Third space professionals and undergraduate teaching – A comparative study in China, the United Kingdom and Canada

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Abstract
This research explores the emerging position of teaching professionals in research universities through the framework of ‘third space professionals’. The third space is described as an overlapping space between the professional and academic domains in university and usually staff who are neither traditional academics nor traditional professionals work in this space and considered as the third space professionals. This research is achieved through three case studies, each in China, the United Kingdom and Canada. By investigating the role and positioning of teaching professionals in higher education, this research provides empirical evidence supporting the existence of the third space for professionals in higher education. The findings show that the responsibilities of the teaching professionals are relatively similar at each university, mainly including training academics and supporting curriculum development. However, their positioning in the university and value in supporting teaching and learning can be influenced by their relationship with academics. Universities’ expectations of teaching professionals play an important role in shaping their collective identities. By proposing a three-dimensional space model for higher education, this research builds on...
INTRODUCTION

As public goods, universities have a responsibility to serve the public interest and to deliver social benefits. Until recently, research universities did not treat teaching as a priority. Boarder literature suggests that two reasons behind: the increasing pressure to compete for scarce resources as framed by discourses and policies (Carpentier, 2021; Hazelkorn, 2015); and the growing competition for students in higher education marketplaces. To ensure the sustainable development of higher education, universities are being exhorted to raise the standards of educational provision and attend more closely to student satisfaction (Deem, 1998).

Universities have adopted a variety of strategies to promote teaching and learning. For example, Whitchurch (2008a) proposed the concept of ‘third space’, which refers to the development of a space between the professional and academic domains (Whitchurch, 2008a). In this space, the idea of administrative service has changed to emphasise collaboration with academic peers and the various constituencies with whom higher education institutions interact (Whitchurch, 2008b). Accordingly, the term ‘third space professional’ – which describes university staff who work primarily in the third space – emerged.

To narrow down the scope of this study, the population has been limited to professionals supporting undergraduate teaching and learning in research universities. Staff in such positions usually have expertise in a particular discipline combined with knowledge of the scholarship on teaching and learning, or they come from a professional educational background. In the main, they support academics’ teaching and their role includes (but is not limited to) improving the curriculum and pedagogy in general or for specific disciplines. Their function can be different from one institution to another, and thus their identities may also be diverse.

Due to the ambiguous and dynamic nature of such positions, the university staff occupying them are not well-recognised. As a result, their contribution to teaching and learning is undervalued. The purpose of this study is to evaluate how staff members perceive this type of position in terms of supporting teaching and learning by highlighting the role and position and, therefore, provide insights into the understanding and formation of the identity of teaching professionals. Using a comparative study of three research universities in China, the United Kingdom and Canada, this study shows that more research universities are opening such positions. In addition, the findings suggest that support staff are recognised differently depending on the institution’s aim in establishing such positions, with varied impacts on teaching and learning. Finally, this study discusses an alternative model of understanding the higher education space. Instead of having multiple spaces that are restricted by boundaries, this three-dimensional space model provides the idea that all university staff can work in the space based on their responsibilities and skills.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Staffing in higher education institutions has experienced multidimensional changes over the decades. In the past, stability and predictability were provided by relatively stable employment conditions and linear career structures in higher education. However, modern universities are now involved in ‘a very complex knowledge producing game’ (Limoges et al., 1994, p. 65), which means they must look for staff members with a variety of current, diverse skills in a volatile environment (Wood, 2005). There has been a shift from a secure,
low-maintenance environment to one that is increasingly high-maintenance and high-risk, although the extent and pace of the shift depend on the relationship between the institution and the government and the powers devolved to the institution (Gordon & Whitchurch, 2007). Additionally, a proportion of younger staff do not necessarily wish to pursue a long-term career; they are looking to gain specialised experience that will equip them for a future that is more uncertain than it was for their predecessors (McCrindle, 2005, 2006). Globalisation has also contributed to changing individual expectations and work styles by providing more choices and possibilities (Gordon & Whitchurch, 2007). As a result, higher education institutions have diversified their staffing in response to a changing environment.

In investigating the scope of responsibilities in higher education, scholars have noted an increased diversification of academic tasks, including teaching, scholarship, research, consultancy, community service and administration (Kogan et al., 1994). Gordon and Whitchurch (2007) cluster these tasks into six overarching core functions: teaching and student support; research; community service; professional service; leadership, management and consultancy; and developmental project work. As a result, new categories and strata of academic positions have emerged and expanded, despite the fact that most observers continue to perceive faculty in traditional terms, ignoring the distinguishing characteristics of the current academic workforce (Rhoades, in Whitchurch & Gordon, 2009).

The following sections present studies on the emerging professional staff and the development of teaching professionals in higher education to elaborate on the general context of this research.

2.1 The emerging professional staff in higher education

For many occupational groups, the idea of a profession had become a powerful source of identification by the turn of the 20th century (Whitchurch & Gordon, 2009). The broader literature has recognised new features of professionalism, especially in relation to the development of an environment in the public sector that is more focused on the market and the consumer (Bossu et al., 2018). On the one hand, the scope of the academic profession has been broadened and diversified (Whitchurch & Gordon, 2013). On the other hand, it charts the blurring of the boundaries between academic faculty and other occupational groups within higher education institutions and challenges previously taken-for-granted status hierarchies (Henkel, in Whitchurch & Gordon, 2009). However, this notion of professionalism implies a controlled, provider-led environment with distinct boundaries separating those who belong to the professional group from those who do not. Nonetheless, it continues to influence staff who seek to legitimise or re-legitimise their position within their occupational sector (Bossu et al., 2018).

