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Taylor & Francis Group

JOURNAL OF HIGHER EDUCATION POLICY AND MANAGEMENT

Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management

ISSN: 1360-080X (Print) 1469-9508 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/cjhe20

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To cite this article: Natalia Veles & Kohei Takagi (10 Oct 2025): Developing sustainable careers in higher education: third space professionals in Australia and Japan, Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management, DOI: 10.1080/1360080X.2025.2548477

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/1360080X.2025.2548477

Published online: 10 Oct 2025.

JOURNAL OF HIGHER EDUCATION POLICY AND MANAGEMENT
https://doi.org/10.1080/1360080X.2025.2548477

Developing sustainable careers in higher education: third space professionals in Australia and Japan

Natalia Veles [a] and Kohei Takagi [b]

[a]College of Arts, Society and Education, James Cook University, Queensland, Australia; [b]Center for Higher Education Research & Development, Kanto Gakuin University, Yokohama, Japan

ABSTRACT

This paper examines how career sustainability is interpreted among higher education staff in Australia and Japan, focusing on third-space professionals who work across academic and professional domains. The research explored the tensions between the career aspirations and career paths of these professionals in both countries using the sustainable careers framework within a qualitative research design. In this phase, completed in 2024, perspectives on career sustainability were gathered from six staff members in one Australian university and six in a Japanese university (12 individuals in total). Despite significant differences in recruitment approaches and work organisation in Australian and Japanese universities, most enabling and disrupting factors of career sustainability discussed by participants were common, with only a few dissimilarities. The findings from this phase were used to develop preliminary recommendations for policy and practice in career development for university third space workers and will inform the second phase of this research.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 16 July 2025
Accepted 11 August 2025

KEYWORDS
Sustainable careers; third space professionals; universities in Australia and Japan; comparative study; qualitative research

The first decades of the new millennium demonstrated that individual careers remain dynamic, shaped by a complex interplay of local and global political, socio-cultural, economic, and technological developments (De Vos, 2024). The increasingly precarious and contingent nature of work, coupled with personal life events, continues to disrupt career trajectories and shape the discourse in career development (Akkermans & Kubasch, 2017). More recently, growing global concerns for environmental sustainability, progress towards the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (N. Arthur & McMahon, 2019; McMahon & Knight, 2024; United Nations, 2015; Veles & Kim, 2024), and the lasting impacts of the global pandemic have further transformed the world of work (Blustein & Flores, 2023). In response, academic formulations of career concepts have shifted from understanding careers as a sequential process of accumulating various, largely controlled by an individual, work and work-related experiences (De Vos, 2024) to presenting careers as part of an evolutionary new, global sustainability paradigm. This

CONTACT Natalia Veles Natalia.Veles@jcu.edu.au College of Arts, Society and Education, James Cook University, Queensland, Australia

new paradigm synthesises the traditional focus on individual careers and larger organisational and societal factors of health and well-being, equality, sustainable community, and universal access to decent work (Blustein et al., 2023; DiFabio, 2017; Hartung & DiFabio, 2024).

We recognise how global changes affect universities as workplaces and university employees who are equally impacted by these changes. The global university work environment is becoming more fragmented, fluid, and unpredictable. Over the past two decades, research has shown that university roles and identities are continuously evolving, with work spanning various domains and interaction spaces (Veles et al., 2023; Whitchurch, 2023). The term 'university third space' was introduced to describe emerging roles, identities, and new spaces of work and interaction (Whitchurch, 2008). Third space professionals refer to university workers whose work is often located between professional and academic activities. Due to the contested nature of third spaces, the contributions of these workers to university work are often invisible, their identities blurred, and their careers and career paths problematic.

To explore the tensions between the career aspirations and existing career paths of modern university third space professionals, we designed a two-phase research project. We started by investigating how sustainable careers are understood at universities in two different cultural and organisational contexts, by people who work in those third spaces. This paper presents the findings of the first qualitative phase of comparative research into the careers of third space professionals in two universities: Australia and Japan. We used the sustainable careers framework (De Vos et al., 2020) to design the research and interview participants, and Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) (Braun & Clarke, 2020) to understand the meaning of participants' experiences and guide us in addressing the research question: What are the enabling and constraining factors for developing sustainable careers in third space environments in universities in Australia and Japan? The findings from the first phase and the preliminary recommendations developed and presented in this paper will inform the quantitative design of the second phase of this research, which will further explore the factors from the personal, contextual, and temporal dimensions of the sustainable careers framework and help us design career development interventions to support the careers of university third space professionals working across culturally and organisationally dissimilar contexts.

