Research article

Critical thirding and third space collaboration: university professional staff and new type of knowledge production

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Abstract

In this article, the author first addresses the persisting knowledge invisibility of university professional staff by drawing on selected findings from their qualitative, multiple case study research conducted in an Australian university with a campus in Singapore. Analysing a selected case of a university project, the author applies critical thirding as a concept to demonstrate how university third space collaboration resulted in creating new, Mode 3 institutional knowledge and led to a transformative change of research commercialisation practices. The author then compares research findings from this selected Australian university case study to the insights from a systematic literature review which was conducted three years later as a separate research project using an international literature sample. The review provided evidence that since the 2000s university workers, professional and academic alike, in tertiary education institutions around the world, have been engaged in complex identity work, demonstrating increased agency towards de-invisibilisation of their roles and co-creating new knowledge, thereby contributing to

university advancement. The author concludes that by applying the analytical power of critical thirding to social spaces of new knowledge production, it is possible to support and promote equal contributions of all university actors to achieving institutional goals.

Keywords critical thirding; third space collaboration; Mode 3 knowledge; professional and academic staff collaboration; university third space environments

Introduction

The global tertiary education sector has undergone extensive changes since the 2000s (Chan, 2018; de Wit and Altbach, 2021). Universities in Australia and the Asia–Pacific region at large have been further embracing internationalisation and massification, with a focus on pursuing increasing student participation and widening access to tertiary education (Gale, 2011; Leach, 2013). New corporate practices have been introduced to support the increasing number of students. These practices in turn have led to changes in organisational culture, including staff and student relationships (Davis, 2017; Marginson, 2013). In addition to its effects on organisational culture, corporatisation was reflected in the decrease of public funding for students and research, which intensified competition among higher education providers (Croucher and Woelert, 2022; Veles, 2022).

In light of these developments, university work is becoming increasingly fragmented, precarious and unpredictable, affecting those who undertake the work. The term 'university third space' was introduced to higher education by Celia Whitchurch (2008, 2013, 2018) and later popularised by a growing number of higher education scholars (Bossu and Brown, 2018; McIntosh and Nutt, 2022; Smith et al., 2021; Veles, 2022) as a new way of describing university work, changing professional roles and identities of university actors, and spaces of their interaction. The concept uses spatial thinking derived from the field of cultural sociology (Bhabha, 1994; Soja, 1996). Such conceptual reframing emerged during the last century as a series of critical reimaginings of the world which required a radically new way of addressing socio-economic complexities that could no longer be described through two – historical (temporal) and social (sociological) – dimensions (Foucault, 1984; Lefebvre, 1974; Soja, 1996).

Third space thinking is characterised by being open to new directions emerging from multiple identities, voices and perspectives. Whitchurch (2008, 2018) has observed that a university third space develops where staff occupy a boundary zone between the traditional academic and professional services. Third space enables people working in those boundary zones, and members of the wider university, to reimagine the traditional academic/administration divide (Veles, 2022) as a continuum of collaborations or enduring partnerships among staff (Veles et al., 2023). There have been many examples of collaborations among academic and professional staff before, during and after the global Covid-19 pandemic to improve learning and engagement. Those collaborations assisted institutions in overcoming pandemic-related setbacks, and they helped universities to grow and flourish (Baré et al., 2021; Veles, 2022; Veles et al., 2023).

Professional staff, including administrative, technical and other, comprise 56 per cent of staff in Australian universities (AGDE, 2022), and proportions are similar in other countries. The knowledge produced by people working in research administration, academic and learning development, student learning support, careers and employability contributes to the creation of organisational collaborative and intellectual capital (Veles, 2022). Individual and collective knowledges of professional staff, however, continue to be largely excluded from organisational capital, thereby rendering professional staff invisible (Allen Collinson, 2006; Rhoades, 2010, 2016; Ryttberg and Geschwind, 2017; Szekeres, 2004). (The use of the plural form of 'knowledge' is not grammatically correct, but it is conceptually critical to underscore the plurality of various types of knowledge produced by different groups of actors. It is a manifestation of critical pluralism of spaces where knowledge is produced, disseminated and applied to the benefit of the whole Mode 3 knowledge ecosystem.)

