

Researcher Developer: An Evolving Third Space Profession in Higher Education

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Overview

- Survey background
- Interviewee characteristics
- Focus on:
 - Paths to becoming a researcher developer
 - Relevance of doctoral study
 - Their future – and necessary CPD
 - Future of researcher development

Third space professionals

Whitchurch, C. (2008), Shifting Identities and Blurring Boundaries: the Emergence of *Third Space* Professionals in UK Higher Education. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 62: 377–396.

From the abstract:

This paper ... builds on a categorisation of professional staff identities as having ***bounded, cross-boundary and unbounded*** characteristics.

[I]t describes a further category of ***blended professionals***, who have mixed backgrounds and portfolios, comprising elements of both professional and academic activity.

The paper goes on to introduce the concept of ***third space*** as an emergent territory between academic and professional domains, which is colonised primarily by less ***bounded*** forms of professional. ...

Finally, it is suggested that ***third space*** working may be indicative of future trends in professional identities, which may increasingly coalesce with those of academic colleagues who undertake project- and management-oriented roles, so that new forms of ***third space*** professional are likely to continue to emerge.

Project Background

- Vitae London Hub Steering Group
- PTES, PRES, CROS & PIRLS – but what about researcher developers?
- Survey with follow-up interviews
 - 14 interviews
 - Telephone/Skype used (and one face-to-face)
 - Structured interviews with twelve main questions
 - Duration 20-54 minutes
 - Transcribed and analysed using NVivo

Demographics: Survey and interviewees

Category	Survey (N=102)	Interviewees (N=14)
Gender	77% female	64% (9/14)
Nationality	90% UK	93% (13/14)
Age	53% 30s	38% (5/13)
Ethnicity	8% BAME	14% (2/14)
Qualification	68% have doctorate	71% (10/14)
Background	46% Science; 29% SocSci; 25% A&H	43% Science; 43% SocSci; 14% A&H

Mix of regions and mission groups

Equal numbers 0-5, 6-10, 10+ years as researcher developer

Equal numbers academic, professional services and hybrid

Q1. Why did you become a researcher developer?

- Two main routes:
 - Research background
 - Professional services background
- For the former, an active step away from 'research', often following experience of researcher development as a researcher - and a search for stability
- For both
 - Strong element of serendipity, including using existing skills and experience as well as funding availability
 - Wanted to help researchers
 - Desire to stay in university environment

Q7. “Do you think that your role requires the holder to have a doctorate?”

- Not yes/no answers – much more nuanced, with a focus on shaping the role
- However, a number of responses to the previous question (on subject utility) anticipated the doctoral issue
- General recognition of value of doctorate
- Key themes:
 - Credibility (perceived)
 - Competence
 - Empathy
 - Mixed teams

Q10. What CPD would you see as useful to you?

- [PAUSE], uncertainty
- Lengthy descriptions covering past, present and future, as well as team members/ colleagues development - but not demonstrating planning of own CPD
- Future focused tended to be non-specific, i.e. Not related to a particular post
- Little interest in courses or formal qualifications – and little budget to pursue them

Q11. What do you hope to do in the future, professionally?

- Lack of planning of own career
- Uncertainty – no clear career path
- Increase in seniority or...
- ... Remain in role but continue to develop/learn
- Looking for flexible roles that could be shaped in line with their personal interests and values
- Emergent planning, building on the wide variety skills and experience from their researcher developer role. Seemingly comfortable with ambiguity.

Q12. Finally, how do you see the role of 'researcher developer' changing?

- Embedded, but financial pressures
- Increase in skills
- But rather than specialisation, there will be more role diversification

Researcher developers as HEPROs (Higher Education PROfessionals)

- The self-understanding of HEPROs as professionals is still weak and professional identities vary
- They are generalists and experts, rather than specialists
- HEPROs work at interfaces and often shape new fields, e.g. Doctoral education, alumni work, graduate surveys
- HEPROs stuck in their role – lack of sustainability (i.e. not stable – funding and progression)

Barbara Kehm (2016). PRIDE Conference, Berlin

Conclusions

- We are great!
 - But we need to tell others... and ourselves
- Marked contrast: personal comfort with own career path but concern at lack of obvious path
- Need to argue case for funding for our CPD needs
- Professionalization requires evidence-based practice
- Must engage in critical thinking, including theory
- Academic/non-academic distinction unhelpful (esp. TEF)...
- ...move towards other ways of thinking, e.g. careers within and outside university