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Applying for professional recognition in higher education as a third space professional: an autoethnographic exploration

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ABSTRACT

In higher education, third space practitioners span academic and professional spheres and do vital work, but their knowledge can be overlooked, undervalued or resisted. In this paper, the author reviews what is known about the work and professional identities of third space practitioners, and the significance of external recognition. Using an autoethnographic approach, they consider how they experienced this liminal space. The author found that their professional identity, understanding of their career construction, and sense of recognition and validation all benefitted from the Advance HE fellowship application process. Implications for practice are identified. They recommend that third space professionals, and those supporting and developing them, explore opportunities for recognition and validation that support self-reflexivity, which can underpin the development of professional identity and confidence, and the articulation of third space skills, experience and contribution. Third space researchers should also consider the potential extent of the third space beyond the institution.

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The third space in higher education

The third space typically comprises higher education staff across academic and professional services who are not on academic contracts, but who nevertheless have a key role in designing, developing and/or delivering teaching and learning, collaborative projects and partnerships (Whitchurch 2008). In the complex, post-pandemic higher education environment, their role is ever more critical (Livingston and Ling 2022). The third space itself is naturally collaborative, with partnership working by experts in different fields delivering effective teaching and support (Abegglen, Burns, and Sinfield 2023) to support accessible, authentic learning (Murray 2025). Social capital, networks and relationships are vital to the success of third space professionals (Nutt and McIntosh 2025; Thorpe and Partridge 2024) and benefit the institution and its activities, through the creation of collaborative capital (Veles 2023). However, those operating in the third space can feel excluded and undervalued if their expertise and contributions are not acknowledged or welcomed (Livingston and Ling 2022; Milton, Yhnell, and Jones 2025; Vere, Verney, and Webster-Deakin 2024), frequently facing challenges around professional identity, imposter phenomenon, invisibility and esteem, as well as difficulties, barriers and gatekeeping in their interaction with academic staff and institutional structures, processes and boundaries (Akerman 2020; Smith et al. 2021; Thorpe and Partridge 2024; Veles, Graham, and Ovaska 2023). Some third space staff may be comfortable positioning themselves as 'misfits and disruptors' (Milton, Yhnell, and Jones 2025, 4), others less so.

Whitchurch (2008) originally characterised four types of third-space professionals. Bounded professionals recognise and remain within existing role boundaries. Cross-boundary professionals also recognise the existence of boundaries, but use their knowledge within and across different boundaries to build either their own career, institutional activity and capacity, or both. In contrast, unbounded professionals overlook or disregard boundaries that others might see as barriers, often working cross-institutionally. Finally, blended professionals take on specific, mixed roles spanning professional and academic spaces. While the latter sounds

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potentially straightforward, with roles created precisely to traverse boundaries, Hains-Wesson's (2025) own autoethnographic reflections on such a role highlight challenges and the importance of trust, collaboration, role understanding, and recognition of contributions to success. The themes of trust, collaboration and recognition are also identified elsewhere in third space literature (Larkin 2025; Little and Green 2022; Livingston and Ling 2022; Veles 2023; Vere, Verney, and Webster-Deakin 2024) and appear crucial to a flourishing third space, and ultimately supporting high quality teaching, learning and support for students.

As a careers professional who has held varied career guidance, development, research and learning related roles in the third space, careers research and theory inform my work with others, but also my own self-reflexivity. In considering my own career, I typically draw on theories of planned happenstance (Krumboltz 2009; Mitchell, Al Levin, and Krumboltz 1999) and the chaos theory of careers (CTC) (Bright and Pryor 2011). Happenstance recognises career uncertainty, and that unexpected events can be serendipitous, leading to new opportunities; the planned element encourages a series of choices and actions that help individuals to put themselves in the right place at the right time to capitalise on opportunities arising through happenstance. Chaos theory acknowledges that wider contextual influences and environmental factors create a 'continual interplay of influences of stability and change' (163). To navigate this requires recognition of the roles of complexity, change and chance in career-making, and active participation of individuals in career construction, which is likely to be non-linear in form. Diverse routes, the significance of happenstance, and non-linear career progression have emerged in other autoethnographic work by third space careers professionals (Larkin 2025; Lennox 2023).

