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JAMES COOK UNIVERSITY AUSTRALIA

Title

Imagining a Future: Changing the Landscape for Third space professionals in Australian Higher Education Institutions

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Abstract

In the last decade there has been a shift in the discourses around professional staff in higher education that has been influenced by neoliberal agenda that focused on driving education reforms. Earlier discussions centering around nomenclature variations have progressed to those about creating and developing borderless professionals operating in the third space – a notional space where professional staff and academic staff with diverse and valuable skills work as equal professional partners on complex and multifaceted projects. This article looks at the evolution of the debates around professional staff. It considers how the notions of professionalism and professionalisation are being reconceptualised in the third space. Discussion progresses towards capability building and developmental opportunities of aspiring third space professional staff in higher education settings. Possible pathways of engaging with and empowering professional staff in designing their future careers and professional identities are considered. Building a community of research practices under the auspices of ATEM and engaging postgraduate students in the university third space project work are proposed as potential areas for further research in the field of professional staff capability building.

Keywords: neoliberalism, higher education, professional staff, identities, third space, capability building

Introduction

The recent decades of neoliberal expansion in the higher education landscape are often characterised by the shortage of resources, mass education imperatives, the contest- ability of the research funding and competition among education providers that has had an impact on universities (also referred to as higher education institutions, higher education), nationally, internationally and globally (Clark, 1998; Connell, 2013; Gray, 2015; Sharrock, 2012; Szekeres, 2004; Whitchurch, 2007). It is within this landscape that academic and professional staff in universities face the challenges of perpetual restructures, competition for resources and continuous adjustments to their work, workloads, work profiles and portfolios.

This article looks at how in this perpetually changing and challenging environment for all Australian universities, the debates around professional staff continue to evolve. The notion of professionalism and professionalisation in the context of spaces in which professional and academic staff operate is considered. The emergence and the development of the third space (Whitchurch, 2008) – a collegial space where university professional staff and academic staff work collaboratively on complex and multifaceted projects – is examined. The focus of this examination is on practitioners' evidence-informed literature that continues to receive minimal attention in the field. Listening to the viewpoints of professional staff and giving prominence to their perspectives has a particular importance in the context of staff capability-building pathways. The authors propose two specific developmental pathways to move professional staff capability- building discussions forward.

Contemporary neoliberal university imbalance

Neoliberalism as an ideology and an economic and societal foundation theory provides an overarching theoretical lens for discussions on changing staff identities and roles. It is the neoliberal notions of performativity, managerialism, massification, marketisation and corporatisation that have the most relevance for staff as they have an impact on the working environment in contemporary universities (Anderson, 2006; Ball, 2003, 2008; Kandiko, 2010; Schulz, 2013). The effects of neoliberalism on higher education can be traced throughout the universities of all Western countries with similarities evident in the way it has had an impact on Australian and the United Kingdom's (UK) higher education (Conway, 2000). The UK higher education system has been experiencing transformations since the higher education reforms were introduced in the 1980s (Collinson, 2007; Deem, 2010). Parallel to the changes in the UK higher education sector, the Australian higher education scene was subject to radical changes that heralded the end of a social justice agenda in the Australian Labor Party education policy (Connell, 2013) and the 1989 Dawkins university reforms (Dobson & Conway, 2003; Goedegebuure & Schoen, 2014; Meek, 2012).

In the UK higher education context, discussions in the literature have concentrated on the linkages between the university future described by the exponential growth of mass education, devolution and the moves towards improvement of efficiency and accountability on the one hand, and the requirements for new managerial models to support this move on the other. These new models of management are in fact the features of the European public sector of the 1980s and its new public management model (Kolsaker, 2014; Krücken, Blümel, & Kloke, 2013; Meek, 2012; Rhoades & Sporn, 2002) focusing primarily on organisational culture and the improvement of the organisational performance in this culture.