Within the university setting, there are dynamics that foster a common purpose as well as tensions between various staff groups that may have previously operated independently of one another. Whitchurch and Gordon (2010) demonstrated that this phenomena leads to both convergence and divergence between academic and professional identities and creates spaces for the emergence of new types of identity and their associated activities. These include, for instance, collaborative work on designing appropriate content and delivery of new forms of virtual learning (Whitchurch & Gordon, 2010).

Researchers have discovered that the traditional dichotomy between academic and administrative roles is dissolving and that formal employment categories no longer reflect reality (Bossu et al., 2018). In addition, terms such as 'non-academic' and 'support' staff, which imply that professional groups are supplementary to academic colleagues, have been contested (Graham, 2012; Szekeres, 2004; Whitchurch, 2015). In turn, some academic personnel may transition into roles in which they are accountable, to a greater or lesser extent, for delivering current agendas.

There's evidence that academic and professional staff are under pressure to diversify their portfolios, often to support institutional objectives that are widely based and focused on the community and market. This means that they have less time for activities that are strictly disciplinary or functional. The result has been the emergence
of cohorts of ‘peripheral professionals’ (Duncan, 2014) and ‘portfolio professionals’ (Whitchurch, 2008a). These professionals do not necessarily recognise a singular, predetermined career ladder (Bossu et al., 2018).

Given these circumstances, it is not unexpected that discussions about what it means to be an academic or a professional in modern higher education have become more popular in the literature. On the one hand, researchers have noted a separation and fragmentation of functions: for example, those in academic roles are no longer responsible for certain aspects of learning, notably the design and implementation of online programmes (Rhoades, 2007). On the other hand, in order to increase participation, outreach and the student experience, academic and professional staff are working in new spaces, such as community and business partnerships (Whitchurch & Gordon, 2010).

The literature indicates that there has been a failure to develop processes and mechanisms that can address various aspects of human resource management, particularly the emerging professional roles. There is a remarkable absence of defined practices that outline the basic dimensions of employment. Similarly, questions of how best to motivate, develop and reward individuals in these new categories of employment have not been properly investigated (Rhoades, in Whitchurch & Gordon, 2009). As Rhoades (in Whitchurch & Gordon, 2009) noted, these professionals are invisible. It is not that they are seen and yet are unheard. Rather, it is that they are unrecognised and unacknowledged. Whitchurch et al. (2009) observed that professional staff members in higher education received less attention than academic staff members with regard to the diversification of their portfolios. Employment categories like ‘academic’ and ‘non-academic’ conceal the diminishing distinctions between staff member groups. The location of a professional activity can also create tensions. For example, quality assurance can be located in academic practice, professional development and student services. The location can impact the nature, ownership and perceptions of the activities by staff, students and external stakeholders (Bossu et al., 2018).

Although some studies highlight the transition of the professional identity from passive or invisible to more active agency (Veles et al., 2023), in practice, a common issue was a lack of clarity surrounding job descriptions, particularly assumptions about the amount of time that was assumed to be devoted to teaching, research and other activities such as knowledge exchange or community engagement. Roles and workloads were often based on understandings between middle managers and individuals, which were open to individuals to interpret.

To summarise, although the emergence of new forms of professionalism has been noted in the broader literature, these references do not fully capture the shifts experienced by higher education professionals as they contribute to the future advancement of their institutions under increasingly fluid conditions. Understanding these shifts and the possible tensions arising from them will be critical to the development, recognition and rewarding of such positions. Furthermore, despite an expanding literature on academic identities and careers (e.g., McAlpine & Åkerlind, 2010; Teichler & Cummings, 2015; Yudkevitch et al., 2015), no such research has been adapted to any extent for professional staff.

2.2 | The development of teaching professionals in higher education

In recent years, the picture has been further complicated by the emergence of staff with non-academic contracts undertaking roles that are likely to involve academic elements, such as writing research grant applications, teaching study skills and establishing online learning platforms (Whitchurch, 2017).

A more complex undertaking is to narrow the research scope to teaching professionals who support undergraduate education by not only exploring the pedagogy and curriculum but also collaborating with and delivering training for academics. This approach has been increasingly adopted by universities due to the growing emphasis on undergraduate education, particularly in research universities. There are two reasons for this: first, competition for scarce resources has escalated within the framework of discourses and policies (Carpentier, 2021; Hazelkorn, 2015); and second, competition for students has intensified in higher education marketplaces. As a
result, higher education institutions are forced to justify their expenditure of public funds and demonstrate their value for money, among other resources they consume (Reed, 2002).

To achieve sustainable development in higher education, universities are being urged to raise their educational standards and satisfy students by providing them with a quality education (Deem, 1998). Among the different approaches being discussed, the promotion and development of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) has become a popular theme. Tight (2018) and Webb (2020) developed the concept, which recognises the importance of taking a critical and research-based approach to teaching and learning; in doing so, it attempts to elevate the status of the role of teaching in comparison to that of research (Tight, 2018). However, the SoTL is considered less of a clear academic discipline and more of a form of research and scholarly based reflective teaching and learning practice (Harrison et al., 2013).

There is limited literature on the SoTL that is aimed at teaching professionals, whose main responsibility is carrying out studies on the topic. Staff in these positions have usually completed their PhD and are often employed on academic or academic-related contracts. Teaching professionals are known by different names locally, nationally, and internationally within higher education – education specialist, academic developer, teaching faculty, teaching associate or teaching professional – and there is no universally accepted definition of the role.