External recognition for third-space professionals

Professional development leading to external recognition can support third space professionals to have clarity of identity and purpose, to challenge role stereotypes and to build professional confidence (Ball and Ribchester 2025; George and Rowland 2019; Jones et al. 2025). This article focuses on the professional recognition offered by Advance HE through their fellowship schemes, where skills and experience are assessed against the Professional Standards Framework (PSF) for teaching and supporting learning in higher education. As George and Rowland recognised in their work with university librarians, 'Because [...] Fellowship is nationally recognised, it demonstrates that librarians' teaching is of equal value to that of academics and other HE teaching staff.' (2019, 288–289). This equivalency of recognition is key; all higher education staff can apply for recognition on an equal basis, regardless of contract type, measured against the same PSF. Later work, which included careers professionals alongside library staff, technicians, and those working in learning technology, found an appetite for engagement with Advance HE fellowship across all these staff groups, thanks to the potential for career advancement, reflection, skills development and self-efficacy (Ball and Ribchester 2025).

There has been some critique of fellowships by academic staff, on the basis of there being no clear connection to teaching quality (Van Der Sluis 2023) or that it is a tick box exercise (Cathcart et al. 2023). However, academic staff have also been found to value fellowship for varied reasons; the opportunity for reflection, the recognition and career development fellowship can deliver, and the supportive network created during the application process (Botham 2018; Cathcart et al. 2023; Donaldson 2022; Shaw 2018; Thornton 2014). Professional services staff report positively on the benefits of fellowship itself but also recognise that inclusive structures and supportive approaches are needed to realise these benefits (Ball and Ribchester 2025). The PSF itself was reviewed and revised in 2023 to emphasise the impact and effectiveness of teaching and learning, better incorporate teaching and learning context, and deliver enhanced focus on inclusivity, both in terms of the range of staff engaging with the PSF, and also the inclusion of all learners (Advance HE 2023a, 2023b).

Autoethnography

Autoethnographic approaches have been used by higher education staff in their explorations of, and reflections on, professional identity (Cutforth 2013; Kumar 2021; Larkin 2025; Lennox 2023; Lennox 2025; Nititham 2022), including third-space practitioners specifically (Hains-Wesson 2025). Autoethnography places the researcher at the centre of their focus and inquiry, situating their personal story within the richness of their wider cultural and societal context (Poulos 2021), often to question the status quo (Fetterman 2020,

140). While sometimes contentious as it disrupts research norms (Harwood and Eaves 2017), autoethnography is recognised as a valid methodology, with five criteria suggested as measures of quality, namely: subjectivity, self-reflexivity, resonance, credibility and contribution (Le Roux 2017).

In common with many autoethnographies, this paper takes a narrative approach (Poulos 2021); the researcher's journey is presented as a story designed to draw out resonance for readers. Robust inquiry is ensured through an initial review to ensure that the autoethnography is credible, both situated in and contributing to the wider literature. The author reflects on evidence derived from their two successful applications to Advance HE for a first fellowship, then a senior fellowship. In writing this article, the author referred to the application documents and the feedback received throughout the application processes, as well as their own recollections, to underpin the autoethnographic account. This helped to ensure that subjectivity was minimised and self-reflexivity supported, to reduce the potential limitations of autoethnography (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 2011; Harwood and Eaves 2017; Le Roux 2017; Poulos 2021).

My experiences as a third space professional seeking external recognition via Advance HE Fellowship

I began considering applying for Advance HE Associate Fellowship when working as a careers advisor and researcher developer in a small, specialist higher education institution in England. Working in a small team meant limited opportunities for direct, upward progression – any such opportunity was likely to be ten to fifteen years away. In 2016, I completed the Aurora programme, a female leadership development initiative run by Advance HE. On this programme, a fellow participant asked the question that had also been plaguing me, namely, how do I develop my career in the sector when there is no clear opportunity for me to work towards? The guest speaker, who was a senior higher education leader, described their approach of collecting 'badges' – experiences, courses and accreditations that show your interest, potential or skills. The guest speaker had done this themselves, gathering strategic project experience that meant when the next opportunity arose, they were well-positioned to demonstrate relevant experience, interest and connections. The guest speaker reflected that they might not know which badges would be useful when, but by pursuing badges aligned to personal and professional interests as well as the direction of travel of their institution and the wider higher education sector, they were well placed to capitalise on them when opportunities arose. As a careers advisor, this should not have been news to me; they were describing how to work with, and plan for, happenstance (Krumboltz 2009; Mitchell, Al Levin, and Krumboltz 1999) and position themselves to succeed through active participation in their own career (Bright and Pryor 2011). However, hearing it in this context spurred me into action.