With the claim of such deficit in mind, the author's doctoral research explored university professional staff intercultural and cross-boundary collaboration occurring within third space environments (Veles, 2020, 2022). This article re-examines a selected case from this research in the context of continued invisibility and suppression of knowledge of professional staff. An analytical concept of critical thirding (Soja, 1996, 2009) was applied to selected findings of this case to demonstrate how collaboration of

multiple actors through recombination of knowledges led to developing a sustained partnership among actors. This successful symbiosis further led to a new – Mode 3 (Carayannis and Campbell, 2011, 2016; Veles, 2022; Whitchurch, 2023) – institutional knowledge production.

Later on in the article, the insights from the discussed case study are compared to the relevant findings of a recently conducted systematic literature review (Veles et al., 2023). The systematic literature review (SLR) presents consolidated and interpreted research into professional identities and spaces of interaction of university staff published in the 2000s and 2010s. The article concludes by reinforcing the importance of recognised contributions of all actors, which is critical in the current tertiary education environment of continued instability, precarity and transience of work.

Persisting and pervasive discourse of invisibility

University professional actors are gradually becoming acknowledged for their contributions towards new and innovative practices that advance success in delivering various goals of the university (Bossu et al., 2018; McIntosh and Nutt, 2022; Veles, 2022; Whitchurch, 2023). Regrettably, this group continues to be perceived by institutions as marginal to social, organisational and intellectual capital (Akerman, 2020; Botterill, 2018; Ryttberg and Geschwind, 2017; Veles, 2022; Whitchurch, 2023).

The tacit practices of exclusion have been perpetuating the narrative of invisibility and marginalisation of professional staff, which has been discussed in the literature since the publication of Judy Szekeres's (2004) article 'The invisible workers'. Szekeres's (2004) commentary resonated with many members of the university professional staff community (Conway, 2012, 2013; Graham, 2009, 2010; Small, 2008; Whitchurch, 2008).

Despite the endeavours of professional organisations and individual practitioners alike 'aimed at lifting the veil of invisibility' (Dobson and Conway, 2003: 124), research suggests that once invisibility enveloped its subjects, it was difficult to lift. The language used in earlier and also in more recently published research literature continues to reflect the silent voices of the marginalised (Graham, 2010), residual (Gornitzka and Larsen, 2004) and invisible professionals (Rhoades, 2010) who work behind the screen (Botterill, 2018), on the edge (Birds, 2015), in the background and on the periphery (Allen Collinson, 2006) of university activities, despite actively contributing to and initiating new knowledge production (Briody et al., 2021).

Mode 3 knowledge workings towards staff de-invisibilisation

A university is a site of systematic and deliberate production of knowledge. Knowledge in universities is traditionally associated with the disciplinary knowledge produced by academic experts in demonstration (Foucault, 2004) and disseminated through teaching and research (publication) activities. Research as a distinct mission of European universities was added significantly later, in 1809, when Wilhelm von Humboldt designed a new university in Berlin that combined education and research and included fundamental research in the professional role of university professors (Anderson, 2004; Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff, 2000). Throughout the post-industrial changes, the emergence of the university as an organisational actor (Gibbons et al., 1994; Jacob, 2006) has been foregrounded by continuing creative destruction (Davis, 2017), or rather creative reinvention, which was accelerated by the events of the Covid-19 pandemic (Veles, 2022). These changes reinvigorated the debate about the place that university occupies, and the role it plays in society (Scott, 1997, 1999). The supreme epistemology of academic disciplines as bundles of knowledge (Clark, 1986) within universities was consequently scrutinised. The concept of Mode 1 and Mode 2 (Gibbons et al., 1994; Nowotny et al., 2001) knowledge production signalled the age of transformations in society, attributed to the increasing interaction between spaces occupied by science and society, and blurring of the traditional boundaries between these spaces, and between the traditional and new knowledges. The purpose of the Mode 2 project was not to obliterate the traditional, discipline-bound academic knowledge (Mode 1), and neither was it to idealise Mode 1 knowledge (Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff, 2000). Instead, it was to subject traditional knowledge to critical recombination and to enable a new (applied and specialist) knowledge paradigm to emerge. This new paradigm possessed inherent characteristics of openness, greater diversity of perspectives and increased transcendence of boundaries between the sites of knowledge production (Nowotny et al., 2001). Most importantly, it was predicated on the pluralism of sources of knowledge

production and the types of produced knowledge and reconfigured interaction between the knowledge producers (Nowotny et al., 2001).