According to Fremstad et al. (2020), roles and responsibilities of teaching professionals have expanded, ranging from helping individual academics with teaching and learning to more involving organisational development (Schroeder et al., 2011; Stensaker, 2018). However, as Bennett et al. (2016) observed in their study, we [teaching professionals] are employed under standard academic contracts, yet work in a centre that falls under the professional management structure of the university. This means that we are not part of a school or faculty, and thus not formally connected to a discipline, yet our job descriptions involve a division of duties between the traditionally academic ‘research, teaching and service’; we are still intrinsically ‘academics’. (Bennett et al., 2016, p. 217)

In other words, there is an implication that teaching professionals are increasingly important in sustaining the higher education function, especially from the education perspective. Nevertheless, there is confusion in determining who these teaching professionals are, the positions they hold and whether they are academics or professionals. Unlike traditional academics, they do not have student-facing work and their research is SoTL. In addition, unlike traditional professionals in higher education institutions, their work is closely related to teaching and learning practices.

Drawing from the literature, there are clear gaps in the understanding of the function, position – and therefore, value – of teaching professionals in undergraduate education. This research aims to provide insight into the understanding of the such a type of position in higher education institutions.

3 | RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND THE ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

Drawing on the gaps identified in the literature review, this research examines the identity of teaching professionals in higher education institutions, particularly in research-intensive universities. There are two research questions:

• What is the role of teaching professionals in undergraduate education?
• How are teaching professionals in undergraduate education positioned in higher education institutions?

To provide background on the emergence of teaching professionals in higher education institutions, the identity of teaching professionals will be framed as the interplay between an individual’s agency and the structures
and boundaries that they encounter (Whitchurch & Gordon, 2010). The first research question asks for teaching professionals’ responsibilities both from their job description and beyond. The second question aims to investigate teaching professionals’ positioning in the higher education institutions, particularly the interactions and relationships with the academic staff.

This research will apply the theory and framework of third space professionals. Whitchurch (2008a, 2008b) has described the emergence of a ‘third space’ between the academic and professional spheres of activity, in which ‘blended’ roles are developed, which consist of elements of what have traditionally been considered either strictly academic or purely professional activities (Whitchurch, 2008a, 2009a). In what Whitchurch (2008a, 2015) refers to as the ‘rise of third space professionals’ in higher education (Bennett et al., 2016), possibilities for new forms of professional identity emerge between an increasingly redundant academic-professional dichotomy.

In her study, Whitchurch (2008a) described different types of professionals, including unbounded professionals, cross-boundary professionals and blended professionals. The study also described the professional roles, academic roles and corresponding activities. The cited Figure 1 illustrate how different professionals can be positioned.

According to Whitchurch (2008a), on the left side of the diagram, it is the professional staff performing traditional generalist, specialist and ‘niche’ functions. On the right side of the diagram, the traditional roles of academic staff are presented, including teaching, research and the ‘third-leg’. Alongside these traditional roles, ‘perimeter’ roles have been developed, both from professional staff’s perspective and academic staff’s perspective. Over time, these ‘perimeter’ roles have increasingly converged in third space around broadly based projects such as student transitions, community partnerships and professional development (Whitchurch, 2008a:384). In the middle of the diagram, it is the third space activities which incorporates both elements from the professional side and the academic side by developing project-based activities.

The lower half of the diagram illustrates and visualises the position and movements of bounded professional, unbounded professionals, cross-boundary professionals and blended professionals. Voluntarily or not, bounded professionals tend to congregate on the left side of the diagram, within a clearly defined organisational or functional location. If they enter a third space, it will likely be based on distinct temporal and spatial parameters. Similar situation applied to the mainstream academic staff who are primarily concerned with teaching and research would be situated on the right side of the diagram mostly. According to Whitchurch (2008b), the third space between professional and academic domains is predominantly inhabited by unbounded and blended professionals, as well as academic staff engaged in project-oriented activities. These groups expand and cultivate third space actively, which may further legitimise third space for more potential staff to participate in. Cross-boundary professionals, in contrast, move in and out continuously, utilising the boundaries between third space and professional and academic domains for superordinate purposes (Whitchurch, 2008b).

Jones et al. (2014, p. 420) elaborated on this idea by proposing the distributed leadership with three elements: concertive action (through groups and networks to achieve conjoint activity), movable boundaries (that encompass a wide net of leaders) and a broad distribution of expertise (Woods et al., 2004). Sharif et al. (2019) further emphasised that these adaptable networks are based on mutual respect and trust and integration instead of hierarchy, shared collaborations and responsibilities and the enactment of conflict-resolution strategies to mediate potential differences among partnerships. Overall, there is a general development from the discussion of the ‘third space’ or the ‘third space activities’ to the ‘third space professionals’, which drives more attention to the university staff who are neither purely academic nor completely administrative.

To summaries, the concept of third space is useful for exploring the fluid and dynamic experience of identities that do not have distinct markers that can be either accepted or rejected (Bennett et al., 2016). These identities may also involve what Whitchurch refers to as ‘edginess’ (Whitchurch, 2015, p. 85) and ‘paradox’ (Whitchurch, 2015, p. 104). Those who dwell there may feel themselves outsiders, or inordinate, or invisible (Bennett et al., 2016).
The majority of studies on third space professionals focus on the professional occupations in universities, such as roles in finance, human resources, estates, business development and external and public relations (Whitchurch, 2004; Whitchurch, in Whitchurch & Gordon, 2010); there is insufficient research on teaching professionals. In the following sections, this paper will use the third space as a foundation for investigating the identity of teaching professionals in research universities.

