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Achieving Inclusion: University Staff Working in Third Space Between Academic and Professional Spheres of Activity

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Abstract

The article reflects on the case of staff employed on academic and professional contracts in UK universities who work in areas of activity that are not aligned precisely to either domain, sometimes referred to as "third space." Examples are given of academic staff on teaching-only contracts and people employed on professional contracts in educational and research development roles. Although such individuals are likely to be highly qualified, with a master's or doctoral qualification, teach and, in some cases, undertake research, they occupy territory in the university that often lacks formal recognition. This is particularly so in relation to the legitimacy of their roles and parity with academic colleagues who undertake mainstream teaching and research and contribute to the UK Research Excellence Framework. Despite increasing commentary on the existence of these roles by practitioners themselves, institutions have been slow to accord them legitimacy in terms of, for example, dedicated space in institutional structures, appropriate professional development opportunities, career paths, or promotion and assessment criteria. Such individuals are therefore liable to feel excluded from the mainstream, even though they may be making a significant contribution to academic endeavours. Examples are offered of the extent to which individuals are able to achieve recognition at both a personal and collective level, and suggestions are made as to practical ways in which universities might accord this group of staff greater visibility, and thereby reduce the cultural, and implicitly hierarchical, divide between them and academic colleagues with an extended teaching and research profile.

Keywords

academic careers; academic staff; educational development; higher education; professional staff; professional careers; research management; third space; UK; work in academia

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1. Introduction

This article considers the sense of inclusion or otherwise of university staff employed on both academic and professional contracts who work in areas of activity that are not aligned precisely to either domain, in what has sometimes been referred to as "third space" (Whitchurch, 2013, 2018, 2023, 2024a, 2024b). It includes as exemplars academic staff employed on teaching-only contracts, who undertake activity outside the precise parameters of their roles; an early career academic who was unable to achieve a permanent academic post and therefore accepted a professional contract; and individuals employed on either academic or professional contracts who work in the fields of educational development and research enterprise. These two fields of activity have been chosen because they attract highly qualified staff, often to doctoral level, who work side by side with academic colleagues, but may be employed on professional rather than academic contracts. In turn, they have developed their own professional associations, international networks, journals, blogs, podcasts, and mail lists. The concept of third space has been picked up in recent years in the literature, for example, on learning development (Beckmann, 2018; Bossu & Brown, 2018; Grant, 2021; Joubert, 2024; L. Knight et al., 2022; LaCroix, 2021; Livingston & Ling, 2022; Mcintosh & Nutt, 2022; Parkes et al., 2014; Puhr, 2024; Veles et al., 2023) and research enterprise (Birds, 2015; Botha et al., 2021; Dunleavy et al., 2019; Hockey & Allen-Collinson, 2009; Holliman, 2017; Kerridge et al., 2024; C. Knight & Lightowler, 2010; Mackie & Holden, 2022; Santos et al., 2024; Veles, 2022; Veles et al., 2019). The article goes on to review ways in which the above groups of individuals feel themselves to be accorded recognition, legitimacy, and thereby a sense of value by their institutions, colleagues, and peer groups. Finally, the findings are theorised using Bourdieu (1988, 1993), demonstrating that the extent to which recognition occurs is likely to depend not only on structures and cultures at institutional and local levels, but also on individual contacts and social capital.

Despite increasing commentary on the existence of third space roles, the sense of legitimacy by those undertaking them is variable in terms of, for example, dedicated space in institutional structures, appropriate professional development opportunities, promotion criteria, and career paths. Such individuals can therefore feel excluded from the mainstream, even though they may be making a significant contribution to academic endeavours, thereby illustrating a lack of inclusivity at the heart of institutions. At a national level, the UK Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA, 2024), in its datasets, groups all staff who do not have academic contracts, including professional, clerical, technical, and manual staff, under the general category of "non-academic." Moreover, since 2019–2020, it is no longer mandatory for higher education providers in England and Northern Ireland to return information about these "non-academic" staff, literally rendering them invisible. Although there are beginning to be signs that senior managers are asking questions about how to create more collaborative, third space environments, this has been slow to occur in practice, despite occasional workshops and seminars (see, for example, Baré et al., 2021; Bühlmann et al., 2020; Turpin & Gruba, 2021). Furthermore, despite discussions about career development for people in third space roles and the possibility of a dedicated track in which all feel included (see, for example, Baré et al., 2021; Grant, 2021; Grant & Kennie, 2024; Harrison, 2024; Mcintosh & Nutt, 2024; Wolf & Jenkins, 2021), there is less evidence to date of this occurring in practice.