Literature overview

This section provides an overview of the literature on university third space professionals and how differing recruitment and employment conditions in Australia and Japan impact professional staff. It also outlines the conceptual framework used in this research.

University third space professionals

The global university work environment is increasingly fragmented, fluid, precarious, and unpredictable, affecting both academic and professional roles (Whitchurch, 2023). Over the past two decades, higher education research has shown that university staff roles and identities are continuously evolving, with work spanning various domains and interaction spaces (Veles, 2022). The term university third space was introduced by

Whitchurch (2013) and further developed by scholars worldwide (Bossu & Brown, 2018; McIntosh & Nutt, 2022; Takagi, 2018; Veles, 2022) to describe this phenomenon. Recent scholarship highlights the growing prominence of third space practitioners in East Asia, with Takagi (2015, 2018) examining their emergence in universities across Hong Kong and Japan. Ninomiya (2023) identifies 'new types of specialists' in areas such as faculty development and academic support, introduced through Japanese university reforms.

Third space identifies new ways of working, changing professional roles and identities, and, following Bourdieu's conceptualisation of social capital, characterises a distinct field of practice (Whitchurch, 2025). Applying the concept to university staff interactions offers a productive approach for researchers and practitioners to reimagine the traditional academic/professional divide and develop insights into the workforce needed to sustain and advance university work globally.

Research highlights the challenges these university workers face in navigating work across multiple domains, reconciling professional identities, reconceptualising professionalism, enacting agency, and pursuing recognition of their work contributions from university communities (Veles et al., 2023). To establish and maintain a mutually beneficial relationship between universities and third-space workers, who are often marginalised due to the invisibility and misrecognition of their work and hybrid professional identities, it is essential to examine how their careers evolve, what enables and hinders their career development, and identify specific career interventions to help them craft sustainable careers.

University professional staff careers in Australia and Japan: a comparative view

Despite political, economic, and cultural differences between the higher education systems of Australia and Japan, both countries are witnessing the emergence of hybrid professional-academic roles (Takagi, 2018; Veles, 2022). These developments, intensified by post-pandemic funding constraints and global competition, have placed increasing pressure on universities to innovate and adapt (Marginson et al., 2020).

Fundamental differences in employment systems shape how professional staff are recruited and progress in their careers. Japan's 'membership-based' model – where individuals are hired *en masse* and rotated across departments – contrasts with Australia's 'job-based' system, which emphasises role-specific recruitment and performance-based progression (Baré et al., 2022; Hamaguchi, 2024). These systems influence access to professional development, career mobility, and interpretations of career sustainability.

In Japan, the post-WWII economic boom fostered organisational careers characterised by lifetime employment, seniority-based progression, and collective values (Dore, 1987; Westney, 1996). However, economic stagnation since the 1990s led to labour market deregulation and the rise of non-regular employment, including part-time and fixed-term roles (H. R. Watanabe, 2018). Despite these shifts, traditional employment practices remain dominant, with core workers enjoying job security and seniority-based rewards (Fujimoto, 2024; Kambayashi & Kato, 2017). The Japanese 'membership-based' system prioritises organisational needs over individual aspirations. Employees are hired without specific job roles and are rotated every 3–5 years to build broad organisational knowledge (Fujimoto, 2024; Maeura, 2024). This system rewards

tenure over performance and is managed centrally by HR departments (Hamaguchi, 2024). While it fosters integration and loyalty, it limits individual agency in career development.

In contrast, Australia's job-based system was formalised through the Higher Education General and Salaried Staff Award 1993, which introduced a unified classification structure for professional staff (Baré et al., 2022). The Higher Education Worker (HEW) 10-level framework defines clear entry requirements and performance standards though progression beyond the top increment often requires applying for new roles, frequently in open competition with external candidates. While professional development and secondments are encouraged, genuine career advancement remains limited (Croucher & Woelert, 2022). Australian universities are evolving as complex, entrepreneurial institutions, yet the HEW structure has not kept pace with emerging roles that blend academic and professional functions. Roles such as academic advisors, learning developers, and liaison librarians often fall outside traditional classifications, rendering their contributions invisible and undervalued (Veles et al., 2023).

