

## **“The approach breaks down barriers.” Academic-professional mentoring partnerships that shift the power differential through mutual third-space alliance.**

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### **Research Domains**

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

### **Abstract**

Those able to negotiate the boundaries of academic/professional practice have been defined as ‘integrated practitioners’ and it has been suggested that university leadership roles should be occupied by integrated practitioners who can challenge the academic power dynamic. We suggest that challenge to the power dynamic need not be confrontational, but one of mutual enrichment, and we demonstrate how mentoring can hold a third space learning environment. As a mechanism for the mutual exchange of expertise and the growth of complex leadership practices, mentoring can encourage both parties’ engagement in meaningful dialogue, and build mutual empathy, and cross-cultural awareness. Initial analysis of mentoring evaluation data from the UKRI Future Leaders Fellows Development Network (FLFDN) Leadership Mentoring Programme revealed benefits spanning areas of mutual value associated with third-space positionality. These include breaking down academic/professional barriers and building shared understanding that tackling contemporary institutional challenges coherently, requires different types of knowledge and expertise.

### **Full paper**

A ‘third space professional’ can “...offer coherence to institutions by the way they work across the clear, and often problematic, boundaries between academic and professional pathways.” (Whitchurch, 2015). Yet recognition of the boundary-spanning expertise of third space professionals, and ability to contribute to cross-disciplinary working, is often overlooked. Those able to negotiate the cultural boundaries of academic/professional practice have been defined as ‘integrated practitioners’ (McIntosh and Nutt, 2022), and it has been suggested that university leadership roles should be occupied by integrated practitioners who challenge the academic power dynamic (Caldwell, 2023). In this paper we suggest that integrated practitioners need not be installed in formal university leadership positions in order to offer this challenge. Additionally we suggest that challenge to the power dynamic need not be a confrontational power-struggle, but one of mutual enrichment, and we demonstrate how mentoring partnerships can hold a third space learning environment.

Mentoring is a mechanism for the mutual exchange of expertise which supports the growth of complex leadership practices (Ghosh et al. 2019). Where mentoring is designed with intentional aims and a clear

understanding of the leadership context, it encourages both parties' engagement in meaningful dialogue, and mutual empathy, trust, and cross-cultural awareness (Guccione and Hutchinson, 2021). Mentoring conversations, therefore, are a site of great potential for addressing academic/professional power imbalances, yet many university mentoring programmes are designed to develop discipline-specific leadership. This heuristic habit, speaks to the perceived greater value of intra-disciplinary knowledge (Atkins *et al.*, 2020). Being 'an academic' is an important social identity, leading individuals to seek mentors who are part of the group to which they belong (Thijm, 2023). Yet, an 'in discipline' approach limits organisational leadership development. Working only with those who are similar, limits perspectives and reinforces power structures (Sarabipour *et al.* 2023). Secondly, at senior levels, the available pool of 'more senior' colleagues who can act as mentors within in the discipline is vanishingly small. Thirdly, disciplinary leadership, whether academic or professional, requires more than disciplinary knowledge, drawing on a wide range of strategic insights and interdisciplinary understanding, as well as familiarity with university policy, governance, and routes for influencing decision-making (Taberner, 2019).

These factors combined, present mentoring programme designers with a rationale for the design of mentoring for academic-professional leadership development. Whether or not the professional member of staff identifies as a 'third-space' or 'integrated' professional, the combination of different expertise and perspectives created through the mentoring partnership, opens up a third space through which mutual alliance and learning can flow.

### ***Mentoring for mutual enrichment***

In 2021, the UKRI Future Leaders Fellows Development Network (FLFDN) Leadership Mentoring Programme was established. It prioritised a non-directive, person-centred leadership development conversations for UKRI-funded Fellows (emerging leaders in research and innovation). Leaders from universities, industries, third-sector and charities were recruited as mentors, and this paper will focus on the outcomes of university academic-professional mentoring pairs. Participants were encouraged to seek commonalities, build trust, celebrate differences and similarities equally, and use the mentoring partnership to view leadership from a different perspective. Our findings provide qualitative insights into the value of mentoring that creates a third-space for dialogue, from mentors and mentees partnered between 2021 and 2023.

### ***Preliminary Findings***

Initial analysis of mentoring evaluation data and semi-structured interviews with three mentoring pairs revealed benefits spanning areas of mutual value associated with third-space positionality. These include breaking down academic/professional barriers and building shared understanding that tackling contemporary institutional challenges coherently, requires different types of knowledge and expertise:

*"The approach breaks down barriers... I have been pleasantly surprised."* – Mentor 1

*"In an increasingly complex, unpredictable, and interconnected world, none of us can afford to live and work in silos. The [...] programme is a welcome opportunity to break down barriers and help each other connect..."* – Mentee 2

This paper will present the completed thematic analysis and offer comment and discussion related third spaces and parity of esteem in university professional and academic roles. As integrated professionals have been suggested to be the antidote to silo working, enabling cross-disciplinary and evidence-based approaches to flourish, and modelling innovation (McIntosh and Nutt, 2022; p1), we suggest that combined academic-professional mentoring has the potential to have significant impact on the creation of culture of collegiality, breaking down barriers between groups of staff, and avoiding silos (Kift, 2022). Utrecht University's shift to reduce staff segregation by calling all university staff 'university staff' is a symbolic gesture, with laudable aims, that made headlines in 2023, and we suggest that academic-professional mentoring has demonstrable value to actively promote collegiate collaborative understanding.

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