2. The Study and Examples Drawn

This article draws on a project conducted between 2017 and 2020 for the UK Centre for Global Higher Education (CGHE), an international research centre based at the University of Oxford and University College

London, funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council, the UK Office for Students, and Research England (Whitchurch et al., 2021, 2023). The project considered trends in the development of the UK workforce. Interviews were conducted initially with 69 individuals employed on academic and professional contracts, including directors of human resources and members of senior management teams, in eight higher education institutions, selected on the following basis:

- Regional location, covering all four UK nations (five from England and one of each from Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland);
- Institutional type: three pre-1992 Russell Group universities (leading research-intensive universities); two pre-1992 non-Russell Group universities (with a balanced teaching and research profile); two post-1992 universities (former polytechnics, teaching-focused); and one post-2004 university (former college, teaching-focused);
- Disciplinary and staff profiles, whereby a senior lecturer in a pre-1992 university would be equivalent to a principal lecturer in a post-1992 university.

Almost three-quarters (39) of the 53 respondents who did not have senior management roles were re-interviewed two years after the first interview, so that there was a longitudinal element to the study. It became evident from these narratives that almost 50% of this subset of respondents—25 out of 53—described significant elements of their role that were outwith the strict parameters of purely academic or professional work. This article focuses on these 25 respondents, 23 of whom agreed to be re-interviewed. These are described in Table 1. As can be seen, the contractual situation was by no means clear cut and, for

Table 1. Respondents from the CGHE study categorised as working in third space environments.

	First round of interviews (2017–2018)	Second round of interviews (2019–2020)	Male	Female
Academic staff employed on academic contracts (including three teaching-only)	15	17	5	12
Academic staff employed on professional contracts	2	0	0	[2]
Individuals employed on professional contracts undertaking educational development roles	3	2	1	2
Individuals employed on academic contracts undertaking educational development roles	2	1	0	2
Research development professionals (professional contracts)	3	3	0	3
Total	25	23	6	19

Notes: (a) The two academic staff employed on professional contracts at the first interview had been transferred to academic contracts by the time of the second interview; (b) six of the eight people employed on professional contracts had doctoral qualifications, including the two who had transferred to academic contracts at the time of the second interview; (c) the overall gender balance of all the study participants across the two sets of interviews was 65% female, 35% male; of those categorised as working in third space, 69% were female, 31% male; (d) 10 of those categorised as working in third space were employed in research-intensive universities, five in teaching and research universities, eight in teaching-focused universities, and two in the teaching-focused former college.

example, some individuals undertaking academic work had been placed on professional contracts. Others—for example, those with teaching-only contracts—might also undertake some kind of research and/or major project. Although the study was conducted in the UK, it adds to a developing literature in non-Anglophone countries on this drift of activity beyond strict academic/professional boundaries (Bühlmann et al., 2020; Kossek & Zwiauer, 2012; Schneijderberg & Merkator, 2012; Zellweger Moser & Bachmann, 2010; Zinner, 2016).

3. Analysis

As a starting point, after the first round of interviews, a biographical profile of interviewees was drawn up. This included their current role and future aspirations. From this, descriptive codes were developed, for example, type of contract, key relationships, and career trajectory. Further analysis of the emergent data considered respondents according to their positioning in relation to institutional processes and structures. Interpretive codes were then developed for possible latent meanings, such as tension between individual aspirations and perceived career opportunities. As a second step in the analysis, an overview was taken of overarching themes, and from these pattern codes were developed to establish links or themes across respondents' accounts. These included, for example, approaches to roles and careers, understandings about the value placed on individual activities, and possible career moves, including where the narratives told different stories (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 57). The data gathered from both rounds of interviews was further analysed using Creswell's data analysis spiral (Creswell, 1998, p. 143), whereby data is revisited via processes of reading, describing, classifying, interpreting, and representing, with continuous links made between these activities. The data was then mapped against possible variables, such as different types of institution and the career stage of the individual. This enabled "semantic" (explicit, overt) and "latent" (underlying, implicit) themes to be identified (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

In the sections that follow, individual exemplars are used to show how individuals on both academic and professional contracts can feel misaligned and even excluded if all or part of their work takes them into a third space environment. This is symptomatic of a move away from the traditional concept of an academic as someone who undertakes both teaching and research. In the last 15 years or so, there has been a significant increase of people employed on teaching-only contracts who do not have research formally included in their contracts. Thus, the proportion of academic staff who are expected to undertake both teaching and research has fallen from 52.3% of the total in 2010–2011 to 42.8% in 2022–2023 (HESA, 2024). The analysis is arranged so as to illustrate degrees of exclusion and inclusion, arising from dissonance between formal institutional structures and the lived experience of individuals. These are highlighted in a series of seven exemplars. Following Bourdieu (1988, 1993), they illustrate that a sense of inclusion is more likely to be experienced by those with a strong peer group network, and/or local mentors.

4. Degrees of Exclusion

The following exemplars illustrate the degrees of exclusion experienced by three people with academic backgrounds at different stages of their careers, two on teaching-only contracts and one on a professional contract.