A further distinction lies in the generalist-specialist divide. In Japan, most professional staff are generalists, rotated to gain broad experience and foster collaboration (Kimura, 2023). Specialists are fewer and limited to such professions as librarians and IT engineers. While generalism is seen as a strength, it can hinder the development of deep expertise, particularly in roles requiring specialised knowledge, such as international education (R. Watanabe & Hoshino, 2016). However, Oba (2014) cautions against uncritical adoption of Western professionalisation models, noting the Japanese system has developed under unique organisational conditions, including smaller operational budgets.

In Australia, recruitment is role-specific, with job descriptions outlining required qualifications and skills. Positions may be generalist or specialist, and career progression typically involves applying for advertised roles, either internally or externally. This system supports individual agency but may lack the structural support for long-term career development seen in Japan.

Ultimately, these contrasting systems reflect broader cultural orientations: Japan's employer-driven career formation (Fujimoto, 2024) versus Australia's model of career self-management supported by institutional frameworks (National Careers Institute, 2022). These distinctions are critical as a broader context for understanding how sustainable careers are conceptualised and enacted by university professional staff in both contexts.

Conceptual framework of sustainable careers

The concept of sustainable careers selected for this research is grounded in the Systems Theory Framework of Career Development (McMahon & Patton, 1995; W. Patton & McMahon, 2021) and informed by evolving career models such as boundaryless (M. B. Arthur, 1994) and protean careers (Hall, 2004). It reflects a dynamic interplay between personal agency, social context, time, and the subjective and objective meanings of work (De Vos et al., 2020). These dimensions are further shaped by individual experiences of happiness, health, and productivity, which are increasingly recognised as core indicators of career sustainability (Greenhaus et al., 2024).

Newman (2011) introduced the term 'sustainable careers' to describe career trajectories that support extended working lives through renewability, flexibility, and adaptability. These principles align with the broader notion of social sustainability (Mensah, 2019) which later included the studies of careers. Career sustainability narrative, largely focused on supporting individuals in their attainment of positive work and life experiences (Kossek et al., 2014) has gained traction in response to global disruptions such as economic instability, precarious employment, and technological transformation (Donald et al., 2024; Greenhaus et al., 2024). These shifts have intensified uncertainty around work and careers, particularly in the context of ageing populations and extended life expectancy (Callanan et al., 2019).

Building on Newman's foundation, De Vos et al. (2020) proposed a multidimensional framework of sustainable careers that integrates systemic and dynamic perspectives. In essence, the framework builds on the Systems Theory Framework of Career Development (McMahon & Patton, 1995; W. Patton & McMahon, 2021) in integrating the following three elements: individual (agency), systemic (systems of influences) and dynamic (i.e., recursiveness or the ongoing relationship among the influences and changes occurring over time resulting from these interactions). De Vos et al. (2020) framework acknowledges the three key dimensions for exploring the sustainable careers, including 'person' (as the central actor possessing agency who is creating and sustaining meaning of their life and work); context (as the system of multiple influences on the individual's life and work) and time (as careers are presented as the processes unfolding over time and presenting opportunities for dynamic learning).

The framework further proposed the three categories of the indicators that are being increasingly tested as factors of career sustainability (Heijden, 2005). These factors or 'building blocks' include *health, happiness* and *productivity* (De Vos et al., 2020). *Health*, as the first career sustainability indicator, refers to the alignment between an individual's career and their physical and mental well-being. Sustainable careers in recognising how physical and mental demands can accumulate and affect work ability over time, need to minimise long-term strain and support health and well-being across life stages. *Happiness*, as the second indicator, represents the subjective experience of fulfilment and satisfaction across one's career; it is viewed holistically and in relation to the changing life circumstances. Happiness reflects the dynamic alignment between career development and work engagement, and personal values, goals, and needs for balance and growth. Finally, *productivity*, as the third indicator, relates simultaneously, to the current performance at work and the perception of future employability. It emphasises the ongoing alignment between individual competencies and evolving organisational needs. Productivity encompasses engagement, adaptability and an individual's capacity to remain effective across career transition and emerging work contexts (De Vos et al., 2020). This framework therefore emphasises the need for individuals to actively construct meaningful careers over time; it also underscores the critical role of organisational and societal structures in supporting and sustaining individual careers with the latter indicating the increasing focus on the social justice component of the framework.

