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Is a careers consultant for researchers a ‘third space’ professional in higher education?

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Abstract

In the limited research about the roles of careers professionals in higher education, very little has been written about careers consultants who specifically support academic researchers such as postgraduate research students and early career researchers, including postdoctoral research associates. This article sets out to create a better understanding of the role of careers consultants for researchers, drawing on the debate on ‘third space professionals’ to shed light on this complex and perhaps surprisingly challenging job in higher education institutions. After outlining a standard careers consultant’s work with reference to some of the available literature, the article uses a personal case study to highlight the realities of working across institutional boundaries. The author uses Daubney’s (2020) KASE framework drawn explicitly from careers work, work from Whitchurch (2013) from the third space literature, and a description from UKRI, the UK national funder, to describe and discuss their specific role (UKRI, cited Imperial, 2025). The article argues that, by performing many of the activities associated with an academic, the role-holder could be seen as an academic, but the author concludes that the notion of ‘third space professional’ fits well with the work of CCRs.

Keywords: third-space professional; careers consultant; careers consultant for researchers; employability.

Introduction

The purpose of this case study is to address a gap in the literature around careers professionals’ roles in higher education institutions. Careers consultants for researchers (CCRs) occupy a particular niche in their institutions, often sited organisationally within

student support services, but working with client groups including postgraduate research students (PGRs) and early career researchers (ECRs) such as postdoctoral research associates, who are supported day to day by research management and funding departments or staff organisational development. The study will provide detail about these roles, using the insights into the researchers' world gained from the author's own position. It is hoped that this detail will serve to promote interest in these roles by showing the range of work delivered and skill required, and to bring awareness of their work across organisational divides. It is also important to understand the work of career guidance professionals who focus on supporting PGRs and ECRs because of the part CCRs play in UK national policy priorities to enhance researchers' career mobility across different sectors (BEIS, 2021).

The case study approach builds up layers of understanding, starting with a brief description of the role of a standard careers consultant in higher education. It builds onto that a discussion of the role of a CCR, using Daubney's KASE framework (Daubney, 2021), to illustrate the knowledge, attributes, skills and experiences required for that role. It is useful also to consider Denney's (2022) 'bridge professional' in thinking of CCRs' roles.

Finally, in discussing the author's current role, using UK Research and Innovation's 'iceberg' diagram (UKRI, cited Imperial, 2025, see Figure 4), it is asserted that their activities and experiences would map onto those deemed desirable in an academic researcher. The case study allows for a personal insight into how the term 'third space professional' (Whitchurch, 2013) could create status in what is sometimes an uncomfortable institutional situation. The intention is to demonstrate the worth and value of the breadth and depth of CCRs' work.

