Guest Editorial

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Introduction

It is our pleasure to introduce this Special Issue of the *Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education* (*JLDHE*), dedicated to exploring third spaces in higher education (HE). Throughout its 55 articles, this issue explores the excellent practices being undertaken by third space professionals in diverse contexts around the world.

Special Issues require a sustained collaborative effort as part of the broader editorial ecosystem. We wanted to make a couple of acknowledgements before we dive in. During the process of editing this collection we were deeply saddened to learn of the passing of Tom Burns. Tom has an article in the issue, co-authored with Sandra Abegglen and Sandra Sinfield. We wanted to take this opportunity express our sadness and condolences at his passing and thank him for his contributions to the sector.

In addition, when we embarked on this Special Issue over a year ago, we were joined in the early stages of its development by our friend and colleague Dawn Lees, who is the Student Employability and Development Manager in the University of Exeter Career Zone. Dawn has not only contributed to the development of the Special Issue but also in paving the way for and encouraging scholarship and recognition for third space educators at the

University of Exeter. She had to bow out of the process due to a personal bereavement, but we wanted to recognise and thank Dawn for her contributions. We also congratulate her on the recent National Teaching Fellowship.

As guest editors, we appreciate the significant support of the *JLDHE* editorial team, especially Tom Lowe and Alicja Syska's support as we navigated everything from articulating the Call for Papers to copyediting, and their continuous training and guidance throughout the process.

Third space and higher education

Universities rely on the expertise of third space professionals, those who occupy the liminal space between academic and professional services in higher education (Whitchurch, 2013). Third space professionals transcend traditional academic and administrative roles and are characterised by a hybrid and often fluid function that blends elements of academic expertise and administrative/professional service. Yet these individuals and teams often do not feel that their contributions to the education landscape and ecosystem are recognised, supported, or valued. Local and national contexts further complicate the experiences of third space professionals.

Third space professionals, such as Academic Developers and Learning Developers, can face challenges in developing effective collaborations with academic colleagues and senior leaders as they navigate complex hierarchies within both academic and professional services structures. Their liminal identity between these spaces results in a lack of defined career pathways, particularly in comparison to academic colleagues. Yet we recognise, as stressed by Abegglen, Burns, and Sinfield (2023), that the collaborative work undertaken by many third space professionals in partnership with academic colleagues and students across their institutions can create opportunities for individuals to gain professional and personal empowerment and agency. This Special Issue seeks to create a platform for transnational third space professionals to identify, recognise, and celebrate their contributions to the education landscape and ecosystems within which they operate and to address the challenges and benefits of collaborating across professional 'spaces' with other professional services, other third space professionals, and academic colleagues.

The guest editors represent a diverse team from across the University of Exeter, who came together as a guest editorial team because we are all committed to sharing our practice as third space educators and supporting and developing others to do the same. We particularly wanted to provide a space for those new to sharing practice through publication. As colleagues and as a guest editorial team, we have always argued that there is a wealth of experience and knowledge in the sector that we are currently missing out on because we lack the infrastructure to support those in the third space to formalise and publish their practice and research. As evidenced throughout this Special Issue, third space professionals have a unique perspective on and knowledge of HE and teaching and learning.

Given the number of articles in this issue, we have organised it around four overarching themes:

- **Collaboration and partnerships**, and the ways in which collaboration can create opportunities for third space individuals to gain professional and personal empowerment and agency (Abegglen, Burns and Sinfield, 2023).
- **Identity and positioning**, incorporating personal reflections and proposals to increase visibility and recognition of those who identify as third space professionals.
- **Leadership, influence, and credibility**, including the role of trust and credibility in collaborative working across 'spaces' (Little and Green, 2021) and valuing and increasing the visibility of third space professionals (Hall, 2022).
- **Careers and professional development** of third space professionals and integrated practitioners (McIntosh and Nutt, 2022).

We will introduce each of these themes in turn, offering an overview of the discussions and debates explored in each section.

Collaboration and partnerships

In a publication dedicated to the third space professional within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), it may come as no surprise that the themes of collaboration and partnership run through several papers. The myriad projects and activities in which third

space professionals are involved are frequently facilitated through collaboration and/or partnership, with a recent scoping review of third space literature noting that collaboration is a hallmark and defining characteristic of this space (Thorpe and Partridge, 2024). Moreover, the recent addition of 'collaboration' as a Professional Value to the Professional Standards Framework (Advance HE, 2023) also stresses the significance of understanding this aspect of third space working.

