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University professional staff roles, identities, and spaces of interaction: systematic review of literature published in 2000–2020

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ABSTRACT

Higher education as a field of research and a broad topic for investigation continues to grow; however, several topics remain less explicated than those about core university activities (teaching and research). Specifically, the experience of university professional staff is a topic that attracts lesser attention but is important and relevant to higher education institutions' current and future operations. A systematic review of 54 publications from the first two decades of the twenty-first century, across the Global South and Global North, was undertaken to advance knowledge about the changing roles and occupational identities of professional staff and the spaces of interaction with others in the university community. This review found changes in professional identity construction, a growing sense of agency in professional staff, increasing visibility in their contributions to university work and developing collaborations with academic staff. These findings are set in the context of critical engagement with the discourse of third space and other boundary zones of staff interaction and working together. Our review concludes with specific propositions for university practice, informed policymaking and future research.

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Introduction

In recent decades, higher education has grown as a sector and as a distinct field of study and research, which is reflected in the increased volume of literature dedicated to higher education topics (Bentley and Graham 2020). There is corresponding interest from, and a need for, policymakers, practitioners, researchers and research funders to access research-based literature to make informed decisions within higher education policy, practice and future research (St. John, Daun-Barnett, and Moronski-Chapman 2018). This environment requires 'in-depth accounts of significant areas of policy development affecting higher education internationally' (Hazelkorn and Locke 2022, 1).

The topic for this systematic review arose from two considerations. First, Malcolm Tight's recent systematic review of syntheses of higher education research confirmed

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the centrality of pedagogical research in the broad field of higher education research (2021). Consequently, there remains a clear deficit of research 'into the experiences of professional and non-academic staff' (Tight 2021, 223). Second, the serendipitous association of two authors with experience in practice leadership and research in professional staff work and identities, combined with the expertise of a senior librarian as the third author, produced a team with systematic search and review knowledge and knowledge of the research and practice field (McKeown and Ross-White 2019).

Affected by the recent events of the pandemic, the higher education sector across the globe continues to address political, financial and economic changes and challenges (Locke 2020; Veles 2022). Additionally, technological developments have created conditions for the deepening precariousness of higher education talent, inadvertently marginalising vulnerable student and staff groups and diminishing sustainability and satisfaction derived from work (e.g. Veles and Danaher 2022; Whitchurch, Locke, and Marini 2019). These and other developments started long before the disruptions of the pandemic and continue to manifest as universities across the world rebuild, reimagine and reinvigorate in the post-pandemic environment. The roles, responsibilities, spheres of influence and professional identities of all staff continue to change, at times aligned with and at other times outpacing or lagging such global changes.

The term professional staff – referring to a large community of university staff who perform administrative, student services, financial, technical and numerous other roles critical to organisational operations – has not been applied consistently in the tertiary education sector across the world (Veles 2022). Nor does it appear to be a widely socialised term, as the traditionally deficit-based term 'non-academic' continues to be used in higher education literature (e.g. Croucher and Woelert 2022). This terminological diversity reflects the diversity of their jobs and activities, the various professionalisms the staff represent and the divergent classification types into which they fall across the institutions of the Global South and Global North (Veles 2022).

This terminological inconsistency reflects organisational complexity and diversity of universities in various countries. In the higher education institutions context of Africa (e.g. Opoku 2013), Asia (e.g. Takagi 2015, 2018), Canada (e.g. Sharif et al. 2019) and the US (e.g. Christiansen, Stombler, and Thaxton 2004; Davis, Lundstrom, and Martin 2011; Pace, Blumreich, and Merkle 2006), the terms faculty and staff are used. Historically in those regions, faculty refers to academic (teaching and research) staff working in the respective educational faculty whose primary roles are to teach students and disseminate knowledge through research. Staff in those universities is a collective term referring to those whose main roles range from clerical and administrative to sales and executive, with the overarching professional purpose of supporting and promoting the functions and missions of the university. The equivalent terms used in the literature of other regions (e.g. Australia, New Zealand, the UK and other European countries) are academic and professional or support (which includes administrative, technical and, occasionally, managerial) staff.

Before the events of COVID-19 and increasingly during the pandemic, professional staff have been involved with, and at times led, the design and implementation of innovative solutions to support academic colleagues and students. These partnerships led to improved learning and engagement in internal and external collaborations, which assisted their institutions to continue to grow and flourish, withstanding many pandemic-related and other setbacks (Baré et al. 2021; Veles 2022). In Australia, professional

staff comprise as much as 57% of the higher education workforce (Australian Government Department of Education 2022), with equivalent proportions in universities in other countries (e.g. Baltaru 2019; Baltaru and Soysal 2018; Stage and Aagaard 2019; Tran, Battese, and Villano 2020). This significantly sized group of university staff has been gradually included in and become a focus of higher education research (e.g. Birds 2015; Botterill 2018; Graham 2013, 2018; McIntosh and Nutt 2022; Sugrue et al. 2019; Whitchurch 2008a, 2008b, 2008c, 2009, 2012, 2018; Veles 2022). Research on professional staff, their identities and interactions with academic colleagues and other university communities appears to have reached the volume and conceptual maturity to progress to the stage of knowledge systematisation. Such systematisation would assist practitioners, policymakers and researchers gain clarity about the current state and future directions for improving university practices and research pathways.

The review that is the subject of this paper is intended to systematise the knowledge from this century's first two decades. It was undertaken to address two research questions that are sufficiently broad and yet appropriately granular to reflect and interpret current and signpost future developments:

- How are the occupational identities of university professional staff being interpreted by multifarious university staff?
- How have spaces and interactions between university professional and academic staff been developing from 2000 to 2020?

The term 'multifarious university staff' is intentionally vague, intended to encompass all university staff, whether their positions are professional, academic or third space. In our readings of the selected literature, while it was possible to surmise some as authored by professional staff and others by academics, it was not possible to definitively determine to which group every author considered themselves most closely affiliated. Moreover, in our experience, university staff change positions between professional and academic (and vice versa), some on a regular basis and, furthermore, some roles are designated as professional in one university, while a position undertaking the same functions and responsibilities may be designated academic in a neighbouring institution.

With these questions and caveats in mind, we progress to articulating our collective positioning on the questions of professional identities, organisational and symbolic spaces that involve multiple persons working together, and boundaries that divide individuals and groups in the complex university lifeworlds. These questions were foundational in developing the analytical framework that structured and guided this review and assisted in drawing the recommendations for future developments.

Methodology: approach to knowledge systematisation

Over the last 30 years, since the emergence and advancement of evidence-based practice, Systematic Literature Reviews (SLRs) have become a valuable approach to accessing, systematising and analysing research literature, particularly in health research from which they originated (Hong and Pluye 2018). More recently, this approach to conducting literature reviews has been adopted by other disciplines that seek to apply systematised knowledge to practice and research. SLRs have been increasingly used to assess and

evaluate literature in higher education research (Bentley and Graham 2020; Tight 2021) – a relatively young field of research with a heightened attention to and aim of improving practice and informing its interdisciplinary theoretical and methodological tradition.

This article pursues a broad goal of SLRs: the identification, critical review and synthesis of publications on a particular topic (Tight 2021). A more specific goal was to go beyond a discussion of synthesised findings, to 'communicate the results and implications of otherwise unmanageable quantities of research' (Petticrew and Roberts 2006, 10) for end users who may include higher education leaders, practitioners, researchers and policymakers. For evidence-based policy development and practice improvement (Petticrew and Roberts 2006), SLRs, like ours, provide a source of critical and critically examined evidence and insights to inform future decisions.

This SLR process followed the 12-step review process formulated by Petticrew and Roberts (2006, 284–287). When writing and reviewing the protocol (Step 3), we drew on external guidelines for creating a systematic and reproducible method to review strategy and execute searches, which presented an optimal balance between sensitive and specific translation of search strategies between several databases (Bramer et al. 2018). Lastly, using a published and tested-in-practice guide strengthened the findings' comprehensiveness and transparency (Chapman 2021), thus enhancing both the analytical and applied value of the resultant practice and policy recommendations.

We made one modification of the guidelines during critical appraisal (Step 8), at which the methodological soundness of the literature is assessed (Petticrew and Roberts 2006). Methodological assessment was deliberately integrated into the quality appraisals of the journals and the book publisher in which the selected empirical studies were published. This decision is justifiable on two counts. Firstly, the journals were assessed by our library professional team member using Ulrich's Serial Analysis System (USAS) (ulrichsweb.com), which is designed to identify, evaluate and assess serials collections. This approach relied on the credibility and objectivity of the peer-review process that the assessed journals undertook before publishing an article. The only research monograph selected for the review (Whitchurch 2012) was appraised by evaluating the publisher's reputation. Secondly, this curation via peer review in high-quality publications provided confidence in the methodological soundness of both qualitative and quantitative studies included in our SLR. To this end, we assessed and used the quality of the journals and the reputation of the monograph publisher as a heuristic method for assessing the methodological soundness of the selected studies.

Search strategy and methods for selecting the sources

To ensure that the approach to the literature search was comprehensive, transparent and reproducible, we created and followed a checklist, which was a modified version of Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews (PRISMA). The flowchart (adapted from Moher et al. 2009 and Acton 2019) is shown in Figure 1.

Preliminary decisions

Following the steps described in Petticrew and Roberts (2006) and Bramer et al. (2018), after having developed clear and focused research questions, we defined the spatial

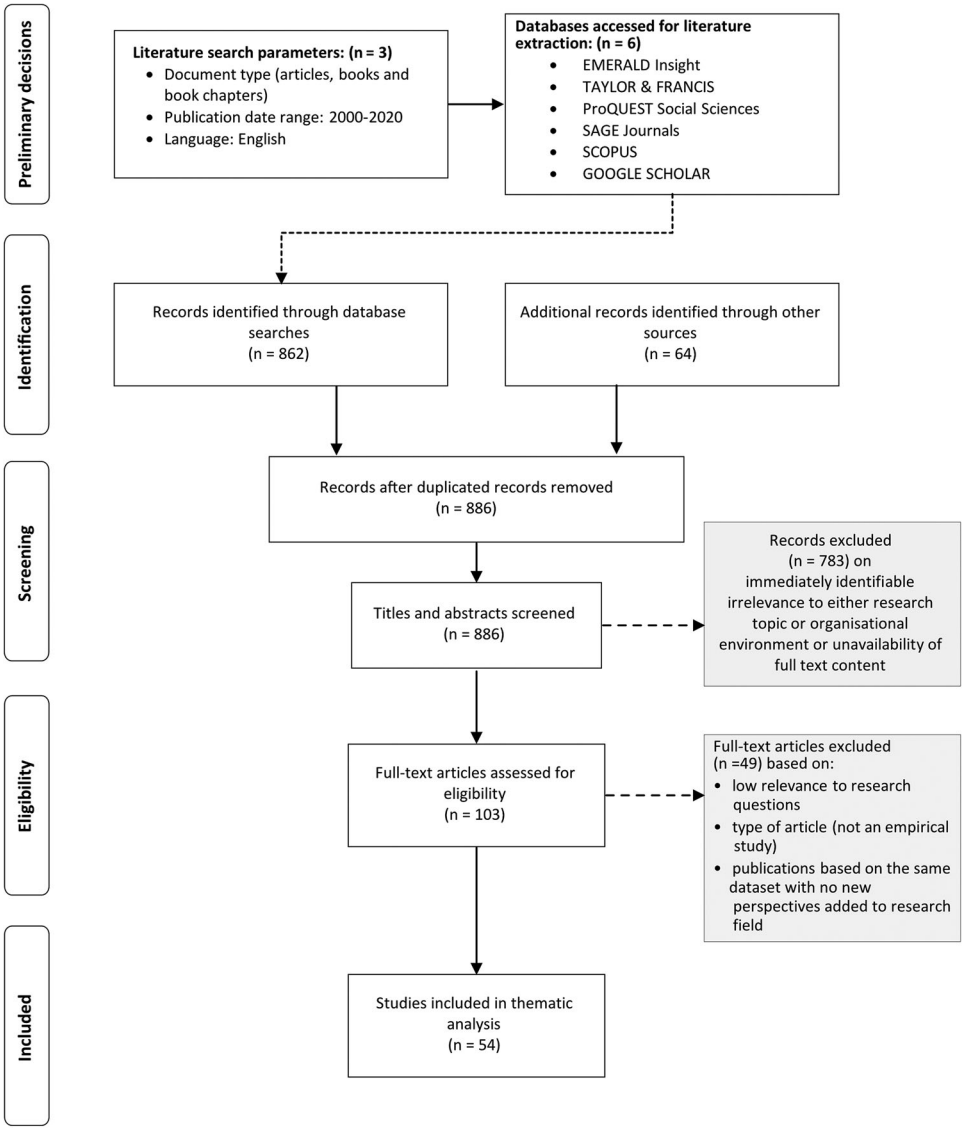

Figure 1. Systematic literature review reporting diagram (adapted from Moher et al. 2009 and Acton 2019).