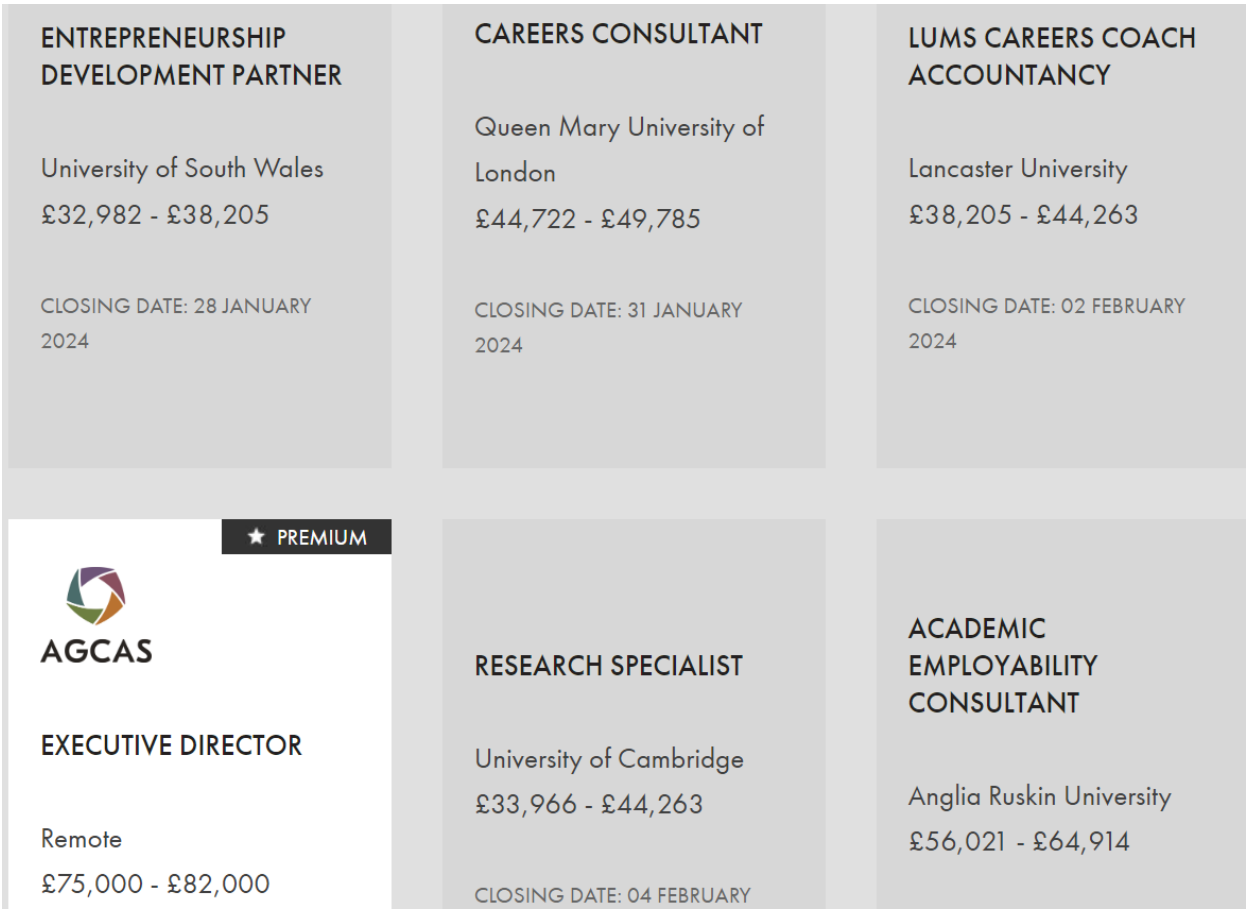
What do careers consultants do?

This article refers to the job title 'careers consultant', while noting that in some careers services, 'careers adviser' is the preferred term. A profile for 'higher education careers adviser' (Prospects, 2025) lists consultants' standard tasks: one-to-one guidance work, organising training events, and working with employers to learn about the current labour market and recruitment trends. It can also include the creation of online learning, marketing activities to client groups, and the need to 'code, analyse and interpret data for

[national graduate] surveys' (Prospects, 2025, n.p.). These activities lean heavily into the professional services side of the third space (Whitchurch, 2013).

Neary (2011, p.44) writes of the 'fundamental belief that the public at large has little understanding of the careers adviser role'. Careers teams include, amongst others, employer engagement, data and events specialists, learning technologists, work-based learning advisers, and marketing and communications professionals.

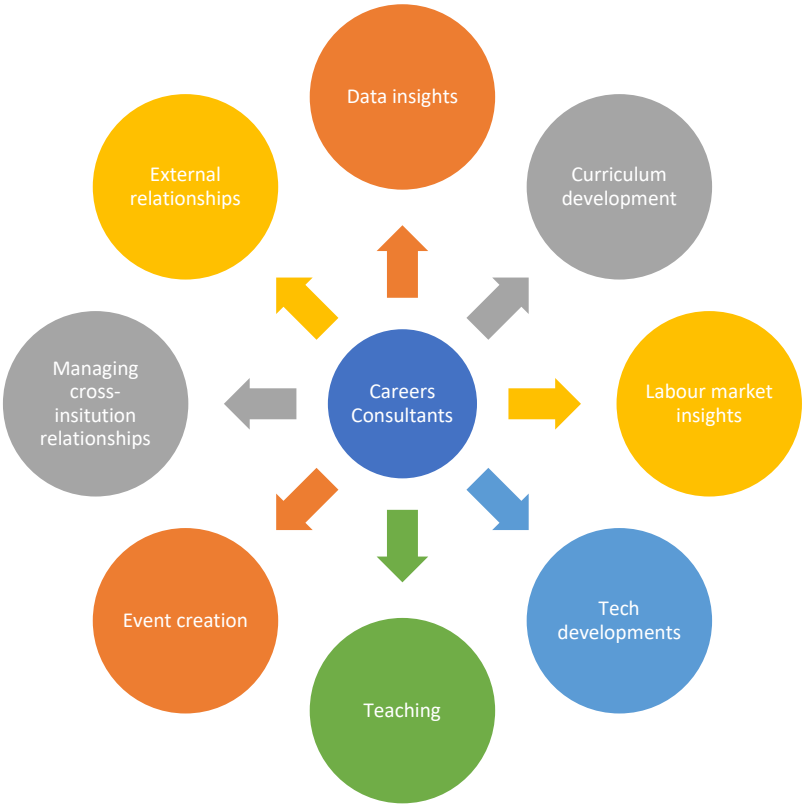
Figure 1. A snapshot of vacancies on the AGCAS website 26 Jan 2024, showing the range of job titles likely to be employed in a university careers service.