Greenhaus et al. (2024, p. 482) further refined the definition of career sustainability as 'the extent to which an individual attains happiness, health, and productivity at work and maintains these experiences over the course of the career'. In advancing the concept of career sustainability, Schweitzer et al. (2023) introduced a self-reflective cycle of

retrospection, introspection, projection, and prospection as a practical tool for career counsellors to support individuals in reframing their career pathways with sustainability in mind.

The sustainable career framework is increasingly situated within the broader discourse of career ecosystems, which highlight the interdependence of individual, organisational, and societal actors (Baruch & Sullivan, 2022). This positioning aligns with career construction theory (Savickas, 2005) and systems theory approaches, reinforcing the iterative and contextual nature of career development.

Empirical research has explored sustainable careers across diverse populations and contexts, including contingent workers (Retkowsky et al., 2023), mothers in management (Michaelides et al., 2023), former athletes (Richardson & McKenna, 2020), and university students (Russo et al., 2023). Recent studies have examined the processes and stakeholder influences that shape career sustainability (Barthauer et al., 2020; Gerritsen et al., 2024; Hennekam et al., 2022; Kossek & Ollier-Malaterre, 2020; Van der Heijden et al., 2024). Cross-cultural investigations have also emerged, including studies in Turkey (Kilic & Kitapci, 2024), China (Xu et al., 2020), Greece (Argyropoulou, 2022), and the United States (Chin et al., 2022).

Despite this growing body of research, the concept of sustainable careers remains fragmented and under-theorised, with limited longitudinal research to capture its dynamic nature (Chin et al., 2022; Greenhaus et al., 2024). In applying this conceptual framework to this research, we acknowledge its analytical power and recognise its limitations. We deliberately apply this framework as we value its connection to social justice and advocacy work by career practitioners to address systemic injustices. In our research on third space professionals, these injustices include a lack of recognition and inadequate organisational support for career development. In addition, we aspire to advance sustainable career scholarship by providing deeper intercultural perspectives and sector-specific analyses to enhance understanding of how sustainable careers are constructed and maintained across culturally and organisationally dissimilar contexts.

Methodological approach

In this research, with its first qualitative phase conducted in 2024 and the second quantitative phase planned for 2026, our intercultural and international research team explored how sustainable careers are conceptualised and the enabling and constraining factors for developing sustainable careers in third space environments in higher education in Australia and Japan. The purpose was to investigate the tension between career aspirations and existing career paths of contemporary university workers operating across academic and professional domains (i.e., third-space professionals) and develop recommendations for addressing these tensions.

Research sites and research team

The choice of countries for this international, cross-cultural study stemmed from long-time research connections between the three researchers working on university third

space and the need to introduce a comparative perspective of dissimilar cultural orientations in the debate of higher education staff career sustainability. All three researchers have worked in universities in Australia, Japan, and the United Kingdom. We have a deep understanding of our respective countries' higher education contexts and a desire to advance research and improve practice related to third space professionals' career sustainability and development.

Phase one research design and participants

The first phase was a small-scale qualitative study involving interviews with 12 professional staff members identified as third-space professionals or working in third space (Whitchurch, 2025), located in two comparably sized universities in Australia and Japan. Interviews were conducted with staff in various professional roles across different organisational units in early, mid-, and late-career phases (Table 1). Participants occupied junior to middle management positions, equivalent to HEWL 6–8 in the Australian professional staff classification system.

Participants were sourced through an utilisation-focused selection method (M. Q. Patton, 2015) to ensure diverse roles straddling professional and academic domains, described as third-space working environments. The qualitative interviewing method enabled the researchers to capture the complexities of participants' perceptions and experiences about working and conceptualising their sustainable careers (M. Q. Patton, 2015).

Data collection

Ethics approval was secured from both institutions (Australian university protocol: H9478; Japanese university protocol: H2024-2-1). Participants received a Plain Language Statement via email, outlining the study's purpose, procedures, and their role in the research. Those who consented were invited to participate in online interviews. For Japanese participants, the interview guide was translated into Japanese to ensure clarity and cultural appropriateness.