Parallel organisational environment changes have led to similar outcomes for the Australian higher education sector resulting in the emergence of and a continuously persisting imbalance of demand for the public universities' offering, and the supply of funding to sustain this increasing demand. This imbalance accompanied the transition from a small-scale higher education market with its primary focus on domestic students and supported by abundant public funding, to a global-scale mixed economy tertiary market (Sharrock, 2012). This imbalance became more critical with the expansion of the range of the educational programmes on offer, the increasing complexities of educational policies and regulations, burdens of compliance and imperatives of the quality frameworks. Response to this imbalance requires new models of institutional management (Krücken et al., 2013; Rhoades & Sporn, 2002; Shattock, 2000), innovative ways of staff collaboration, new networks and partnerships to increase staff self-value as well as individual and team contributions to the achievement of the universities' strategic goals. An innovative means of collaborating among the universities' diverse staff is a third space, the concept first introduced in the writings of Whitchurch (2008) as a feasible response to address the new challenges within the higher education sector.

Emergence of the third space

The concept of the third space first came into prominence with studies conducted by Whitchurch (2008) in UK higher education institutions. The genesis of its application to higher education professionals can be attributed to professional identity and profes- sional identity changes resulting from changes in global higher education and university transformation. The traditional, twentieth-century notion of profession as a source of identity was later contested in relation to academic identity, which is known to be associated with a discipline, 'an epistemic community with distinctive culture' (Henkel, 2010, p. 8). Another aspect of identity theory – boundaries and gatekeeping – has been extensively discussed in identity literature (Barth, 1969; Bernstein, 2000; Jenkins, 2008), and it is still relevant to discussions on how professional staff perceive their identity and their roles in relation to those of academics (Krücken et al., 2013). However, boundary maintenance discourse has been replaced consistently by the debate around the development of unique (as opposed to defined

by the academic) professional staff identities and the blurring of roles and portfolios of academic and professional staff (Henkel, 2010).

The third space concept is now widely acknowledged representing discussions around higher education activities that require the joint effort of wider university networks and diverse teams comprising professional and academic staff undertaking project-based activities of various size and scale (Kolsaker, 2014). The concept of the collegial third space continues to evolve in the work of researchers including Whitchurch (2009a, 2009b, 2009c), Whitchurch and Gordon (2010), Middlehurst (2010), Conway (2013), Graham (2013), Kolsaker (2014) and Gray (2015).

It is important to consider the broader conceptual context of the third space in order to understand how it translates to the higher education environment. The notion of third space encompasses exploration of the spatial relationships in social theory, as well as the 'impact of diversity and divergence', multitude of philosophical studies of dualism, such as, Said's 'cultural geographies', Bell's 'state and market', Bourdieu's 'high and low culture', Routledge's 'combination of "insider" and "outsider" voices' and a plethora of cultural and education theory studies (Whitchurch, 2012, p. 21). Whitchurch (2009a) redefines the historical binary relationships between university professional staff and academic staff that are now rapidly changing, generating a new typology of professional identities. This typology encompasses four main types: bounded professionals (with fixed portfolios and more prescribed roles); cross-boundary professionals (engaged in interpretative and translation activities around the existing boundaries and strategically using the boundaries to build and extend organisational capacity); unbounded professionals (working on broad organisational developmental projects that are above and beyond the boundaries' constraints) and finally, blended professionals (with mixed-portfolios of professional and academic activities) (Whitchurch, 2009b, 2012). Unbounded and blended professionals and portfolio-specific academic staff are those who are able to, or are assigned to work across boundaries that exist between administrative and academic domains. Because their activities are not constrained by functional and organisational boundaries, they contribute to university's developmental, internal and external engagement agendas as they work on specific organisational projects in collaboration with academic teams. This space in which they operate requires convergence of talent, fusion of skills and creative tension, contributions from diverse personnel unencumbered by titles, job roles and position descriptions. These staff members view 'the building of communicative relationships and networks as more significant than the observance of organisational boundaries' (Whitchurch, 2008, p. 386). At the same time, understanding the university's academic climate and academic culture is paramount to understanding its core values, beliefs and strategic intent.

