

Practice-based expertise for Research Managers and Administrators in Third Space: Fostering sustainable career pathways through knowledge production

Susi Poli

Alma Mater Studiorum University of Bologna, Bologna, Italy

Research Domains

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

Abstract

This paper examines how practice-based expertise contributes to sustainable careers for Research Managers and Administrators (RMAs) as Third Space (TS) professionals in European higher education. Extending the process model of sustainable careers to include identity expression as an additional, intersecting lens, we show how RMAs develop processual knowledge through practical experience and transform it into shareable propositional knowledge within professional networks. Data from the EU-funded RM-ROADMAP project shows how sharing different forms of knowledge enhances career health, happiness and productivity. Furthermore, knowledge socialisation strengthens community expertise, reinforces professional representation and enables coherent identity expression despite non-linear career paths. This has significant implications for institutional policies regarding career development pathways for RMAs as TS professionals.

Full paper

This paper examines how Research Managers and Administrators (RMAs) develop sustainable careers through their practice-based expertise, once they have become aware of themselves as Third Space (TS) professionals in higher education. Building on the extended process model of sustainable careers presented in this symposium (De Vos et al., 2020), we explore how creating and sharing knowledge enhances career adaptability (in terms of health, happiness, and productivity) while strengthening relationships and networks that enable RMAs to function as members of TS and transcend traditional boundaries.

Indeed, despite the crucial role that RMAs play in the research ecosystem (context) throughout the development of their careers, a role that is confirmed by the growing

visibility and body of literature focused specifically on this group (Kerridge et al., 2023), there is still a lack of research on the three interwoven dimensions of a sustainable career, namely the person, the context and the time, and on the additional, intersecting dimension of identity that may arise when they consider themselves part of TS (Whitchurch, 2006).

The study of RMAs through a TS lens is rare (Poli et al., 2023; Whitchurch, 2025) and the literature has been criticised for its perceived generalisation of roles and careers and lack of specificity. Indeed, the application of such a lens to this particular group, which already has a relatively strong sense of community and collective identity, may be beneficial for further advancement. Unlike other professional groups, RMAs rarely report issues of liminality or fragmentation within their roles and careers.

This further dimension of identity expression may be included in the personal dimension as a competitor to agency in the pursuit of RMA careers. But identity can also be linked to the context in which RMAs find themselves and, for example, the type of contact they have in that context; identity can also be linked to time in terms of the evolving or even changing identity that RMAs can have in a particular context over time. Identity can therefore belong to one, two or even three dimensions of the model, and in this respect identity can be seen as a fourth, overlapping lens of this model.

Questions of identity in the field of RMA have been sufficiently examined, while the dimension of agency has rarely been so examined (Poli & Taccone, 2023; Yang-Yohishara et al., 2023). Thus, this relative knowledge of the identity dimension in RMA leads us to suggest that this element may become another lens to be applied within the career model, which will become more relevant and visible if RMAs consider themselves as part of TS.

This paper therefore addresses the contributions of these RMAs to the creation, development and sharing of knowledge in isolation or through networks; how this unique and sometimes unheeded expertise contributes to career sustainability, mainly but not only in terms of happiness, health and productivity; and how knowledge production supports not only agency within the group but also identity expression, focusing even further on the implications for health, happiness and productivity. This is done by further exploring data from a sample of practitioners identified as 'ambassadors' in a recent EU-funded project, RM-ROADMAP, led by the European Association of Research Managers and Administrators. Four themes emerged from thematic analysis of data from a series of semi-structured interviews: knowledge, relationships, networks and third space. Eraut's conceptualisation of knowledge production (1985, 2000, 2002, 2004) was then used to delineate specific types of knowledge generated by RMAs, distinguishing between process knowledge (i.e. practical know-how) and propositional knowledge (i.e. codified knowledge), with implications at both collective and individual levels. It has emerged that RMAs express themselves and their identity as TS professionals by 'juggling' forms of knowledge and developing processual knowledge through practical experience, which they transform into shareable propositional knowledge within their professional networks.

This fourth, intersecting identity element of their career model can happen and become visible and thus shareable to the whole community through a variety of forms of socialisation that can take place at conferences, through publications and research projects. One of the key points is that enabling individuals to explore new avenues of knowledge production, including those that may have an impact on their profession (so-called research on RMA), and to share their knowledge with their peers, can ultimately contribute to a sustainable career, supporting professional health, happiness and productivity.