The university third space phenomenon: Investigating perceptions of professional staff working across boundaries in an Australian university and its Singapore campus

Natalia Veles, Helen Boon, Margaret Carter

James Cook University

The University third space is often presented as a powerful driver and an increasingly widespread phenomenon of shifting job roles and identities of both professional and academic staff in the contemporary global university environment (Birds, 2015; Graham, 2013); Whitchurch, 2008/2015). It is defined as new and emerging, or re-invented forms of university activities that transcend traditional academic and professional portfolio binaries, as well as professional identities, creating new work engagements between academic and professional staff (Whitchurch, 2012, 2015).

The advancement of globalisation leads to convergences of higher education policies and workplace practices (Gopinathan, 2001; Gopinathan & Lee, 2011; Green, 1997, 1999; Mok & Lee, 2003); to renegotiation of spaces occupied by university staff in the course of their professional engagements, and to redefined boundaries within universities and across multiple national and international professional, geographical and sectoral domains (Henkel, 2010). Third space may be viewed as a potential way of reinventing academic and professional staff professional engagement. It may be used as a meta-discourse to interpret universities' local responses to globalisation.

Australia's location in the Asia-Pacific region, with its close political, economic and trade connections with countries of Southeast and East Asian countries, including Singapore – the "region of exceptional economic dynamism" (Marginson, 2013, p. 87) – has far-reaching implications on the way higher education systems and processes in these countries are operationalised and how education services are delivered. This systemic convergence and the increasing connection between tertiary institutions has a flow-on effect on how university staff, academic and professional, operate and collaborate within their own organisations, across professional and geographical borders, and how their roles and professional identities blend and integrate.

The international presence of an Australian university affords a unique research opportunity to explore how university professional staff navigate these simultaneously challenging and propitious new professional spaces in a cross-cultural and cross-national context. A qualitative multiple case study (Patton, 2015; Simons, 2009; Stake, 2006) will explore the emerging phenomenon of the university third space from the perspective of professional staff working in Australian and

Singaporean campuses of an Australian university. The impact of national culture and its dimensions (collectivism/individualism (Triandis, 1993, 1995) and the Confucian dynamism (Hofstede & Bond, 1988) in particular), will be examined to understand professional staff predispositions towards working across professional and geographic boundaries (Cohen & Mankin, 2002; Mankin, Cohen, & Fitzgerald, 2004; Mankin & Cohen, 2004).

The new understanding of the university collaborative engagement will be created through building the university third space narratives. These will be analysed using contemporary frameworks of professional staff identities and a typology of third space (Graham, 2013; Whitchurch, 2012). The narratives will provide recommendations to build university professional staff expertise and resilience in their evolving roles within the emerging university third space.

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