Debates around professional staff

There has been a gradual shift in the discourse around the higher education profes- sional staff from the involved and intense discussion of the higher education workers' titles and roles (Dobson, 2009; Szekeres, 2011) to discussions of persisting and 'often contentious' relationships between academic and professional staff (Graham, 2012, p. 439). Dialogue appears to be reaching maturity and sophistication and discourse is focusing on the nature and the typology of spaces where professional and academic staff not just co-exist, but collaboratively work on projects of tactical importance for the universities.

These shifts in discourses reflect what Whitchurch (2012) describes as three phases that develop within the interaction processes between individuals and the spaces they occupy. These changes, depicted in Table 1, 'represent phases in maturation of activities and identities': Contestation, Reconciliation and Reconstruction (Whitchurch, 2012, pp. 26–27). They signpost the move from the default position of regulations and rules to the testing of the new grounds for new forms of activities (Contestation); then further to the position that the collaborations and partnership relations may exist between parties (Reconciliation); and, finally, arriving to the space where it is

possible and desirable to foster new collaborations and relationships and where individuals are no longer defined by the rules, regulations and positions descriptions – a third space.

Table 1. Overview of professional staff discourse shifts

Evolution stage	Key focus of the discourse around professional staff	Authors and years of publication
CONTESTATION	***Earlier debates***	
	Nomenclature and titles – narratives of invisibility, marginalisation, exclusion and under appreciation	Castleman & Allen, 1995; Deem, 1998; Conway, 2000; Dobson, 2000; Lauwerys, 2002; Dobson & Conway, 2003; Gornitzka & Larsen, 2004; Szekeres, 2004; Whitchurch, 2006; Collinson, 2007
	Gender dimensions	Castleman & Allen, 1995; Burton, Cook, & Wilson, 1997; Probert, Ewer, & Whiting, 1998; Currie, Thiele, & Harris, 2002; Chesterman, Ross-Smith, & Peters, 2003; Eveline, 2004; Stewart, 2004; Gander, 2010; Bagilhole & White, 2011; Strachan et al., 2012
RECONCILIATION	Professional and academic staff tensions and emerging partnerships	Castleman & Allen, 1995; Burton et al., 1997; Probert et al., 1998; Currie et al., 2002; Chesterman et al., 2003; Szekeres, 2004; McMaster, 2005; Gander, 2010; Bagilhole & White, 2011; Conway, 2012; Strachan et al., 2012; Krücken et al., 2013
	Recent and recently emerging themes	
RECONSTRUCTION	Professional staff identities' fragmentation and identities' reconstruction; 'identity stretch'; first professional staff typology	Whitchurch, 2007, 2008, 2009a, 2009c, 2009b; Whitchurch & Gordon, 2009; Whitchurch, Skinner, & Lauwerys, 2009; Graham, 2010; Middlehurst, 2010; Whitchurch & Gordon, 2010; Graham, 2012; Whitchurch, 2012; Graham, 2013; Kolsaker, 2014; Gray, 2015
	Professional staff as a group (despite the evident lack of its homogeneity)	Conway, 2000; Dobson & Conway, 2003; Szekeres, 2004; Whitchurch, 2006, 2007; Middlehurst, 2010; Szekeres, 2011; Sebalj et al., 2012; Strachan et al., 2012; Whitchurch, 2012; Conway, 2013
	Professional staff growth, development, acquisition of firmer legitimacies, maturity, professionalisation and higher sophistication in the career choices	Conway, 2000; Dobson & Conway, 2003; Szekeres, 2004; Whitchurch, 2006, 2007; Middlehurst, 2010; Szekeres, 2011; Sebalj et al., 2012; Strachan et al., 2012; Whitchurch, 2012; Conway, 2013
	Third space professionals, typology and positioning of the *third space*	Whitchurch, 2007, 2009a, 2009c; Middlehurst, 2010; Whitchurch, 2012; Conway, 2013; Graham, 2013; Kolsaker, 2014

As the Reconstruction phase is reached, new discussions come into play. The previously prevailing conversations of 'managerialism' and 'us and them' dichotomous relationship among the university

staff are still ubiquitous (Collinson, 2007; Connell, 2013; Deem, 1998; Deem & Brehony, 2005; Gornitzka & Larsen, 2004; Sharrock, 2012; Szekeres, 2004, 2011; Whitchurch, 2006). However, these are being forced out by debates on the constructive ways academics and professionals can join forces to work on common projects that enable professional and academic staff working in diverse and mixed groups realising opportunities and achieving outcomes for all (Whitchurch, 2010). Diversification of professional and academic functions and a simultaneous convergence between activity domains has become the reality of the higher education environment. These developments have created the need for re-evaluation of professional identities, perceptions of professionalism and staff self-awareness in relation to the spaces they occupy or aim to move towards in the future.

