

# **What is Third Space? Definition, developments, challenges and opportunities**

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Dr Celia Whitchurch

Associate Professor

Centre for Global Higher Education

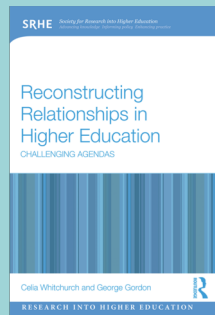
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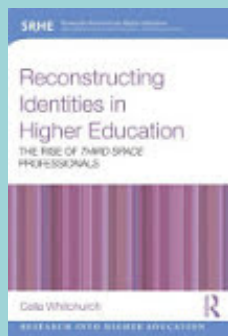
*A Delicate Balance: Optimising Individual Aspirations and Institutional Missions in Higher Education*

Celia Whitchurch, William Locke, Giulio Marini (March 2019)  
Project 3.2 Working Paper 45 <http://www.researchcghe.org>



*Reconstructing Relationships in Higher Education: Challenging agendas*

Celia Whitchurch and George Gordon (SRHE Routledge 2017)  
drawing on Staffing Models and Institutional Flexibility (LFHE Project) and Meeting the Staff Development Needs of the Changing Academic Workforce (HEA Project)



*Reconstructing Identities in Higher Education: The Rise of Third Space Professionals*

Celia Whitchurch (SRHE Routledge 2013) drawing on  
Professional Managers in UK Higher Education: Preparing for Complex Futures (LFHE Project)

## Contexts: a changing academic workforce

- Significant numbers of staff have worked in other sectors/move in and out, therefore more mobility/fluidity
- Increasing awareness of impact in research and of the overall student experience eg employability
- Mismatch between formal understandings of institutional policy and ways in which these are interpreted in practice eg proportions of T/R/KE
- Structures such job descriptions often inaccurate
- This can lead to 'hidden' activity + 'mis-recognition'
- Management roles increasingly regarded as a path to promotion eg of a teaching or research programme

# Examples of 'Third Space' roles<sup>UCL</sup>

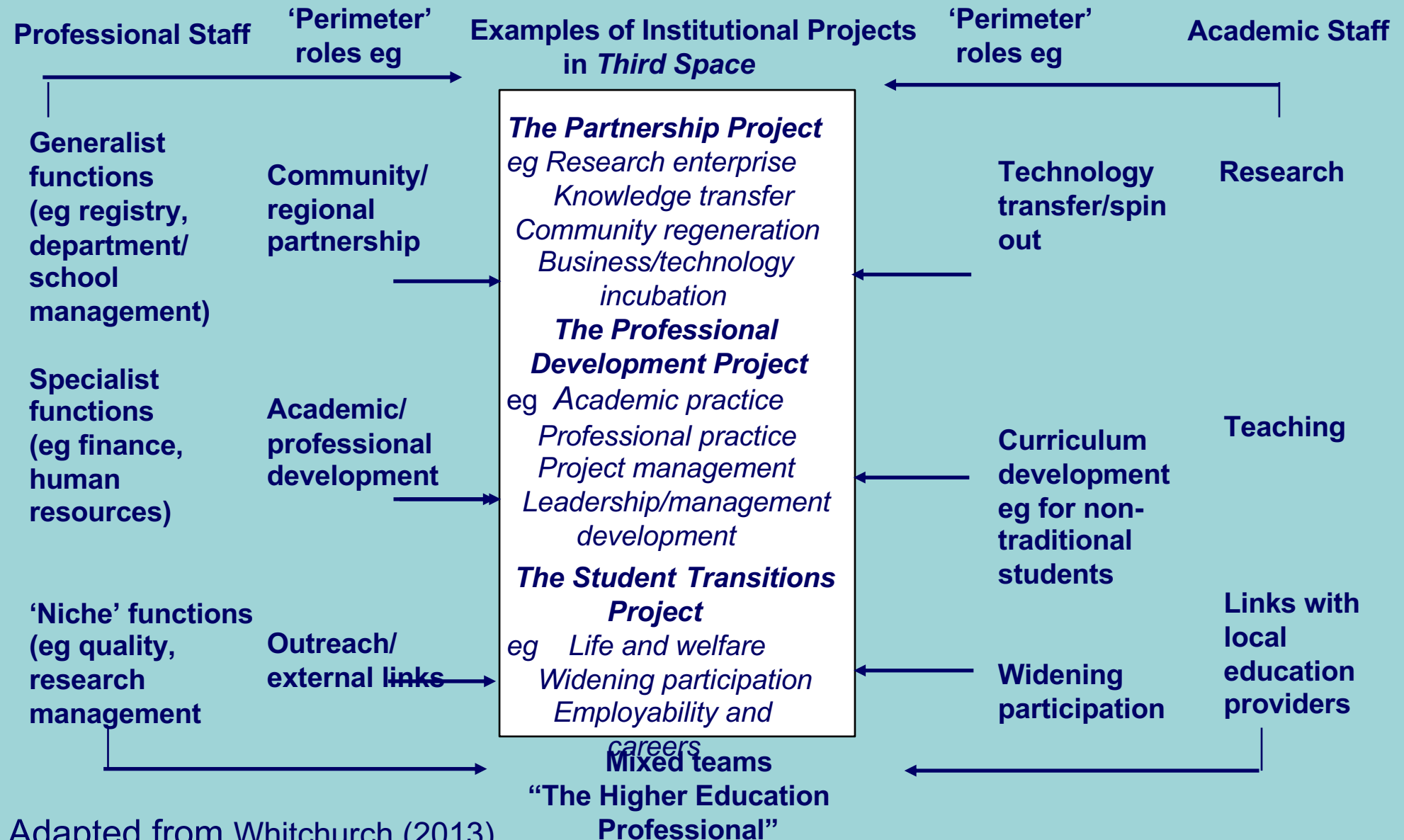
- *Research management* eg knowledge exchange, incubation and spin out, preparation of bids, relationships with funding partners, database development
- *Public engagement* eg employer links, workplace learning, regional and public agency development
- *Learning support* eg tutoring, programme design/documentation, academic literacy, research into educational practice, educational technology
- *Online learning* eg online programme design/development/adaptation, social media
- *Institutional research* into and reflection on eg student recruitment/outcomes, employability