FIGURE 1 A changing higher education workforce map: the emergence of third space between professional and academic domains (Whitchurch, 2008a, p. 385).
4 | METHODOLOGY

For this study, I applied a constructionist (or interpretivist) approach with the research aim to understand ‘the world of human experience’ (Cohen & Mainion, 1994, p. 36). Constructivists do not generally begin with a theory; rather, they ‘generate or inductively develop a theory or pattern of meanings’ (Creswell & Creswell, 2017, p. 9) throughout the research process. By adopting the inductive approach, the main methods of collecting data include documentary analysis and interviews.

4.1 | Research methods

Teaching professionals’ work is considerably influenced by local contexts (Fremstad et al., 2020; Sugrue et al., 2017), this research is therefore investigating the identity of teaching professionals through three case studies, each in China, the UK and Canada.

According to Vidovich et al. (2012), carefully selected individual case studies across different national contexts might contribute to building a ‘global case’ of a particular higher education–policy phenomenon. This global case could lead, for example, to developing a typology of particular policy transformations across the globe. At the individual level, presenting studies from different countries could also uncover more convincing evidence regarding similar perceptions among individuals from different national contexts or higher education systems.

The documentation used in this research includes the public-access descriptions and institutional decisions regarding the teaching professionals. This method provides an official view of the creation and development of the position. Additionally, interviewing is used as an effective way to access people’s perceptions, meanings and definitions of situations and constructions of reality (Punch, 2013). For this research, I applied semi-structured interview because of its flexibility. This research is part of a larger research project investigating the institutional strategy and undergraduate education at world-class universities and the following information was collected for this study:

- The responsibilities and duties of teaching professionals
- Interactions between teaching professionals with academics regarding undergraduate education (this is asked from both teaching professionals and academics)

The predetermined questions acted as my guide for the interviews. However, they did not represent the totality of the questions or the communication between the interviewer and interviewee. Therefore, the structure and themes of each interview could slightly differ from each other.

4.2 | Sampling

The principle of the sampling is to find similar universities in different regions. As a part of a larger study, this research identified the similar research intensive universities in terms of status (public university), focus (comprehensive), global rankings, location (city-level consideration), student scale, faculty scale and other elements related to teaching and learning for generating credible results and generalised findings. To better reflect the global context, I selected universities in Asia (China), Europe (the UK) and North America (Canada). These three countries attract enormous attention from academic, political and economic perspectives. Furthermore, these systems also have a relatively larger number of undergraduate students. Therefore, the recommendations might be generalisable to other systems.
From an individual level, this research aims to have opinions from teaching professionals. Additionally, this research also provide insights from academics regarding the interactions between teaching professionals and academics. Therefore, this research participants include both teaching professionals and academics.

4.3 | Data collection

Documentation data were collected from the university websites. I collected the institutional strategy and the information of the central unit of teaching and learning from the each university’s websites.

In the case study in China, I applied the snowball technique due to the difficulty approaching academics through public records. In the UK and Canada case studies, I first studied the information of potential participants on the university websites and then emailed (three times at most) all the staff who met the criteria. I also applied the snowball technique when I needed more participants in specific positions. The combination approach worked well in the British and Canadian contexts.

4.4 | Data analysis

Universities' descriptions and decisions on teaching professionals were analysed through content analysis. On the one hand, I followed this procedure to establish the case study's context. On the other hand, the procedure enabled me to collect more details for the interview.

Thematic analysis is used for analysing transcripts because it is well suited to identifying, analysing and reporting patterns or themes within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Braun and Clarke suggested that thematic analysis might be data-driven, whereby themes are deduced from the data without necessarily fitting them into a pre-existing coding frame or the researcher’s analytic preconception. Information concerning the duties of teaching professionals and their interactions with academics was the focus of the identified themes.

5 | FINDINGS

This section presents the findings from case studies conducted in China, the UK and Canada. Each case study is similarly organised to illustrate the identity of teaching professionals in terms of their responsibilities and positioning in the institution. This section first presents findings from the interview with teaching professionals and then triangulates the information collected from the university website, interview with teaching professionals and interview with academics. Finally, this section concludes with a comparison of the three case studies.

5.1 | The role of teaching professionals

To elaborate teaching professionals’ role in three universities, I interviewed at least one teaching professional from each university and asked them to explain their responsibilities from their own perspective.

At Star University, Mr Jiang explained that his main responsibilities are to coordinate and support curriculum and pedagogical development. More specifically, teaching professionals are involved in providing training. The central unit of teaching and learning provides workshops that are led by teaching professionals. In addition, teaching professionals are involved in evaluating courses. In some cases, teaching professionals may also be included in teaching and learning groups to support courses designed for undergraduates.
At Cross University, teaching professionals review and enhance teaching and learning practices. They are involved in curriculum development and programme design and they help improve staff’s teaching and learning skills. That is, teaching professionals appear to have two main responsibilities: conducting research on curricula and pedagogy in the context of undergraduate education and training academics to enable them to provide high-quality teaching. Ms Lynn stated that teaching professionals based at the central unit of teaching and learning also ‘started going into departments and offering more tailored, consultative [work or support]. So, we go and meet departments and have discussions about their ambitions and plans for their education, and then we try to direct support toward them’.

While collaborating with the academic departments, teaching professionals are also involved in quality assurance. As Dr Von stated, ‘we are a teaching and learning unit, so we are primarily dealing with quality enhancement. We basically help departments and programs during annual student experience reviews and internal quality reviews’. Speaking from a strategic and institutional perspective, Dr Von illustrated that teaching professionals are ‘supporting the educational strategy of the university by bringing academics from different departments together’. Dr Von also explained that teaching professionals are supporting the ‘teaching excellence framework’ by helping with ‘writing narratives and submissions to panels’.