4.1. The Case of Academic Staff Having Teaching-Only Contracts

Although teaching-only academic roles have been introduced within UK higher education institutions, with associated promotion paths to professor, evidence shows that there is little belief or confidence in this route to a professorship (sometimes referred to as a chair), or the associated promotion criteria (Whitchurch et al., 2021, 2023). This has left a significant number of this group feeling excluded, particularly in relation to promotion opportunities. The first exemplar is someone in mid-career who had overseen the educational strategy of their school and, despite a research record, had transferred to a teaching-only appointment, but was unable subsequently to achieve promotion to professor on the teaching track. The second is someone who, in late career, achieved promotion to senior lecturer after several attempts, for an innovation relating to student welfare and support. This not only illustrates the variability in people's experiences, but also the ad hoc way in which they were inhibited by institutional conventions. Although institutions have theoretically developed career paths for people in teaching-only roles, individuals in this group of staff who do not succeed can feel doubly excluded, by not being seen as a fully-fledged academic, and by a sense of being low priority for promotion. This is illustrated in the two Exemplars below, of two people in the later stages of their careers.

4.1.1. Exemplar 1: Senior Lecturer, Teaching-Only Academic Contract, Research Intensive University

This person (male, 50s, applied sciences) had been head of education for their school for nearly a decade, and during that time had relinquished research because of the pressures of administration. This had included not only admissions, examinations, student complaints, and appeals, but also, because of their technical know-how, responsibility for workspace design and the redevelopment of a teaching building. They described how they had applied for a professorship on the basis of this work and had not been successful:

> If you're from an educational background…the career path to a chair [professorship] is extremely difficult…you've hit a glass ceiling…, there is a very small number of people who have progressed to the chair in education…it's also very difficult to obtain money for [education research].

However, after completing their management role, they had then become involved in a number of local construction projects, which might be seen as a form of community regeneration, and had brought in substantial contract income:

> I'm on the education teaching contract, [but] I'm probably doing more research than a lot of the staff…I've probably got as many education publications as I have disciplinary publications, I've…a significant amount of money on both sides, so I don't necessarily reach the benchmark for either criteria…so in my mind, there's something obviously not right there.

Their achievements could be said to fall between management, project innovation, community engagement, and education development. Their assumption was that their research was not regarded as sufficiently pedagogically oriented and that the criteria for promotion were not flexible enough to accommodate the full range of their activity. They therefore perceived the promotion system as discounting them, recognising neither their contribution to teaching nor to research. As a result they had resigned themselves to their situation, focusing on utilitarian aspects—"It's well paid…we're on the national pay scale…you've a lot of

flexibility"—thereby to some extent suppressing their academic identity, and viewing their role more as a job than a vocation.

This individual, therefore, saw themselves as falling between two stools, achieving credit for neither their teaching nor their research. However, it may also be significant that they did not appear to have had advice about how to frame the application, or feedback on how it might be assessed. By contrast, the following person had, late in their career, achieved the desired promotion, attributed by them to the social capital that they had built, in particular to a colleague who was able to help.

4.1.2. Exemplar 2: Lecturer, Part-Time Teaching-Only Academic Contract, Teaching and Research University

This person (female, 60s, biological sciences) had a 0.85 contract which had gradually increased over the years since they had had children. They had administrative responsibilities for student welfare, disability, and tutoring, and in particular guiding students with anxiety. As a result, they had been given a sum of money by a donor to support student welfare, which they had used to develop mindfulness sessions. These had been rolled out to schools in the university as well as to other institutions. They had also forged links with colleagues in careers, staff development, student services, and employability, and had spoken at national and international conferences. There was evidence that the sessions had not only helped retention but also student satisfaction. However, this person did not feel qualified to undertake the required pedagogical research required for promotion as their background and interests were scientific: "I'm not into educational pedagogy…apart from the mindfulness stuff and how it affects the brain and neurochemistry I don't…do scholarship as such."

Nevertheless, after feeling excluded for many years, they had achieved promotion to senior lecturer between the two interviews: "A big component was the mindfulness, because it's…gone everywhere and we've taught more people to be trainers." This had been interpreted by the promotions committee as having equivalence with pedagogical research and as having impact on the student experience. This person saw a critical element as being the help they received from a senior member of the school, as well as contacts who might be approached as anonymous referees: "I did have some good things from students who remember me teaching them and now are, like, head of a pharmaceutical company." As a result of the promotion they said that their "life has totally changed" in that they felt valued and recognised for their achievements.