Furthermore, a nuanced layer of the discourses about the current Reconciliation phase is represented by the notion of borderless professionals (Middlehurst, 2010). These are the individuals who operate in the third space and are best positioned to address contemporary higher education imbalance of funding scarcity versus critical activities and outputs. They offer a mix of relevant and robust skills, commercial and academic acumen, and ability to use multiple platforms (physical, virtual and blended) to their organisation's advantage. During the Reconciliation phase, it is this unique space, where multi-skilled and cross-skilled profes- sionals operate, and where the real blend of talent happens, the projects develop and are taken to the next level of accomplishment and engagement.

This unique space has been the subject of various interpretations in the literature. It is sometimes viewed as complementary to existing spaces where core university activities of teaching and research occur. Likewise, it has the potential to create bridges between existing spaces and/or creating completely new and distinct spaces (Whitchurch, 2012). This space may also be situated above the well-traversed terrains where hybrid professionals develop and demonstrate their blended and highly sought- after capabilities (Middlehurst, 2010). In certain contexts, the space may further enable or strengthen operations across key 'strategic management agendas' and two out of four 'priority zones': 'creative engagement' and 'sustainable enterprise' (Sharrock, 2012, pp. 325–327).

These examples illustrate the complex interplay and the spaces in which individuals operate. It thus becomes clearer that the traditionally held view that the professional staff's only legitimate purpose is to support and enhance the core functions of teaching and research (Duncan, 2014), may need to be reviewed in the context of third spaces. Borderless professionals operating in the third space not only support other commu- nities' and other organisational agendas, but rather confidently and equally contribute alongside academic staff in creating and adding value to the organisational capital.

Within these discourses the main focus of consideration is based on the merits of assigning titles, specific job roles and job descriptions to professional staff (see Table 1). One school of thought has been to defending the distinct roles, portfolios and profiles of professional staff as a means of providing a foundation for the nomenclature ladder and for the defined nomenclature hierarchy. Writers aligned with this school of thinking acknowledge that there are potential dangers with blurring the boundaries between professional and academic staff, while advocating that these blended spaces could be appropriate for the 'new professionals' (Dobson & Conway, 2003; Sebalj, Holbrook, & Bourke, 2012). An alternative school of thinking advocates for flexibility around job identification, career building and self-managed career portfolios of professional staff (Middlehurst, 2010; Whitchurch, 2009a, 2012). The proponents of this school outline a number of benefits of the flexible approach to staff careers and portfolios, including having a career frame as opposed to a career ladder. Unlike the career ladder that presupposes only an ascending move for staff, the career frame allows staff to develop lateral networks and move along the lateral trajectories throughout their careers acquiring multitude of valuable skills and capabilities on the way and thus strengthening their skills portfolio. Thus they become hybrid professionals operating with academic staff in these new collegial spaces.

These two distinct approaches are continually evolving. For many, there has been an evolution of thinking around the professional staff job roles and their position in the university structure. Initially concerns existed surrounding the blurring of the boundaries separating the job roles, as there was

strong support for distinct status and roles when staff worked in partnerships or worked within their own portfolios (Conway, 2000; Dobson & Conway, 2003). This view was later replaced by a higher degree of acceptance and support for the emerging open structures based on the relationship building and on enabling professional and academic staff collaborations while working on the broader university projects (Conway, 2013).