The role of the careers consultant has evolved over the past 20 years, a process closely connected to the 'increased emphasis on graduate employment' in UK HE (Gilworth, 2020, p.5). For example, the labour of forming relationships to influence access to the curriculum, and then creating learning opportunities through interventions in the curriculum, so-called 'embedding employability', was the second-highest priority for services in 2023 (AGCAS, 2023).

The increasing use of technologies including AI, means that careers consultants can create tailored careers support for individual groups, based on data such as careers registration (Gilworth, 2021). It follows that skills in analysing data, influencing, marketing, pedagogy and tech are now as valued as those of advice and guidance. Thambar, Neary and Zlatic (2021, p.4) suggest that '[t]he need for practitioners to be digitally literate, creative in using technology and active on social media has become a professional requirement'. It is also vital to understand the changing needs of students, within the institutional environment that the consultant works. Figure 2 illustrates the variety of tasks this role now encapsulates.

Figure 2: The varied roles of careers professionals, including careers consultants.



In seeking to influence curriculum, to gain access to student time, or to support student employability programmes, careers professionals are skilled third space workers, 'fluent in multiple expert languages, (understanding) different professional motivations, and able to connect with a range of occupational dispositions' (Manoharan, 2020, p.57).

Funding arrangements (or identified need) might mean that certain practitioners are closely aligned to specific cohorts or academic disciplines. Careers guidance training should allow consultants to work meaningfully across multiple disciplines; however,

experience suggests that many consultants prefer to build up specific sector knowledge. Business schools often fund their own careers teams, not just to create subject specialism but to add to the perceived prestige of the schools (see e.g. Imperial, 2020).

What do careers consultants for researchers do?

Research conducted by the UK HE careers professional body, the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services, revealed that the majority of careers services in UK and Irish higher education institutions (research-intensive and otherwise) provide careers support for researchers (AGCAS, 2020). Some services have staff who only work with PGR students, or solely with ECRs, and some work with both cohorts. The survey estimated a mean client to consultant ratio of 3,000 researchers to one careers consultant, where that consultant focused solely on working with researchers (AGCAS, 2020). Using the KASE framework (Daubney, 2020), originally developed at King's Careers & Employability, the section below unpacks the role of a CCR.

Knowledge

CCRs acquire a strong working knowledge of the realities of academic career paths and, given the global nature of that work, the means to understand such career paths in an international context. A typical workshop for a researcher audience would be 'Understanding the HE landscape in the UK', elucidating some of the 'hidden curriculum' (Jackson, 1968; Guccione et al., n.d.) in elements of this sector. CCRs develop knowledge about how funding for fellowships and research is distributed and notice how the structural inequities of that distribution affect researchers' career prospects (see RSC,2025, amongst others).

Researchers are often a more experienced audience than undergraduates (UGs) and postgraduate taught (PGT) students (UUK, 2021); hence, CCRs deploy knowledge of how mid-career professionals deal with career change. Inevitably, CCRs work with researchers who have not secured a prized academic job, or perhaps those who have realised that an academic role is not what they thought it would be. In so doing, CCRs often see and support the disappointments, sense of regret, and grief concomitant with the initial stages of identity change.

In straddling the divide between the 'students and education' and 'research' sides of institutions, CCRs often take policies and initiatives that impact UG and PGT students and apply these to PGRs and ECRs. For example, issues of access and participation have only recently become a focus in PGR recruitment (see, for example, the Oxford and Cambridge project, Close the gap). Conversely, CCRs take knowledge of how research operates to inform careers colleagues about topics such as the Research Excellence Framework (UKRI, 2025), which may impact the amount of time and attention that academic stakeholders have for careers work. Whitchurch (2013) might characterise CCRs, who integrate their knowledge of different parts of the institution, as 'cross-boundary' professionals.