Although the case of the above exemplar demonstrates that with help in the interpretation of criteria, it can be possible to make progress, this tends to be an ad hoc process within inflexible structural promotion and career frameworks. In both exemplars, it is as if the individuals concerned were hidden in plain sight, invisible because they slipped between formal categorisations and criteria that did not accommodate activity outside the mainstream. Furthermore, although the literature points to a lack of time and opportunity for pedagogical research, particularly if individuals are part-time (see Arvaja, 2018; Loveday, 2018), these exemplars suggest that there are also other reasons. They both demonstrate the effects of an in-between status and the sense of exclusion engendered by promotion criteria that are geared primarily to linear academic careers involving both teaching and research. Achieving recognition and indeed legitimacy for novel activity, although not impossible, is likely to involve persistence, the recruitment of supporters, and the ability to demonstrate relevance and impact. From the examples, it would seem that national systems influencing recruitment and progression, giving weight to publications and research income, compounded by local structures that reflect this, constrain

the development of individual careers for those at different stages who have, in different ways, out of interest or necessity, blurred the edges of their academic roles. Recognition of situated, Mode 3 knowledge for local contexts, emphasising the involvement and feedback of users (Carayannis & Campbell, 2012, 2016), and thus extending the concepts of Mode 1 (pure disciplinary knowledge) and Mode 2 (applied disciplinary knowledge; see Gibbons et al., 1994), could be said to have helped the person in Exemplar 2. Indeed, such recognition could possibly be more fully incorporated into promotion and progression criteria more generally, particularly for people on teaching-only contracts (for further discussion of the development and use of Mode 3 knowledge, see Whitchurch, 2023).

4.2. The Case of Early Career Academics

At the other end of the academic career trajectory, the following exemplar illustrates the relatively narrow window of opportunity for an early career academic to achieve a substantive post and develop an academic career. Despite having a doctorate and a series of short-term academic jobs, this person was unable to secure a permanent appointment and therefore accepted a professional contract managing their institution's education strategy. As a result they felt an acute sense of exclusion early on, before accommodating to a more secure future on a professional pathway, using the experience that they had gained as an academic. Despite considerable regret about not being able to pursue an academic career, they had accommodated to a different type of career, as shown in Exemplar 3.

4.2.1. Exemplar 3: Education Strategy Manager, Professional Contract, Research-Intensive University

This person (female, 30s) had a PhD, had published a number of journal papers, and had had a series of short-term lectureships, but had been unable to obtain a permanent academic position. They had therefore taken a series of project-oriented roles culminating in responsibility for the university's education strategy and curriculum development. Although they were employed on a professional contract, it was "very much in the…academic sphere":

> Writ[ing] up the papers for the policy changes and…governance, and in addition to that…engagement with faculties to find out…what elements of best practice are going on, so that we can…feed that into other parts of the university.

Therefore, for this individual, although "[achieving an academic post is] very much my preferred option…the reality of employment makes it my non-preferred option." In their current role, they lectured to graduate teaching assistants and indeed taught their own humanities subject part-time at another university, but felt that were not regarded as a bone fide academic: "The culture…is very much…if you do anything other than an academic role, it's almost [like] you've failed, rather than you've chosen to do something else." Furthermore, there was a sense of being excluded by what they saw as their peer group: "If I went to a…research seminar…I wouldn't necessarily feel welcome there….If someone attended who was…not employed in an academic role…, quite often there would be disparaging remarks said behind their back." As a result, they also felt that a senior academic management role would not be available to them as an endpoint in their career:

> There's only so far you can go with [current role], because it's technically professional services, you're never going to get to be [a pro-vice-chancellor] because that is an academic role….I don't know how academic populations would feel if a…non-traditional academic ended up being in charge of them.

Ironically, having progressed to an education development role, they felt that they had by that stage evolved beyond an early career academic post: "I'm not qualified for a standard entry level academic job [any more], but….I've outgrown what that would be as well." They had, therefore, decided to make their career on the professional track. Furthermore, the perception of this person was that the split between academic and professional roles was not only a feature of the institution they worked in, but was built into the wider higher education system in the UK:

> Institutions aren't willing to, or can't really employ people unless they know that they're going to get three-star or four-star publications and they're going to bring in good research income….Do you take a gamble on employing an early career researcher who may only have two publications or no publications…[or] do you go down the route of creating more teaching-only contracts, which actually do give people stable employment?

In their view, these difficulties were perpetuated by the lack of opportunities for people to diversify or build experience that would further their careers elsewhere: "I don't think universities…are displaying a duty of care [to] early career academics and later career academics…to be able to sell themselves to the outside world."

From the three narratives above, there would appear to be two elements of feeling included that are connected: firstly, being accorded recognition and legitimacy by the employing institution, and secondly a personal sense of being visible and valued. Perceptions of the first are likely to affect the second. In all three cases, the individuals were strongly influenced by the former. However, as will be seen from the examples of educational and research developers below, others also drew some gratification and a sense of identity from feeling that they had a key role in developing a relationship with and between academic and professional colleagues, as well as from strong professional networks, as suggested by Bourdieu (1988, 1993).