In reviewing Whitchurch's (2012) book on reconstructing identities in higher educa- tion, Conway refers to the third space operations and the third space professionals in contemporary higher education. She states that by placing the focus on the relationships as opposed to structures we will be able to build the future university the way we want it to be rather that the way that is imposed on us (Conway, 2013). In other words, using Bernstein's concepts of educational knowledge transmission and boundaries between the knowledge transmission (Bernstein, 1971), the previously maintained state of control and strong boundaries are being replaced by the third space professionals' redefining traditional structures, notions of management, professionalism and leadership and with the 'focus more on development, facilitation and collaboration than on control' (Whitchurch, 2012, p. 143). These paradigm shifts in the writers' thinking demonstrate the complexity of the professional identities' phenomena that continue evolving with the changes in the university communities.

It is important to note that the researchers' works listed in Table 1 cover a wide range and richness of topics pertinent to the neoliberal higher education context. Only the elements that reflect the professional staff deliberations' evolution are summarised.

As evidenced from the evolving mindsets, professional staff are no longer being defined by their roles, accountabilities and position descriptions, but rather by complex and reconstructed identities, their relationships with other university communities and by their own perceptions of what it means to be professional in the contemporary higher education environment.

Changes in perceptions of professionalism and professionalisation

Whitchurch (2008) has implied that the future belongs to the third space professionals who create their own identities, reformulate their roles according to the needs of the project and in collaboration with academic and other professional colleagues, acquire the skills that they may be currently lacking to bring maximum benefit to the project and extend their own professionalism through workplace collaboration and workplace real life learning. Sharing this viewpoint, the authors of this article imagine that while this a possible future pathway for many professional staff, it may not be appealing for all. Many will continue working within predefined portfolios within the boundaries of their roles on specific administrative tasks, however their numbers may decrease with time.

If the imagined future is the one where the third space dominates university scene, then the questions to consider are, what will it take to enable and empower professional staff to work effectively and efficiently in this third space? Furthermore, what types of higher education professionals will be in demand? What blend of traditional and unique skills and capabilities will they need to acquire and how will these capabilities transpire in the future (Middlehurst, 2010)?

The Australian single university case study conducted by Graham (2013) supports the argument that in a contemporary higher education environment with the proliferation of new technologies more professional staff find themselves working in the third space and shifting between professional and academic roles (Graham, 2013). In recon- structing the notion of professionalism and professionalisation in the higher education landscape, Kolsaker (2014) uses four key constructs to measure professional staff and academics' responses to professionalisation: knowledge, expertise, autonomy and asso- ciation with a professional group. These constructs are fairly consistent with those proposed as 'embryonic definition of professionalism of administrative staff' (Gornitzka & Larsen, 2004, p. 462) discussed by Gornitzka and Larsen (2004), Blümel (2008, May) and subsequently commented on by Szekeres (2011), Graham (2012) and Krücken, Blümel and Kloke (2013). The

following key elements may constitute professionalism for professional staff despite a clear lack of the homogeneity among them:

- organisational knowledge as a common and systematic cognitive and problem- solving base;
- previous relevant experience and expertise evidenced through the acquisition of formal qualifications or completing training programmes and/or academic path- ways to obtain qualifications;
- professional networks and professional associations to perpetuate expertise and
- knowledge exchange, professional standards' development and creation of university professional shared identity;
- formalised status and decision-making autonomy of the roles professional staff fulfil.

In line with the argument that the professional staff lacks homogeneity (Dobson & Conway, 2003), earlier commentary in the literature (Middlehurst, 2010; Szekeres, 2011; Whitchurch, 2008) has pointed out that professionalism may be reconceptualised as a community of professionals, rather than the membership of any particular professional body, or possessing particular credentials to be used as an entry to the profession of the education worker. Szekeres (2011), however, advocates for both: setting up the com- munities of professionals as well as credentialing professional staff through higher education qualifications in order to increase their legitimacy and credibility and to enable them to contribute equally to the projects they work together with academic staff. One could conclude that this may be a very reasonable solution considering that the third space is a space of high achieving and highly skilled individuals who see themselves as equal partners, possessing strong understanding of the higher education environment.