The interview guide was structured around the Sustainable Careers Framework (De Vos et al., 2020; Van der Heijden et al., 2020), with a focus on third space roles and identities (Veles et al., 2023). Questions were designed to elicit insights into the enabling and constraining factors influencing sustainable career development in third space environments. The guide was organised around three core dimensions: time, context, and person.

The time dimension addressed participants' career trajectories, including significant turning points, enablers and barriers to career development, and future aspirations. The context dimension explored the structure of participants' current roles – whether aligned with academic, professional, or hybrid functions – and institutional support mechanisms such as rewards, incentives, and access to professional development. The person dimension focused on individual agency, job satisfaction, work-life balance, and the personal meaning attributed to their roles.

Table 1. Phase one research participants.

Country	ID	Role Title	Gender	Age	Employment Type	Yrs Working This University	Work Arrangement	Highest Qualification	Classification (AUS only)
AUS	ACDA4	Senior Career Development Advisor	M	50–59	Permanent	1–3	On campus	MA	HEWL8
	ADLL6	Liaison Librarian	F	30–39	Permanent	1–3	On campus	PhD	HEWL6
	ALDM5	Manager Learning Development	F	50–59	Permanent	10+	Hybrid	MA	N/A
	ALTA1	Learning Technology Advisor	F	40–49	FT Contract	1–3	On campus	BA	HEWL6
	ARPA2	Research Development Officer	F	30–39	Permanent	3–5	On campus	PhD	N/A
	ATFR3	Trusts and Foundations Relationship Officer	F	40–49	Permanent	1–3	On campus	BA	HEWL6
JP	JSAP1	Specially Appointed Assistant Professor	F	30–39	FT Contract	3–5	Hybrid	MEd+	
	JIRM2	Institutional Research Office Manager/IT Office Chief	M	40–49	Permanent	10+	On campus	BA	
	JRPM3	Centre for Research Promotion & Support Manager	F	50–59	Permanent	10+	On campus	MA	
	JCCL4	Career Centre Team Leader	M	40–49	Permanent	10+	On campus	BA	
	JIRA5	Institutional Research Office Team Leader/ Adjunct Lecturer	M	40–49	Permanent	10+	On campus	MA+	
	JCAM6	Office for Community & Alumni Relation Director	F	40–49	Permanent	10+	On campus	BA	

Data analysis

Interview transcripts were returned to participants for member checking to ensure accuracy. Data were analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA), a method supporting the identification and interpretation of patterns across qualitative datasets (Braun & Clarke, 2020; Byrne, 2022). This approach aligned with the study's constructivist epistemology and qualitative design, allowing for a nuanced understanding of participants' experiences (Byrne, 2022).

The analysis combined deductive and inductive strategies. Deductively, it was informed by the Sustainable Careers Framework and third space scholarship; inductively, it was grounded in the data itself. NVivo 14 software facilitated coding and theme development. Initial codes were generated and iteratively refined through collaborative discussions among the three researchers. A recursive codebook was developed and shared for review and refinement.

Themes were constructed from coded data and underwent multiple rounds of revision. The researchers drew on their diverse professional backgrounds and experiences as former third space professionals to interpret the data. Writing was integrated throughout the analytic process, consistent with RTA principles (Byrne, 2022). Themes were organised into two overarching categories: enablers and disruptors of sustainable careers, with sub-themes analysed based on their relevance to participants in either or both national contexts.

Methodological integrity

To ensure methodological integrity, the research team engaged in continuous reflexivity and transparency throughout the study (Levitt et al., 2018). Team members regularly discussed how their personal and professional values, shaped by diverse socio-cultural and economic contexts, influenced the research process, from design to data interpretation.

We applied the concept of third space as creative understanding (Veles & Danaher, 2022) to our research collaboration, privileging no single perspective. The continuous engagement of the dialogical imagination (Bakhtin, 1981) encouraged critical reflection on preconceptions and biases and supported the co-construction of culturally informed interpretations.

To achieve fidelity to the subject matter and utility in achieving research goals (Levitt et al., 2018), our research team acknowledged that the phenomenon of sustainable careers is socially constructed and subjectively interpreted by the research participants. We actively managed the influence of our respective individual perspectives through all stages of data collection and analysis, particularly during data interpretations and reporting of findings. The initial conceptualisation of impacts on third-space professionals' sustainable careers was discussed within our research team first, then at the international career development conference (Veles & Takagi, 2025). After the research presentation and posing reflective questions to the audience, we gathered further insights through round table discussions with conference participants, followed by individual researcher reflections and the whole team's final discussion.