When the Mode 3 project enters the knowledge debate, it advances the collaboration of multiple actors for the purpose of knowledge production as an ecosystem enabling people to work together on actualising the ideas of innovation, entrepreneurship and democracy (Carayannis and Campbell, 2011, 2016). Translating this debate to institutional contexts, a collaboration of staff working in cross-boundary university third space environments is simultaneously a product, a process and a purpose of multiple actors coming together and joining their diverse individual knowledges and expertises to innovate, to develop solutions to address current and prepare for future challenges (Veles, 2022). University third space, being a site of 'extraordinary openness … critical exchange … [and] multiplicity of perspectives' (Soja, 1996: 5) therefore affords its actors-inhabitants the agency to challenge stereotypes and question assumptions while critiquing the dualisms of the past. As such, the Mode 3 knowledge production ecosystem actively works on making all staff contributions visible and important to advancing institutional goals (Briody et al., 2021; Veles, 2022; Whitchurch, 2023). However, such an ecosystem can succeed only if there is a systemically developed and implemented recognition of all actors and their contributions to the knowledge construction project.

Conceptual benefit of critical thirding

A strategy of critical thirding (Lefebvre, 1974; Soja, 1996) is employed in this article to challenge the continuing demarcation between university professional practices and staff identities and to critique one of the most persistent dualisms in higher education – a dualism of academic/non-academic othering (Macfarlane, 2015). The outworkings of the dualism perpetuate the invisibility and tacit silencing of professional staff, and induce systemic misrecognition (Fraser, 2007; James, 2015; Lovell, 2007; Whitchurch, 2023) by rendering their knowledges and voices secondary to those of the academics. The strategy allows a contesting of the traditional binary division neither through dismissing the validity of Mode 1 knowledge of one group or Mode 2 knowledge of the other, nor through merging one and the other. Instead, it articulates the possibility of a third perspective, Mode 3 knowledge production. It is radically new – both similar and yet different – and, therefore, it has the potential to resurrect and 'continuously expand the production of knowledge beyond what is presently known' (Soja, 1996: 61). Such 'creative recombination' (Soja, 1996: 6) of ideas and perspectives assists in addressing the imbalance of values assigned to knowledges created by various actors and professional groups. It disrupts the narrative of university dualisms, and the unhelpful intrusion of those dualisms in everyday university practice by privileging some actors and making others invisible. Critical thirding also provides a mechanism for higher education researchers and practitioners to be vigilant towards the formation of new dualisms, such as essential/non-essential worker dualism, which emerged in the higher education and other service sectors during the global Covid-19 pandemic (Gilder, 2020).

Having discussed the continuing debate of staff invisibility and Mode 3 knowledge production within a broader conceptual framework of critical thirding (Soja, 1996, 2009) as a means of addressing systemic injustices, the next two sections of this article present a brief overview of the research study, discuss selected findings from a case and apply critical thirding reasoning to demonstrate how the collaborative project created new knowledge and led to transformative changes of university research commercialisation practices.

A case of don't judge a book by its cover: reflecting on selected research findings

Between 2017 and 2019, the author conducted her doctoral qualitative constructivist multiple case study research (Bazeley, 2013; Merriam, 2014), which was designed as a two-phase research project. In the first phase, 17 university managers were interviewed to explore how staff interpreted the concept of third space and cross-boundary work. The second phase was a multiple case study of five university projects. For the second phase, a further 17 participants took part in interviews, the purpose of which was to understand what made each project successful and to discover what motivated staff to take part in collaborations. It was also to explore the dynamics of staff professional relations and changing practices

through collaboration. All interviews were semi-structured, conducted by the author in person or online in a one-on-one setting, and informed by the interview guide to ensure 'that the same basic lines of inquiry are pursued with each person interviewed' (Patton, 2015: 439) and that all key topics were being discussed (Veles, 2020). Data analysis of the interview transcripts was facilitated by the computer-assisted method, using NVivo data analysis software, which supported the development of themes and the construction of narrative case summaries (Veles, 2020).