(geographical span), language (the language of publications), temporal (historical period), and methodological (methodology used in the research reported in the articles) and boundary categories. These boundaries were used to adhere to a sound search strategy (cf. Nichols and Stahl 2019) and ensure the feasibility of a study (Acton 2019). To this end, only journal articles, with one exception, were included in the review. To ensure strengthened quality and trustworthiness of the findings, only journal articles that were indexed in relevant databases and published in peer-reviewed journals were included in the review.

The one exception to the decision about the publication type was the deliberate inclusion of a published book (Whitchurch 2012). The vast body of knowledge on the

topic of this review produced by Celia Whitchurch over many years (e.g. 2004, 2006, 2007, 2008a, 2008b, 2009, 2010) was subsequently compiled and deliberated in her book (2012). Based on this consideration, we purposely decided to analyse her book and three distinct articles (2006, 2008a, 2008b) rather than all the papers authored or co-authored by Whitchurch.

Articles published globally were used, to increase the reach and include relevant publications in diverse and culturally dissimilar environments. Limiting the selection to works published in English was necessitated by two practical reasons: the difficulty accessing literature published in languages other than English and the time constraints relating to translating relevant literature into English. Nevertheless, we acknowledge that this decision would potentially exclude a small body of literature that would have enriched the findings. Finally, only articles that reported empirical findings were included in the review.

The temporal boundary (thereby restricting publications to 2000–2020, inclusive) was primarily informed by our pre-existing knowledge concerning the advancement of professional and support staff's professionalisation and engagement with higher education scholarship that coincided with the beginning of the 2000s. The end date was chosen deliberately. We assumed that papers published online in 2020, owing to extended publishing lead times, would be based on research conducted prior to the critical point of the COVID-19 pandemic events; research about the impacts of COVID on the professional staff roles and identities was outside of the scope of this review.

In higher education research, there has been a preponderance of studies conducted with a qualitative approach. In contrast, there has been only a small number of quantitative studies (e.g. Croucher and Woelert 2022; Gornitzka and Larsen 2004; Stage and Aagaard 2019), some of which represent a growing number of longitudinal analyses of university workforce (professional and support staff) changes. In pursuit of a broad goal of SLRs (Tight 2021), both qualitative and quantitative studies were included in this review. Nevertheless, it was recognised that the descriptive research questions ('how') this review intended to address would invariably be incompatible with quantified results.

Identification

Six databases containing publications within the broad domains of education and social sciences were searched individually to access and retrieve all publications within the bounded categories. Search optimisation techniques, such as database-specific syntax, appropriate terms in thesauri and translation of search terms across the selected databases, were used to maximise precision (i.e. inclusion of highly relevant results across databases) and feasibility of the further analysis. A table containing the search term strings used for each of the six databases with the total number of retrieved results of 862 at the specified cut-off date of 10 January 2021 is located in the Appendix.

The expertise of our specialist librarian (the third author of this article) was indispensable in searching these databases. This author adroitly navigated the complexities and shortfalls of the thesauri across various social sciences databases (Pinto 2008). The Appendix provides the search terms for each database that the authors used to capture the body of 'higher education' literature on the topic of this study. Backward chaining was used on the retrieved database searches and a pre-existing reference list on a relevant topic to

identify additional articles that had not been captured through the database searches. Supplementing the systematic database search with backward chaining ensured the completeness and depth of the included literature. As a result, 64 articles were identified in addition to 862 results retrieved from the database searches. The rigour of the triangulated approach to the literature search notwithstanding, we acknowledge that some relevant articles may have been missed.

Screening and eligibility

After duplicate items were removed, the resulting body of literature contained 886 entries. The next step (screening) involved the two researchers independently reading the abstracts of the selected records and discussing their assessments of the relevance of the publications against the research topic and questions. The appropriateness of the organisational environment (i.e. articles based on research conducted in organisations outside the higher education sector were eliminated at this stage) and the availability of full texts were considered. In the following stage (eligibility), the identified and prescreened 103 full texts were read closely by the same two researchers using three predefined qualitative criteria to eliminate articles: those with low relevance to the research questions; those that did not represent empirical studies; and those empirical studies that drew from previously published datasets with no new perspectives contributing to the research topic.

Inclusion

After the multi-stepped elimination process was completed, 54 items (53 articles and one research monograph) were sufficiently relevant to the research questions, met the quality criterion, and were included in the review. The final number of sources was larger than used in many published SLRs, which commonly range between 20 and 30 reviewed records. The decision to discontinue any further eliminations using additional criteria, thereby achieving a smaller and more feasible review, was predicated on the intentional departure from a narrow formulation of research questions. The purpose of undertaking the SLR was to access, synthesise and present findings of the 20 years of research into professional staff identities and interactions across higher education spaces, which was essentially open-ended and invited a larger body of research for consideration.

Overview of the sources

Analysis of the 54 publications initially used NVivo qualitative data analysis software (www.qsrinternational.com) to code data into a broad coding frame for discussion and further analysis of the emergent themes (Massaro, Dumay, and Guthrie 2016; Silverman 2013). Accordingly, a brief NVivo-assisted analysis was undertaken on two levels. First-level analysis involved coding easily accessible and retrievable information across the four categories. This analysis was subsequently used to discuss the themes identified through the second-level analysis. These themes were aligned to the conceptual and analytical frameworks and resulted in the synthesis of a wealth and richness of insights derived from multiple readings of the sources.

The first-level analysis categories (Table 1) largely followed the searched categories of knowledge: *geography*, *research methodology*, *types of professional roles and identities* and *spaces of interaction*. *Geography* of the included publications provided valuable insights about the diverse terminology used across countries and the way roles, professional identities and spaces of interactions are interpreted in dissimilar higher education systems and traditions. *Research methodology* presented an overview of the methodological approaches used in research on this topic. Finally, *types of professional roles and identities* and *spaces of interactions* were the two central categories for this research project.

For the categories *geography* and *methodological perspective*, their fields (Table 1) are mutually exclusive, and the totals for these categories each sum to 54 articles. However, the fields for *professional staff roles and identities* and *spaces of interaction* presented a challenge in categorisation. Job titles are used dissimilarly across the countries of research. For example, the use of 'administrator' or 'administrative staff' in countries like Australia was dissimilar to that in the US. Therefore, we grouped those roles and identities as generic professional or support staff or academic staff (professional or academic), new professionals (or, as they are referred to by German [Schneijderberg 2017; Schneijderberg and Merkator 2013] and often American [e.g. Daly 2013] higher education scholars as 'higher education professionals' or 'HEPROs' in their description of university staff who are located in-between academic and administrative spheres of activities), library (LIS) professionals, and research managers or administrators (RMA). Groups represented to a lesser degree were purely administrative staff (Admin), academic developers (AD), learning designers (LD), information technology (IT) staff, and a combined group of staff of mixed portfolios, managerial staff and other types of professionals (Mixed).

Table 1. Overview of the articles.

Category	Field	Number
Research methodology	Quantitative	8
	Mixed methods	4
	Qualitative	42
Geographical area	UK	18
	AUS	9
	EU	7
	US	6
	Asia	2
	Africa	2
	Canada	2
	NZ	1
	Multiple	7
Professional roles and identities	Professional or academic	12
	New professional	12
	LIS	11
	RMA	9
	AD	3
	LD	2
	IT	2
	Admin	4
	Mixed	9
Spaces of interaction	Teaching & learning	19
	Third space	19
	Research	12
	Engagement	3
	Not specified	10

Similarly, fields for *spaces of interaction* were not mutually exclusive; some roles belonged to more than one field. For example, some spaces were identified as traditional (such as teaching and learning) and simultaneously as a third space or an innovative project space. Therefore, the resulting totals for these two categories are greater than the number of sources (Table 1).

In concluding this section, we acknowledge that regardless of the comprehensive approach used to search, retrieve and finalise the search results for this review, thereby providing a high degree of transparency and reproducibility of the research findings, there are limitations to the methodological decisions and implementation. These limitations include, for example, terminological complexity (e.g. the contested use of the term 'professional staff'), researcher bias in selecting supplementary articles through backward chaining, the complexities and inconsistent design of databases and the temporal scope used to search the databases. As such, this SLR uses one slice of the literature, which may have inadvertently omitted some relevant sources, thus resulting in a distinct perspective. Nevertheless, as discussed earlier in this section, the rationale for each decision allows for a robust selection of literature relating to the research questions.

The final comment in this section concerns how the literature sources are differentiated in this review's reference section. Articles used as data are indicated with an asterisk at the end of their entries in the reference list. This approach provides a compact way of differentiating these two sets of literature.

The following section discusses the analytical frameworks we use to discuss and interpret the main three themes. Those themes were identified through second-level analysis relating to the research questions and used to formulate suggestions for future practice, policy, research and the nexus thereof.

Theoretical and conceptual layering

Findings derived from the analysed literature were refracted through a combination of theoretical and conceptual frameworks to achieve two goals. The first goal was to provide a set of actionable 'transformative redefinitions' (Massaro, Dumay, and Guthrie 2016, 776), navigating the reader through new knowledge to future research on the topic rather than presenting a mere collection of descriptions of findings. The second goal was to use a consistent and critical foundation for discovering consistencies and variations across the distilled findings concerning our research questions. Accordingly, we begin this section by introducing and explicating the conceptual framework which guided this review, articulating our positioning on the questions of professional identity, boundaries/boundary zones and spaces, and staff interactions/collaborations in higher education.

Professional identity

We pay close attention to theories that stress dynamic accounts (e.g. Hall 1990; Delanty 2008) and the plurality and multilayered nature (e.g. Angouri 2016) of professional identities. Our interpretations are grounded in the discipline of the sociology of organisations and are aligned with socially constructed identity theories developed within the symbolic interactionist tradition (Prus 1996; Snow and Anderson 1995). We support the idea of

professional identity development that highlights the transition from passive (invisibility) to agency (active voice, advocacy, and representation).