These engagements provided valuable feedback from both academic and practitioner communities, informing subsequent analysis and interpretation. The approach contributed to research integrity (Bennett et al., 2024) through enhancing interpretative strength while honouring participant contributions (Pratt et al., 2022).

Research findings: discussion of themes

Guided by the sustainable careers framework (De Vos et al., 2020), participants reflected on their career trajectories, current roles, and future aspirations. They discussed career turning points, institutional support, autonomy, work-life balance, and perceptions of job security. Thematic analysis revealed two overarching categories – *enablers* and *disruptors* – shaping their career experiences. These themes varied across national contexts, reflecting the influence of country- and organisation-level cultural and policy differences between Australia and Japan.

The summary of all findings is presented in Table 2, organised into the thematic categories of *enablers* and *disruptors*. These represent factors identified by participants as having manifested in the past, having an enduring effect or shaping their views on future career sustainability. *Enablers* refer to factors perceived as having positively influenced or continuing to influence participants' perceptions of career sustainability; while *disruptors* denote those seen as negatively impacted or still affecting that perception. In the following sections, we discuss several arbitrarily (and explained by the limitation of the paper's word count) selected illustrative examples to demonstrate how these factors contributed to participants' visions of sustainable careers.

Career turning points (career shocks)

Our analysis revealed that participants interpreted the same events as either positive or negative career shocks (Akkermans et al., 2018). The COVID-19 pandemic, while broadly disruptive, catalysed new opportunities for third-space professionals. As one Australian Learning Technology Advisor noted, 'The trajectory of online learning and COVID really pushed that into the forefront. Organisations planning to move online had to pivot quickly' (ALTA1).

Japanese participants often cited global events, such as the 2008 Lehman collapse and the 2011 Fukushima disaster, as pivotal, whereas Australians referred to personal milestones like childbirth or relocation. This divergence reflects broader cultural orientations, with Japan typically characterised as collectivist and Australia as individualist (Radford et al., 1993). However, caution is warranted to avoid overgeneralising cultural differences. These findings underscore how third-space professionals' career trajectories are shaped by both global and personal disruptions, interpreted through culturally situated lenses.

Age

Age emerged as a salient theme across both national contexts, though interpreted differently. Australian participants over 40 viewed age as an asset, contributing to professional credibility and respect. As one participant noted, 'I'm a bit older, and

Table 2. Sustainable career factors perceived as either enablers or disruptors among participants in Australia and Japan across the past, present and future.

	Australia	Japan
PAST	**Enablers**:	**Enablers**:
	Positive career shocks	Positive career shocks
	Being of mature age	Project work
	Work experience	Work experience
	Education (at a doctoral level)	Education (at a master's or incomplete doctoral level)
	Skills and competencies	Skills and competencies
	Personal qualities and attributes	Membership-based recruitment (equitable opportunity)
	Job-based recruitment (specified position description)	
	Disruptors:	**Disruptors**:
	Negative career shocks	Negative career shocks
	Education (having no doctoral level education)	Membership-based recruitment (no specified job description or performance criteria)
PRESENT	**Enablers**	**Enablers**
	Project work experience	Organisation of work (internal job rotation – institutional knowledge acquisition)
	Being of mature age	Project work experience
	Education (at a doctoral level)	Education (at a master's or incomplete doctoral level)
	Skills and competencies	Skills and competencies
	Personal qualities and attributes	Agency and autonomy within project work
	Institutional support for third space work (at line manage level)	
	Agency and autonomy within the role	
	Disruptors	**Disruptors**
	Organisation of work (frequent university restructures leading to position redundancies)	Being of mature age
	Education (having no doctoral level education)	Organisation of work (internal job rotation – work/career disruptions)
	Excessive reliance on the line manager support	Inconsistent mid-career hiring policies
		Differentiation of specialist/generalist
		Lack of institutional support for third space work
FUTURE	**Enablers**	**Enablers**
	Career security (skills, experience and competency based)	Job and career security (confidence of long-term employment with the same university)
	Family support and broader life aspirations beyond retirement	
	Disruptors	**Disruptors**
	Organisation of work (frequent university restructures leading to position redundancies – lack of job security)	
	No progression beyond level at employment	

people sometimes look at those with more experience and say, "Ok, you've got something to offer. I'll give you the chance . . . "' (ACDA4). However, age was also linked to missed opportunities, such as pursuing a PhD: 'If I were younger and looking to progress, I'd have to do a PhD, which I might do for interest, but not for my career' (ACDA4).