At Maple University, teaching professionals mostly contribute to curriculum and pedagogy development, teaching and learning technologies support and teacher training. There seems to be more detailed work planned for different sub-units. Dr Dearo, whose title is curriculum consultant, explained that her main responsibility is related to course and curriculum services. She stated that her primary task ‘is to deal with the programmes, whether they are degrees, certificates or diplomas’. She helps with promoting existing degrees and developing new degrees. She also stated that there is another group of teaching professionals who are ‘instructional designers or course developers, and they deal with individual courses’. She continued, stating that their responsibilities, therefore, ‘might include learning to teach better in the classroom, putting courses online, developing useful strategies, understanding what technologies are available and uploading a video to one’s blackboard account’. Furthermore, some teaching professionals are involved in dealing with learning technologies and applicants specifically. As Dr Dearo stated, ‘For example, we use Canvas now. We moved from another Blackboard back to this Blackboard. So, they deal with that thing more specifically, as well as our in-house technologies’. Professor Copenhane, Director of the central unit for teaching and learning, further explained that ‘we have staff members in our unit who work specifically with different faculty members’. For example, ‘we have someone in our unit who works with the art faculty, and they sit over with the people in the art department, and they work directly on projects related to that department. Similarly, with science, we have someone who works directly with the science faculty and all other departments’.

Maple University also created a full-time position termed ‘educational specialist’ to further support teaching and learning. These educational specialists are primarily positioned at the faculty and departmental levels, and according to Dr Beope, an educational specialist, this position is held by a ‘discipline-based educational research faculty member’. To be eligible for this position, applicants must hold a PhD. They offer consultations from pedagogical, technical and disciplinary perspectives to help faculty members improve their course designs. Dr Sindy, an education specialist made the following statement about their work:

Basically, I help the instructors [teaching faculty] to engage their students. So, I can do that by either helping them with transforming their courses, doing surveys to get feedback from the students, evaluating the assessments, observing their courses or giving them feedback on how things are going.

Comparing these three cases reveals that the responsibilities of the teaching professionals are relatively similar at each university and their duties mainly include training academics and supporting curriculum development. At Maple University, some teaching professionals deal with teaching technologies.
5.2  The positioning of teaching professionals

To illustrate the positioning of teaching professionals at the university level, it is necessary to first explicate the central unit frequently mentioned by teaching professionals that supports teaching and learning affairs. This unit can assume various names but is usually responsible for the same fundamental functions, including managing student affairs, developing pedagogy and curriculum and providing training and support for academics. The structure of the unit can differ in terms of the relationship between the vice president's office for education and the management hierarchy. This central unit is often subordinate to the vice president's office and usually consists of both academic and administrative staff and the head of the unit is always a member of the academic staff. In the following paragraphs, I review the descriptions of these units from the selected universities' websites to provide contextualised information for exploring teaching professionals' position in the university system.

The central unit at Start University is responsible for the following duties:

- Building an undergraduate training system for the daily management of education
- Constructing a quality assurance system for overseeing undergraduate training and improving the quality of the curriculum and pedagogy
- Promoting the construction of a college system and managing the educational activities of the colleges
- Enhancing the teaching ability of academics
- Carrying out research on education and teaching and promoting the reform of training modes and teaching methods
- Promoting the construction and management of teaching facilities and laboratories, as well as safeguarding daily teaching activities
- Undertaking secretariat work for the Teaching Steering Committee, the Curriculum and Civics Leadership Group, the Textbook Development Committee and the Language and Literature Committee

The central unit is composed of several sub-offices, including the General Office, Teaching Quality Management Office, Office of Experimental and Practical Teaching, Office of the College Tutor, Centre for Teaching and Learning Development, Office of Academic Administration, Centre for Undergraduate Service and Centre for Modern Educational Technology.

The teaching and learning centre at Cross University mainly provides professional development and teaching and assessment resources. The Professional Development Office serves multiple functions, including providing teaching and learning training sessions for staff; offering programme and module design support; building a community for sharing teaching methods, learning and assessment techniques, as well as evaluation and student feedback practices; and promoting education accessibility.

At Maple University, the teaching and learning centre focuses on promoting professional development in teaching and learning, integrating technology into teaching and learning, developing distance learning courses and programmes and other technology-enhanced learning opportunities and, through the Centre for the Education Scholarship, promoting scholarly approaches to curriculum and pedagogy. The centre is responsible for the following duties:

- Delivering research-informed programmes for supporting professional growth in teaching and learning skills, inclusive classroom environments, course structures, educational technology and reflective teaching practices.
- Collaborating with academic and administrative units to plan and develop educational experiences that enhance learning flexibility, including distance learning, blended course offerings and open educational resources.
- Providing strategic consultation, facilitation and project coordination services to support major research-informed pedagogical and curriculum initiatives.
- Collaborating on projects that strategically investigate, develop, test and evaluate educational technologies.
• Providing leadership and support for strategic curricula and pedagogical initiatives through the Centre for the Education Scholarship to promote greater coherence and synergy within and across the disciplines.

At all three universities, the head of the central unit is a professor from a department, as are the heads of the sub-offices. There is no information about teaching professionals provided on the university websites in terms of their roles within each sub-unit. That is, it is difficult to identify each teaching professional and their responsibilities from the information provided on the websites of each university, which also leads to the difficulties of having an objective view on how teaching professionals are positioned in the higher education systems.

