles supporting students. Hierarchies of belonging based on job title or contract should not exclude large sections of the university community from opportunities to have their teaching contributions recognised.

Conclusion

While exploratory, this study represents an important exploration of an overlooked area of practice and lays the groundwork for further research focused on the experiences of third-space professionals engaging with fellowship schemes. The findings suggest that professional recognition schemes grounded in inclusive support and recognition of the expertise found across all university roles offer significant untapped potential, for both individuals and institutions.

The authors plan further research to expand the pool of participants. This will include professional support staff not currently engaged with fellowship, to understand barriers and motivations. Interviewing line managers of successful fellows and colleagues involved in supporting institutional schemes will provide additional perspectives. This more comprehensive qualitative approach will facilitate a holistic institutional view. Comparing experiences across diverse university roles is key to evaluating how existing cultures and systems enable or impede access to recognition frameworks.

Further research across other institutions would also be valuable in assessing the ubiquitousness of the themes identified here. Such studies could provide more definitive evidence on the types of support that best enable professional services staff to successfully engage with teaching excellence frameworks. There is also scope for more targeted investigation of how fellowship recognition impacts career development and progression opportunities for professional staff. Longitudinal research tracking individuals on their journey towards fellowship and beyond would reveal longer-term effects.

Ultimately, enhancing inclusion requires critically examining how well professional excellence schemes align with and value the varied contributions of professional services staff. The new 2023 version of the Professional Standards Framework (Advance HE, 2023) has taken initial steps to better acknowledge the diverse roles that can contribute to high-quality learning including a greater emphasis on professional context. However, more consistent evidence is needed to inform practical steps to ensure that structures, communications, events, mentoring and assessment are tailored to make teaching recognition genuinely accessible across the whole university community.

It is only through recognising the expertise found across all university roles that the modern institution can realise its full potential as a collaborative community united in supporting students.

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Author details

Caroline Ball is an academic librarian at the University of Derby, a senior fellow of the Higher Education Academy and has also worked as a copyright and licensing advisor and a lecturer in publishing. Her research interests centre on knowledge equity, diversity, and democratisation of access to information and learning opportunities, focusing particularly on systemic barriers and biases in dominant knowledge systems. She is also an active Wikipedian, was awarded the UK Wikimedian of the Year award in 2020 and currently serves on the Wikimedia UK board of trustees.

Chris Ribchester is an associate professor of Learning and Teaching at the University of Derby with strategic responsibilities including oversight of the Advance HE accredited programmes and leadership of the Pathfinder Fellowship Scheme. He also has responsibility for the University's Undergraduate Research Scholarship Scheme, and he is the pedagogic lead for Education for Sustainable Development. The latter role aligns closely with ongoing research interests and projects, including approaches to embedding nature connectedness into the HE curriculum.

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