Since the end of the last century, there has been a shift from a binary conception of university work to a more complex conceptualisation. These more complex conceptualisations have resulted from a gradual growth in empirical evidence towards an intersection of these two domains and a corresponding growth in new professional staff roles and identities. This developing understanding of university work has given rise to a concept of a university *third space* (Whitchurch 2008a, 2018) – a new practice site intersecting professional and academic domains and a zone of co-constructing diverse and, at times, overlapping professional identities. Parallel and closely connected to *third space* perspectives are spaces that are overlapping (Whitchurch 2008c, 2010, 2012), hybrid (Henkel 2010) or liminal (Allen-Collinson 2006); interpreted as a matrix (Graham 2014) or shifting arenas (Birds 2015; Shelley 2010).

Our focus is aligned with the interactionally grounded conceptualisation of professional identity (Angouri and Marra 2011; Brekhus 2008). We sought to synthesise and critically interpret narratives of professional staff identities presented in the selected accounts over two decades, portrayed through the interactions with and from the perspective of diverse university staff. We were guided by three assumptions that characterise social constructivist identity theory (Marra and Angouri 2011) and provide a generative and critical view of professional identity in higher education research. First, professional identity manifests through *doing*, as opposed to *being* or even *becoming*. It is enacted through negotiation of self *and* others, and self *with* others (Marra and Angouri 2011). Second, professional identity is situated in multiple work and work-related contexts and manifests its complex and multilayered nature through the whole range of communication devices used by the actors. It is, therefore, more appropriate to use the plural form in discussions about professional identity to reflect multiple identities throughout one's working life and across various diverse work contexts. Third, the frequently used interchangeability of *roles* and *identities* reflects an undeniable connection and interplay between the two concepts (Marra and Angouri 2011). Nevertheless, we distinguish between roles and identities. Roles are what staff perform at work and are measured through various institutional processes. In contrast, professional identity is how they see themselves in the real work-world: as part of their roles, as extensions of or differentiation from such, or as performing multiple roles within various work contexts.

Boundaries and spaces

University spaces, where professional identities develop and staff work and interact, are inalienable arenas of development and interaction. Over recent decades, the traditional university domains of teaching and research have been supplemented by additional university missions. Such missions include enhanced engagement with local and global communities, internationalisation of higher education, sharpened attention to student engagement and the learning experience, and other longer-term project-based work. These additions have resulted in an increasing, and increasingly inevitable, overlap between various roles, traditionally referred to as 'professional', 'support', 'administrative' or 'allied', and those that relate to the academic practice of teaching and research. Therefore, previously delineated stable boundaries between the work

domains, work types and professional identities have weakened and become more permeable.

Similar to our perspective that professional identities are not fixed but continuously evolving, we interpret institutional boundaries as fragmentary zones – never completed and never completely enclosing any activity domain (Haye and González 2021). Boundary zones (created by new university imperatives) witness staff enacting those new and emerging university imperatives, moving in and out of various professional roles and identities while crossing physical and symbolic boundaries. As staff move at and across these boundaries, their conceptualisations of professional identity and understandings of roles are refracted through multiple responses, actualisations and contestations. In light of perpetual incompleteness, partial understanding and a plurality of effects, boundary is no longer a line that divides the opposing categories. Instead, boundary transforms into a zone that can be entered (Haye and González 2021; Valsiner 2009) and (temporarily) inhabited by multiple staff to work and learn together. In other words, institutional spaces and boundaries, as well as professional identities, are profoundly contextual and constructed, enacted and interpreted in multiple ways.

The typology of university *third space* environments (Whitchurch 2012, 2018), or boundary zones, represents various intersecting and, at times, merged work and identities. It describes the multiple environments of cross-boundary interactions as either *integrated*, *semi-autonomous*, or *independent*. *Integrated* spaces are stable arenas – funded, legitimised and recognised as teaching and research activities with defined staff roles and associated professional identities. S*emi-autonomous* spaces are typically characterised by temporary project work, generally funded to a lesser degree than core activities, and with more ambiguously described roles and identities. Work in *independent* boundary zones occurs sporadically along various university domain intersections or outside those domains. Independent spaces are often underfunded and enjoy or grapple with pseudo-market conditions (Veles 2022) and work in those zones relies primarily on collaboration for a solution to a particular problem (Whitchurch 2012, 2018). This typology is not, however, an immutable structure. A space may be equally interpreted, for instance, as *independent* or *semi-autonomous* depending on the associated project's conditions and the perspectives of collaborating staff; whether they perceive their *third space* project as becoming embedded in the university framework or remaining independent.

These environments simultaneously represent discursiveness of practices and their occasional contestation, as seen in literature on the topic (e.g. McIntosh and Nutt 2022). They are profitably applied to ordering and making sense of the university's increasingly complex contexts, and they likewise apply to analysing and interpreting findings in this SLR.

Ways of working together: collaboration

Professional interaction is the third element in our conceptual framework. If professional identities represent continuous *becoming* and spaces of interactions provide the situated *being* of individuals and occupational groups, then interactions themselves portray the *doing* – the connections between staff – essential to university operations. We pay equal attention to various ways workplace relations are theorised in the scholarly literature, concentrating on collaboration to achieve outcomes for individuals and institutions.

Collaboration is often idealised as an optimal way of working productively in complex organisations (Eddy 2010; Veles and Danaher 2022). For example, university collaboration often involves staff and other stakeholders coming together to work on a project or solve a problem, benefiting individuals and the institution. However, this way of working is not devoid of potential and real challenges and controversies (Veles 2022; Veles and Danaher 2022). Documented benefits of collaborations include efficient use of increasingly scarce resources; drawing on multiple individuals' expertise; and collective energy, creativity and intellectual capacity that generate synergies and lead to competitive advantage for organisations and individuals (Beyerlein, Beyerlein, and Kennedy 2005; Diamond and Rush 2012). In addition, temporary or project-related collaborations may lead to more enduring partnerships between individuals and teams, defying temporal and spatial boundaries. However, competition and rivalry, inversely related to collaborative relationships, may often foment disagreements between collaborating partners, counteracting the benefits of collaboration. Nevertheless, our perspective is that the value and benefits of university collaborations, particularly in a world destabilised by the COVID-19 pandemic, cannot be underestimated.

Above, we have articulated our conceptions of the dynamism of professional identities, the discursive spaces with boundaries and boundary zones that connect or separate staff, and the organisational and symbolic spaces that enable or hinder their work and interactions. These understandings provide a series of beacons for us, as authors and reviewers of the literature, and for readers to make sense of the synthesis and interpretations of the complexity of university staff and their life worlds. The discussion now progresses to thematic descriptions of findings across the selected articles through the lens of those positionings.

Discussion of themes

Here we discuss themes drawn from our selected literature: evolution of professional identities, emerging spaces of interaction and ways of working. The discussions are supported and guided by theoretical and conceptual positionings presented in the previous section.

Theme 1: complexity of roles of professional staff as a basis for evolving multiple and hybrid identities

Dynamic vs. static identities

In the reviewed articles, authors discussed professional identities of professional staff as continuing to evolve in the contemporary complex higher education context. This evolution was acknowledged to be aligned with or in response to the globally changing sector and corresponding changes in expectations from work demands imposed on staff (Graham 2012). Those few articles that did not address occupational identities of professional staff were focused on other matters, such as spaces of interactions (e.g. Cox and Pinfield 2014; Verbaan and Cox 2014) or ways of working together among staff (e.g. Machin, Harding, and Derbyshire 2009; Pace, Blumreich, and Merkle 2006), also within scope of this SLR. Finally, some articles discussed identities with no explicit reference to the nature of those identities: static or dynamic, multi-faceted or unified. This last

group of articles attracted our attention and resulted in a nuanced analysis of the findings. In placing their research focus elsewhere, the authors of those publications potentially (inadvertently or otherwise) further problematised the debates about professional staff, portraying them as a uniform and faceless group. Those articles appeared mainly at the start of the century when debates around professional staff were gaining force but were still lacking maturity, the phase which Whitchurch (2012, 26–27) defined as *Contestation* and Allen-Collinson (2006) described as the *contestation of occupational identity*. Further discussions about evolutionary professional staff debates (*Contestation, Reconciliation* and *Reconstruction*) can be found in Ryttberg and Geschwind (2017), Veles and Carter (2016) and the inclusion of a new – *Transformation* – phase in Veles (2022).

Asymmetric perceptions of identities

The inattention to professional identities and lack of acknowledgment of varying professional staff groups co-existing with others in universities resulted in the following findings in a small number of the reviewed articles. First, a portrayal of professional staff as a homogenous group lacking occupational identity (group or individual) or with an implied static occupational identity was argued to be an oversimplified or generalised description of the administrative job (Krücken, Blümel, and Kloke 2013). Second, and largely resulting from this portrayal, the notion of a parallel existence between professional and academic groups with little to no intersection was reported as having given rise to asymmetrical perceptions and misconceptions about the work and professional orientations of certain groups of university staff.

An example of this group of articles was Christiansen, Stombler, and Thaxton's (2004) study of librarians from the social sciences research perspective. This article discussed an asymmetrical disconnection between library staff and academics. However, ironically, the discussion failed to include the voices of the librarians in question. The authors found the existing disconnection between these groups unsurprising. What perplexed them was the difference in how librarians and academics perceived this disconnection and its consequences. Organisationally, Christiansen, Stombler, and Thaxton (2004) found a contrast between the collaborative nature of library work and the solitary nature of academic work, exacerbated by physical (space-sharing) and temporal (work time differential) divisions. Further, the service orientation of librarians (as perceived by academic staff) was considered of lower status than the knowledge-production orientation of academic staff. These observations are also complicated by debates about the distinct identities of library workers. Librarians – by virtue of a long history of professionalisation and prerequisite academic qualifications as an entry point to the library profession, and, more recently, through evolving new activities which are strongly aligned with academic labours (e.g. support and promotion of the teaching of digital literacy to students and academic staff) – self-identify as professionals of a higher order than general support staff (Corrall 2010). Overall, identity (including self-identification and perceptions around other-identification) and status matter within professional groups and across various university staff cohorts, leading to a significant discourse perpetuating the *othering dualism* (Macfarlane 2015; see also Birds 2015; Conway 2012; Kolsaker 2014; Whitchurch 2012) that continues to contribute to fragmentation of academic and professional staff and the further fragmentation of various professional staff groups.