After further consideration, I decided that my main focus should be on formal validation and recognition of my work. I took this decision after reflecting on a range of experiences and interactions in my workplace. In common with many careers professionals, I worked to embed employability in the curriculum, as well as providing extra-curricular support and events. In-curriculum activities included designing and delivering learning activities that aligned to module and course objectives, e.g. tutorials for students on land-based courses that explored sector-specific labour market information and supported students in skills reflection and identification. I was conscious that I had received mixed engagement from academic staff in relation to delivering careers content in the curriculum. I was warmly welcomed by some, but not others. The most common reason given was a lack of classroom and content delivery time, but there were others who directly challenged my expertise, stating that academic staff knew more about employment and employers. It is not uncommon for professional services staff to have their proficiency challenged in this way (Livingston and Ling 2022; Milton, Yhnell, and Jones 2025; Vere, Verney, and Webster-Deakin 2024). On one occasion, this challenge happened in an academic departmental team meeting; I felt that I had been deliberately and publicly undermined by certain academic staff members. However, this made me determined to focus on developing recognition in relation to in-curriculum delivery, helping me challenge role stereotypes and build my professional confidence (Ball and Ribchester 2025; George and Rowland 2019) to handle similar situations in the future and keep the door open to any professional opportunities. I was also reassured by positive feedback from other academic staff members who had observed me delivering in-curriculum; I always sought staff feedback after class delivery. I also reviewed any career-related comments from the National Student Survey to reflect on student feedback.

As I already held a relevant Master's degree and a separate postgraduate careers qualification, my thoughts turned to professional accreditation. My institution ran supported applications for Advance HE fellowships (as part of the Higher Education Academy, at that time); this was attractive as it was readily and conveniently available to me at no individual cost. Fellowships were visibly supported by the institution, which reassured me of their value (Thornton 2014), and I perceived AFHEA as an accessible, achievable entry point as a professional services staff member (George and Rowland 2019). I did not really consider any other approach to accreditation due to these positives, which was perhaps shortsighted, but does not seem to have been detrimental in the longer-term. It may also reflect a lack of professional accreditations available to those in the third space, as I was not aware of any alternatives. I began to compile examples of my activities to apply for AFHEA and booked a meeting to discuss my application as part of the supported scheme.

At this point, a positive intervention from a senior member of staff challenged my perspective. On reviewing my developing portfolio of evidence as part of the institutional support available for fellowship applications, they suggested that I should apply for FHEA and that I should set my sights higher. This proved to be a vital push for me, helping me to overcome the imposter phenomenon that is common in higher education (Akerman 2020; Cathcart et al. 2023) and to recognise the extent and depth of my own expertise and experience. I felt valued because they were willing to invest institutional time and effort into my development (Akerman 2020), and I felt that they understood the contribution of professional services staff. This internal recognition and support were undoubtedly an important stepping stone in helping me to feel confident in pursuing FHEA. Donaldson (2022) has discussed the supported journey to fellowship, and for me, too, this collegial approach was critical.

When applying, I found the process allowed me to draw out positive interactions with staff and students across the institution, and to recognise that they were more numerous and richer than the negative ones (which sometimes loomed disproportionately large). Learning from all types of interactions informed my application, and reflecting on the range of examples I could build into my application allowed me to fully realise the scope and scale of my work, providing validation, belonging and institutional fit and contribution, as seen in other studies on Advance HE fellowships (Ball and Ribchester 2025; Cathcart et al. 2023). I again reached out directly to staff whom I had worked with in-curriculum, using their feedback to shape my application. Alongside this, I was also developing my understanding of my professional identity, via reflection on, and articulation of, my work. As others have considered, this process of reflection can be transformative for third space staff, supporting self-awareness and encouraging onward evaluation of activity and impact (Ball and Ribchester 2025).