5. Degrees of Inclusion

5.1. The Case of Educational Developers

Educational development portfolios included managing the student experience, the Teaching Excellence Framework, widening participation, the virtual learning environment, equity and diversity, employability, and careers. People in these roles have a well-established collective identity via their own professional networks, such as the Association of Learning Development in Higher Education (ALDinHE). Of the five people working in educational development in the study, including the person described above in Exemplar 3, two had academic and three had professional contracts. The two with academic contracts had been full-time academics and continued to undertake some teaching in their subject areas. Of the remaining two with professional contracts, one had a doctorate. This person, despite some sense of loss, was sanguine about not pursuing an academic career, as shown in the following Exemplar.

5.1.1. Exemplar 4: Head of Academic Practice, Professional Contract, Research Intensive University

This person (male, 40s, doctorate) had gone into school teaching after their doctorate and "abruptly turned my back…on the prospect of being an academic….Even after two years, I felt…my contacts and my knowledge base wasn't sufficient to enable me to enter back." They had a pragmatic approach to their career: "Doing this kind of job…kind of cuts away intellectual endeavour….I wouldn't say I'm entirely satisfied…I mean, I'm happy, I'm fairly senior, I'm fairly well paid…from an entirely practical point of view." Despite the element of pragmatism, this person was positive about having an academic background, which they saw as helping their credibility in an in-between, bridging role: "I see us as almost buffering academics from what the centre is imposing…my sympathy has always been to the academic community…the friendly face of the centre." They therefore distinguished themselves from, for example, human resources, which they saw as being "about business…about customers…a vocabulary that I find alien," allying themselves with academic colleagues. They also felt that they belonged to the wider educational development community: "I do lots of work for [them]…I'm an accreditor…I'm a consultant….I meet a lot of people through…that network…so we're almost like a quasi-academic [association]…contributing towards the ethos in higher education." There was therefore a sense of belonging to the academic enterprise as a whole, as well as to a wider professional network, and of bringing the two together, with a feeling that this was a valuable and valued role.

Such a holistic approach seemed to be a distinguishing feature of this group of staff, conferring an in-between role that they saw as constructive, as opposed to what the above person referred to as reinforcing "career trenches." Such a bridging role was described further in Exemplar 5.

5.1.2. Exemplar 5: Head of Educational Development, Professional Contract, Research Intensive University

This person (female, 50s) had a master's degree but not a doctorate, had come through an educational technology route, and "broadened out…into…student development [including widening participation, equality and diversity]. So, there is a connectiveness to it…opportunities arose that brought things together." The idea of connectiveness was a theme throughout their narrative, being appreciative of the unique nature of academic work and the individual nature of academic identity: "There's an element where [academics are] almost self-employed, and their identity is what sells things out there." This person, therefore, saw a major part of their role as encouraging academic staff to undergo professional development, and they were also involved in supporting people's careers:

> One very strong thing that came out [of the latest staff survey]…was the frustration around progression, the lack of opportunities for development…[so] we're saying things like…what are the kinds of things you're interested in, how might we help to support that….[I'm] absolutely happy to meet and talk things through…look at application forms, offer support and…give…feedback [on interviews].

Like the individual in the previous exemplar, they were a member of a number of learning development networks: "There is a growing number of people like me…our community of practice helps to share in terms of developments that are happening…that I can think about and bring back." There was also a sense of having options, of creating a portfolio of activity, and of being able to move on rather than any feeling of exclusion or loss:

> I would say I am satisfied with [my career], I enjoy what I do….I have been able to move into areas bit by bit, that allows me to influence and shape change…but once it's up and running, I like to move on….I'll probably go somewhere [else]…it may well be out of higher education.

Nevertheless, this person ultimately moved into a senior management role at their university rather than leaving the system.

Because of the teaching function of academic developers, for example in relation to professional certification in teaching and learning, there can be blurring with academic roles. This can at times lead to some abrasion and a sense of exclusion in relation to progression and, for example, the inclusion of research and publishing in their workload. Nevertheless, as shown above, respondents invariably spoke of seeing it as part of their role to foster institutional inclusiveness, and to pursue arrangements that enabled this. Initiatives that enabled joint working, including the building of new physical space, were mentioned by more than one interviewee. One example was a centre focused on learning development, quality, and technology-enhanced learning, where research was undertaken into fields such as widening participation and learning analytics. This enabled connections to be made across a range of professional groupings, as suggested by one of the educational developers with an academic contract:

> The whole area is quite large, and flows to different parts of the university….It…helps a dialogue across the services and support staff and the many other professional staff that fall across…those areas….They find it easier [to] begin to understand the pressures of academic staff…and the academic staff begin to understand some of the pressures on a group of people from careers or from the IT service or from the library….People then build further partnerships…to help that flow of conversation, to see into each other's worlds. (vice-dean, female, 40s, education, academic contract, teaching and research university)

Following Sennett (2018), this type of initiative exemplifies how appropriately designed physical space can translate into a place where interactions and innovations occur, in this case across academic and professionally oriented activities. It points to efforts among educational developers at the middle management level to deliver a greater sense of inclusivity by literally constructing a space that brings together people in different roles, on different types of contracts. As people in such roles progress and even become part of senior management teams, it may be that they can in turn influence the creation of more inclusive structures.