Amplified discourse of de-invisibilisation

The more recent articles in our study demonstrated sophisticated discussions about various groups of professional staff (e.g. research administrators, academic developers, learning development professionals, academic language and learning advisors) with nuanced and rich discourse about their professional identities. For example, Gravett and Winstone (2019) reported multiple complex roles of *learning development staff* in a UK university, who assist students in implementing assessment feedback. In addressing the evolving requirements of *listener*, *dialogue partner*, *interpreter*, *coach* and *intermediary* (between students and academics), their emerging and changing professional identities associated with those roles ranged from quasi-academic, *third-space* intermediaries to boundary spanners (those transcending organisational boundaries of institutional domains). Discussion of professional staff's multiple roles or 'many faces' (Gravett and Winstone 2019, 727), with their invariably imprecise positioning between various traditionally defined binary categories, 'academic' or 'other', was identified in several other articles. The ambiguities of professional staff roles arose concerning university librarians in Ghana (Opoku 2013), Australia and Vietnam (Pham and Williamson 2020); the UK (Machin, Harding, and Derbyshire 2009) and the US (Davis, Lundstrom, and Martin 2011; Polger and Okamoto 2013). Such ambiguities were also observed in *academic-related staff* at the University of Hong Kong (Takagi 2015); *specially appointed academic staff* (SAAS) or *tokunin* staff with project and administrative responsibilities in Japanese universities (Takagi 2018); academic developers in Norway and Sweden (Fremstad et al. 2020) and in one Canadian university (Sharif et al. 2019). Role and identity ambiguity was further noted for *instructional design experts* promoting the adoption of learning technologies in teaching the curriculum in a South African university (Stoltenkamp, van de Heyde, and Siebrits 2017); *academic language and learning advisors* in Australian universities (Grossi and Gurney 2020); *student engagement staff* in a regional university in Australia (Leece and Jaquet 2017); and *professional managers working in advancement* (fundraising and alumni relations activities) in UK universities (Daly 2013). All these authors pointed out the ambiguity, additionality (multiple role undertakings and evolving priorities *in addition* to the core work for which staff are employed) and situated nature of professional staff identities.

Beyond direct exploration of staff work and changing roles, job titles were investigated (Stage and Aagaard 2019). This exploration provides another indicator of changing professional identities with significant implications for organisational structures, the university workforce and changes in interactions between professional and academic staff. Stage and Aagaard (2019) claimed that this Danish pattern of change could be observed in many European countries. Other aspects of professional identity were investigated within a group of US student affairs professionals (Wilson et al. 2016) with identified impacts of career commitment and career entrenchment on shaping and strengthening the sense of professional identity within this group.

Grossi and Gurney (2020) argued that professional staff comprise multiple occupational subgroups with unique group identities that are constantly developing, multilayered and contextually complex. Similar findings were seen in the sociologically rich discussions on research administrators' occupational identities (e.g. Allen-Collinson 2006, 2009; Hockey and Allen-Collinson 2009; Deem 2010), along with findings from more contemporary

works. Crucial in these examples of discursive changes is the increasing academic component of 'traditional' professional staff roles. This growing academic component suggests a shift from the traditional support focus of professional staff to a focus on co-production of knowledge with academic colleagues and their increasingly equalised participation in sharing knowledge with students and other university stakeholders (Berman and Pitman 2010). For example, professional staff have moved from *wanting* to define themselves, be visible and valued (Sebalj, Holbrook, and Bourke 2012) and *wanting* to move away from 'occupational (non)identities' (Allen-Collinson 2006, 274) imposed by others, to *becoming* increasingly accomplished and visible (Sugrue et al. 2019; Stoltenkamp, van de Heyde, and Siebrits 2017), 'as they seek collaboratively to fabricate the future of the university' (Sugrue et al. 2019, 14). These articles acknowledge the complex and sometimes futile task of categorising new and emerging roles. They actively describe the challenges associated with new identity construction and interpretation (for professional and academic staff) and demonstrate agency in *de-invisibilisation*, which reflects, we argue, the cumbersome and lengthy process of moving from *wanting* to *becoming*.

Reinterpreting professionalism

Another facet of professional identity, crucial in the process of developing self and group identities and observed across many publications, was *professionalism*. Principal discussions included understanding this term in relation to professional staff, how professionalisation as a process is interpreted concerning professionalism as a feature of identity, professional staff's positioning within professionalism, the overarching professionalisation debate and the contested question of the locus of professionalism in universities. We observed an increasing critique of narrow or traditional conceptualisations of professionalism, such as an 'affiliation to a particular profession' (Kolsaker 2014, 136), possession of disciplinary knowledge and expertise (Gornitzka and Larsen 2004) and something perceived as exclusive and 'traditionally associated with a prescribed body of knowledge, professional-client relationships, and overarching validating bodies' (Whitchurch 2012, 105). Moreover, many authors discussed the need to recognise the evolving nature of professionalism within professional staff contexts (Gornitzka and Larsen 2004; Kolsaker 2014; Shurville, Browne, and Whitaker 2010; Whitchurch 2008a). In addition, professionalism was articulated as *professionalisms,* recognising that it takes multiple forms across time, contexts and among various university actors and groups, often leading to multiple and new identity formations (Daly 2013; Kolsaker 2014; Whitchurch 2012).

In the literature, some professional groups are considered more professionalised than others (e.g. librarians and research administrators) by virtue and the support of long-existing professional membership-based organisations. These organisations offer credentialling, continuous professional development, networking, conferencing and other types of connectedness among members, generally serving as entry to, gatekeeping and preserving the profession's integrity (Wilson and Halpin 2006; Hockey and Allen-Collinson 2009). However, other groups, such as learning technologists, were not seen as professionalised and somewhat 'lacking coherence or identity' (Ellaway et al. 2006), despite efforts to develop professional frameworks with accreditation standards. Interestingly, missing from later publications were discussions about generalist organisations, such as the Australasian Association for Tertiary Education Management (ATEM), the UK's Association of University Administrators (AUA) and the Canadian Association of University Business

Officers (CAUBO), and their roles in organising, professionally developing and mentoring professional staff, strengthening their sense of belonging to a collegial community through networking, provision of scholarly and good practice publications and, in the case of the AUA, a formal postgraduate qualification. It has been noted that professional staff complete such qualifications to give them greater parity, and a sense of legitimacy, with academic colleagues (Szekeres 2011; Whitchurch 2015; Ryttberg and Geschwind 2017), a trend noted as more prominent in the UK compared with Australia (Graham and Regan 2016). The omission of more recent discussions concerning generalist professional associations may signify the waning relevance of these associations for professional staff's sense of identification and identity formation. In contrast, the sense-giving and sense-making of professional networks have increased, explicitly focusing on interaction and networking rather than member-organising and profession-gatekeeping (Ryttberg and Geschwind 2019). This shift could be perceived as a stronger indicator for developing the professional identity of professional staff.

Various terms, including *paraprofessionals*, *pracademics, para-academics*, *transacademic professionals and anti-academics* (e.g. Carson 2004; Dashper and Fletcher 2019; Stage and Aagaard 2019) were noted. These labels simultaneously dilute and enrich the professions, continuing the contestation of boundaries. These descriptions may be collectively designated *integrated professionals* (McIntosh and Nutt 2022). Library services, and the professionalism and professionalisation of librarians, are featured in many publications, with the work of Carson (2004) providing, perhaps, the most comprehensive and insightful analysis of the work of academic librarians. Carson's (2004) findings and conclusions, developed within a Marxist framework of cognitive and affective aspects of labour, reflected the changing nature of professionalism of librarians impacted by technological, economic and internal organisational structural forces. Wilson and Halpin (2006) addressed the effects of the ubiquitous digitalisation on hybridisation and the resulting de-professionalisation of the library profession that was precipitated by the arrival of information technology specialists into academic librarianship.

The importance of reinterpreting professionalism as *professionalisms* (Whitchurch 2012) and appreciating small 'p' professionalism along with capital 'P' Professionalism of professional associations (participant cited in Wilson and Halpin 2006) is critical for professional staff's development of their sense of professional identity and a better understanding of their positioning in the overall higher education context.

Renouncing and reinventing identities

Two studies described thought-provoking perspectives of university staff identities, presenting a more granular and refined way of thinking about professional identities. The first study examined a new project-based identity formation in Japanese universities (Takagi 2018). The second (Dashper and Fletcher 2019) explored professional identity for academics within the vocationally-bound discipline of events management in a UK university, illustrating the destabilisation of academic staff identities. The latter study, although focused on academic identities, is relevant to this review because of the three particular narrative strategies that academic participants devised to make sense of their 'unstable identities' (Dashper and Fletcher 2019, 1), effectively positioning them between professional and academic epistemologies and organisational domains.

Takagi's (2018) research described the *specially appointed academic staff* (SAAS) – new project-based professionals employed by Japanese universities to work in internationalisation, having duties in education and administration. It was suggested that SAAS desire a shift from the deficit perception of '"academics doing administrative work" or even as inferior scholars' (Takagi 2018, 284) to that of valuable new specialist professionals with excellent career prospects and opportunities to realise self and university missions. Hence, the origins of this novel professional identity may not necessarily be located at the intersection of affiliation to a discipline and an organisation. Instead, this professional identity may arise from a commitment to a third mission or a new university project, which enables SAAS to distribute knowledge and public good more widely than it may be achieved by other university staff.

Dashper and Fletcher (2019) present a unique and increasingly important illustration of the extension of higher education and its imperative to embrace vocationally-oriented education. This article discusses the disavowal of aspects of professional identity for staff developing and teaching the vocationally-focused discipline of events management. Inability or resistance to fully occupy and identify as either an *academic* or a *practitioner*, 'professionals within this educational field adopted multiple narrative strategies to claim legitimacy in different ways, different contexts and in relation to different audiences' (Dashper and Fletcher 2019, 8) as *anti-academic*, *traditional academic* or *blended professional* (borrowed from Whitchurch's [2009] concept). The *anti-academic* conceptualisation carries a distinctly negative connotation, with staff attempting to disassociate themselves from a traditional academic identity considered antiquated in a new vocational narrative. Perhaps *strategic amputation* – removal of an element of professional identity that no longer fits the purpose – can be applied to the agency of staff in reconfiguring their professional identities.

In summarising the variety and richness of professional identities, we stress that the diversity of roles that professional staff occupy, embark on or reinvent continues to change and challenge professional staff, thus impacting their occupational identities and sense-making. Most publications reflected the dynamic and multilayered nature and the plurality of those identities (Angouri 2016). Examples of renouncing elements of professional identity were sometimes strategically voluntary and at other times reluctantly involuntary (e.g. Dee and Leisyte 2017). Other examples illustrated succumbing to the inevitability of hybridisation (e.g. Wilson and Halpin 2006). These studies emphasise the fragility of professional and academic identities and common challenges university staff face when working in new activity domains, new projects or on other university imperatives located outside or between traditional spaces.

Theme 2: emergent new spaces of interaction: simultaneously contested sites and new boundary zones with opportunities for transformation of work practices

Traditional and novel spaces of university work

Spaces are integral to and provide context for university work, working relations and changes affecting professional and academic staff identities. Spaces were interpreted through distance, time and specific work-related factors (e.g. digitalisation of services and processes). University spaces were also articulated as traditional (i.e.

teaching and research), new and emerging outside the traditional, or at the intersection of those.