Participants for the first phase were sourced through a utilisation-focused selection method (Patton, 2015). For the second phase of research, decisions on how many and what cases to include were guided by the desire to include a variety of university third space types (Whitchurch, 2013, 2018) across culturally dissimilar research sites (Australia and Singapore). Five cases were selected according to purposeful sampling of a maximum variation (Patton, 2015). The limitations of the sampling decisions and insider-research biases were acknowledged and discussed as part of the ethical practice research (Veles, 2020). These guiding ethical principles implied that the researcher's reflexivity included considerations about what it meant to be an insider researcher conducting research within the university that was simultaneously the site of research and the site of work (Labaree, 2002; Mercer, 2007).

The author (Veles, 2020) examined five purposefully selected (Patton, 2015) and dissimilar in origin cases of collaborative projects, in which professional and academic staff worked together across functional, organisational and cultural boundaries in one regional university in Australia with campuses across Australia and Singapore. A multiple case study looked at the perceptions of all staff about cross-boundary work, and at professional staff motivations towards collaboration. The findings from the interviews with 34 professional and academic staff provided the author with an enriched understanding of the third space scholarship, and highlighted the complex relationships between organisational actors who came together to work, create and innovate (Veles, 2022; Veles and Danaher, 2022).

Locating the research within Australia and a wider Asia–Pacific geographical context came about through the exploration of the literature combined with pragmatic considerations of opportunities where such a research enquiry could take place. Locating the research within one Australian university was motivated by two reasons. First, the university operates across campuses and study centres in Australia, with the campus in Singapore presenting a unique opportunity to explore the phenomenon of the university third space cross-boundary collaboration in a single organisation through a diversity of cultural settings (Veles, 2020).

The research established that many professional staff identified themselves as working largely at an intersection of academic and professional domains. They perceived themselves as having blended or hybrid identities, often facing multiple directions and having to marry their own professional spaces with those of academics (Veles, 2020). All staff acknowledged that the enduring organisational boundaries were making collaboration go unrecognised and, at times, completely unnoticed, with no resources afforded to support staff working together. In addition to accounts of staff with positive experiences working in third spaces, others portrayed third space as a site of entrapment, comparing it to a wasteland, belonging to neither one nor the other world (Veles, 2022). Such portrayal was consistent with some commentaries in boundary literature (Akkerman and Bakker, 2011). The research concluded with recommendations for university leaders, managers and professional staff members that deliberate and consistent efforts need to be applied to raise the profile of the university third space collaboration and to make third spaces the sites where academic and professional staff connect to collaborate, form partnerships and innovate together. In addition, collaboration between professional and academic staff needs to be normalised as a continuum of partnerships within university professional life to build university collaborative capital (Veles, 2020; Veles and Danaher, 2022).

The project selected for this article is an example of how three university actors – the Research Academic (an academic in a science discipline) and the Inventor (professional staff in a technical support role), guided by the Research Business Manager (a professional staff member in a managerial and business development capacity) – came together to develop a research solution to meet a particular need of the Research Academic. As a result, they developed a new environmentally friendly, lightweight model of a device for collecting biological samples in the field, which provided for the needs not just of one researcher, but of the whole research community. The device was consequently commercialised, and it is currently offered to scientists in Australia and globally. Two of these staff members (the Research Academic and the Inventor) later established a company independent from the university to manufacture and sell the devices. This was the evidence of how Mode 3 knowledge was produced

through collaboration of university actors, and how it was shared with and applied to practice by a wider research community.

All three project participants were brought together serendipitously, either through staff recommendations or following the earlier positive experience of working with one another. All three described challenges that they faced individually and collectively while working on the project, and what helped them to ameliorate the effects of those challenges.

First, the participants commented on the severe shortage of time each of them had to dedicate to the project. Second, the nature of the project itself required continuing effort in navigating and, at times, breaking through organisational barriers, bureaucratic processes and outdated systems, which were incongruent with what they required for the project to succeed. In addition, locating the right people to invite to the project or to obtain expert advice was often impossible. The accidental nature of knowing the people with the right skills was the manifestation of the university boundaries, which disconnected people and obstructed institutional knowledge proliferation. As the Research Academic said:

> How would you know that these people [professional staff] exist? How do they reach out? Often, they might have amazing solutions, but if they're not interacting with a wider community, how would you ever get that cross-pollination, if you don't have these two groups interacting?