5.2. The Case of Research Development Professionals

Research developers tended to have an extended worldview that included interaction with, for example, funding bodies, industrial partners, and international networks such as the European Association of Research Managers (EARMA). They were likely to see themselves as part of a broader collective beyond the university, with a dedicated Master's qualification and the possibility of employment elsewhere. It appeared to be an expanding field with career paths that were becoming established as research funding and impact agendas become more competitive. The three research professionals in the study were employed on professional contracts, and their portfolios included advising on applications for research grants, impact development, supporting spin-out activities, and liaising with funding bodies. At more senior levels they had a planning role in seeking and matching likely funders to the research profile of individuals. One had a doctorate, another was in the process of completing theirs, and the third had ambitions to undertake one.

There is evidence that research enterprise roles are seen as one possible career route for people with doctorates, and that increasing numbers of research professionals have one (Kerridge et al., 2024). In that sense, they might be said to be on the cusp of academia. As witnessed by one interviewee:

> If you count the number of staff in R&E [research and enterprise] that have PhDs, or that are working towards one, or that have some kind of research experience, it's quite high compared to any other kind of support service within a university….I think you could deliver what the job says on paper without having experience of research, but I think having experience of research gives you an edge…so when I'm reading through somebody's application or when we're actually talking about their project and I'm saying…"that sample size is far too small"…it can sometimes help with…getting people on side. (research development manager, female, 30s, doctorate, teaching-focused university)

Furthermore, all three research developers in the study had experience outside higher education before taking up their roles, ranging from charities, libraries, and museums to research councils and public sector bodies. None of them necessarily saw their future within higher education, although by the time of the second interview, despite some frustrations, two had been promoted to higher grade roles at a different university. Exemplar 6 was the exception, this person feeling disadvantaged by the lack of a doctorate.

5.2.1. Exemplar 6: Research and Impact Officer, Teaching-Focused University

This person (female, 40s) had a background in psychology and had worked in marketing before taking up their post. They had initially managed an EU project, but then reverted to a focus on impact, "working one to one with the academics, in preparation for the next REF and sort of assisting them with impact in whatever they were doing their research in." This role included "a lot of help…a lot of redrafting…so you could say that we sort of co-author them." They had ambitions to undertake a doctorate, but were not eligible to be funded by the university, so felt excluded in that sense:

> The focus now is on getting all members of academic staff to have PhDs, so if you're not classed as academic staff, and I'm services…they've got no reason to actually fund you…or support your development….Ironically, a lot of the academic staff being made to do PhDs really don't want to do them…and I would love to be in that position.

They were also conscious of a lack of a career framework for people in roles that were adjacent to the academic enterprise: "There's a lot of roles within higher education that need to be…clarified as a career….There doesn't seem to be a clear…way into them." There were therefore frustrations and they were thinking of a complete career change:

> I've got to make a choice between staying with a career that wasn't ever what I intended, or dropping it completely and moving into something new….I have considered…the idea of going into consultancy…there's quite a gap in the market…it's quite a new and emerging field….I…feel like I'm not really using my skills.

They therefore had an open mind about moving on to employment outside higher education, including self-employment as a consultant.

There is a sense in which the above individual not only felt barred from developing their role, but also that there was no career structure in place that would allow them to progress. They therefore felt that they were essentially an outsider, particularly as they did not have a doctorate. Coming from business and industry they found it more difficult to understand, and were perhaps less tolerant of, the somewhat nuanced employment conventions within higher education. By contrast, the following individual had a doctorate, although they felt that any credit they gained from this was equivocal.

5.2.2. Exemplar 7: Impact and Engagement Officer, Teaching-Focused University

This person (female, 30s, doctorate) had experience as a research associate as well as public sector and project management: "When they hired me for this job, they did it specifically because….I've got kind of the office experience and the real world experience and the academic experience." They continued to be involved in academic networks, although without recognition for this from their institution: "There's some frustrations around the fact that I'm publishing myself, so I've got a monograph…I've got a book chapter due out later, and I'm doing that in my spare time." Furthermore:

> It's very strange, because they teach [arts and humanities subject]…on our history course, which they…technically they said I could teach on, but I'm not allowed to teach on that, because that's not in my contract…so they could do with it and I could do it, but it's not in my contract.

Nevertheless, it was clear that this person was more valued for having a doctorate than if they were without one:

> When I started, my line manager said to me that, [although] I was not going to put "doctor" around anything, "put it on your things because it will change the way you're treated," and I thought, do I want to, do I not want to, but it does [help]….Some are more respectful…some [academics] have said to me that it really helps them, so that when I'm reading their bids…that I can kind of look at it from a research perspective.