Perhaps not surprisingly, discussion of traditionally embedded or *integrated* (Whitchurch 2012) spaces was most prevalent in the reviewed sources. Three main areas were identified: professional services, research and teaching. In the occupational spaces of professional services, such as library and information services, academic and professional staff were perceived as working in the non-intersecting spaces of service work (i.e. library) and production (i.e. academic work) with no intersection (Carson 2004; Christiansen, Stombler, and Thaxton 2004), perpetuating professional and organisational boundaries. However, more recent publications about the library space evidenced a shift towards a higher degree of interconnectedness and intersection of practices among academic and library staff (e.g. Machin, Harding, and Derbyshire 2009; Olsen 2012; Pham and Williamson 2020). Another traditionally integrated university space – research – presented a similar arena of contestation of the notion of professionalism and claims for power and legitimacy, with a mixture of parallel and intersecting practices between academic (research) and professional (research administrators and managers) staff (Allen-Collinson 2006, 2009; Dee and Leisyte 2017; Deem 2010; Hockey and Allen-Collinson 2009; Shelley 2010). However, claims about the parallel practices were not shared by all researchers. For example, Allen-Collinson's (2006, 2009) and Deem's (2010) research presented evidence of strengthening the shared academic culture and corresponding values and identities and increased boundary-crossing work of research administrators. Lastly, teaching, assessment practices and curriculum development are core *integrated* university activities. These constitute another shared space increasingly occupied by professionals of various *zones of belonging* (Whitchurch 2006), additional to staff employed on conventional academic contracts. Examples include librarians teaching credit-bearing courses (Davis, Lundstrom, and Martin 2011) or co-designing curricula for new courses (Machin, Harding, and Derbyshire 2009) and learning development professionals through their provision of assessment feedback to students (Gravett and Winstone 2019). In Japan, academic-related staff (Takagi 2015) and specially-appointed academic staff (Takagi 2018) have multiple roles in addition to teaching. Learning technologists and academic developers, in their provision of technical expertise (Ellaway et al. 2006) and combined pedagogical and technology expertise (Sharif et al. 2019), share the teaching space with academics. The integrated space of teaching did not present evidence of a lesser contestation between academic and professional staff or weaker claims for legitimacy and control. Instead, it presented a significantly more 'crowded' space, populated by diversity and interdependence of staff, increasing the difficulty of delineating between various occupational roles, work priorities, segmentation of activities and, therefore, clearly defined professional identities.

In professional services, proximity and increasing assimilation of work resulting from the digitalisation of libraries and other workspaces created a range of shared practices. These changes precipitated the creation of integrated (i.e. *semi-autonomous*) spaces, such as those inhabited by librarians and information technology (IT) staff (Verbaan and Cox 2014; Wilson and Halpin 2006) or research administrators. This latter example investigated a new interactive and discursive university space, research data management, to which three distinct professional sub-cultures responded. These groups sometimes conflicted, contesting a re-articulation of roles and identities. The challenges of

working together, and defining new roles and activities, led to disputed claims of jurisdiction over a novel space of university activity and staff interactions (Verbaan and Cox 2014).

Like the new semi-autonomous spaces, in what could be described as an *independent third space*, one source explored how professional and academic staff initiated and operated a research commercialisation spinout company (Birds 2015). In this space, a 'symbiotic relationship between the company, the university and the participants' lifeworlds was re-engineered in a manner which felt uncomfortable and unplanned' (Birds 2015, 435). The dynamic, tempestuous and uneven relationships between diverse groups and individuals resulted in multiple reconstructions and new hybrid identity constructions, which emphasised the continuously changing perceptions of professional knowledge, its contestation and location across many diverse spaces of staff members' work and interactions.

These examples of traditionally articulated *integrated* spaces of teaching and research, new *semi-autonomous* spaces and novel *independent* spaces (Whitchurch 2012), illustrate that the contestation and challenges of defining new and assimilated professional roles continued to be widely discussed. The significant conclusion derived from the synthesised findings was that irrespective of the space type, there was a tendency for groups of staff to reinterpret and rearticulate the notion of professionalism and an associated desire by professional staff to define their professional identities in relation to academic and other professional colleagues (Allen-Collinson 2009), which often led to inadvertent or implicit construction of new intraprofessional boundaries. This tendency represents the dynamic nature of university spaces, boundaries and professional identities.

Physical proximity, symbolic distance and operating across spaces

The importance of physical proximity of staff (being embedded within the same organisational unit or an academic team) was articulated in several studies (e.g. Gray 2015; Pham and Williamson 2020; Sharif et al. 2019; Wohlmuther 2008). 'The opportunity for personal, face-to-face interaction' (Pham and Williamson 2020, 5) was seen as positively impacting staff working together and developing collaborations, as well as promoting a sense of belonging (Sharif et al. 2019), building mutual trust and appreciation for diverse staff motivations (Wohlmuther 2008). This need for proximity was interpreted by some authors (e.g. Pham and Williamson 2020) as somewhat incongruous in the ubiquitously digital(ised) age and would be even more contested in the pandemic-affected world of super-connectivity across physical boundaries. Nevertheless, it provides critical insight into the power of spatial relationships, which appears to transcend digitally-enabled super-connectivity.

The tensions between local and central spaces, and staff working at those sites, observed by some authors (e.g. Gray 2015), were not confirmed by one study, which claimed there was no tension between centrally located and faculty-based staff (Small 2008). However, the complexity of the interplay of 'the spatial and symbolic dimensions' of the location should not be underestimated (Fremstad et al. 2020, 113), nor should the perceptions of where staff members were located be underplayed, as these perceptions may not necessarily coincide with their physical location.

As symbolic manifestations, spaces are conceptualised as sites of power and control of one group of staff over another and, equally, of agency and empowerment of staff who, until recently, may have seen themselves as lacking those attributes. In this sense, the

space narrative is closely related to a theme of *de-invisibilisation* of identities discussed previously. The symbolic spaces pointed to political and organisational allegiances which impacted staff agency and quality of interactions. Space was referred to as a *zone of proximal distance* to develop and enact agency (Fremstad et al. 2020), described through 'axes of influence' (Sugrue et al. 2019, 3). For academic developers, navigation of both horizontal (i.e. collegial and collaborative relationships with colleagues) and vertical (i.e. hierarchical relationships) axes were required to work across organisational boundaries, strengthen relationships with all colleagues and develop leadership agency. These recent publications discussing development of various occupational identities of professional staff suggest that successfully navigating multiple university spaces – physical, virtual and symbolic, proximal and distant – may be the continuing feature of university work and identity development. Such findings confirm earlier claims of this nature (Graham 2013; Whitchurch 2012).

It can therefore be concluded that spaces present not only contexts in which work and relationships occur and identities are continuously (re)constructed, but also drivers of staff relationships (the closer staff are located in their work worlds, the more likely they are to develop positive and enduring professional relationships) and signifiers of power accumulation (the more centrally to the university senior leadership staff are located, the more likely they are to have access to power and control over university decisions and resources). They are also indicative of current and future of university work trends.

Third space narrative is on the increase

The concept of the university *third space* was first introduced by Whitchurch (2008b) and articulated as a space 'between professional and academic domains, requiring contributions from a range of staff. In this space, the concept of administrative service has become reoriented towards one of partnership with academic colleagues and the multiple constituencies with whom institutions interact' (378). Originally, the *third space* was perceived as a project-based, short-term activity involving people of diverse backgrounds, work experiences and professions. Work in those spaces focused on building relationships and social capital. This re-focusing was essential to building new forms of institutional activities, creating and developing a new type of higher education professional, the *third-space professional* (Whitchurch 2008b, 2012).

The increasing number of publications in the 2010s using a third-space concept to analyse research findings demonstrates the concept's global applicability for a widening variety of new, emerging and non-traditional projects and activities. The typology of third-space environments, ranging from traditional or integrated to semi-autonomous and further to independent spaces (Whitchurch 2012), appeared to remain relevant and appropriate for describing new integrated activities occurring across university domains. For example, spaces associated with new institutional agendas were noted for research data management in UK universities (Cox and Pinfield 2014; Verbaan and Cox 2014). New spheres of internal and external university interaction within established university agendas included business liaison and development, philanthropy, student engagement, internationalisation and strategic research or research commercialisation affecting universities in Europe (e.g. Sweden, Ryttberg and Geschwind [2017, 2019]), the UK (e.g. Birds 2015; Whitchurch 2008b, 2012), Asia (e.g. Japan and Hong Kong,

Takagi 2015, 2018), the US (e.g. Daly 2013), Canada (e.g. Sharif et al. 2019) and Australia (e.g. Leece and Jaquet 2017).

Whitchurch (2012) represented working in the unknown third space as simultaneously risky, uncomfortable, exciting, invigorating and rewarding for professional staff. Takagi (2018) described Japan's specially-appointed academic staff (SAAS) as feeling stuck in the third space and their project-based identity. Paradoxically, SAAS felt energised and excited about operating across multiple versatile domains, acquiring new knowledge and skills, and participating in new professional and industry networks. However, they also experienced a lack of clarity in job responsibilities, a disconnect between the nature of the job and individual competency requirements and limits to job continuity. Similarly, Dashper and Fletcher (2019) discussed a new vocational discipline in a UK university using the third-space concept, blending academic and professional staff identities and professionalisms. This space offered some (without traditional academic experience) a sense of novelty, an opportunity for experimentation and confidence in applying their professional experience. However, it also created destabilisation and a sense of vulnerability for those with more traditional academic backgrounds. In the Canadian example (Sharif et al. 2019), the creation of new third spaces – faculty-based teaching and learning units supporting flexible learning initiatives – produced new professional roles having positive and problematic connotations, characteristic of many third-space situated descriptions in the research.

Third space was also applied to symbolic concepts such as leadership and management, traditionally contested by both professional and academic communities. *Third space* was presented as an archetypal and aspirational space of leadership (Jones et al. 2012) and the future of university management (Conway 2012). A commonality is the metacharacteristic of *third space* as a catalyst of positive relationships, a promoter of shared values and an alleviator of historical tensions between central management and the *academic heartland* (Clark 1998, 2001, 2004). Values of communitarianism, collegiality and collaboration were portrayed as somewhat idealistic visions of the university *third space*.

Overall, the publication rate of sources using the *third space* conceptualisation grew between 2000 and 2020, but the discourse was somewhat lacking in criticality. Some authors proposed alternative metaphors (e.g. Graham 2013; Graham and Regan 2016; Shelley 2010) or supplementary frameworks (e.g. Verbaan and Cox 2014) to conceptualise the evolving spaces of university interactions and professional identities. Many authors, however, appeared to be 'bundling' everything that did not fit in traditional university spaces under the umbrella of *third space*, with no significant advancement of knowledge about the positioning of *third space* staff or interactions within this space. The phenomenon's ubiquity and the researchers' readiness to apply the concept to their investigations may suggest that there is no discrete *third space* but rather a continuum of emergent new work environments. This idea is supported by the claim proffered by a UK conference participant from Whitchurch's (2012) research: 'we are all *Third Space* now' (138) and articulated more recently (Whitchurch 2022) in the blog post dedicated to the exploration of third space perspectives through the plurality and multiplicity of third space configurations. This perspective suggests that the practice of *third spacing*, or working in boundary zones, may have been gradually socialised and normalised from being a fringe activity (Whitchurch 2012) to becoming *the university proper*, thereby gradually entering the formal lexicon among higher education institutions.

Theme 3: ways of working in boundary zones

Three positions on collaborations

Discussion on collaboration between academic and professional staff as a way of university working can be grouped into three categories:

- a somewhat idealistic view: collaboration, largely conditional on applying specific models or approaches to be successful, is a positive way of working
- a somewhat pessimistic view: collaboration is not something that occurs in the working worlds of professional and academic groups
- a realistic or balanced view: collaboration occurs in pockets or only in project work environments rather than across the institution and all contexts.