The second reference to teaching professionals’ positioning is based on their interactions with the academic staff. This is because supporting academics’ pedagogy and curriculum development seems to be one of the main responsibilities for teaching professionals.

At Star University, the academic committee under the central unit for teaching and learning is mainly responsible for supporting academics and conducting evaluations. The committee consists of academic staff from different departments, and they possess diverse disciplinary expertise. However, instead of providing systematic services, teaching professionals more often provide individual support that goes largely unrecognised. Professor Young stated, ‘I’m not sure what academic support the university is providing. Maybe there are some [staff], but I’m not sure’.

At Cross University, teaching professionals are mostly recognised for their role in providing training. Professor Krati stated, ‘we attend a training session led by that staff [teaching professionals] in a sense that they can also inform and influence the way they teach. So, [they teach] things such as making you aware that there are different types of learners in the classroom and [show you] how to engage with them and teach for a variety of audiences’. The training is also related to the fellowship provided by the Higher Education Academy, which is considered essential for those who teach and support learning in higher education in the UK. In addition, there are academics who are aware of the support provided by teaching professionals regarding curriculum design, but they possess no direct experience collaborating with them.

At Maple University, teaching professionals are widely recognised, mostly for their contributions to teacher training. Professor Yemek stated that teaching professionals ‘provide all kinds of workshops and tutorials and even hands-on training for how to use these [education] tools’. Academics also recognise that teaching professionals are ‘trying to make sure people are sharing their best approaches between different departments and among different faculty members’. In addition, academics are also aware that teaching professionals ‘administer a lot of these teaching grants’, as stated by Dr Legrass. More importantly, academics realise that teaching professionals are conducting ‘a lot of the research on teaching and learning’, as stated by Professor Francisco. This is a crucial factor that differentiates teaching professionals from traditional administrative staff involved in teaching and learning at higher education institutions.

During a collaborative initiative between teaching professionals and academics at Maple University, Dr Aecher planned to ‘set up a virtual lab with surround projectors, and maybe some mixed reality classes’. He involved teaching professionals who were on the education technology support team, as well as other academics.

The interviews conducted with academics revealed varying levels of recognition of teaching professionals at different universities. That is, the value attributed to teaching professionals for supporting undergraduate education is different at each university. At Star University, academics are generally unaware of the existence of teaching professionals and the teaching support they provide, even though some academics mentioned the central unit for teaching and learning and the training provided by the university. At Cross University, the teacher training provided by teaching professionals is widely recognised. Even though academics are not familiar with the collaboration and support provided by teaching professionals that are targeted toward improving the curriculum, most academics believe that teaching professionals provide valuable planning and training that assists them in gaining teaching experience and improving their knowledge. At Maple University, in addition to providing teacher training, particularly regarding education technology and tools, teaching professionals also support applying for the grant
for developing and promoting teaching. Their work is also valued for bringing academics together from different
departments. Moreover, at Maple University, there were examples of academics involving teaching professionals
in course design. These types of interactions between academics and teaching professionals are more construc-
tive than scenarios where academics interact with teaching professionals through teacher training. More impor-
tantly, at Maple University, academics recognised that teaching professionals are not performing administrative
work but rather are conducting education-related research. The research-led education is considered as the main
value that teaching professionals are contributing to the development of teaching and learning. Depending on the
operating environment, the differences and similarities between these cases can be interpreted from a political
and cultural perspective. To avoid generalising about the national characteristics of higher education in the se-
lected countries, this research, however, focuses primarily on the institutional level.

6 | DISCUSSION

6.1 | The identity of teaching professionals

Summarised from the previous two sections, the public-facing websites of the universities studied here did not
explicitly address teaching professionals. Teaching professionals usually have similar responsibilities at higher edu-
cation institutions. However, the nature of their work can be discreetly different. At Star University, most teaching
professionals are still primarily performing administrative work, while at Cross University and Maple University,
they are more recognised for their expertise in teaching and learning. Interactions between teaching professionals
and academics can also be very dynamic. That is, the impact of teaching professionals on undergraduate educa-
tion can vary due to the different levels of interaction between the academics who are implementing the teaching
practices. The question is, what does those findings mean to the identity of teaching professionals?

First, teaching professionals have both academic and administrative responsibilities, and they have established
the legitimacy for their profession, which is situated between traditional academic and professional domains.
Nevertheless, the identity of teaching professionals is significantly influenced by institutional planning and the
positioning of their profession within the university. Compared to the other two universities, Maple University
has strategically prioritised teaching and learning by allocating more funding and cultivating an environment that
promotes undergraduate education. As a result, the number of teaching professionals at Maple University has
grown, and therefore, they are more ‘seen’ by academics and are more likely to feel a sense of shared identity as
teaching professionals.

Second, although identity can be influenced by external factors, internal coherence and sense-making remain
the dominant factors (Gordon & Whitchurch, 2007). Discipline is considered to be a main factor in constructing
a shared identity for academics in higher education. For teaching professionals, their main discipline is SoTL.
However, it is considered less of a clear academic ‘discipline’ and more of a form of research and a scholarship-
based reflective teaching and learning practice (Harrison et al., 2013). This argument is also reconfirmed with the
findings from the three cases.