The Research Business Manager, in turn, commented that often 'you have more time or better luck finding staff members from [the university] at a breakfast event or something outside'. The Inventor compared the situation with 'a minefield trying to work out who to speak to or who to go to'. Finally, low connectivity among staff, which was raised by both academic and professional staff participants, was a concern as it decreased the diversity of staff working on the project and promoted the stifling uniformity of thinking.

As the three participants continued working on the project, they developed strategies that assisted them in advancing their collaboration. They not only gradually developed an appreciation for the unique knowledge each of them possessed; they also developed a shared understanding that their knowledge was not sufficient on its own to solve problems. For example:

Research Academic:	I had an equipment [*sic*] that wasn't fit for purpose, and so I was very frustrated by that. I'd been trying to solve it by myself, but obviously I didn't have the expertise: I'm not a builder, I am not an engineer.
Research Business Manager:	You have a really good mix: you've got the scientific knowledge in research, and you've got technical stuff, but you've also got a businessperson here.
Research Academic:	One of the reasons why it's worked is because the Inventor and I have such different skill sets, we really complement each other.

Knowledge originated from combining the individual expertises needed to be further recombined to achieve the success of the undertaking. This recombination was afforded by applying a skill of translation, which the participants developed and cultivated during the project. The Research Business Manager's contribution was boundary-crossing by nature, and his role involved bridging diverse expertises of participating actors. He described his ability to provide advice, guidance and advocacy as a translationary function of turning knowledge into a product that was valuable for a third party (for example, a business research organisation). The Inventor developed a skill of translation through deliberately engaging with the Research Academic's research. The Research Academic gradually overcame her discomfort and uncertainty about being in a shared space when she acquired agency in the process of knowledge translation:

> There is that translational skill for everything: the Research Business Manager was translating his expertise, but the Inventor was translating his, and I was translating mine, like when I would speak about science, I would speak completely differently if I was speaking to someone [who did not have a science background].

As the participants were engaged in translating their respective knowledge for one another, and for the external research and business communities, they effectively increased the permeability of boundaries between individual practices at the sites of interaction. In addition, entirely new practices emerged at

the boundary as the result of this collaborative co-creation and translation. The diversity of these new practices converged to create a new – simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar – practice, which eventually transitioned into an independent third space outside of the university research domain when the project was launched into the commercial world:

> I think [the diversity] was critical; we could not have achieved what we needed to achieve without that diversity. The Inventor brought different technical skills: he could physically build the devices, and I was about function – what we do to bring those two things together. And I think what you get is a product that has the best of both worlds. (Research Academic)

For the university, the success of the project brought to bear the importance of connecting the right people with their unique knowledge, expertise and boundary-crossing competence (Walker and Nocon, 2007), which was interpreted by the participants as translational skill. The participants realised that preconceptions that people often have about other staff members based on their role titles or position descriptions lead to dismissing or excluding the knowledges of those actors. As such, many opportunities to collaborate and create something new and unique are often missed.

An academic leader, who was not part of this collaborative project, addressed the whole university community by saying: 'Don't judge a book by its cover or allow yourself to be guided by those unconscious biases. Don't see somebody who is in the tech overalls and think that they do not understand. That's the work they're doing now, that's not a limit to their expertise.'

For the project participants, working on the project illuminated the criticality of combining people's knowledges and experiences. It also emphasised the need for the organisation to create environments providing staff with space and time to develop professional connections, discuss ideas and co-create. Individual transformation within this project manifested in the Research Academic's perception of her professional identity transition: from a scientist with research commitments into a researcher who was able to develop an innovative solution and support the whole research community, thereby having a much greater impact on science and the world of research.

The overall success of the project was attributed to collaborating partners who recognised the value of their professional relationships, and combined their three individual passions (for conservation, innovation and research commercialisation) to create a unique space for experimentation and innovation. They advanced their communication through open discussion, the free exchange of ideas and by directing discussion from the perspective of expertise rather than power. Main learnings from the project were the importance of connecting with the critical actors based on their expertise and cross-boundary mindset; the necessity for the university to recognise collaboration as a way of working together to achieve desired outcomes; and to provide collaborating staff and teams with space and time to develop connections and networks. Finally, team members advocated for professional staff to receive more individualised approaches to the recognition of their work and professional contributions from their managers and supervisors, and from university leaders at large (Veles, 2022).

