

# 113 Third-space research: Influencing higher education policy?

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## Research Domains

Higher Education policy (HEP)

## Abstract

The first two decades of this century have witnessed unprecedented global societal changes. Likewise, the higher education sector has undergone colossal changes, socially, technologically, economically, environmentally and politically. Concurrently, Whitchurch observed that a third space has developed where staff and activities occupy a boundary zone between the traditional binary divide of academic and professional services. A recent systematic literature review (SLR) revealed that the third space has increased over this time; however, the industrial relations structures that govern official staff structures and institutional reporting to governments (conspicuously in Australia) remain based on a binary divide that has outlived its usefulness. This paper analyses potential changes in work practices and interactions in the context of this SLR and the current Australian Universities Accord (a comprehensive review of Australia's higher education system). Similarities with and implications for other higher education contexts are explored.

## Full paper

### Introduction and background

During the first two decades of this century, the global higher education sector has undergone extensive changes, such as internationalisation, massification and widening participation, technologies supporting online education and AI, and embracing neoliberal management practices (Chan, 2018; de Wit & Altbach, 2021). In November 2022, in response to such challenges, the Australian Government announced the Australian Universities Accord, a comprehensive review of the Australian higher education sector that aims to align the Australian higher education sector and national needs. This review seeks to develop a shared understanding of the issues among higher education leaders, practitioners, researchers and stakeholders, to devise an agreed transition to a boldly different sector in the following decade.

The Accord Discussion Paper (Australian Government Department of Education [AGDE], 2023) raised, *inter alia*, the question of how higher education providers might adopt innovative employment practices to address the sector's challenges. The discussion paper acknowledged insecure employment, limited career progression, increasing financial challenges faced by academic staff, and the need to address these concerns. Despite comprising 56% of staff in Australian universities in 2021 (Australian Government Department of Education [AGDE], 2022), professional (including administrative, technical and other) staff received only two footnoted mentions in the Accord Discussion Paper (pp. 27–28). In response, the Association for Tertiary Education Management submitted a paper addressing existing inadequacies in the higher education workforce, and provided recommendations for changes to support professional and academic staff alike (Baré & Beard, 2023).

Concurrently, a systematic literature review (SLR) was published (Veles et al., 2023) that examined the identities and spaces of interaction of hybrid/third/new space professionals in higher education literature over the first two decades of this century. Major themes derived from the analysis reaffirmed the complexity of the roles of professional staff as a basis for evolving multiple and hybrid identities (i.e. third-space identities), resulting from the increasingly complex higher education context (Whitchurch, 2012). The SLR also identified the emergence of various new spaces of interaction. Crucial for policy recommendations was 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, p. 776) of professionalism, professional identity, and ways of working together among university staff in new spaces.

Using the Australian context as a case study, this paper examines how evolving staff roles, identities and spaces of interaction might inform and influence global higher education policy development.

### **Policy conundrums for sustainable higher education futures**

The SLR found nuanced analyses of the re-interpretation of professionalism and identities across various university contexts (Veles et al., 2023). Moreover, the SLR revealed a steadily rising number of third-space narratives (e.g. Whitchurch, 2018; Whitchurch et al., 2019), indicating a heightened sense of agency among professional staff, who increasingly work across multiple boundaries. This research identified a gradual normalisation of new interaction spaces, portraying the university as a constantly changing arena or boundary zone of new types of work, with professional interactions between diverse staff, students and community stakeholders. In contrast, the Accord (AGDE, 2023) was entirely silent on the third space. Baré and Beard (2023) suggest formal recognition in career and industrial relation structures of a group of cross-boundary or third-space professionals. However, this approach may exacerbate the persisting inequalities between academic and professional staff.

### **Research—policy nexus: Whither the way forward?**

The Australian Universities Accord (AGDE, 2023) should recognise diverse conceptualisations of professionalism, while acknowledging all staff contributions and promoting diverse career paths among professional and academic staff alike. It is crucial to develop new human resources and industrial relations frameworks that transcend the traditional and outdated academic/administrative binary (Graham, 2014; 2018; Veles, 2022), employing and remunerating workers based on required work, specific projects or ongoing collaboration, thereby benefiting the university, individual staff and their career aspirations, and aligning with the needs of students, research and other communities.

Globally, policymakers, practitioners, researchers and research funders need to make evidence-based decisions. Drawing on research insights systematised in the SLR, changes to higher education policy can modernise and improve the sector and redress the systemic and continued imbalances in recognising staff contributions and their roles in advancing higher education. Hence, research is indispensable in informing global higher education policy and advancing social and organisational changes (e.g., Hazelkorn & Locke, 2022; St John et al., 2018).

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