CCRs' understanding of the research funding landscape and where careers support for researchers sits in the policy arena (e.g. UKRI, 2021; 2024) is similar but different to colleagues' understanding of the debates around graduate employability (but see Thambar, 2016, p.29 on careers consultants' 'lack of interest in wider institutional issues'). We need to use the knowledge gained by keeping up to date in these areas to seek out opportunities to embed careers activities, making them structurally unavoidable (Daubney, 2020) within researchers' journeys.

Attributes

Careers consultants are expected to maintain the standards of confidentiality and the credibility that come with being qualified. These attributes are vital for CCRs; often a conversation with a researcher starts with them seeking reassurance that nothing will go further. Given the 'imbalanced power' (Vähämäki, Essi and Palmunen, 2021) usual in a researcher-manager relationship (whether PGR-supervisor or ECR-principal investigator), it is not surprising that discretion is a concern.

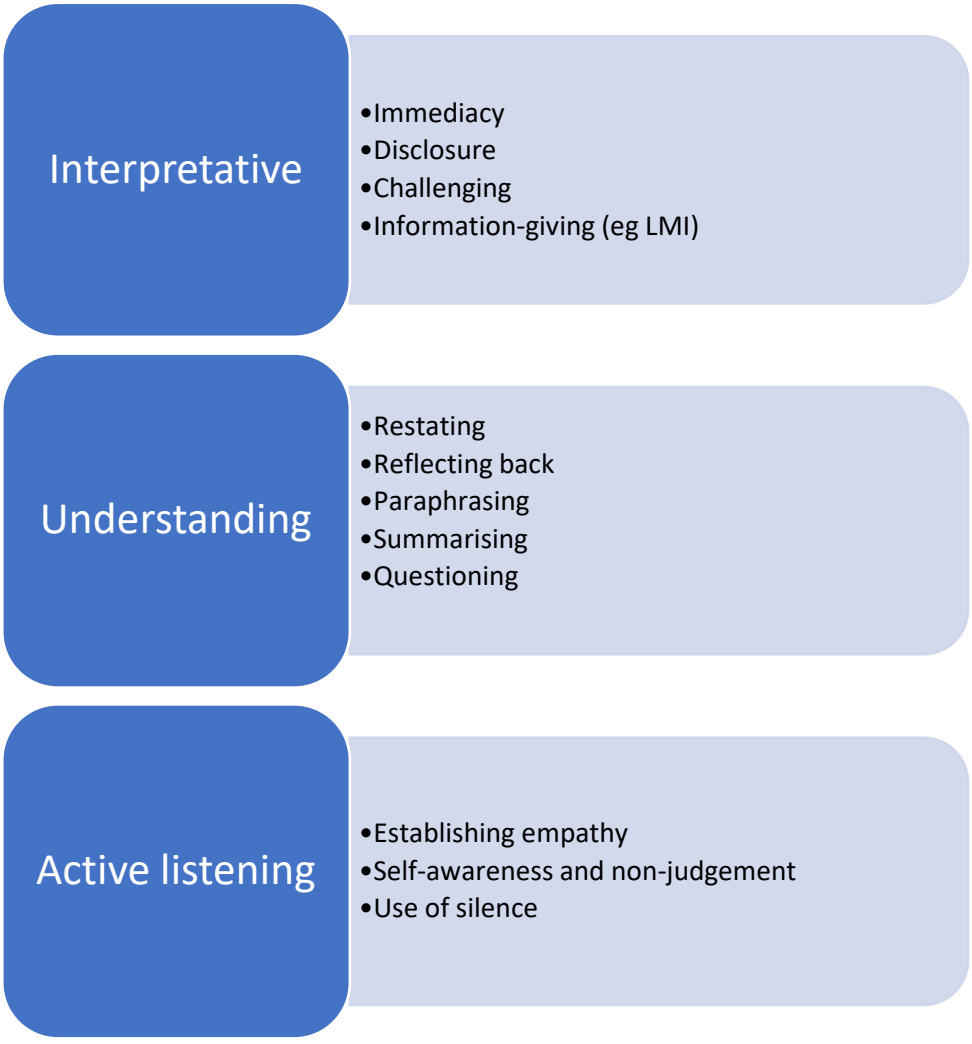
To the CCR, the client's personal satisfaction with their eventual outcome is a priority. Surprisingly, this position could be seen as contentious in an academic institution. It is usually in a manager's interest to keep the researcher close by – in their own research group or a collaborator's – so that the research project is completed efficiently without the loss of momentum that might be incurred should a researcher leave. This is not always the best outcome for the researcher. Often, a short-term postdoctoral contract is offered to a