Critical thirding reasoning: learning from the case

The outcome of the project was that the three participants working together created a unique and innovative research solution, and they have since been disseminating the knowledge beyond the university boundaries. Their achievement provided a critical learning for all project participants. Applying critical thirding (Soja, 1996) reasoning to interpret the insights from this case of third space collaboration makes it possible to understand how the actors engaged in challenging university hierarchies, institutional boundaries, and staff categorisation to produce a powerful counternarrative of agency, connection and diversity appreciation, which helps to displace the dominant narrative of systemic invisibility, exclusion and misrecognition.

The complexity of reconciliation of various university staff knowledges, practices and identities, as shown in the analysis of this cross-boundary project, highlights the reductionist nature of binaries (Soja, 1996). It also demonstrates the 'disintegrating nature of the academic/non-academic dichotomy' (Macfarlane, 2015: 107), whereby academic knowledge is privileged over other knowledges produced by other university actors. As critical thirding suggests, all actors need to be making a strategic '"other-than" choice that speaks and critiques through its otherness' (Soja, 1996: 61), thereby breaking 'the hammerlock of binarist logic' (Soja, 1996: 65). The project participants made this choice, and

although the road to transformation was not easy, they persisted on the path. Their persistence resulted in the realisation of their individual and project aspirations. Breaking through the organisational constraints, they engaged in critiquing the first and second space modes of knowing (Soja, 1996) by engaging in Mode 3 knowledge construction (Carayannis and Campbell, 2011, 2016) and arrived at a radically different – third – space. This space did not negate their individual knowledges, and neither did it simply combine or privilege any type of knowledge. Instead, third space practice afforded the participants to assess their pre-existing knowledges, their knowledge of institutional systems and structures and their knowledge of the world external to the university. They then moved towards changing their ways of thinking, which transported their project to a new, external space of other possibilities. Critical thirding opened for project participants an opportunity to redraft existing university practices and design a new future commercialising their research innovation.

The project provided an impetus to capitalise on the achieved new ecosystem of knowledge, further connecting people, culture and technology (Carayannis and Campbell, 2011) in a whole-of-university project on redesigning research commercialisation practices and creating new spaces within the university to enable future collaborative research innovation projects. This was an example of successful and perhaps exemplary third space collaboration, which transformed university practices and changed project participants' work and even lives. The author acknowledges that there were other projects that did not reach this transformational power as this project did, due to failed efforts to recognise many staff members' autonomy and competence, and their contributions to project work.

In the next part of this article, the research findings are compared to selected findings from a SLR (Veles et al., 2023) to amplify the importance of systemic application of critical thirding to challenge outdated university practices and to advance the global project of Mode 3 tertiary education knowledge creation.

Systematic literature review selected findings and the call for critical thirding

Shortly after her doctoral research findings were published (Veles, 2022), the author answered a call for developing SLRs on topics of special interest to further advance higher education as a growing and distinct field of study and research, which was reflected in the increased volume of literature dedicated to higher education topics (Tight, 2019, 2021). Tight's (2021) recent systematic review of syntheses of higher education research confirmed the centrality of pedagogical research in the overall field of higher education research. Consequently, there remained a clear deficit of research 'into the experiences of professional and non-academic staff' (Tight, 2021: 223). As a result, collaborative SLR research was conducted to examine the literature on identities and spaces of interaction of higher education staff over the first two decades of this century (Veles et al., 2023). The review addressed two 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?

To ensure that the approach was comprehensive, transparent and reproducible, the SLR used a methodology that drew on two published protocols, including a 12-step review process developed for systematic reviews in social sciences disciplines (Petticrew and Roberts, 2006), and a modified version of the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews (PRISMA) protocol (Moher et al., 2009). The specific criteria that were applied to selecting the literature included the geography, language, period and type of publications. To maintain a sound research strategy, and to include diverse research findings from culturally dissimilar contexts, while being pragmatic about the feasibility of the research study, the authors included only peer-reviewed empirical, qualitative and quantitative research articles that had been published globally in English between 2000 and 2020. The included publications were derived from six selected discipline-relevant databases related to the field of education and social sciences: Emerald Insights, Taylor & Francis Online, ProQuest Social Sciences, SAGE Journals, Scopus and Google Scholar. The original search retrieved 862 results. After further screening and applying the developed eligibility criteria (for example, appropriateness of the organisational environment and availability of full texts), the

number of publications was reduced to 103. These full texts were closely read by the authors to identify and retain publications with high relevance for the research questions.