This section contains 13 contributions that invite us to reflect on how third space professionals engage in complex, challenging, and often rewarding ways of collaborating and partnering with colleagues within and outside the third space. Several pieces present collaborative projects that brought together professional and academic colleagues in the third space to produce resources or tools designed to support learners or improve their experiences at an HEI. Zoë Allman and Rachel Davies discuss how such a collaboration sought to create a whole-provider approach to embedding mental wellbeing within a UK HEI, and Alison Cornforth outlines the positive impact of collaborative third space working in the creation of a website designed to share inclusive teaching resources and support educators in this area of practice. Kate Murray reflects on how a third spacer's collaborative engagement can embed more authentic approaches to learning and teaching in the curriculum, and Loretta Goff examines the development of a collaborative micro-credential course on academic integrity, highlighting the importance of such projects for increasing connections between colleagues and students.

Whilst Goff's perception of the value that lies within pursuing collaborative third space endeavours is echoed in many of the contributions within this section, Julie Blackwell Young and Sarah Parkes' opinion piece calls readers to question whether we are witnessing a decline in the meaningful collaborations that amplified third space professionals' contributions to HE during the COVID-19 pandemic. Revisiting their five principles of partnership (Parkes, Blackwell Young and Cleaver, 2016), the authors discuss fears of a return to siloed working environments, stressing the importance of acknowledging and promoting work that unites colleagues from within the third space. Such sentiment is echoed by Jill Hanson, Alison Pope, and Carolina Salinas, who argue that collaborative projects, such as their work to create an enrichment programme for learners at a UK HEI, benefit from moving beyond the informal modes of collaboration in which third space professionals often engage.

The distinction between formal and informal modes of working together is made clear by Katie Akerman and Ceri Hunter's discussion of the formalised and intentional actions of a quality and standards team within a UK HEI, whose approach to establishing a 'pedagogic partnership' has helped third space professionals to inform and shape the practice of academic colleagues. Karen Arm also discusses partnerships rather than collaborations, examining the Student as Partners research programme at a UK HEI and how the students involved were supported to reflect on their third space identity.

Alongside discussions of collaborative ways of working, two papers in this section explore collaboration as a pedagogic practice. Nicholas Bowskill, David Hall, Melody Harrogate, Ebere Eziefuna, and Ben Marler examine collaborative learning as a constructivist pedagogical approach, outlining how generative artificial intelligence might function as a non-human partner in staff development. Rebecca Edgerley and Russell Crawford explore how we might observe, assess, and even model collaboration as a skill for colleagues and learners within HE, further examining the characteristics of collaborative work that are discussed by many of the contributions in this section. Ending with a 'poetic coda', this case study aligns with two others in this section that embrace creative forms of scholarship in their discussion of collaboration within the third space. Kevin Brazant's photographic essay discusses interdisciplinary approaches to group work and collaborative experiences in learning development, whilst the contribution of Sandra Abegglen, Tom Burns, and Sandra Sinfield uses a playful 'untext bricolage' to collaboratively reframe their prior explorations of staff and student partnership and collaboration within the third space.

It is striking that many of the papers in this section (and across the entire Special Issue) are co-authored, highlighting internal, external, and international collaborations within the scholarship of third space. Indeed, the brief communication 'A pan-European perspective of third space professionals located in Learning and Teaching Centres' brings together 24 colleagues in a collaborative reflection and discussion.

Identity and positioning

The concepts of identity and positioning are core to this Special Issue. Whitchurch's (2008) conceptualisation of the third space is arguably all about the identity and positioning of roles that are increasingly situated in a continuum somewhere between 'professional' and 'academic' in our HEIs. In this section's articles, we see individuals whose roles may be

termed 'academic' or 'professional services', depending upon the norms at the institution where they work. This third space is growing as different ways of accessing HE are emerging, and HEIs are facing new and increasingly complex challenges.

