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

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Centre for Higher
Education Studies

- To provide an opportunity for participants to consider:
 - Changes to the roles and identities of professional administrators and managers
 - The creation of new ‘spaces’ at the interface between professional and academic activity (*‘Third Space’*)

Two studies...



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- Funded by the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education (LFHE):

www.lfhe.ac.uk/publications

- (1) *Professional Managers in UK Higher Education: Preparing for Complex Futures* (Whitchurch 2006, 2008)

- (2) *Optimising the Potential of “Third Space” Professionals in UK Higher Education* (ongoing)

- Literature on ‘professionalisation’:
 - qualifications; code of practice
 - increasing specialisation
 - from “administration” to “management”
- Less account of:
 - increasing diversity of professional staff
 - mobility in and out of higher education
- No analysis/theorisation of these changes

Respondents



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- Five UK institutions (pre- and post- 92)
- 41 interviews plus electronic questionnaire
 - Generalists eg registry, dept'l managers
 - Specialists eg finance, human resources
 - 'Mixed' roles: learning support; widening participation; community partnership
- Further interviews in Australia (10) and US (15)

Findings I...



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- Different approaches to similar roles
- Particularly in relation to functional and/or organisational boundaries
- Not necessarily related to job descriptions or organisation charts

Two finance directors...



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1 – Post-1992

“A lot of the significant contact that we have with academic managers is in terms of how they manage their financial resources ... we have to have oversight of that and report to the requisite authorities.”

2 - Pre-1992

“ ... we try to bridge this divide between ‘let’s keep the academics happy and the RAE is all important...’ [and] developing ... activities elsewhere [such as widening participation, regional partnership]... We’re growing, not just in size, but in diversity and complexity... you can’t have a finance director who is just number crunching...”

Identity 'dispositions' of professional staff



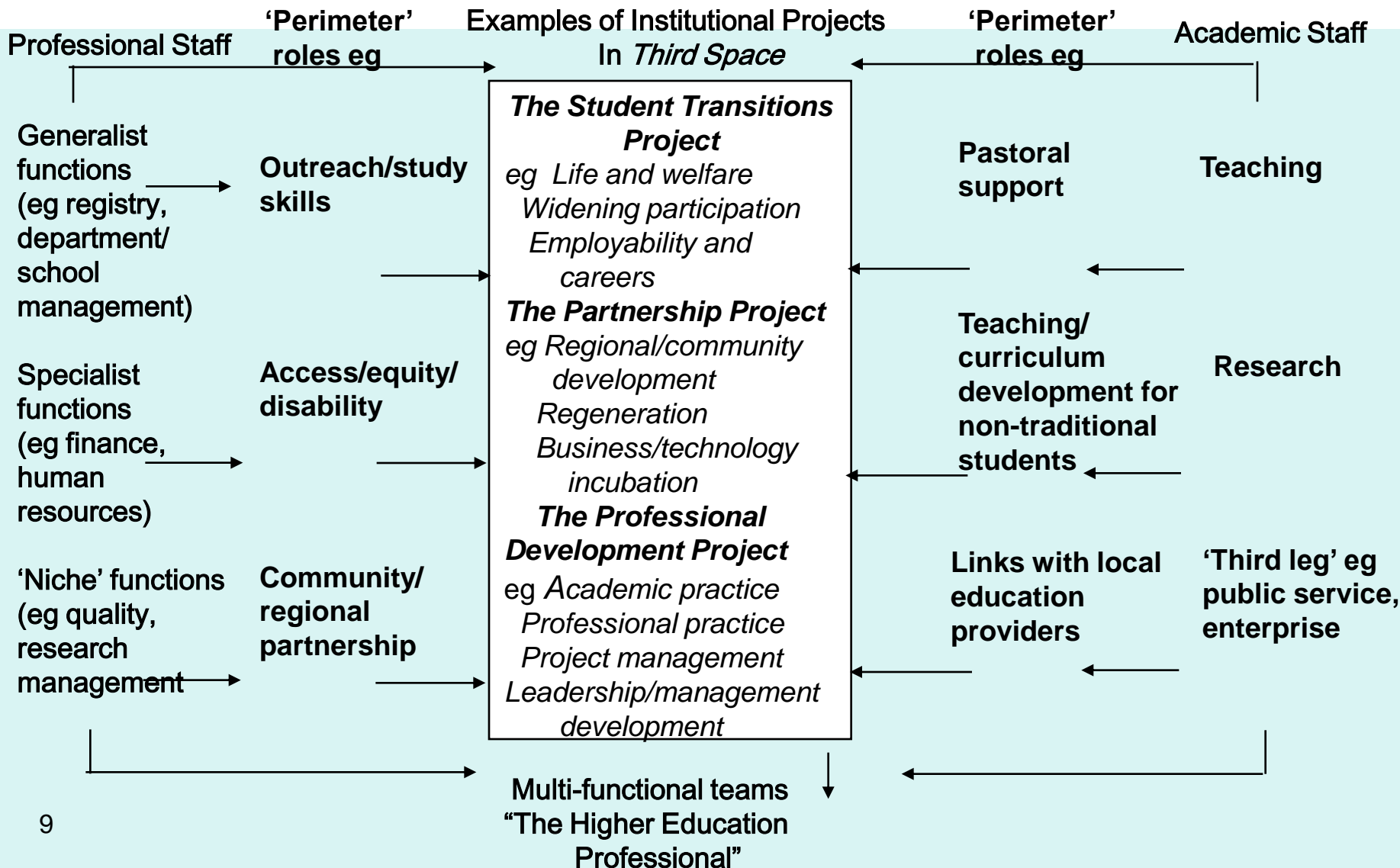
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Identity 'dispositions'	Characteristics
<i>'Bounded professionals'</i> (voluntary or involuntary)	Work within clear structural boundaries (eg specialist function , job description)
<i>'Cross-boundary professionals'</i>	Actively use boundaries and cross-boundary knowledge for strategic advantage and institutional capacity building
<i>'Unbounded professionals'</i>	Lack of consciousness of boundaries; focus on broadly-based projects across the university, and contribute to institutional development
<i>'Blended professionals'</i>	Dedicated appointments spanning professional and academic domains

Findings II: The Emergence of *Third Space*



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Characteristics of *Third Space I*



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- Flattening of management and leadership:
 - done by more people
 - at earlier stage of careers
 - less ‘gap’ between managers and managed
 - may lead in one setting, be led in another
- Non-positional authority :
 - “There’s no authority that you come with”
 - ^{f6}“It’s what you are, not what you represent”

Characteristics of *Third Space II*



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- Ambiguous working conditions
 - “Sometimes an academic unit, sometimes an office”
 - Turning this to advantage
- But also ‘safe’ space in which to experiment eg
 - Support of senior figure or mentor
 - Work-based research opportunities
 - Programmes of study/masters/doctorate

Discussion



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- Identify an area where you are aware of “Third Space” taking place
- What might be the implications of “Third Space” for
 - Individuals
 - Institutions?