Moreover, even though there is evidence that teaching professionals have become increasingly recognised as
a result of the increasing emphasis on undergraduate education at higher education institutions, there is consid-
erable confusion surrounding their identity, both among themselves and academics. This may be due to ununified
job titles and varying types of contracts. Based on the findings, teaching professionals can have very different
job titles even at the same university, including, but not limited to, ‘curriculum consultant’, ‘education specialist’,
‘teaching associate’ and ‘teaching fellow’. It can be difficult to understand the differences between each job title,
if there even is any. Moreover, teaching professionals do not all have the same types of contracts. The types of the
contract can be academic, academic-related, professional or administrative. For example, at Maple University, Dr
Sindy was a teaching professional who had a faculty contract (academic contract) when she worked as a teaching
professional based at the central unit. However, they stated, ‘but then when I became an education specialist [a teaching professional who is based in the department], they made that position a staff position [non-academic contract], which is very confusing. [It is] Exactly the same job’. Moreover, academics’ perceptions of teaching professionals can be confusing due to their unclear understanding of the nature of teaching professionals’ work. For example, in addition to teacher training, other aspects of teaching professionals’ work are also largely unrecognised, especially the contributions they make to disciplinary research in their jobs (mostly SoTL). Moreover, they are still frequently considered administrators.

It is also clear that teaching professionals are different from other professionals in higher education due to their close links with educational practices and the nature of conducting research on teaching and learning. As the three case studies demonstrated, most teaching professionals are teaching (training), conducting research (on teaching and learning) and performing services. In this way, their responsibilities resemble those of academics. Teaching professionals conduct research on teaching and learning to contribute to their academic discipline. That is, the perceived value of teaching professionals is derived from both their professional and academic credentials (Whitchurch, 2015). Therefore, one can further ask whether they can be considered ‘third space academics’. According to this study, one of the main differences between teaching professionals and academics is the academic autonomy. Even though teaching professionals are performing academic research, they are expected to investigate topics that share a common goal: supporting teaching and learning at the university. Moreover, most of their work is project-based, which may further limit their free choices regarding academic activities.

To compare the three cases from an institutional perspective, teaching professionals’ identities consist of both academic (mostly SoTL) and administrative elements in all three universities. It is more of a proportional difference between universities. For example, the academic element for teaching professionals is more dominant than the administrative element at Cross University and Maple University compared to Star University. Additionally, teaching professionals in all three cases experience certain levels of negligence from their institutions, regardless of their role and positioning. The variation of titles within the university leads to further confusion in all three cases, which can be mitigated by having a more unified title with a clearer description. Different from Star University, where teaching professionals are not strategically involved in university planning, the emergence of teaching professionals at Cross University and Maple University is more of a strategic response to the requirements of higher education development in teaching and learning. The difference between Cross University and Maple University is in their stages of development. Maple University has a longer history of having teaching professionals, therefore, their career path is more developed and structured. Meanwhile, due to the larger number of teaching professionals, they are consequently less neglected at Maple University. Those differences are mostly caused by diverse institutional planning and expectations. To promote a clearer collective identity for teaching professionals, universities need a well-defined understanding of the purpose and goals associated with employing teaching professionals. Therefore, the university can contextualise strategic planning and implementation for developing the teaching professionals’ career path and maximising their value in teaching and learning.

6.2 Teaching professionals and the third space in higher education

To reflect on the theoretical underpinning of the concept of ‘third space’, this study provides evidence for the ‘third space’ occupied by teaching professionals in higher education from both physically and symbolically. Teaching professionals are situated mostly in the central unit for teaching and learning and they take on ‘blended’ roles (Whitchurch, 2008a), that combine components of what has been thought of traditionally as purely academic or purely professional activity (Whitchurch, 2009a, 2009b).

However, a key paradox of third space is the conjunction of space that is both safe and risky. On the one hand, safe spaces offer some respite from time and organisational pressures while also providing opportunities to experiment and develop novel applications and form new relationships. On the other hand, the very aspects
that third-space professionals tend to find stimulating, such as a lack of clear boundaries and the opportunity to be creative, can also be perceived as risky, threatening or dysfunctional (Whitchurch, 2015). Because they incorporate safe and risky aspects, third space might be characterised as ‘holding space’ (Winnicott, 1990, in Whitchurch, 2015), where staff are encouraged to believe that outcomes will be achieved, although these may not be proven or precisely known and people learn to tolerate uncertainty. Third space can, therefore, provide individuals with the opportunity to move beyond functional and disciplinary boundaries to ‘work with new people in new ways on new problems’ (Rowland, 2006, p. 95, in Whitchurch, 2015). In other words, teaching professionals can be important resources for improving higher education, especially in terms of curricula and pedagogies, as they contribute a flexible and innovative approach that brings together academics and facilities knowledge and skills sharing for teaching and learning. However, unclear job descriptions, multiple job titles and contract, and most important, the limited recognition of teaching professionals’ wide range of responsibilities may make it difficult for teaching professionals to establish their position within the education system. This can also result in challenges related to evaluating their value within undergraduate education.

Moreover, even though ‘third space’ provides a perspective of recognising the evolving role of professionals in higher education and provides a legitimate space for the development of professional staff like teaching professionals in higher education, this framework still set the boundaries between different groups of staff inside higher education institutions. Although the boundaries are ‘blurred’, the teaching professionals are still restricted to those invisible boundaries and there is very little mobility between spaces. Therefore, by using the three case studies, this research discusses an alternative framework of understanding the higher education space where all staff can be included.

6.3 | The three-dimensional space for higher education

In the existing literature about the spatial dynamics of higher education, most of the studies emphasise the categorisation of the work in higher education and therefore defining the group or community of people who are specialised in (e.g., ‘third space professionals’ from Whitchurch, 2008a; ‘hybrid’ from Henkel, 2009; ‘matrix’ from Graham, 2014) or interested in that certain type of work (e.g., ‘community of practice’ from Lave & Wenger, 1991). As a result of the discussion of the space, much focus has been given to the boundary between groups. Some studies expand the idea with the focus on the transition or the mobilities across the boundaries and between spaces (e.g., ‘third space professionals’ from Whitchurch, 2008a; ‘liminal space’ from Allen-Collinson, 2006).