This section includes personal reflections from a variety of contexts. Emma Norman's case study addresses the issues she has faced when managing a peer-mentoring scheme from the third space alongside the benefits that her third space identity and position afford her professionally. Claire Toogood and Katy Hale similarly reflect how empowering it can be for colleagues to claim their identity as a third space professional. Azra Naseem, Jannat Karim Khan, Tashmin Khamis, and Jane Rarieya use vignettes to explore their experience of establishing their identity as third space professionals at a multi-country university.

The potential for student support is further evident in two papers that both claim to 'bridge the gap': Nicola King, Jess Johnson, Hannah Jordan, and Hannah Lyons share their new approach to student support, made possible by appointing Pastoral Mentors to academic roles. The Pastoral Mentor will 'bridge the gap' between academic and professional services support. Thomas O'Shaughnessy and Tracy McAvinue focus on inclusivity, returning to Bhabha's (1994) theory of third space. The hybrid identity of third space professionals allows for a heightened awareness of the support that HEIs must be able to offer.

In his opinion piece, Peter Samuels explores his professional journey as a learning developer operating in professional, academic, and third space roles. Based on his professional experience, he reflects on the challenges that continue to face HEIs about where to position Learning Developers organisationally. Jon Baldwin, Bonita Charles, Emma Davenport, John Keefe, and Debora Minà discuss the reorganisation of academic support in response to COVID-19 and the benefits of formalising third space roles to embed them within the structure of academic departments. Joshua Wang and Elise Kenny similarly reflect on the value of 'subject specialist third space staff'.

Whilst both benefits and challenges of the identity and position of third space professionals are evident across the articles in this issue, some articles also propose solutions. Steve Briggs argues for the need for a taxonomy of specialisms of Learning Development practitioners to clarify the role and value of third space professionals to the sector. Colin Simpson similarly reflects on how poorly defined and inconsistent job titles of third space professionals are a barrier to understanding and valuing their work. Kate Mitchell, Kashmira Dave, Meredith Hinze, and Alex Tsirgialos reflect more specifically on the way

professional identity is formed in third space roles (specifically those related to Technology Enhanced Learning roles). They propose a framework to help colleagues understand and shape their third space identity. Finally, Ann Gagné makes recommendations that would support HEIs in developing the support that third space professionals may need. These approaches have the potential to help third space professionals clarify and increase the visibility of their roles and the expertise they provide within their HEIs, as well as reflect on and understand their professional identities.

While Whitchurch's conception and understanding of third spaces can benefit professional identities, the concept can also be contested. For example, Michael Begun points out the potential limitations of his original 2008 conceptualisation of third space, situating the critique in cross-cultural work. He provides a helpful history of the terminology, before suggesting a focus on critical cross-cultural collaboration rather than abstract conceptualisations of third space identity. Steven White also traces some of the origins of the concepts of third spaces, delving into a range of understandings that have informed our current thinking. He provides practical examples that link to Whitchurch's work to consider the work of Learning Developers across a range of contexts. In this section, we find personal reflections on third space and identity and positioning, alongside proposals to increase visibility and recognition. There is also a critical engagement with the very concept of third space identity to impact our understanding of third space roles in theory and in practice.

Leadership, influence, and credibility

Many of the 13 articles in this section explore the role and contribution of third space professionals in terms of how to operate as a leader in roles with often limited formal authority but strong networks and influence. These articles also cover the challenge of establishing credibility across the academic/professional services divide, and the potential leadership role that third space professionals can play in an era of 'supercomplexity' and living amidst uncertainty (Barnett, 2000).

In exploring the importance of credibility in quality assurance work, Nevena Martinović and Emma McCallum's opinion piece speaks to experiences echoed across this Special Issue. Greer Murphy and Emily Perkins, for example, report similar issues in their work as Academic Honesty and Integrity Administrators. Along with Donnesh Dustin Hosseini, they

highlight the lack of recognition for third space expertise and a sense of 'academic elitism'. Hosseini characterises this using Dotson's (2011) notion of pernicious ignorance and silencing, where the audience — here academics — disregard the expertise of the speaker — here the third space professional. Both theorisations of this experience — academic elitism and pernicious ignorance — resonate across the Special Issue. Without wishing to widen the existing academic/professional services divide, the credibility of and respect for third space expertise is clearly an issue that needs to be addressed. Indeed, as highlighted by Tim Savage and Kelly Vere, there are still many third space professionals in HE fighting to be recognised as educators.

