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Navigating cross-cultural and disciplinary spaces - Borderless or third space professionals by chance or for choice?

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Abstract

This paper sets out to discuss the cross-cultural mobilities, experiences and skills that are in demand among high-profile HE professionals enabling research. These HE professionals have also be called 'borderless' or 'third space professionals' and are widely explored by Middlehurst (2009) and Whitchurch (2013, 2015), respectively. At the same time, Higher Education has become more international, requiring staff to cross not only academic and administrative boundaries but also enter unfamiliar cultural spaces.

In shedding light on these issues, a personal reflection, complemented by insights into these two interwoven concepts found in the existing literature, will be provided on skills required and knowledge gained in such multi-cultural endeavours. This will be enriched by insights into the presumable impact on skills of these professionals, of their host HEIs, but also on types of borderless careers in academia and professional settings (Whitchurch, 2021, 2023).

Full paper

Within the context of today's borderless higher education (Middlehurst, 2011, 2002, 2009; Whitchurch, 2018, 2013), there are many different professionals working in higher education carrying out diverse roles and portfolios (Whitchurch, 2013). These professionals have to cope with a range of challenges arising from external demands and environmental conditions, with both subtle and substantive differences resulting in a plethora of choices and consequences for institutions and individuals.

In regard to the challenges set above, Middlehurst poses the following questions in her works on borderless higher education and borderless professional staff navigating this challenging landscape. Her questions challenge '*What kind of higher education professional is needed in future?*', '*What kind of developmental opportunities lead to the emergence and growth of professional skills and identity?*', '*What capabilities and capacities need to be developed to grow as a higher education professional?*' (2008).

To answer these questions but also to complement Middlehurst's views on borderless professionals, this paper discusses this concept coupled with the one on 'third space' role and professionals. This debate on the two concepts will later on be complemented with personal insights from a multicultural lens in the field of research management and administration (RMA).

Borderless, therefore, is one of the two concepts chosen for the discussion in this paper. This concept goes on well, coupled with the concept of 'third space', as the definition of a high number of professionals spanning their expertise between domains and holding a wide range of roles. A global network of third space professionals has recently been launched, integrating academic and professional practice perspectives and thereby complementing the many professional associations for research managers, administrators and the like (<https://www.thirdspaceperspectives.com/about>).

Focussing on HE professionals working on enabling research, we see that there has been an increase in collaborative research both in domestic and international contexts (see, for example, Adams, 2013; Leydesdorff & Wagner, 2008). More recently, the growing recognition of the importance of academic research for addressing global challenges, has aided a change of these collaborative patterns away

from an Anglo-American focus towards a multi-centred network that increasingly features institutions from lower and middle-income countries (Gui et al., 2019). Much work has been done in the context of international collaborations and establishing equitable partnerships (see, for example, Bradley, 2016; Fransmann et al., 2021; Joste, 2015). Little attention though to date has been put on those professionals that enable those collaborations.

This increase in collaborative research can easily be compared with what Whitchurch calls 'the Partnership Project', that is one of the institutional projects laying in-between academic and professional domains of roles and activities in today's borderless HEIs. To make the point even clearer, Whitchurch depicts this space and the group populating it as '*Third space, therefore, is characterised by mixed teams of staff who work on short-term projects such as bids for external funding and quality initiatives, as well as ... longer-term projects ... A number of respondents used organic imagery to describe this process of joint working, seeing the building of communicative relationships and networks as more significant than the observance of organisational boundaries, so much so that third space work may occur in spite of, rather than because of, formal structures*' (Whitchurch, 2013:386). Building on these observations, Veles (2019) argues that third space professionals are well suited to bridge disciplinary and cultural divides.

The paper explores the concept of 'third space' in the field of research management and enabling international research collaboration, considering cultural dimensions as well as local requirements and practice. This notion will also be applied to the personal experiences of the author in her multicultural work experiences in a pool of countries worldwide offering a framework to navigate different cultural, juridical and governance structures.

A final suggestion to bring into this discussion, aims to share some reflections on the set of borderless skills required in a changeable and fast-evolving, global higher education sector in the near future. It will explore the types of knowledge that are more likely to be in demand, and therefore sought after, in such multi-cultural endeavours, and the presumable impact on skills of these professionals and their host HEIs creating a closeness of professional and academic careers and roles (Whitchurch, 2021).

The conclusions of this paper point to the borderlessness of today's experiences in HE, in the UK and abroad; the multitude of professional roles that can be found within this educational framework; and to these professional roles and careers getting closer to the academic 'concertina' recently identified (Whitchurch et al, 2021).

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