

“On the Edge but Not There Yet”: Exploring the Liminal Space of Higher Education Professional Services Staff and Research

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Research Domains

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

Abstract

This paper explores the author’s dual role as both an active researcher and a professional services staff member within higher education, examining the tensions that arise from navigating these two intersecting spaces. It critically reviews current literature on the concept of the "third space" and the experiences of professional services staff who work across institutional boundaries and constraints. Using an autoethnographic methodology, this paper explores the notion of being an outsider, drawing on the author’s experience as a senior professional services manager and published researcher with a diverse career across central administration, academic schools, and research roles within higher education. The paper concludes by offering practical recommendations for how professional services staff can effectively engage with this liminal space, fostering meaningful collaboration with academics and professional services colleagues across their institution to support high-quality research and PhD supervision.

Full paper

Introduction

The concept of the Third Space is part of higher education (HE) vocabulary and manifests in various places, such as technicians, academic developers, and research staff. However, there is little research on professional services staff who undertake their own research and/or work with PhD students in a supervisory capacity. This paper addresses one professional services staff member’s personal experience in navigating this liminal space.

Background

Celia Whitchurch, who is credited with developing the concept of Third Space professionals, has written prolifically on the idea of those in HE who span both professional services and academic roles across and beyond boundaries (Whitchurch, 2006, 2012, 2018). This research area has grown over the last twenty years, and increasingly work has been published looking at identities and the evolving professional services workforce in particular (Veles et al., 2019; Akerman, 2020; Caldwell, 2022a; McIntosh and Nutt, 2022; Veles, 2022a). However, there has been a lack of research within this space around professional services staff members as researchers or PhD supervisors. Many publications and books that focus on doctoral education cite academic staff as PhD supervisors (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Bitzer et al., 2016; Wichmann-Hansen et al., 2020; Wilkins et al., 2021; Wilkin et al., 2023; Almlöv and Grubbström, 2024), but there is scarce evidence of university staff with PhDs outside academics taking on these types of roles. Although there is an increasing number of postgraduate programmes aimed at higher education professional services, including the DBA in Higher Education Management at the University of Bath, there is scarce evidence on how professional services undertake research once they have graduated.

This paper explores my lived experience as a member of professional services staff who resides in the third space but is othered by the academic community as being outside the perceived norm of the research space, despite being an active researcher who holds an EdD. It discusses the taboo of being a professional outside the traditional academic career paths of teaching and research, and how this impacts professional identity, linking to the othering and impostor syndrome that is common in higher education professional services (Caldwell, 2022b).

I will explore the non-traditional career path I have taken, through a professional doctorate (EdD), and having worked in different professional services roles, which have enabled me to develop both research skills and also work with PhD students in terms of training, mentoring, and supervising.

Methodology

Oxber, (2022) in their autoethnographic article talks about mission drift and line managers not being sure of where the responsibility lies for activities outside the norm. This feeling of uncertainty is linked to being an outsider in an academic world. Using an autoethnographic storytelling, I will examine my experience in attempting to straddle the line of researcher and professional services and the “taboo” around being the “other” within this space. Although I have research and PhD assessment experience, the perception of their “otherness” around the academic experience of being questioned and challenged when working with doctoral students and undertaking research.

Gander, (2024), in her recent autoethnographic article, articulates the difficulties and prejudices that she encountered when moving from a professional services role to an

academic one, demonstrating that this is a global issue for many staff. While much literature around professional services staff comes from the Global North, an increasing amount is coming out of the Southern Hemisphere (Veles and Carter, 2016; Bossu and Brown, 2018; Veles, 2022b; Joubert, 2024), evidencing the frustration that professional services staff feel when moving around and across boundaries.

Conclusion

The paper will give all staff working within the Third Space an understanding of perspectives of working with academic staff in a research space, regardless of institution, and encourage more collaborative ways of working. There are several challenges faced by staff on professional services contracts who work with PhD students and undertake their own research. These include credibility of experience, the terminology to describe both themselves and each other as professionals, how this workforce is seen within the academy and how staff work across the traditional boundaries of academia and administration. Exploring the challenges when working in this space, this paper will outline the author's experiences but also offers suggestions for how staff across the HE sector who are not on an academic contract can engage with research and doctoral supervision.