In their opinion piece, Erik Brogt argues that using Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK) as a model can enhance the credibility of third space professionals. They point to the need to 'embrace our role as nodes' in teaching and research networks to give ourselves and our work visibility and credibility. Conversely, Alison Purvis, Beth Fielding-Lloyd, Melissa Jacobi, Dave Thornley, and Nick Woolley argue that it is the responsibility of senior leaders to bridge the divide between academic and professional services by identifying as third space professionals themselves.

Following on from the need for third space professionals to be recognised and valued for their expertise, several articles in this section also speak to the role that third space professionals can play as university leaders in an increasingly 'supercomplex' environment (Barnett, 2000). Ian Fellows, Gill Gilber, Leoarna Mathias, and Sarah Parkes highlight third space practitioners as agents of cultural change, emphasising the importance of their role in innovation and university transformation. Françoise McKay similarly suggests that third space professionals are an unrecognised catalyst for change. Fiona Denney and Emily McIntosh take this a step further by arguing that the future workforce of HE depends on third space leadership, as it is third space professionals who have the skills and attributes to operate in a 'supercomplex' environment. Similarly, Emmajane Milton, Emma Yhnell, and Kath Jones discuss the untapped potential of third space professionals in supporting the sector through future uncertainties. They also highlight the need to recognise the diverse talents and expertise of third space professionals, bringing us back to the issues of credibility and visibility introduced by Martinović and McCallum and Hosseini.

Although Denney and McIntosh argue for the need for contract changes and consideration of criteria for leadership to make use of the untapped potential of third space leaders, papers from Diane Nutt and Emily McIntosh, Karen Heard-Lauréote and Carina Buckley,

and Rachael Hains-Wesson foreground the need for developing trust and building effective relationships to affect change within their institutions. Nutt and McIntosh similarly argue for the potential power of relationships to build social capital and networks in HEIs. Heard-Lauréote and Buckley propose a framework for building trust in relationships between the academic and professional services communities, with recommendations that reflect Brogt's proposal to embrace our role as nodes or intermediaries. Hains-Wesson's paper brings this together by outlining the critical leadership requirements needed in the third space, including trust-building, understanding of roles, resource and time management, effective communication, and recognition of individual and collective contributions.

Throughout this section, readers will see the challenges of the academic/professional services divide discussed alongside the challenges facing universities. We are most struck by the untapped potential of third space contributions to help universities to respond to these challenges.

Careers and professional development

Whitchurch suggests that 'not only will third space experience be increasingly attractive to staff, but also… it may become a prerequisite for career development' (2008, pp.387−388). As such, it is to be expected that many of the papers in this Special Issue have focused on careers and development: 15 of which are found in this section. Authors have used opinion pieces, case studies, and research papers to articulate some of the opportunities and challenges facing third space professionals in terms of not only their own career development but also the impact they have on the career development and learning of others.

This section's authors have explored careers and development in HE in a holistic sense. From the position of Careers Consultant for Researchers, Kate Murray reflects on the lack of literature focused on these types of third space roles, wherein a professional services member of staff is performing many of the activities associated with an academic (speaking at conferences, being approached as an expert, delivering teaching and learning activities). John Miles considers the expertise and skillset of Researcher Developers and how this might influence their careers going forward. Joanna Wilson-Scott similarly focuses on the competencies of Educational and Academic Developers. By contrast, Sarah Allbeson highlights the role of line managers in career conversations and

the need for organisational strategies. Craig Morley and Nicola Grayson's opinion piece considers the less established career routes for professional services staff, certainly compared with those on academic contracts, and argues for conceptualising the third space as a 'collective unity'. Through these papers, we see how third space professionals are operating outside standard HE structures. This makes it ever more important for those in the third space to understand their identity and positioning, alongside the need for HEIs to put structures in place to support the career development of third space professionals.

Several articles make the case for a clearer career development framework for third space professionals. In response to Williams et al. (2011), Jennifer Boreland, Tanya Henry, and Sue Sharpe suggest a framework for Educational and Learning Developers to make the competency and expertise of third space professionals clearer (showing the impact of their practice on quality learning and teaching) in contrast to academic colleagues' whose expertise is often more explicit in their job titles. Speaking of frameworks, Jenni Jones, Debra Cureton, Julie Hughes, Jimmy Jennings, Matt Pearce, and Harveer Virdi reflect on the use of the Institute of Leadership and Management qualifications to support third space professionals in building confidence in navigating managerial responsibility. Again, these articles identify opportunities for change in higher education to support third space professionals' career development.