In total, 54 research publications from the international literature published between 2000 and 2020 were explored. Analysis deployed NVivo data analysis software to code data into a broad coding frame for discussion, for further analysis of the emergent themes and the development of policy and practice recommendations. Further details of the methodology, the research flowchart and the application of the protocols can be found in the published article (Veles et al., 2023).

Findings from the selected literature were analysed through the lens of the theoretical frameworks of professional identity (Angouri, 2016; Delanty, 2008; Hall, 1990), spaces (that is, third space, in particular – Whitchurch, 2008, 2018) and boundaries (Haye and González, 2021; Valsiner, 2009) to increase the rigour of the SLR and to enable the authors to develop recommendations which would apply to higher education policy and practice.

Major themes derived from the analysis reaffirmed the complexity of the roles of professional staff as a basis for evolving multiple and hybrid identities, resulting from the increasingly complex higher education context (Whitchurch, 2013). The SLR also identified the emergence of various new spaces of interaction among staff where they work together and solve problems. Crucial for higher education policy recommendations was the evidence of professional and academic staff experiencing similar navigational challenges in these new spaces of interaction, making binary ideas of professional identities outmoded, unproductive and unable to account for the complexity of processes and goals of contemporary university work. The SLR provided actionable 'transformative redefinitions' (Massaro et al., 2016: 776) of professionalism, professional identity and ways of working together among university staff in new spaces.

Three themes were identified in the SLR (Veles et al., 2023):

1. *The complexity of roles of professional staff as a basis for evolving multiple and hybrid identities* (Veles et al., 2023: 138–43): It was identified that during the researched period (2000–20), professional staff identities underwent significant transformations in response to the changing higher education landscape. Discussions surrounding how professional and academic staff negotiate the complexities of interpreting and integrating these new identities within their work environments progressed during this period. Initially focused predominantly on the terminology used to describe staff roles, the discourse evolved into more nuanced examinations of new definitions of professionalism. The intricate process of identity formation among all staff members, coupled with the demonstration of agency among professional staff, became evident through deliberate efforts of highlighting their roles and contributions within the university context.

2. *Emergent new spaces of interaction: simultaneously contested sites and new boundary zones with opportunities for transformation of work practices* (Veles et al., 2023: 143–7): Emerging spaces of staff interaction posed analogous navigational challenges for professional and academic staff, rendering binary conceptualisations of professional identities counterproductive, outdated and inadequate in capturing the intricacies of university work processes and objectives. The increasing number of documented narratives centred on third spaces was discernible through research conducted and disseminated by both academic and professional staff, indicating a heightened sense of agency among the latter group. These professional staff members demonstrated an inclination and readiness to engage in research on their own identities and interactions within the university milieu.

3. *Multiple ways of working in boundary zones* (Veles et al., 2023: 148–51): Finally, establishing and normalising novel spaces of staff interaction entailed collaborative efforts among academic and professional staff, transcending both vertical and horizontal boundaries. Such endeavours were characterised as collaborations, boundary-spanning activities or cooperative partnerships. Irrespective of the specific mode of representation, the success of collaborative endeavours was observed to rely upon a multitude of physical and symbolic factors, with human agency emerging as a predominant catalyst for attaining collaborative advantages, at both the individual and the institutional levels.