However, this informal acknowledgement was not backed up by formal permission to teach, therefore it represented a situation of some recognition, but not full inclusion. Between interviews they had moved institutions, had added engagement to their portfolio, and managed two early career academics but, ironically, was not accorded the same recognition as they were:

> I…now line manage two research associates…to gather evidence for the REF [Research Excellence Framework]….I don't get to use my research skills in this job, but the temporary people they're hiring as RAs [research associates]…do…so it's kind of a lack of valuing….The RAs tend to get more respect than I do because they're seen as researchers

This person illustrated a dissonance between a lack of formal recognition at the same time as being valued at ground level for their contribution. Despite informal recognition of their academic credentials, there was non-recognition in terms of their formal employment category, thus inclusion on one level but not another. Nevertheless, they had been able to move upwards and onwards in developing their career.

Both educational developers and research enterprise professionals demonstrate how academic and professional activity can be seen as a continuum of effort, although not necessarily an equal relationship:

> Universities have this very two-tier system…academics and professional services…we don't call them support services or support staff any more….It's a transition going on…[but] I think there is still a long way to go to make sure they are considered equal colleagues… I just find it, strange, that division. (head of teaching and learning, female, 40s, teaching and research university)

Nevertheless, there were signs that crossovers could occur, particularly for educational developers: "If you want to be considered for the lecturer's title, you can apply, providing you've got some research, if you've got some articles in the area of learning and teaching" (head of teaching and learning, female, 40s, teaching and research university). Overall, of the two groups, educational developers appeared to have more crossover with academic colleagues, partly because many had teaching responsibilities, either in their own discipline or on professional development programmes, and some had academic contracts. They have a developing literature focusing on "integrated practice" (Mcintosh & Nutt, 2022), supported by their dedicated *Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education*. Likewise, it would appear that research professionals are trying to establish their status institutionally, notwithstanding the appreciation they receive from individual members of staff, at the same time as developing internationally as a profession (Kerridge et al., 2024). What is also implicit in both sets of narratives is the sense of an employment hierarchy, with academic staff at the top, rather than the sense of a team approach with academic staff at the core.

6. Discussion and Theorisation

As well as describing the situation of people working in in-between, or third space, in areas of activity such as educational and research development, the examples have shown how academic staff, particularly those on teaching-only contracts, may have third space elements to their roles that are not accommodated in a binary categorisation of teaching and research. Moreover, these elements are no longer simply a temporary state of being during work on specific projects, as originally suggested by Whitchurch (2013). The findings point to the continuation of a strict definition of, and entry criteria for, being an "academic," particularly in more research-oriented institutions, and to an inflexibility in the structural architecture of at least some institutions. Furthermore, it would appear from the narratives in the study that a sense of exclusion, with associated feelings of a lack of recognition or legitimacy, is likely to be greater for academic staff who, for whatever reason, find themselves working outside purely academic space.

From the doctoral level onwards, academic identity tends to derive from recognition for original work in one's discipline or field, developed throughout a career. This becomes a personal journey as part of an academic community that puts a value on an individual's work through peer review processes. The development of a career is not, therefore, simply a question of taking up a more senior job, or even of finding a job in more conducive surroundings, as it might be for someone in a purely professional role. The person in Exemplar 4 expressed this distinction between academic and allied roles: "The job is [a] job for me, it's not kind of part and parcel of who I am, as I think it probably is for lots of academics, [where] the job is more than just the job." Indicators of esteem such as citations, research grants, and invited lectures are therefore internalised as an element of identity (Blackmore, 2016; Blackmore & Kandiko Howson, 2011). In Bourdieu's terms these represent symbolic, as opposed to economic, capital (Bourdieu, 1988, 1993). Thus, significantly, the person

in Exemplar 1 was less concerned about the financial benefits of promotion to professor, which he saw as minimal, than the personal prestige that would accrue: "The reality is, if I got a promotion, I would be on the bottom [of the] professorial scale. There's four points on it…I'd be making £7,000 more than I'm making at the minute, less, by the time you take tax [and] USS [Universities Superannuation Scheme contribution]." Any sense of exclusion for those who want to be valued for their academic contribution can therefore seem all the more personal, particularly if an application for promotion is rejected.

It would appear from the study that people specifically employed in what have been described by commentators as third space areas of work, such as learning development or research enterprise, may have less concern about recognition per se by their institution if they see themselves as part of a wider professional community and as having options that they have developed outside the university. At the same time, as argued by Hall (2022, 2024), there is a danger that third space can become "no space" and therefore invisible, although this may suit some people who feel that this frees them from institutional structures and enables them to pursue activity that interests them and that they value. However, it can also lead to a sense of isolation. The development of social and professional capital (Whitchurch, 2024a) would appear to be critical in establishing a better understanding of roles that do not fall precisely within academic and professional spheres, in achieving outcomes that are recognised by institutions, and in engendering a sense of inclusion for associated identities.