Although the application process as a whole was positive and well supported, I struggled with a sense that the measurement criteria were geared more towards those in academic roles than wider higher education staff. For example, some of the wording of the 2011 PSF, particularly in relation to the core knowledge dimension, was challenging as an emerging third space professional. Terminology such as the former K5 measure, 'Methods for evaluating the effectiveness of teaching' (Advance HE 2019, 3) was much more difficult to apply in the third space than the current K3, 'critical evaluation as a basis for effective practice' (Advance HE 2023a, 2023b, 5). The latter is more inclusive of all staff who may be involved in teaching and supporting learning, and the types of feedback and evaluation they may engage with; a welcome shift towards equitably recognising third space and professional services staff.

When the opportunity arose to move into a lecturing post in the subject area of my postgraduate degree, a fellowship was not explicitly required. However, it validated the quality of my work teaching and supporting learning, and the reflective process helped me to confidently articulate my skills and experience. It is hard to say whether other professional development or forms of external recognition would have had the same impact, or whether having a fellowship helped me to succeed in my application. However, I certainly feel that the combination of a clear professional identity and confidence developed through the fellowship application was a key contributing factor in my success. The career move I made certainly cemented my understanding of myself as a third space professional; I moved into an academic staff position, taking with me a wealth of professional services knowledge and understanding that allowed me to be more effective. I had put myself in a position to seize unexpected opportunities (Krumboltz 2009; Mitchell, Al Levin, and Krumboltz 1999) in my non-linear self-constructed career (Bright and Pryor 2011) and thus continued a career journey shaped largely by planned happenstance.

Later experiences of the Advance HE Senior Fellowship

Four years later, on the other side of a global pandemic, changes in my health meant I needed to once again lean into the unexpected and move away from a primarily student-facing role. Seeing myself as a third space practitioner meant I did not feel overly tied to an academic identity; I took a role as a Research Manager in a higher education membership organisation where all elements of my higher education experience were valued. I also maintained some student-facing work as a Visiting Lecturer at a different institution. When investigating SFHEA application support at my new institution, I noted that I had experienced a distinct mindset shift between FHEA and SFHEA. While I had to build my confidence and needed external encouragement to feel FHEA might be within my grasp and capabilities, I already knew I could achieve SFHEA with my experience, skills and knowledge. One of my two SFHEA case studies focused on my work as a Research Manager and how this influenced practice across higher education. Both case studies demonstrated that my 'comprehensive understanding and effective practice provides a basis from which they lead or influence those who teach and/or support high-quality learning' (Advance HE 2023a, 2023b, 9), meeting Descriptor 3, which aligns with SFHEA. Feedback on the Research Manager case study said 'There is very strong evidence provided of how you work with and lead professional services that you critically evaluate and reflect upon.' (Anonymous Reviewer, Personal Communication, August 23, 2024).

Where previously I had found the PSF challenging, this was now less of an obstacle, because of the changes that had made the PSF more inclusive for a wider range of staff across higher education, including those who would perceive themselves as being in the third space. Openness to the many roles involved in teaching and supporting learning was evident in the new PSF, making it far more straightforward to demonstrate my breadth of skills and experience in my application. As before, I found value in the validation and reflection (Ball and Ribchester 2025; Cathcart et al. 2023). Having changed roles, I was reassured and supported by external recognition. It also supported me in identifying the work I had done to continue creating and constructing a career (Bright and Pryor 2011) even in challenging circumstances, finding the right way forward for me. I had an excellent mentor, again benefiting from an in-house support scheme (Donaldson 2022).