In contrast, Japanese participants often perceived age as a constraint, shaped by long tenures and expectations of organisational loyalty. One participant reflected, 'My memory and other things are starting to decline, but I would like to be of some use' (JCAM6), while another noted, 'If you are younger and have the ability, it's only natural to consider the option of changing jobs' (JCCL4). These findings may show diminished autonomy at work while prior research suggests age-supportive cultural meanings in Japan (Karasawa et al., 2011), highlighting the need for further investigation and caution against cultural and contextual homogenisations.

Project work = third space way of working

Japanese participants (JSAP1, JIRM2, JRPM3, JIRA5) described projects as valuable boundary-spanning opportunities. While generalist roles, such as finance and administrative support, remain embedded within the organisational structures in both Australia and Japan, project-based work enabled participants to apply their specialised expertise and collaborate across departments. Examples included grant applications, university website renewal, and IT crisis management during the pandemic, all of which facilitated third-space engagement. The Australian Learning Technology Advisor highlighted digital transformation as a project that demanded cross-functional work and collaboration with the academic and student communities. These findings supported the university third space research (e.g., Takagi, 2018; Veles, 2022; Whitchurch, 2025) and presented project work opportunities as an enabling factor for career sustainability.

Education

Education was perceived differently in Australia and Japan. Both contexts acknowledged the career-enhancing value of higher education, particularly undergraduate degrees. However, views diverged on postgraduate and doctoral qualifications. Japanese third-space professionals respected PhDs but considered even incomplete doctoral studies more valuable than a Master's. In Humanities and Social Sciences, it is common in Japan to complete coursework but withdraw before the dissertation, which still enables entry into academic roles. As JSAP1, a Specially Appointed Assistant Professor with a Master's and incomplete PhD, noted: 'formal qualifications were necessary to teach university courses'.

In contrast, Australian participants viewed the PhD as critical for career progression, even in roles not traditionally requiring it. ADLL6, a Liaison Librarian, explained that the PhD 'pushed [her] ahead of the line', despite lacking library-specific credentials. Overall, Australian third-space professionals saw the PhD as essential for job security, mobility, and advancement across diverse roles. While some felt overqualified, others believed the degree alone was insufficient and could not be grounds for complacency.

Recruitment policies and internal organisation of work

Japanese universities' membership-based recruitment and rotational job assignments offer career exploration but limit long-term planning for third-space professionals. As JCCL4, a Career Centre Team Leader, explained: 'It's difficult to draw up a career vision … There are transfers … Some people want to stay in the same department forever … There are both advantages and disadvantages to that'. Signs of change include increased mid-career hiring to retain expertise. JIRM2 noted: 'When I looked at the recruitment section, I saw that [THE UNIVERSITY] had changed its policy. Until then, mid-career hires had to be under 30 years old'.

In contrast, Australian universities face frequent restructures, often leading to redundancies. Career opportunities and third space work recognition depend heavily on the line managers. ACDA4 stated: 'The line manager understood the policies and how to

make change . . . who to connect with . . . Without that, staff risk being unsupported and their contributions unrecognised'.

Job security vs career security

Despite frequent internal job changes that fostered a sense of job volatility among generalist staff, Japanese professionals exhibited greater confidence in long-term university careers than their Australian colleagues. In Australia, ongoing institutional restructures prompted expectations of future role changes, managerial shifts, and diminished autonomy. Although most Australian participants held permanent positions and felt secure in their employment, they emphasised future career confidence over job stability. This confidence stemmed from accumulated expertise and experience, particularly in third-space roles. As ALTA1 reflected:

> I think the skills that I've gained in this role and my previous experience. . . I feel fairly certain that if my role here wasn't secure. . . I'd be able to find something somewhere. . . I think I've gained substantial skills by working here.