However, there is limited conceptualisation of the possibility of having all university staff in the same space. Furthermore, even though higher education has undergone multidimensional development and needs to be contextualised when it comes to the functions of higher education, no matter how complex the university's functions are, the core remains the same: teaching, research and service. Then here comes the question: instead of diversifying the staffing with the corresponding responsibilities, can the field of higher education be structured only based on teaching, research and service? The following Figure 2 presents a perspective.

**Figure 2** shows the possibility of having the core functions of higher education in the same space by using the three-dimensional axis instead of applying the two-dimensional flat figure and discussing the higher education functions in pairs.

First, within the enormous range of institutional identities that universities can take on, teaching, research and service are often cited in the literature as being the three ‘pillars of higher education’ and while universities will focus on these in different forms and with different relationships between them, they are generally key activities in every university (Centra, 1979; Fairweather, 2014; Muthama & McKenna, 2024). However, these three pillars are used mostly to describe achievement and career progression of academics. This idea can be extended to include all staff working in higher education.
Second, instead of diversifying the responsibilities and creating new professionals, this conceptual framework emphasises expanding and updating the definition of the existing main functions. For the teaching axis, the training is added as well to include the teaching practices conducted by university staff in addition to academics and to expand the subjects being taught from students to the university staff. For the research axis, only disciplinary research is used to be considered research practices. However, the increasing demand for understanding the university’s operating context and supporting the formation and implementation of the institutional strategy has led to the conduct of more research on institution development. Although these two types of research serve different purposes, they both involve investigating unclear problems. Therefore, in this model, the definition of research is expanded to include both disciplinary and institutional research. Most of the professionals are situated in the service axis. ‘Service’ has always been more complicated to define in the higher education context. Many service tasks can be perceived as commodities embedded within the routine work of monotonous committees. Service work can also be idiosyncratic to the routines of a focal employer, thus limiting the value of such competency in labour markets (transferability) (Varela & Premeaux, 2023). In higher education, instead of diving into the numerous types of professionals, this model presents an approach to including all staff who are involved in both general and professional services.

Third, from a practical perspective, the universities can use the three-dimensional space model to specify the expected time allocation for each position by scaling the model. The proportion of different work, namely, teaching, research and service, can be visualised in the model. Additionally, university staff can have a clearer idea of the expectations for their work by identifying other staff who may have similar jobs as they do. In other words, any university staff should be able to find their position in this three-dimensional space model based on the allocation of the work. For example, instead of having boundaries between academics and teaching professionals, the relative distance of two positions may provide insight into the general nature and composition of their work.

However, this model may oversimplify and overgeneralise the complexity of the university workforce. Therefore, it should be noted that universities need to provide contextualised details when it is applied in practice. Moreover, even though the three-dimensional space model can include all university staff in the same space and remove the boundaries between different groups, there is still a chance that the invisible boundaries, or in this mode, the distance between different positions, will still hinder the collaboration and communication between
university staff. This model can provide an alternative approach to thinking about the university discourse in terms of understanding the organisational structure and the staff, but the institutional culture and environment may remain key in defining the relationship between different groups of university staff.

To further develop the three-dimensional space model in practice, one can collect quantitative data on the proportion of work in teaching, research and service from university staff with all different titles. Therefore, the model can be enriched and provide evidence of the positions of different types of jobs within the same institutions and the same job across different institutions.

7 | CONCLUSION

Higher education institutions are under pressure to consider more flexible models for managing staff, partly as a result of global market-oriented environments, financial constraints and changing student expectations (HEFCE, 2010, 2012; UniversitiesUK, 2007a, 2007b). As this paper has shown, however, this pressure also follows from the changing aspirations and expectations of the staff members themselves (Whitchurch & Gordon, 2013).

This exploratory research aimed to shed light on the construction of the identities of teaching professionals by presenting findings from case studies involving universities in China, the UK and Canada. The research revealed that teaching professionals in these countries occupy a unique third space in the higher education landscape, positioned between traditional academic and professional domains. Their identities can be shaped significantly by institutional planning, expectations and the emphasis placed on undergraduate education. While the SoTL serves as a central pillar of their identity, the study also revealed considerable confusion regarding the identity of teaching professionals, which is driven by diverse job titles and contract types.

Based on the findings, this study provides a conceptual framework – the third-dimensional space model – for understanding the higher education workforce. By combining the teaching and training axes, the research axis (disciplinary and institutional) and the service axis (general and professional), this model includes all university staff in the same place by expanding the definition of teaching, research and service. This model replaces the boundaries between spaces with the relative distance between each group or individual staff member in the same institution. In practice, universities and individual staff members can use this model to clarify the definition and expectations of each job. Additionally, the model provides a visual reference for university staff to identify and collaborate with colleagues whose work shares a similar nature.

In conclusion, this research presents compelling evidence that teaching professionals are increasingly employed in higher education to support teaching and learning, thereby occupying a third space in the higher education system. More significantly, based on the empirical evidence of three case studies on teaching professionals and the theoretical underpinnings of the third space, this research proposes a new model of understanding university staff in a changing environment.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author has no conflicts of interest to declare.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

All data underlying the results are available as part of the article and no additional source data are required.

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ENDNOTE

1 The name of this centre is pseudonymised for identity protection.
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