PGR on completing their PhD research. Of course, on the surface, such an offer looks generous, providing stability, the time to complete a paper, and an income. Crucially, however, it may not allow the PGR to do the necessary thinking about what is their next best step.

Skills

A key part of the professionalism identified by careers consultants is 'knowing how to put their commitment to client-centred services into effect' (Gough and Neary, 2020, p.265), using guidance skills such as those illustrated in Figure 3 below.

Figure 3. Careers consultants' guidance skills, based on Ali and Graham (1996).



CCRs use these techniques in one-to-one career guidance appointments (which are typically longer than for other clients), in providing feedback on interview technique or

application documents, and to negotiate greater integration of employability in the researcher experience.

Using career theory gives reassurance to the client, and stakeholders, that careers work is research informed. A comment from a participant at a recent conference (REDS conference, 2023) for researcher developers, 'I didn't even know there were careers theories!', demonstrates the need to keep asserting some of the well-known and emerging careers theories to affirm the rigour of the careers profession. Theories and models a CCR will often turn to include Ibarra's (2023) Working Identity or Law's (1981) Community Interaction Theory, and Hooley, Sultana and Thomsen's (2021) Social Justice Signposts or Tupper and Ellis's (2021) Squiggly Careers.

Experiences

Much of the work delivered by CCRs is familiar: workshops are planned, delivered and evaluated, online learning is designed, and data is used to audit and plan future activities. Marketing occurs through myriad stakeholders, including researcher societies and departmental colleagues. Reports are contributed to committees and advocate for, or create, work experience opportunities. Connections are maintained with employers of researchers and alumni using social media such as LinkedIn. Conferences are attended – and presented at – and CCRs undertake or deliver relevant professional development to peers.

However, Prescott (2023) reminds us that CCRs are more than simply a benign repository of information and guidance. In supporting a woman to feel more confident in an application for a lecturing role, or hosting a panel discussing Black researchers' experiences, CCRs are 'always already' activists (Prescott, 2023). In helping a client move into a role in industry, CCRs may be supporting a government policy to achieve 2.4% of GDP being spent on research and development (UKRI, 2022, p.28). In spending time creating learning for researchers about work shadowing, CCRs are potentially coming into conflict with managers who want their team solely focused on research. Because CCRs support people in their decisions around which sector to work in – note the careful lack of bifurcation such as 'stay in academia or move beyond' – CCRs are helping to shape the future academic pipeline. In this way, these roles are perhaps unexpectedly political.

Listening to thousands of researchers across a broad range of disciplines gives a privileged insight into their experiences. CCRs use these insights not only to design interventions, but where possible, to advocate for clients in meetings, in policy discussions, or in designing research. However, it is rare for those insights to be used institutionally; only once has someone (a researcher client in 2020) remarked that 'You must hear a lot – does HR ever ask you anything about postdocs' experiences?'. The answer, of course, is 'No'.

Denney (2022) describes third space professionals as being in 'bridge positions' and makes the case that these positions allow 'those in the Third Space [to be] often privy to all kinds of conversations and able to observe actions and behaviours that are not open to those in mainstream academic roles' (Denney, 2023, n.p.). CCRs are a prime exemplar of that 'bridge position'.

Case study

In this section, I draw on my experience as a careers consultant for researchers, working on a research project researching researcher careers. Employed on a research grant, and therefore on a fixed-term contract for the first time in my working life, I work as a Careers Consultant for Researchers for the University of Cambridge Action Research on Research Culture (ARRC) project, part of the Bennett Institute of Public Policy (though I am employed through the Human Resources Department), and the University of Cambridge Careers Service. As such, I inhabit a complicated space where I aim to bring my experience as a long-established practitioner into ARRC's research.