Among the three themes discussed in the SLR, two align with the discussion in this article and are therefore reviewed in this section. The first theme is the complexity of the roles of professional staff,

which was found to be foundational in the emergence and proliferation of many new and hybrid identities of all university staff. Within this theme, asymmetrical perceptions of identities were established among the ways that different staff members perceive and interpret other people's roles and identities, and the work activities in which their colleagues engage. This reported misalignment supports the findings from the case explored earlier in this article, where the participants commented on their pre/misconceptions about what their project team members did at work. Within the reviewed publications, there were findings of academic staff holding a view of professional staff being homogeneous and lacking diverse occupational identities (Christiansen et al., 2004; Krücken et al., 2013). Academic staff members were portrayed as lacking knowledge and, at times, interest in what professional staff do beyond what their titles signalled. Similar evidence was noted in the case of the researched project. The participants discussed how they were challenged by the disconnect among university groups and individuals, which resulted in difficulty in finding the right people to connect with and invite into the project. Professional identity across many research publications was often at the core of perpetuating the othering dualism (Macfarlane, 2015; see also Birds, 2015; Conway, 2012; Kolsaker, 2014; Whitchurch, 2013), which was found to be contributing to preventing interactions and collaborations among various individuals and groups (Veles et al., 2023).

These asymmetrical identity perceptions notwithstanding, within the second selected theme from the SLR, which consolidated the findings about partnering, collaborating and working across institutional boundary zones, many publications discussed how both professional and academic staff enjoyed and appreciated working together on various third space projects. Although third space was at times presented as risky, uncomfortable and perhaps somewhat destabilising, working in it was enjoyed by many, and it was presented as having potential for career development, facilitating knowledge co-creation and sharing, new skills acquisition, challenging outdated ways of working and thinking and generally energising people's work (Dee and Leisyte, 2017; Takagi, 2018; Whitchurch, 2013). This second group of SLR evidence supports the findings from the explored case, in which the participants overcame the initial discomfort of challenging their identities and perceptions and, while gradually getting used to working within their group and engaging with other world views, transitioned to a new understanding of their own roles, redefining success, and constructing new meaning of success and recognition.

These are by no means paradoxical or even contradictory findings, as the first group (asymmetrical views of professional identities) supports the manifested legacy of systemic imbalance resulting from outdated staff categorisation which lacks the application of critical thirding reasoning, and which therefore works against creating pathways to new ways of working and working together in boundary zones. The second group of evidence from the SLR, and from the reviewed case, demonstrates a collective rebellion against institutional orthodoxies, outdated perceptions of people's roles and identities, and various structural impediments. This is the evidence of how (primarily professional) staff members are working together on normalising creative collaborations based on a radical recombination of unique, discipline and specialist knowledges. The result of these collaborations advances the de-invisibilisation of staff and provides ideas for addressing misrecognition.

Conclusion: university third spaces as mediators of critical thirding

By comparing the selected evidence from the SLR (Veles et al., 2023) to the research case findings (Veles, 2022), it becomes clear how both professional and academic staff in universities around the world engage in complex identity work. In doing this, they use their agency to overcome many persisting organisational barriers, subverting the outdated othering dualism (Macfarlane, 2015), and asserting the value of diverse and dissimilar perspectives in the context of third space work (Whitchurch, 2013). The commonality of these insights confirms that when staff members applied critical thirding reasoning while working together in various third spaces, they were able to achieve transformative changes beyond the project goals. The application of critical thirding (Soja, 1996, 2009) not only enables professional and academic actors to design together and implement a solution to a problem; it also creates an environment for a transformative change for the actors themselves, and for university practices. Soja (2009: 67) comments that 'according to this critical thirding, thinking follows not a linear but a lateral or spatial logic. Thirding does not only mean adding a third dimension but also creating new possibilities to expand the scope and reach of our knowledge.'

The collaborative projects discussed in this article, and reviewed in the SLR, present alternative epistemic spaces of collaboration, in which the traditional university practices of prioritising knowledges of some over others were contested and challenged by staff working together. When traditional hierarchies and binary ways of thinking are challenged and subverted, the invisible becomes visible, and alternative knowledge transforms into something radically new. It may also become possible that 'a contradiction between institutional coherence and intellectual incoherence, or the competition between managerial and academic values for possession of the university's soul, may conceal a deeper complementarity' (Giddens, 1991: 83). New ways of organising universities according to knowledge domains as opposed to outmoded staff roles and positions may be a way of creating and engaging with knowledge that is required to make sense of a world of current and emerging challenges.

Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

The author conducted the research reported in this article in accordance with James Cook University ethical standards.

Consent for publication statement

The author declares that research participants' informed consent to publication of findings – including photos, videos and any personal or identifiable information – was secured prior to publication.

Conflicts of interest statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the author during peer review of this article have been made. The author declares no further conflicts with this article.

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