# The concept of *Third Space*



- Concept from cultural theory to explore spatial relationships as opposed to cumulative/historic accounts of human/organisational behaviour
- Spatial relationships seen as more significant than structures (social networks across formally recognised spaces)
- Provides for new voices and perspectives, making the invisible visible, the implicit explicit
- Epitomised by eg younger generations being less bound by formal career structures, more proactive in interpreting/developing roles, taking a portfolio approach

# The Emergence of *Third Space*



# Four 'lenses'

- Roles not necessarily specified in job descriptions or HR career structures, but evolve... not only to support and facilitate, but also to promote and develop institutional activity, characterised by
- Working in new ***Spaces***
- Developing new kinds of (mode 2, applied) institutional ***Knowledge***
- Developing new ***Relationships*** (internal, external, lateral, hierarchical, networked...)
- Establishing ***Legitimacy*** for themselves and their work

# Spaces



- Working at interfaces/ambiguous conditions
- Therefore managing plural environments
- “Sometimes an academic unit, sometimes an office” (learning partnerships manager)
- Turning this to advantage...
- Safe space in which to be creative/experiment ***but*** (the ‘dark side’ of Third Space...)
- May be outside mainstream structures, communication channels, checks and balances
- More self-reliance, less security



# Knowledges

- Applied, evidence-based (Mode 2) knowledge eg research into student learning
- Contextual/cross-boundary knowledge: “It’s not enough just to know how to be able to be an accountant... or to manage staff... in order to be effective within a university you need to understand the context.” (faculty manager)
- Understanding different constituencies - students, staff, faculty/institution management teams
- Contribution to knowledge of eg research management/new forms of pedagogy as academic field (publications, conference papers...)

# Relationships



- “if you get the relationships right everything else falls into place” (educational technologist)
- General flattening of organisational relationships
- Complex issues require complex solutions therefore teams needed with range of expertise
- Staff gaining responsibility eg for teams and projects earlier in careers
- Concept of partnership with, rather than management of, or service to, academic colleagues

# Legitimacies

- Credibility likely to be built on basis of non-positional, personal authority/agency: “There’s no authority that you come with” (planning manager)
- Ability to participate in debate with academic colleagues: “learning to divorce argument from people” (teaching and learning manager)
- Appreciating different academic/professional work “rhythms”
- Attitude of academic colleagues that “If you solve a problem for us, we’ll come back and work with you again” (teaching and learning manager)

## Issues and challenges for individuals



- Interface between academic and professional staff...
- Status of *Third Space* work: “I’m a director but I’m not a director... the extent of my authority and jurisdiction is unclear...” (enterprise manager)
- “you’re not regarded as a real academic, and yet I’ve probably done more as an academic than many academics have done this year... the research I’m doing... [is seen] as dirty, and not as real academic stuff” (research partnerships manager). ‘Permission to publish’...
- Whether to stay in *Third Space*; move out of HE; take eg faculty responsibility for T&L; aim for Chair in academic practice or vice-rectorship; pursue MBA, doctorate?

# Issues and challenges for institutions



- More flexible career frameworks eg career climbing frame eg University of Southampton
- New career tracks eg knowledge exchange pathway eg University of Strathclyde
- Role design: “roles need to be continually challenging to avoid boredom... or... turnover” (Knight & Lightowler 2010)
- Encouraging shared practice: “working at the interface of research supporter, community engager and scholar” (Grove et al 2018)
- Providing authority eg to negotiate with external agencies
- Mentoring, secondments, professional development...

- Why does Third Space tend to be recognised only by those within it...?
- How can it be legitimised more widely?
- Can it be created where it doesn't exist?
- Are we all Third Space now?

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