ARRC is conducting experiments on proposed solutions to research culture. In Strand 1 of our work, which focuses on the shortlisting of candidates using narrative CVs (NCVs), I read through NCVs submitted as part of live postdoctoral recruitments and give feedback to participants. This gives me insights that are then used as part of the project's engagement strategy. For example, I am creating 'train the trainer' resources to help the wider sector with a roll-out of knowledge and information about these new application documents. This draws on my knowledge of pedagogy, an understanding of how researcher development happens, and information gleaned from my developing international network of NCV interested parties. In this way, I operate as what Denney

(2023, n.p.) describes as an 'integrated practitioner' who, 'often because they may be the only person doing their role at their university […] develop inter-institutional networks, often regional or national in focus, which provide wider perspectives on pertinent issues'.

For the other project strands, I use career theory and my network and experiences to remind and inform ARRC researchers about careers management more broadly, for example, discussing career decision-making strategies. My understanding of the difficulties faced by postdoctoral researchers has informed the design of a study looking at relationships in research teams. CCR colleagues are contributing as 'experts' to help inform research on precarity.

My experience and varied roles have also allowed me to develop new projects. I successfully co-ordinated a bid for internal research culture funding to run a study looking at researcher destinations and recruited a postdoctoral researcher to deliver the project. My ARRC experiences have taught me some of the wider skills and activities necessary to conduct good research, useful to me as I manage this researcher and the project, as well as in my client-facing work.

Is this an 'academic' role?

Could this new role tip me beyond the 'third space' and into an 'academic' identity? Figure 4 below illustrates common activities undertaken by academics – the section above the water includes those that are usually measurable, valued and visible; those underneath are typically less visible and less easy to assign value to. Nonetheless, funders agree that these activities should all be worthy of inclusion in the new NCV format. Presumably, therefore, they are the activities of an academic.

Figure 4. UKRI's 'iceberg' diagram (UKRI, cited Imperial, 2025).

It is possible to find examples in my current role that fulfil nearly all of these suggested academic activities. Highlights include:

- Speaking at the four regular conferences pertinent to my sector.
- Being approached, by internal and external contacts, as an expert on NCVs for input on institutional roll-out and training.
- Ensuring that the researcher destinations project considers good data management and open research practices.
- Maintaining a LinkedIn presence of over 1000+ professional connections, utilised for the benefit of the ARRC project.
- Reducing carbon by travelling to ETH Zürich, a partner of ARRC, by train.
- Introducing a key contact to the new Head of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion at the University of Cambridge, resulting in Cambridge hosting a UK-wide conference for Black biomedical students.

If I do the things that an academic does, does this mean, therefore, that I am an academic? Has this role moved me beyond the middle, third-space section, to the academic side?

Whitchurch (2013, p.4) writes that 'an individual on a non-academic contract, especially if they have academic credentials and experience, might interpret their role in an 'academic' way'. Does this work the other way around? Does a professional services person, if they have professional services credentials and experience, doing academic work, interpret their role in a 'professional services' way?

Findings

I feel myself firmly sitting in a third space. I am comfortable working across and between different parts of universities and enjoy the freedom that comes with being able to fit in, broadly speaking, between those parts. I thrive in sharing information between parties, seeing and building connections that may benefit those with whom I work, and having expertise in institutions where knowledge is the prime currency. Whitchurch (2022) would define me, therefore, I anticipate, as a 'third space professional', given that I feel that I can add value in either direction. One participant in her study sounds like me when they say: 'There are a lot of things that I get asked to do that I could say no to because they're not part of my formal job role, but I do them because… I… really enjoy that external environment and thinking about… [researcher careers]'.

My current role gives me additional respect and admiration for those researchers that make it through the precarious years of early career academia and go on to teach students, work with professional services staff, and contribute to the generation of knowledge. Ultimately, however, it is the knowledge I have gained about academic researchers' careers, through my role as a CCR, that for me has made it more desirable to inhabit the identity of 'third space professional'.

Conclusion

This case study has described the roles of careers consultant, careers consultant for researchers, and my own specific job. I have argued that the tasks I perform in my job, and those performed by CCRs in general, conform to the definition of academic tasks. However, this is not an identity I welcome, instead preferring the concept of 'third space professional'.

In understanding the detail of the breadth and depth of these roles, and the perhaps surprisingly political space they occupy, CCRs may be better recognised within their institutions and by those that have concern for researcher careers externally. With our knowledge of researchers' experience, ability to bridge institutional divides, and professional skills of questioning and guidance, we present a resource to be tapped into to create a better research environment.

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