Modelists. This category was represented by research into collaboration between professional staff in student affairs, academics and students in a US university (Pace, Blumreich, and Merkle 2006) and between discipline-specific librarians and academic staff in a UK university (Machin, Harding, and Derbyshire 2009). These case studies, using different models, were offered as exemplars of successful collaboration using a structured framework. Two different models were intentionally used to foster group collaboration. Pace et al. (2006) adapted the Intergroup Dialogue Model (Schoem and Hurtado 2001, cited in Pace et al. 2006) to foster group collaborations. The intergroup dialogue method incorporated sharing knowledge and expertise of various groups and individuals, discussing feedback on each stage of the process and using this feedback to improve collaborative effort. Machin, Harding, and Derbyshire (2009) provided another model – the Symbolic Interactionist Framework for Collaboration (SIFC) – to facilitate and evaluate the success of collaborative working processes. Based on the concept of *collaborative advantage* (Huxham 1996, cited in Machin, Harding, and Derbyshire 2009), which applies to a situation in which a positive outcome and benefits for all stakeholders is only possible through collaboration, the SIFC provided a structured approach for developing mutual understanding, trust and respect. These two studies found that a structured framework fosters a commitment from all participants to work together successfully, offering a collaborative advantage for achieving project goals (Machin, Harding, and Derbyshire 2009; Pace et al. 2006).

Doubters. Sources belonging to the second category were more challenging to identify as authors did not present findings in an explicitly pessimistic light regarding professional and academic staff collaboration. The findings nonetheless pointed to challenges of conceiving and enacting genuine collaborations due to the problematic nature of diverse occupational identities. Issues included negative categorisations and the contested spaces of interactions, observed in research administrators' and academic researchers' spaces of interaction (e.g. Allen-Collinson 2006, 2009; Hockey and Allen-Collinson 2009; Deem 2010; Shelley 2010) and in multi-country research about various groups of professional and academic staff (Conway 2012). Collaboration in newly established *third spaces* was characterised as transient and non-enduring, potentially owing to the temporal and finite nature of funding of such spaces and lack of job continuity for staff

working in those spaces (e.g. Verbaan and Cox 2014). In contrast, the inevitable convergence of elements of the roles of librarians and IT professionals in the *integrated* library and information services space was perceived as a space of contestation rather than collaboration due to different perceptions of these groups' respective professional status (Wilson and Halpin 2006). Despite those notes of pessimism, the findings generally confirm the desire of staff from various university groups to work together for the benefit of both institutions and individuals (Deem 2010).

Pragmatists. The third perspective was noted in most articles, in which the contextual nature of collaborations in universities was discussed. For example, Christiansen, Stombler, and Thaxton (2004), Jones et al. (2012), Pham and Williamson (2020), Sharif et al. (2019) and Small (2008) all looked at the situated complexity of relationships between professional and academic staff. Organisational factors, such as working culture or service models, and interpersonal aspects, such as trust or values, can result in positive or negative outcomes (e.g. Gibbs and Kharouf 2022). In contexts with contested and scarce physical and human resources, and unequal and asymmetrical power between groups, transactional tasks took priority over collaboration (e.g. Small 2008). Those contexts were counteracted by cases in which commonality of goals and shared purposes (i.e. student engagement and success) were at the forefront of the project or work engagements (e.g. Olsen 2012). Commonalities enabled staff to see beyond boundaries and dissimilar cultural identifications to focus instead on the process and outcomes of working together.

Conditions for successful collaborations

Factors identified as affecting collaborative work included various subtle or intangible influences, as well as physical or tangible elements more traditionally acknowledged in the literature. Intangible factors include shared goals and the perceived novelty of a project. Tangible factors include proximity, temporal alignment of work priorities, availability of physical resources to support collaborations and a structured process for fostering collaboration.

Nuanced factors positively impacting the process and outcomes of working together were project novelty (Dee and Leisyte 2017; Pace, Blumreich, and Merkle 2006) and shared excitement among participating staff (Dee and Leisyte 2017; participant quoted in Pace, Blumreich, and Merkle 2006). Project novelty included opportunities to form new relationships across the university and to learn new perspectives (Pace, Blumreich, and Merkle 2006). Participatory engagement was another critical success element in collaborative work for a research group librarian working with an academic research team (Olsen 2012).

Among tangible and widely discussed factors were those elements that can be described as temporal and spatial aspects of staff interactions. For example, physical co-location and embeddedness of professional and academic staff in shared spaces defined by common organisational units (e.g. faculty, college or school) promoted effective communication and coordination of work priorities and tasks. These factors resulted in more efficient and positive work outcomes (e.g. Gray 2015; Pham and Williamson 2020; Sharif et al. 2019). In addition, the temporal dimension for successful working relationships (i.e. having similar work time patterns and time availability) was identified

as influential (Gibbs and Kharouf 2022; Olsen 2012) and impacted opportunities for collaboration between professional staff (e.g. librarians) and academics (Christiansen, Stombler, and Thaxton 2004). Other tangible factors include institutional support of human and financial resources and infrastructure requirements, facilitating staff connectedness across spatial boundaries (Carson 2004; Daly 2013; Olsen 2012; Small 2008).

The location of third-space professionals across multiple physical and symbolic spaces (i.e. centralised or de-centralised) raised the question of optimal locations for successful collaborations (Olsen 2012; Sugrue et al. 2019). Application and contextualisation of organisational research models and frameworks (e.g. Pace et al. [2006] apply the Intergroup Dialogue model whereas Machin et al. [2009] used the Symbolic Interactionist Framework for Collaboration) provide a tangible means of evaluating the success of working together and appeared to enhance shared nuanced understanding of ways to improve collaborations. The combined message from these two papers' research findings was that to achieve a higher level of collaborative advantage for their own advancement, achieve the project goal and positively contribute to student and staff learning, all collaborators needed to commit to learning together to work together successfully (Machin, Harding, and Derbyshire 2009; Pace et al. 2006).

Partnering, collaborating or working in and across boundary zones

The rise of brokering or boundary-spanning roles and identities in both professional and academic domains of the late 2010s (e.g. Dashper and Fletcher 2019; Dee and Leisyte 2017; Stage and Aagaard 2019; Sugrue et al. 2019; Takagi 2018) was presented as evidence of an increase in knowledge sharing despite organisational structural constraints. Furthermore, these roles were perceived as conducive to effective working among staff, notwithstanding the tensions accompanying these highly dynamic, fluid, adaptable and innovative ways of working. Overall, the findings point towards a changing landscape of university collaborations occurring across, above and beyond horizontal and vertical organisational structures. These dynamics require continuous adjustments, restructuring in staff roles and the engagement of various new types of staff best suited for these lateral and vertical contexts (Fremstad et al. 2020; Sugrue et al. 2019).

Studies about universities in the US (e.g. Dee and Leisyte 2017) and Europe (e.g. Sugrue et al. 2019) discussed optimal boundary conditions for knowledge sharing across boundaries and successful brokering work. Dee and Leisyte (2017) focused on two scenarios of professional and academic staff collaborations within organisational change: one had a successful outcome for all stakeholders (which engaged the process of knowledge and practice transformation and enabled professional managers' and academics' collaborative learning across boundaries), and the other was deemed a failure (owing to the reliance on the part of professional managers on existing practices which did not involve cross-boundary interactions between parties and therefore did not lead to individual and organisational learning). Sugrue et al. (2019) delved into the power dynamics of the work of academic developers and their interactions with the academic community and university leaders. The brokering work of the academic developers involved compromise on certain values concerning their institutional positioning and professionalism to increase the likelihood of success of their immediate and long-term mission.

Partnership was represented in SLR findings as a pinnacle of collaborations (Conway 2012; Graham and Regan 2016; Whitchurch 2012), an aspirational and desired state of harmonious and mutually beneficial work which epitomises the values of mutual respect and equality, being a higher order of organisational relationship than cooperation and collaboration. The term 'partnership' was sometimes used interchangeably with or as complementary to 'collaborative partnerships' (e.g. Pace, Blumreich, and Merkle 2006). *Pedagogical partnerships* between academic and professional staff were depicted as an optimal way of working together (Graham and Regan 2016) to support student learning, experiences and outcomes. The benefits of *pedagogical partnership* were expressed as 'a move from a hierarchical relationship between teacher and learner to a more collegial or collaborative one' (Graham and Regan 2016, 11), which applied working across professional and academic communities to further improve student outcomes. Although used interchangeably or in addition to 'collaboration', the concept of 'partnership' carried a more enduring and transformational character (in learning, practice and outcomes) than cooperation or collaboration. However, as recognised by Daly (2013) in discussing interactions between development (philanthropy) directors and academic and other professionals, images of partnership should not become over-idealised.

In summary, findings about working relationships between academic and professional staff and between different professional staff groups emphasised the need for critical assessment and interpretation of the various types, processes, success factors and outcomes of staff interactions. Other factors like novelty of tasks, satisfaction derived from clear communication and working together on common goals and other, often intangible, and therefore somewhat invisible or purely affective characteristics of collaborative work were not commonly discussed as significant contributors to the success of collaborations and partnerships. Regardless of the collaboration type, working together was invariably impacted by the availability of resources and resourcing, both human and physical. Access to resources was characterised by unequal power dynamics, which affected the perceptions of success in collaborations. Further, the power of human agency was seen as a significant driving force of all collaborations, ultimately connecting diverse staff and projects in their joint labours, impacting outcomes. Like the socialisation of third space (Theme 2), partnerships became a new orthodoxy towards the end of the 2010s. This situation raises the question about the extent that researchers engaged in a critical evaluation of their findings about professional and academic staff collaboration: whether they considered the findings confirming the new and preferred ways of working together in the complex organisational reality or they merely attributed the results to what was assumed to be optimal working conditions.

Concluding the thematic analysis

Three main themes were found in the reviewed literature.

(1) *Changing professional identities:* From 2000 to 2020, professional staff roles evolved in response to the contemporary complex higher education context, resulting in corresponding changes in professional identity construction. Discourse about professional and academic staff navigating the challenges of interpreting and applying their new identities in their work worlds continued to mature. This discourse moved from a preponderance of discussions at the start of the century about staff nomenclature to

sophisticated analyses of the re-interpretation of the concept of professionalism across multiple university contexts. Complex identity work of all staff and demonstration of the sense of agency of professional staff within the deliberate and continued work on *de-invisibilisation* of their roles and contributions to the university work was evident.

(2) *Spaces of interaction:* New spaces of interactions presented similar navigational challenges for professional and academic staff, rendering binary conceptions of professional identities counter-productive, outdated, and failing to encompass the complexity of the processes and goals of university work. The steady increase in third space narratives was evident through research conducted and published by academic and professional staff, which was another sign of an increased sense of agency of professional staff. These professional staff were interested and willing to undertake research into their own identities and spaces of interaction with other university stakeholders. Increased attention to third-space research may also be interpreted as gradually normalising novel interaction spaces, thereby presenting the university as one continuously evolving arena or a boundary zone of new types of work, professional engagements and interactions between diverse staff, student and community stakeholder groups.

(3) *Ways of working:* Developing and normalising new spaces of staff interaction involved academic and professional staff working together across vertical and horizontal boundaries. This work was presented as collaborations, brokering/boundary-spanning or collaborative partnerships. Regardless of the represented type, the success of working together was found to rely on multiple physical and symbolic factors to succeed, with human agency as a leading driving force for achieving collaborative advantage for individuals and institutions.

In the final section, we progress to our conclusions and recommendations for practice, policymaking and future research. The recommendations are not presented as corresponding with any of the three discussed themes but rather as relating to part or the whole quantum of the synthesised knowledge derived from the reading and critically analysing the authors' findings.

Conclusion and recommendations

In our SLR, we – three higher education practitioner researchers – synthesised themes from 54 publications spanning two decades (2000–2020) and multiple geographical regions. This SLR responded to the impetus to develop a systematised body of knowledge on a selected critical topic within the fast-growing field of higher education research, investigating university professional staff, their changing roles and identities, and the spaces of interactions, discursive practices and collaborations among these staff and between professional and academic staff.