From a Learning Development perspective, Avril Buchanan, Kate Haley, and Chad McDonald's case study identifies the complexity of career development for third space educators and argues for a peer-dialogue approach to respond to this. Indeed, Whitchurch's research has identified that third space professionals will often use different descriptions of their roles to highlight their knowledge and expertise which go beyond their job titles.

While guest editing this Special Issue, it was inspiring to see so many third space professionals contributing and some reflecting on the role of formalising and publishing their practice in their professional development. Stephanie Larkin articulates the opportunities and challenges in doing this well, using autoethnography to outline the experience of a non-academic third space practitioner embarking on their first professional research project. Antonios Kaniadakis and Fiona Denney's article complements this piece, highlighting some of the challenges facing professional services staff in the third space and the importance of making their work more visible through traditional 'academic' means, such as presentations at conferences and peer-reviewed publications. Silvina

Bishopp-Martin and Ian Johnson provide a personal perspective on this, reflecting on their own scholarship journeys as third space professionals. Similarly, Caroline Ball and Chris Ribchester foreground the impact of fellowship for professional recognition and becoming 'part of the university club'.

A subtle theme that appeared in the articles for this issue was how professional services staff work with academics in ways described in our section on 'collaboration and partnerships'. Notably, there is a focus on what this cross-working looks like in terms of career development for academics, professional services, and third space professionals. Indeed, Steve Briggs reflects on time spent in the third space — whether it is short-term, transient, or permanent — and the impact it can have on career development, seeking to 'demystify potential sources of professorship evidence for other third space practitioners'. The Learning Circles in Linde Moriau, Réka Matolay, Emma McKenna, Andrea Toarniczky, Judit Gáspár, Márta Frigyik, and Catherine Bates' paper prompt reflections on what third space careers might look like if these relationships and conversations were to be conducted more formally as part of the professional development of third space professionals. On a similar theme, Evonne Irwin argues for institutional responsibility to create formal (and perhaps temporary) classification-crossing opportunities for third space career progression and reward.

Overall, this section highlights the value of conversations, self-advocacy, reflection, and embracing (sometimes seizing!) opportunities (despite challenges) for the career development of third space professionals. We hope this will give colleagues and senior leaders pause to consider what each of us is doing to support career development in the third space.

Investing in third space professionals as senior leaders

From the conception of this Special Issue to writing this editorial, we have seen our working lives and careers reflected back at us. The benefits and challenges experienced by authors shared across this issue resonate with us. We are encouraged to see so many third space professionals contributing to the understanding and theorisation of our roles and the impact we can and do have on our HEIs and student learning. Throughout the editorial process, the real sense of community and shared identity that exists for those in

third space roles has been clear. We hope this Special Issue will give rise to further discussions and connections.

It seems pertinent to not just reflect on the present but look to the future, where the recommendations made throughout this issue will work to increase the visibility of and trust in third space professionals. During the COVID-19 pandemic, we saw the central role those in third spaces played in pivoting and responding to crises. In the midst of yet another crisis — the financial crisis currently facing universities and the subsequent reduction in financial resource and loss of jobs — the skills and agility of third space roles could be a real asset in leading HEIs through challenge and uncertainty. However, this requires senior leaders to develop clearer career trajectories for third space professionals into senior leadership. We call on the sector to reflect on the knowledge, skills, and expertise shared throughout this Special Issue and the value of investing in the career development of third space professionals as senior leaders.

Acknowledgements

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Rachel Sloan is an Employability and Careers Consultant at the University of Exeter, responsible for leading on employability programme delivery, skills development workshops, and providing one-to-one guidance on career decision making, including exploring self-employment. Rachel began her career in higher education as a Programme Officer, supporting educators in delivering employability training, before moving from 'behind the scenes' to the front of the classroom. As a third space professional herself, Rachel has long advocated for the recognition of Professional Services staff as educators, supporting colleagues in their roles.

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