Advancing the argument of redefining professionalism, Middlehurst's (2010) study discusses the interprofessional practice and broader notions of 'interdisciplinarity' and 'interprofessionalism' – the phenomena that have given rise to, and are now congenital to, the earlier introduced concept of the borderless professional. The technological, epistemological, social and organisational complexities and neoliberal imperatives of the modern higher education arena create the need for professional staff to look at how they can reconfigure the traditional boundaries. It is quite possible that there will be a need to completely remove the boundaries around the current roles, professions and even the organisational, geographical and sectoral boundaries.

In the global environment in which 14 universities in Australia have offshore campuses, the third space is no longer restricted to bricks-and-mortar university campuses. Projects are increasingly conducted by professionals and academics working in virtual environments. Within this context, intercultural dimension and competency building becomes even more important, with universities expanding their international presence and operations overseas (Gray, 2015). Consequently, there will be an increasing need for creating, supporting and mentoring culturally competent borderless professionals who, when working on collegial projects will continue to shape the future of international higher education.

Practical solutions and further research direction

Professional staff capabilities in working in the environment of continuous boundary- shifting can be achieved in numerous ways. Middlehurst (2010) advocates a combina- tion of traditional and contemporary ways including skills assessment and recognition of prior learning to provide transitional pathways to further development; accredited vocational and higher education qualifications; attendance of staff and professional associations' conferences and participation in the networking sessions; secondment within the organisation and shadowing of or mentoring by staff in other roles. These are primarily driven by the organisations' leadership teams based on budget availability and are usually aligned with organisational staff development strategy.

Preparing to operate in the third space presents a number of challenges for individuals, as the new ways of working may challenge current professional practices and perceptions. Projects that staff will work on may not yet exist or have no distinct clear- cut parameters. Staff aspiring to work on such projects may not know in advance what skills they may be lacking or what qualifications will be required. Such new modus operandi require reconfiguration of traditional professional development routes. Middlehurst (2010) maintains that this will entail designing and engaging in crossing the boundaries to seek the most relevant, appropriate and customised developmental opportunity to prepare professional staff for these challenges.

Such cross-boundary developmental opportunities may involve a combination of group and individual learning blended with reflective practices; on-the-project learning; connecting with industry partners to gain insights into contemporary work environ- ment and operational practices, and engaging in continuous feedback loop to improve performance. The crucial feature of these new practices is that they will be driven primarily by professional staff seeking to re-design their roles and their professional identities while challenging the status quo and creating new operational excellences. Such practices have the potential to enable professional staff to build their capabilities as they work collaboratively in the third space with academics.

The professional membership-based organisations operating in global neoliberal higher education spaces have ties with one another and with their member commu- nities. Organisations such as the Australian Association for Tertiary Education Management (ATEM) and its counterparts in the UK (Association of University Administrators (AUA)) and in Canada (Canadian Association of University Business Officers (CAUBO)) provide opportunities to connect professionals around their roles, practice domains and learning needs. These associations' services include support, development and advancement of exemplary professional standards and practices.

ATEM currently facilitates communities of practice inclusive of traditional profes- sional areas of student services and examinations administration. They organise con- ferences and provide professional networking opportunities. In partnership with LH Martin Institute, ATEM provides Australian, New Zealand and other countries' university professionals with a higher education developmental programme (Emerging Leadership and Managers Program, or eLamp) that may or may not lead to credentials being acquired. This programme provides a strong foundation for professional staff (Brown & Davis, 2015). Emergence of programmes such as eLamp, as well as a recently launched stimulus paper on Developing and Sustaining Shared Leadership in Higher Education (Bolden, Jones, Davis, & Gentle, 2015) are signs of the importance profes- sional organisations are placing on the capability building of professional staff.

Third space professionals need to develop a diverse range of skills, particularly in the area of research. Having a strong research capacity is important for these professionals as it raises their professionalism, credibility, expertise and effectiveness when working in these collaborative spaces with academics. There are two possible ways to develop this capability: (1) setting up a community of research practice; (2) engaging postgraduate students in work on third space research projects.