The review followed a methodologically rigorous, thoroughly documented and reproducible protocol. Our protocol is presented in the Methodology section, with additional search protocols and data provided in the Appendix for those who would like to pursue future research.

Three overarching themes were identified, each with several sub-themes:

(1) The complexity of roles of professional staff provides a basis for evolving multiple and hybrid identities:
   - Dynamic vs. static identities
   - Asymmetric perceptions of identities
   - Amplified discourse of *de-invisibilisation*
   - Reinterpreting professionalism
   - Renouncing and reinventing identities
(2) Emergent new spaces of interaction: simultaneously contested sites and new boundary zones with opportunities for transformation of work practices
   - Traditional and novel spaces of university work
   - Spaces: physical proximity, symbolic distance and operating across
   - Third space narrative is on the increase
(3) Ways of working in boundary zones
   - Three positions on collaborations: modelists, doubters and pragmatists
   - Conditions for successful collaborations
   - Partnering, collaborating or working in and across boundary zones

Professional staff roles and identities continued to develop within the selected period for all regions represented in the sources examined. Discourses about those changes developed during this period; later sources included nuanced discussions about the reconceptualisation of professionalism and how it applied to professional staff occupational groups. Discussions about professional staff increased in their intentionality to illustrate the work of professional staff, their navigation of collaborations with academic and other university communities, the nuances of their occupational identities and contributions to achieving various university goals. Analysis of new university activity spaces, while remaining oriented mainly around traditional activities of teaching and research, extended to encompass new university missions, such as research data management, alumni relations advancement, philanthropy and other internal and external engagement. Developing these new activity spaces while sustaining traditional ones required a collaborative effort from disparate university staff groups. However, collaborations were not identified in all university activity spaces, nor were they identified explicitly by all authors as preferred approaches (by all university staff) to achieve strategic and operational goals.

In synthesising the findings of the 54 publications, we offer new spaces of enquiry and options for developing university practice, policymaking and higher education research. Accordingly, we offer the following propositions for the future. These propositions were developed based on rich evidence from our review process and augmented by our first-hand knowledge and experience in higher education research and university practices. They were also informed by critically engaging with the debate among higher education scholars across time about the future of the university workforce. There are three broad scenarios which manifest from this debate. First, the contestation of the divide between academic and professional staff may persist. Second, the current division of staff into two groups of professional and non-academic staff may become gradually supplemented by a growing cohort of the third space professionals or practitioner-academics thereby shifting from two to three types of university workers. The third potential scenario

is homogenisation of higher education workers supported by new industrial and human resource policies. The third pathway is to accommodate a serial project work and to be relevant to current and future socio-economic conditions needing a flexible and scalable workforce. Whether such 'homogenisation-harmonisation' addresses or interferes with the career aspirations of future higher education actors is a question for another review and research. For extended discussions on the future of work in higher education, readers can explore the publications by Baré et al. (2021), Graham (2014), Grant (2021), Locke (2020), Veles (2022), Whitchurch (2012, 2022).

The recommendations below, with discussion linked to our findings, include only those that are directly connected to this SLR's research questions:

- How are the occupational identities of university professional staff being interpreted by multifarious university staff?
- How have spaces and interactions between university professional and academic staff been developing from 2000 to 2020?

Recommendations: institutional practices

(1) Professional staff identities and value of contributions

(1.1) Cultivate professional practices that assist staff in sensemaking professional identities about work and career trajectories.

With the continual formation of new professional identities and reshaping existing ones, it is vital to cultivate professional practices that assist staff in sensemaking their identities affecting their work and career trajectories. For example, the meaning of project-based and third-space professional identities (Whitchurch 2012; Takagi 2018) for staff and their universities needs to be articulated in recruitment, retention and career development to offset the perceptions of such work as transient, provisional and contingent. University leaders and managers need to support these staff to develop meaningful and enduring career paths beyond project temporal and spatial boundaries to help actualise future work for those individuals and make the most of their valuable expertise and experience achieved through project work. Creating sustainable work beyond third spaces and project work for these staff may address the tenuous and challenging balance between their academic and professional pursuits and the project work requirements (Takagi 2018).

(1.2) Foster diverse career paths that are valuable for all staff and their institutions.

Fostering diverse career paths that are valued by individual staff and the wider university community is likely to motivate staff to achieve insights into and gain experiences in both academic and professional practices, thereby creating a stronger connection between these communities and practices. For example, it is crucial to understand how roles designated as professional, such as learning developers (Gravett and Winstone 2019), instructional designers (Stoltenkamp, van de Heyde, and Siebrits 2017), academic developers (Fremstad et al. 2020; Sharif et al. 2019; Sugrue et al. 2019) and other such

cross-boundary roles, are inter-related with those of academics. Harnessing individual insights will provide a rich foundation for university leaders and managers to apply the expertise and capabilities of those individuals to achieve collaborative advantage and other institutional goals (Graham 2013) and further the de-invisibilisation of professional identities, roles and contributions.

(2) Reinterpreting the notion of professionalism
  (2.1) Support the professionalisation of occupational groups, notably third-space staff, to provide occupational groups and individuals with a sense of belonging to a professional community.

Reinterpreting the notion of professionalism and its relation to professional identities, particularly of professional staff, has been gaining momentum since earlier publications raised the importance of this work (Shelley 2010; Wilson and Halpin 2006; Whitchurch 2012). It is important to continue intentional work on supporting the professionalisation movement of various occupational groups, including academic developers (Fremstad et al. 2020; Sharif et al. 2019), learning technologists (Ellaway et al. 2006), research administrators (Allen-Collinson 2009; Deem 2010) and library staff (Opoku 2013; Wilson and Halpin 2006). Such work will provide occupational groups and individuals with a sense of belonging to a professional community, and offer platforms to discuss skills development, acquisition of credentials and other professional activities.

(2.2) Continue to collectively interrogate the notion of professionalism to understand what this should look like for meaningful and effective work now and in the future.

Further to the notion of professionalism, as discussed above, it is equally important to discuss what professionalisation means in practice, as there remain salient questions. Will developing professionalism lead to a stronger affiliation with the academic community and practice and, potentially, a stronger cohesion and alignment of practices? Alternatively, will it inadvertently destabilise the sense of belonging – the 'zone of belonging' (Whitchurch 2006, 166) – to one community or another? Or will it lead to further understanding of third-space identity and the sense of working and living in-between different university work worlds? It is essential to continue to collectively interrogate the notion of professionalism in contemporary universities, trying to understand what the optimal balance between the big 'P' (belonging to a discipline and possession of academic credentials) and the small 'p' (professional attitude to work and development to excel in one's professional practice) should look like for meaningful and effective work now and in the future (Wilson and Halpin 2006).

(3) Harnessing and embedding into practice the notion of pedagogical partnership and other profitable ways of working together
  (3.1) Engage in clearer, more consistent communication for all concerning the purpose and direction of new spaces to guide engagement with these new missions.

With the unabating imperatives to diverse university missions focusing on increased engagement with the local and global communities, as well as on the academic research

which is applied to industry, new spaces of work and staff interaction, independent or partially autonomous from the university core activities, are being therefore created within and outside the universities (e.g. Birds 2015; Cox and Pinfield 2014; Verbaan and Cox 2014). Clearer, more consistent communication is needed among all participants in and contributors to working in the new spaces. This communication should foster the clarity needed for universities and staff to help to make sense of emerging professional identities so that sustainable career paths can be defined for the new activities under changing conditions.

(3.2) Embed pedagogical partnerships into university operations to foster the benefits of working together towards improved student learning and more meaningful and enduring engagement with higher education.

Recommendation 3.2 concerns the continued exploration of how pedagogical partnerships (Graham and Regan 2016) could be stronger and more deliberately embedded into the university operations and how to recognise and foster the benefits of working together towards improved student learning and more meaningful and enduring engagement with higher education. By further improving the collaborative relationships between professional, academic and other university communities, we can not only progress the achievements towards addressing power asymmetries between university staff roles and identities of professional groups that are associated with disparate professional traditions (Jones et al. 2012), roles and 'cultural differences' (Pham and Williamson 2020, 4) but also promote the practice of recognising contributions of all staff to collaborations leading to successful achievements. By promoting successful collaborations and rewarding staff for working together across boundaries, managers are likely to see an increased motivation to develop and sustain inter-professional and cross-boundary partnerships for achieving further collaborative advantages.

Recommendations: informed policymaking

(4) Remote work policies

(4.1) Further develop and implement policies for hybrid collaborations, leveraging the experiences of the pandemic and increased affordances and improvements of digital connectivity.

Since March 2020, working conditions in many (if not all) higher education institutions across the globe have changed and continue to develop in various new directions. Multiple cases in many geographical locations of practices of extended lockdowns and national border closures gave rise to remote collaborations in the absence of opportunities to work together on campus, sharing physical working spaces. Empirical research included in the SLR was published prior to the events of the pandemic, and hence many arguments underscored the importance of developing spatial relationships (physical proximity and sharing workspaces) for successful collaborations (e.g. Gray 2015; Pham and Williamson 2020; Sharif et al. 2019; Wohlmuther 2008). Policies are needed to identify and apply improvements in digital connectivity to such a degree that they emulate, as

much as possible, the demonstrated benefits of physical proximity and shared workspaces.

(4.2) Engage in informed debate about regulating remote work to acknowledge and sustain its benefits while preventing marginalisation of groups of staff.

Related to Recommendation 4.1 is the need to ensure the effective development and implementation of policies for hybrid working and collaborations. Collaborative relationships underpin informed debate that includes all staff, thus assuring that new policies have flexibility built into their structures (Jones et al. 2012) and do not marginalise any staff groups. In the 'new normal' of a post-pandemic world, universities need to seize the opportunity to engage all staff in decision-making processes to address inequities highlighted by remote working during the pandemic.

(5) Reconceptualised industrial relations framework

(5.1) Develop a new human resource and industrial relations framework to transcend the traditional academic/administrative binary, thus recognising the increasingly complex dimensions of university work.

Proposals for developing a new human resource and industrial relations framework to recognise the increasingly complex dimensions of university work were noted in the literature (e.g. Takagi 2015; Graham 2013), supported by calls for systematic analysis of the various drivers of changes in professional staff work, activities and related changing identities and perceptions of work (e.g. Stage and Aagaard 2019). This new framework would also need to recognise the increasing challenge of differentiation between academic and professional activity domains with the increasing number of cross-boundary work and work roles (Whitchurch 2006). Our position is that a flexible matrix structure is required (e.g. Graham 2014) rather than a new third-space higher education worker classification, as proposed recently (Baré et al. 2021). We believe that despite the intention of this recent policy proposal to encompass third-space professionals, a formalised (by an industrial framework) space could increase tensions between all staff by creating internal tensions within professional groups. Such a policy would multiply staffing categories without being nuanced enough to address the multiple varieties of crossover in third-space professional activities.

(5.2) Implement innovative policies and procedures for recruitment, engagement and retention of talented people, based on this reconceptualised framework, for equitable employment, progression and career trajectories.

As an alternative to the proposed policy (Baré et al. 2021), we suggest developing a more practical, meaningful (for staff and institutions alike) and easier-to-apply policy, which would capture all types of workers, offering a single-pay scale transcending the traditional academic/administrative divide (Graham 2014; Graham 2018; Veles 2022). Such a solution would preclude university leaders from creating another bounded space inhabited by another type of professional role and identity. We recognise that the suggested

policy change is not beyond criticism, but it is an approach that may offer an innovative way of recruiting, engaging and retaining talented people, with equitable employment, progression and career trajectories.