Following Bourdieu (1988, 1993), the workplace environment can be seen as a "field of practice," with its own rules or principles that inform the behaviour of individuals, so that they acquire a disposition or "habitus" associated with that field. Behaviour arising from this disposition is a result of both the agency adopted by the individual and the positions that are available to them within the field. In the case of staff working in third space, depending on how they are formally categorised as either academic or professional, some positions may be unavailable to them. Furthermore, the value of activity within a field (or its "capital") depends on the degree of recognition accorded to it by dominant actors, in this case senior and/or local managers with influence on the positioning or progression of individuals. In Bourdieu's terms, therefore, individuals working in third space are subject to the discourse that is created via the dominant organisational field, i.e., the academic field, the definitions accorded to academic and professional staff, and embedded structures such as job descriptions and promotion criteria. Thus, any legitimacy problems that they experience may be attributed, at least in part, to the relative primacy of their institution's "academic" and "professional" organisational fields.

In Bourdieu's terminology, third space activity is "embedded" within one or other of these organisational fields, rather than being accorded its own status. Nevertheless, it would appear from the study that those who are able to build social capital between themselves, and/or with key figures inside and outside the university, are able to go some way towards developing third space as a "field of practice" in its own right, even if this is not formally integrated into university structures in the form of, for example, dedicated career structures or promotion criteria. Furthermore, the narratives suggest that groups such as educational and research developers are able to establish a "field of practice" as a collective, nationally and even internationally, to which they have a sense of belonging, even though this may not be the case at an institutional level. However, any sense of exclusion for them tended to be less personal than the kind of regret felt by individuals who felt blocked from making an academic career. Thus, those who had academic credentials in the form of a doctorate, and/or contracts, who identified as academics but deviated from an established academic "field of practice," as in the case of the first three Exemplars, were more likely to feel

isolated and excluded. In other cases, such as Exemplars 6 and 7, the dissonance between informal recognition and lack of formal accreditation within job descriptions or promotion criteria could lead to frustration and thoughts of pursuing a career outside higher education. Although examples of inclusive practices promoted by educational developers are encouraging, together with evidence of team-building initiatives (Springou, 2023), these could be enhanced institutionally, via institutional sector groups, and nationally. Such developments might include, for example:

- The creation of a third career track for groups such as research managers and educational developers, with associated contracts, job specifications, and promotion criteria to take account of, for example, success in generating new sources of research funding, links with new funders, and innovation in teaching and learning/the digital environment;
- Recognition of applied, user-based Mode 3 knowledge that emphasises situated knowledge, local understandings, and specific contexts, for example via commendation in annual review processes and recognition in promotion criteria;
- The incorporation of crossover points and/or secondments for people who might wish to move in and out of third space activity, for example linked to the term of a project, or the desire by an individual to refresh their thinking;
- A time allowance for those who are appropriately qualified to undertake research and teaching if they so wish, whatever type of contract they have;
- Encouragement in the form of study leave and/or financial support for individuals to pursue doctorates if they do not have them;
- Encouragement to achieve recognition, for example, Fellowship of AdvanceHE for those in educational development roles, which in turn may extend an individual's network;
- The establishment of a national policy statement about individual groupings, using the Technicians Commitment (Vere et al., 2024) as a model, to ensure visibility, recognition, career development, and sustainability.

7. Conclusion

Although it is not possible, from a sample of sixteen individuals deemed to be working in third space environments, to be definitive about factors resulting in a sense of inclusion or exclusion, some indicators of likely causes emerged from the study. For individuals, this is likely to arise from a combination of local factors, such as type of institution, conditions of employment, local precedent, the support or otherwise of a line manager, and the availability of help and advice from a mentor or sympathetic colleague. A critical factor is also likely to be whether or not individuals with doctorates, with or without an academic contract, wish to pursue research, and whether this can be accommodated by their institution. For a collective, such as educational or research development professionals, it can depend on the maturity of the group's identity in relation to, for example, local and national support networks, the adaptability of local employment conditions, for example, whether individuals are allowed to research and/or publish as part of their contract, and opportunities for career advancement both within and outside the higher education sector. It could be that an increased blurring of the boundary between academic and professional identities, via crossover roles, activities, and in some cases qualifications, has increased opportunities for a sense of exclusion because of a dissonance between formal and informal systems of recognition within institutions, in turn rendering those in such roles invisible. However, if an individual sees themselves as able to move to another role or sector in

due course, institutional recognition, particularly in relation to career advancement, may be felt to be less critical. For those working in third space environments, therefore, whether on an academic or professional contract, this positioning may, at worst, bring a sense of exclusion, or at least dislocation, and at best a source of social, professional, and knowledge capital that may add to their profile and, if necessary, be portable elsewhere.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The data upon which this article draws is deposited in the UK Data Archive.

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