Community of research practice

It may be beneficial to set up a community of research practice. Members of this community may be starting new research projects, completing postgraduate research studies or engaged with their doctoral studies. This community will provide a forum for like-minded professionals to enhance their professional capabilities, discussing research ideas, research questions and topics, research designs and methods, ethical issues in research in conjunction with research findings and data interpretation. Such a community would provide the medium for inter-professional research projects that strengthen the connections between disciplines, organisations and third space professional staff engaged in research projects. Though it is anticipated that professional staff will lead this space, ATEM may auspice the establishment of this community. We envisage that the support ATEM could provide may

encompass virtual and face-to-face professional training opportunities on methodologies and research design topics in response to members' needs. Projects examined in this forum could result in connections being built between professional staff and industry practitioners to provide further impetus to Australia's research-industry collaboration recently announced by the Australian Federal government in its Boosting the Commercial returns from research strategy (2015).

It may be advantageous to build this community of research practice aligned with ATEM's existing members' network, partnership with LH Martin Institute and the international connections with the UK and Canada professional organisations. Activities undertaken will enable professional staff with the necessary skills to operate in transdisciplinary and unbounded spaces. It is assumed that this community of research practice, although specifically designed to support and promote collaboration and innovation of the third space professionals, does not need to be a space of exclusivity. Professional and academic staff, staff and leaders of all levels across higher education would be welcome to participate in discussions and research enterprises. Mentorship from the ATEM and LH Martin academic leadership will add value to this capability-building initiative for professional staff joining research pathway.

Engaging postgraduate students

There has been a significant increase in enrolments in Australian doctoral programmes in the last ten years (Berman & Pitman, 2010). The recent study conducted by Berman and Pitman (2010) suggests there are many advantages of including research trained and qualified professional staff in a wide range of university projects. It seems that there could be value in attracting professional staff pursuing their doctoral studies to work in the third space while they are still working on their research project. As evidenced by Middlehurst (2010), as higher education institutions move further towards market-type organisations, the need and opportunities for organisations that nurture multi-skilled professionals will continue to be abundant (p. 232). One could speculate that these professionals will be highly sought after by university leadership while they are completing their studies and/or obtaining their credentials. Developing research skills and engaging with professional networks enable professionals to progress towards their research and study goals. Such achievements will add capital to the organisation and in the process improve organisational culture.

These professional development pathways will need to focus on organisational directives and priority agendas. Merging these two approaches (individual and organi- sational) in the design of professional development pathways has a higher potential to succeed. For a developmental programme to yield the best results, it is advisable for individuals to take responsibility for initiating and pursuing their professional development. It is equally important for a university's learning and development staff and its senior leadership to support, encourage and recognise staff who participate in profes- sional developmental programmes. In addition to maintaining the nexus of individual and organisational goals, these developmental programmes will need to be constantly customised and recalibrated with the individual and projects in mind so they remain relevant, purposeful and demand-driven. Moreover, it would be advantageous if these proposed professional development pathways were built around existing strengths of the individuals, their knowledge sets and skills' capital. Conclusion

Conclusion

A modern university is a complex and yet an adaptable organism. It is comprised of diverse, intelligent and knowledgeable professionals whose challenge is to adapt to the complexities of the global economy, neoliberal constraints and to any other political and economic challenges that the future may bring. When confronted by these profes- sional constraints, professional staff working in these

institutions will continue developing their skills, reconstructing their identities and designing new careers and career pathways. Interdisciplinary staff capability building across a number of disciplines including higher education policy, organisational leadership and workforce planning is a realistic direction for future research.

Community of research practice and postgraduate students' engagement in the third space project work may become feasible solutions to challenges associated with future university capability-building needs. Innovative ways of embedding these developmen- tal pathways into the university learning and development strategy for professional staff will excite, engage and challenge academic and professional staff, alongside organisational learning and development planners, senior leadership staff and postgraduate students.

The authors envisage this article will have resonance with those professional staff working in higher education who are in the process of reconstructing their identities with the view of venturing into other, possibly unknown and undefined roles and blended domains of collaborative third space projects. These professionals may be considering how to bring their own unique experiences and skills to third space projects, to inspire and ignite collective creativity and advance both their own position while providing value to the university. Furthermore, the themes discussed in this article are pertinent to professional and academic staff who are researching or planning to research questions pertaining to professional staff identities, professional and academic staff partnerships and the reconceptualisation of professionalism in higher education.

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