Recommendations: future horizons of higher education research

(6) Extension of current and new topics for research

(6.1) Advance research on topics such as the intersection of agency and identity formation, how group perceptions compare to those of individuals in the context of identity work, the de-invisibilisation of marginalised staff and specific third-space occupational groups.

Within the rich topic of professional identity and identity work, engrossing for researchers and practitioners alike, there is a need to advance research to include directions such as the intersection of agency and identity formation and how group perceptions are compared to those of individual actors in the context of identity work (Grossi and Gurney 2020). In addition, it appears equally important to investigate further the arsenal of identity work that professional staff use to strengthen the de-invisibilisation and self-actualisation movement. As suggested by Fremstad et al. (2020), Sharif et al. (2019) and Sugrue et al. (2019), among others, deepening research into various occupational groups, identities, diverse skills and dimensions of professionalism will create systemic change for increasing visibility, clarifying current perceptions and misconceptions of the work and contributions of those occupational groups.

(6.2) Re-examine the nature of 'boundaries', including exploration of new boundaries brought about by the pandemic, and how post-COVID-19 ways of working impact contemporary and future university work.

Higher education researchers must critically engage with the concept of the third space and its meaning in post-pandemic contexts. Many third-space research directions mapped by Celia Whitchurch (2006, 2008b, 2012) have taken root and been developed further in the publications examined for this SLR (e.g. Birds 2015; Deem 2010; Graham 2013; Gravett and Winstone 2019; Gray 2015; Leece and Jaquet 2017; Sharif et al. 2019; Takagi 2015, 2018; Verbaan and Cox 2014). Using the analytical power of the third space produced many insightful findings in the first two decades of this century, responding to changing organisational boundaries, professional staff roles and identities, and the evolution of university staff interactions. It is timely to re-examine the nature of boundaries in higher education and how the new, post-COVID-19 era of mapping the geographies of higher education institutions impacts contemporary and future university work. It is also essential to include the exploration of new boundaries brought about by the pandemic, such as campus-bound/virtual work and learning, and essential/non-essential work and their impact on work destabilisation and worker dislocation.

(6.3) Examine the effects of variables (e.g. age and gender of staff, and discipline/activity domain in which staff collaboration occurred) on the key themes identified in this SLR.

The publications examined in this SLR tended to focus on particular occupational identities or work roles, disciplines or activity types, encompassing staff of (dis)similar age groups, gender, ability, career stage and the intersections of these representations. As such, it was not possible to examine those categories' effects on the construction and interpretation of the key themes identified in this SLR. Research into these effects, including comparative studies across these categories, could help identify ways of supporting the multiple pathways of staff career construction and development. New forms of university activities create multiple new opportunities for university staff to imagine and construct their careers in and outside higher education across temporal and spatial dimensions (Whitchurch, Locke, and Marini 2021, 2023) and identify the needs for organisational support for the effective advancement of these careers (e.g. Gander, Girardi, and Paull 2019). Nuanced, granular, comparative research mapping the effects of various staff identifications, positionings and activity types could advance contemporary career development theories and enable university leaders to apply findings to empower staff in their career decision-making by providing differentiated, and therefore more meaningful, support for individuals.

(6.4) Continue examining the analytical power and critical application of the third space concept to plurality and multiplicity of collaborative, new and emerging university environments and spheres of activity.

The value of applying the concept of third space to higher education for improved understanding of staff identities and complex ways of working and interacting across workplace boundaries (Hall 2022; McIntosh and Nutt 2022; Veles 2022; Whitchurch 2022) is indisputable. As evidenced across the literature explored in this SLR, the analytical application of the concept manifested in increased visibility of professional staff contributions to the advancement of multiple university goals (e.g. Ryttberg and Geschwind 2017), improved understanding of what constitutes success in project work and collaborations among staff (e.g. Stoltenkamp, van de Heyde, and Siebrits 2017) and their strengthened positioning on what professionalism and professionalisation mean in the context of complex and continuously changing higher education (e.g. Takagi 2018).

(7) Call for methodological innovation

(7.1) Connect existing single-institution studies on the themes presented here by taking research into a comparative context.

Within a large body of insider research (e.g. Birds 2015; Graham 2013; Gravett and Winstone 2019; Gray 2015), there is a recognition of a valuable and valued approach that a researcher takes in researching their own university practices and organisational realities. For example, in professional staff identity research, an insider researcher-cum-interviewer (Grossi and Gurney 2020) was recognised as an active creator of spaces for negotiating new identities and amplifying the value of participants' experiences. Consequently, the majority of those studies had been undertaken within the boundaries of one or two universities and often within one geographical location, with a very small number of authors presenting a comparative perspective on university work and staff identities across multiple universities (e.g. Fremstad et al. 2020; Graham and Regan 2016; Gray 2015; Stage and Aagaard 2019) and universities with dissimilar organisational cultures and academic

traditions (e.g. Pham and Williamson 2020). Future research needs to intentionally connect those valuable but disparate studies by taking them into the comparative global arena (across varied higher education systems), thus broadening the reach and generalisability of findings.

(7.2) Broaden research methodological horizons beyond the almost ubiquitous qualitative approach of publications reviewed in this SLR to provide new perspectives on the themes.

As noted earlier by Malcolm Tight (2004, 2021), for decades, higher education research was criticised for its deficits in theoretical groundwork and limited methodological innovation. Similarly, we found that researchers were deeply engaged with multiple theoretical foundations to guide their research (e.g. Birds 2015; Grossi and Gurney 2020; Cox and Pinfield 2014) and little with theory-building (except, perhaps, Whitchurch's research). From the methodological perspective, the SLR's findings were consistent with Tight's (2004, 2021) observations and criticism: over 80% of the authored publications deployed qualitative research, and within those, the majority used interviewing methods. The overwhelming use of a qualitative approach reflects the difficulty of undertaking quantitative research about professional staff, likely due to problems of definition, particularly at the system level. For example, the Australian Department of Education and the UK Higher Education Statistics Agency both use broad categories of 'academic' and 'non-academic'. The Australian Department of Education exacerbates the invisibility of 'non-academic' by also using the term 'other'. These broad categories may reflect formal employment contracts but are incongruous with the increasingly malleable ways of enacting roles and identities. Accordingly, there is an opportunity for broadening research methodological horizons and cross-boundary approaches.

(8) Further research collaborations and enhancement of practice

(8.1) Foster intentional partnerships across boundaries for research, writing and publishing on topics of common interest and shared expertise as a pathway towards achieving collaborative advantage for the institution and all its staff.

Deem's (2010) call for research collaborations, conducted in a third space by academic and professional staff together, was actualised in many of the publications included in this SLR (e.g. Christiansen, Stombler, and Thaxton 2004; Graham and Regan 2016; Gravett and Winstone 2019; Jones et al. 2012; Shurville, Browne, and Whitaker 2010; Verbaan and Cox 2014). Our recommendation concerns the active engagement of research-trained professional staff in activities that may extend beyond their substantive roles. This intentional partnership for research, writing and publishing on topics of common interest and shared expertise will likely lead to a collaborative advantage for all staff and their institutions. Such third-space collaboration will also prioritise, as Hobson et al. (2018) pronounced, a central idea of the university as a place for learning through promoting a genuine 'partnership between professionals and academics to be acknowledged as central to enhancing learning and teaching in higher education, [which would] include professional voices as authorial, as in having authority' (324). Our recommendation is intended to strengthen the nexus of university practice, research and policymaking by acknowledging

all university staff, illuminating their valued contributions to collaborative practices and providing opportunities for the growth, development and retention of talented people who, in working together, reinforce the university missions of providing learning and opportunities in life, producing research which advances knowledge and promotes progress, developing meaningful connections between learning, learners and society at large.

In conclusion

These suggestions for practice, policymaking and research are not exhaustive and are likely to have omitted many ideas for future development. They provide synthesised knowledge to inform a dialogue between our readers – practitioners, policymakers and researchers.

The main contribution of this SLR is that it presented 'existing research findings and reported experiences of the diverse range of university employees' (Locke 2020, 26) who contribute to university work and advancing higher education for shaping current and future ideas. In doing so, we synthesised a substantial body of knowledge on a critical topic that had not been organised or interpreted prior to this SLR. The ideas we present will inform and improve the connection between practice, policymaking and research in higher education.

To conclude this review, we thank all authors whose research findings were included in the analysis and interpretations. Without their research and dedication to innovation and discovery, it would be impossible to understand the present and to shape the future of university practices, research and policies. Furthermore, the richness of collected and analysed sources allowed this review to 'tap into diverse and substantial facets of higher education, using scientific approaches to reveal new insights and prospects' (Coates 2019, 3).

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Note: An asterisk preceding a reference denotes a data source.

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Appendix

The table displays full search term strings applied to each of the six searched databases at the time of retrieval of searches (10 January 2021) with the corresponding results yielded from each database.

#	Database title	Search terms	Search results
1	Emerald Insight	(content-type:article OR content-type:book-part) AND ((“general staff” OR “professional staff” OR “administration staff”) AND ((“academic staff” OR researcher OR lecturer OR faculty)) AND ((“higher education” OR university OR “tertiary education” OR “post secondary”)) AND ((“professional identity” OR “professional role”)) AND ((“third space” OR *bound* OR collabora*)))	143
2	Taylor & Francis Online	(“general staff” OR “professional staff” OR “administration staff”) AND (“academic staff” OR researcher OR lecturer OR faculty) AND (“higher education” OR university) AND (“professional identity” OR “professional role”) AND (“third space” OR *bound* OR collabora*)	252
3	ProQuest Social Sciences	(“general staff” OR “professional staff” OR “administration staff”) AND (“academic staff” OR researcher OR lecturer OR professor) AND (“higher education” OR university OR “tertiary education” OR “post secondary education”) AND (“professional identity” OR “professional role”) AND (collaboration OR teamwork)	150
4	SAGE Journals	((“general staff”) OR (“professional staff”) OR (“administration staff”)) AND ((“academic staff”) OR (researcher) OR (lecturer) OR (faculty)) AND ((“higher education”) OR (college) OR (school) OR (“post secondary”) OR (“tertiary education”) OR (universit*)) AND ((“professional role”) OR (“professional identity”)) AND ((“third space”) OR (*bound*) OR (collabora*))	120
5	Scopus	((((TITLE-ABS-KEY ((admin* OR manag* OR professional* OR general OR technical OR laboratory OR “non academic” OR support OR service))) OR (TITLE-ABS-KEY ((teacher OR faculty OR academic OR researcher OR lecturer OR professor)))) AND (TITLE-ABS-KEY (staff OR employee OR worker OR workforce OR personnel))) AND (TITLE-ABS-KEY (“higher education” OR college OR school OR “post secondary” OR “tertiary education” OR universit*)) AND (“professional role” OR “professional identity” OR “professional practice” OR “career identity” OR “career role” OR professionalism)) AND (TITLE-ABS-KEY (“third space” OR converg* OR *bound* OR overlap* OR blend* OR hybrid*)) AND (TITLE-ABS-KEY (collaborat* OR partner* OR team* OR project OR cooperat*))	153
6	Google Scholar	(“general staff” OR “professional staff”) AND (“academic staff” OR researcher OR lecturer)) AND (“higher education” OR university)) AND (“professional identity” OR “professional role”)	44
Total combined results: 862			