Concerns were more pronounced by participants who advocated for professional staff on casual contracts. ALDM5 highlighted the emotional and professional impact of insecure employment:

> If the university valued and recognised . . . our professional staff . . . and offered them permanent ongoing positions . . . they feel valued, they feel respected . . . I think moving to more permanent employment, that would be helpful for those people.

Visions of career futures: sustainability of careers

Australian and Japanese third-space professionals conceptualised career sustainability differently, shaped by their respective employment structures and cultural orientations. Despite these differences, many participants expressed limited interest in upward mobility or departmental changes, prioritising professional development, learning, and meaningful work. As ACDA4 noted: 'I don't see going up to the next level necessarily beneficial for my well-being and for my career'. Similarly, JCCL4 shared: 'I feel like the section I'm in now is exactly the one I wanted to be in . . . it's better to stay in student support for a certain length of time'.

Some Japanese participants voiced concern over career stagnation. JIRM2 reflected: 'I'm a bit stuck . . . not sure if there are any new challenges . . . I feel like my brain will degenerate if I continue in this normal cycle'. Others envisioned expanding their careers through project-based work. JSAP1 said: 'I'm open to taking on additional projects . . . even setting up a physical base [in Africa]'.

Structural limitations, such as the lack of recognition for specialist roles, were highlighted. JCCL4 expressed: 'I'm not seen as a specialist, but I'd like to be . . . and stay [in the university] for a long time'.

Finally, career sustainability perceptions were articulated by the Australian participants in the context of larger personal contexts, including family life, balancing work and home commitments, and their life after retirement, whereas Japanese colleagues did not

explicitly mention their broader life aspirations as contributing factors to their perceptions of career sustainability.

Recommendations for supporting sustainable third-space careers

Drawing on insights from research participants, conference attendees, and existing literature, the following recommendations aim to support third space professionals in planning sustainable careers across Australian and Japanese universities. Universities should offer opportunities for professional development, including doctoral study, to enhance career fulfilment and relevance. In Japan, learning should extend beyond department-specific training to support individual agency. Institutions must redesign industrial relations and HR structures to promote innovation, collaboration, and recognition of third space work. This includes addressing the redundant academic/professional divide in Australia and the staff/faculty separation in Japan. Universities should create mechanisms to apply third space expertise to teaching, research, and engagement, acknowledging its unique value. Australian universities can adopt Japan's rotational model to broaden staff experience, while Japanese institutions can increase specialist appointments to retain advanced talent. A dual-track system allowing generalists to specialise to increase mid-career opportunities is recommended. Career counsellors can actively support third space professionals in planning balanced, fulfilling careers by aligning individual motivations and strengths with institutional needs. These recommendations collectively advocate for structural flexibility, recognition of diverse expertise, and intentional career support to ensure long-term sustainability for third space professionals.

Conclusion: research limitations and proposed second phase

This paper presents findings from the first phase of a study on sustainable careers among university third space professionals. While the insights offer valuable cross-cultural perspectives, they are shaped by the employment contexts in Australia and Japan. Notably, most participants were in full-time permanent roles, which may have influenced their perceptions of job security. However, this did not appear to affect their broader sense of career security. The study also encountered limitations in applying Western-centric frameworks of sustainable careers to Japanese contexts (Bal et al., 2021; Schweitzer et al., 2023). Concepts such as agency, autonomy, and work-life balance were expressed differently (or not at all) by Japanese participants, requiring more culturally nuanced interpretations. Additionally, language and conceptual translation challenges common in intercultural research (Van Maanen, 2006), may have affected the clarity of some findings.

Despite these limitations, the study highlights the importance of continued inquiry into third space work and the organisational role in supporting sustainable careers. Participants identified key characteristics relevant for recruitment, development, and internal career pathways, including academic advancement for those pursuing doctoral qualifications. The second phase will involve a large-scale survey to validate these findings and explore personal, contextual, and temporal dimensions of sustainable

careers. This phase aims to inform targeted career development interventions for third space professionals across diverse institutional and cultural settings.

Acknowledgements

The authors wish to acknowledge the valuable intellectual input and scholarly guidance provided by Dr Celia Whitchurch to this research project. Dr Whitchurch's insights enriched the analytical depth of the work, and her contribution is recognised with sincere appreciation.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

ORCID

Natalia Veles http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6010-2653
Kohei Takagi http://orcid.org/0009-0004-9986-3400

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