While some studies have found that higher education staff criticise fellowships (Cathcart et al. 2023; Van Der Sluis 2023), this was not the case for me. Both fellowship processes genuinely helped me to make sense of my contribution within institutions and across the wider higher education sector. The FHEA helped me to initially believe in myself and my work, and both FHEA and SFHEA helped me to navigate career changes with confidence. As someone who now holds one role within an institution and one role in a sector organisation, external validation and recognition continue to be important. The process has also helped me to reflect on and understand my own third space positioning. I feel most closely aligned to the blended professional but operating largely outside any specific institution, with my institutional impact being delivered through sector-level activities. Whitchurch (2008) predicted that new forms of third-space workers would emerge over time. However, current scoping and systematic reviews (Thorpe and Partridge 2024; Veles, Graham, and Ovaska 2023) show a lack of studies considering individuals who work alongside higher education, but primarily outside an institution. Those in professional organisations, sector bodies, lobbying organisations and higher education consultancy should perhaps be considered as inhabiting a novel third space. Veles described the third space as 'simultaneously constructed, defined, and enabled by the knowledges, expertise, and unique talents of the actors who come together to work on a project or to find a solution to a work problem' (2023, 4). In some cases, those actors will not be internal to the institution; definitions of the third space could evolve to recognise this.

Implications for practice: my recommendations and conclusions

For third space professionals considering their own career development, I want to draw out three elements that were critical to my own journey that have been considered in this article, as recommendations for others. Firstly, consider how you can acquire professional 'badges' such as an Advance HE fellowship, which support recognition of skills and knowledge. This approach helped me to accumulate evidence and experience for my next step, even when I was unsure as to what that should be. This is particularly pertinent for those in non-linear third space careers, who may also benefit from understanding their own career

as having elements of happenstance, and the need to be ready to capitalise upon this. Secondly, several individuals played key roles in my journey, as mentors or supporters. For me, the informed intervention from a supportive senior staff member around the level of fellowship appropriate to my circumstances and context was undeniably important to my confidence and identity, as well as the career moves I made later, which were potentially aided by my having Advance HE fellowship. Recognising those individuals, and welcoming and accepting their support, will help you to move forward in your third space career. I also find there is great satisfaction in being a supporter for others; remember, you do not need to be senior in your organisation or career to offer support. While mentoring and guidance from senior staff are hugely valuable, never underestimate the impact of encouragement and enthusiasm. Thirdly, and finally, I have found that understanding and exploring the third space has helped me to make sense of my own career journey and identity. If this also resonates with you, I recommend you explore the growing body of literature and research on third space careers to inform your own journey.

Managers and leaders of higher education professional services should advocate for all staff who are teaching and supporting learning in any context to be equitably considered in advertising and registration for institutional fellowship schemes. Data on staff applying for and attaining fellowship can help institutions to understand whether all categories of eligible staff are applying and/or succeeding and can support the development of much-needed inclusive structures and support (Ball and Ribchester 2025), as well as appropriate interventions on any areas of under-representation. This would better support third space staff, who work across learning and professional services spaces and activities in their institutions, to understand that fellowship can be for them, and that it may offer the professional benefits explored elsewhere in this article.

I would also encourage broader consideration of the third space outside the institution, namely, which organisations and individuals are in this particular space? How can professional development consider these groups? The reflective act of developing a fellowship has potential to shape the student learning experience for the better; in common with others who have undertaken this journey (Akerman 2020; Ball and Ribchester 2025; Cathcart et al. 2023) I feel I am a better careers practitioner, lecturer, researcher and research manager thanks to the self-reflexivity of the process, and the confidence built. Ultimately, delivering the best possible student learning experience is a common goal across higher education. Understanding the breadth and depth of the third space, and how professional development that supports third space practitioners can contribute to this goal.

I cannot categorically say that applying for Advance HE fellowship was the only way to understand my career journey and construction, and to build professional confidence via recognition and validation. Other forms of accreditation, such as those explored by Jones et al. (2025), may have been equally effective. However, for me, as a readily available, supported approach, the Advance HE fellowship, and subsequently senior fellowship, have been transformative. They have changed for the better how I perceive my expertise and experience, and supported me in articulating this to others, underpinning individual career progression. They have also allowed me to support and encourage others in the third space on similar career journeys. On this basis, I would encourage all third space professionals and those who support and develop them to explore forms of recognition and validation that work within their setting.

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agricultural employment, the disability employment gap, inclusive leadership, management and people development practices and the use of case studies in education.

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