



Careers in the third space



Intro

In recent years, the so-called “third space”, a sector between purely academic work and administration, has gained importance in universities. This session will address how professional and academic career development can be connected in this special area of higher education.

How and why has this “third space” developed?

What can we conceive of under the "third space"?

What career opportunities does the “third space” offer?

Context

University organizational and leadership structures in recent decades have changed worldwide

from a **republic of academics in which institutional autonomy and academic freedom are closely linked** - leadership and decision-making are based on collegial decisions by independent academics

to the **university as stakeholder organisation**, in which institutional autonomy is considered a basis for strategic decision making by leaders who see their primary task as satisfying the interests of major stakeholders - the academic voice is one among multiple interest groups.

Bleiklie, I., & Kogan, M. (2007). Organization and governance of universities. *Higher Education Policy*, 20(4), 477-493.

Context

- The evolving governance structures and legal frameworks are providing more autonomy to universities, but also increase their accountability.
- Universities are no longer represented and managed by a researcher acting as primus inter pares, but by executives with executive powers.
- Bigger and more diverse students' population has changed the role of universities in society, increases the complexity of their organisation and requires efficient governance mechanisms.
- There are clearly articulated societal expectations of universities, particularly in terms of their contribution to the knowledge society, by targeting major societal challenges and by training future knowledge workers.

The Emergence of the Third Space

- As a result of this extension of agendas and activities, there is evidence that the traditional 'binary' between academic and professional roles is breaking down, and that formal employment categories no longer reflect reality.
- Terms such as 'non-academic' and 'support' staff, implying that professional groups are an adjunct to academic colleagues, have become contested.
- Academic staff are also expanding their remit by engaging in areas such as knowledge sharing with society or employability, while retaining responsibility for teaching and research. In this way, cooperation within universities is developing in mixed teams to meet current agendas.
- They meet in the “Third Space”.

Third Space

Whitchurch (2013) defined three types of Third Space:

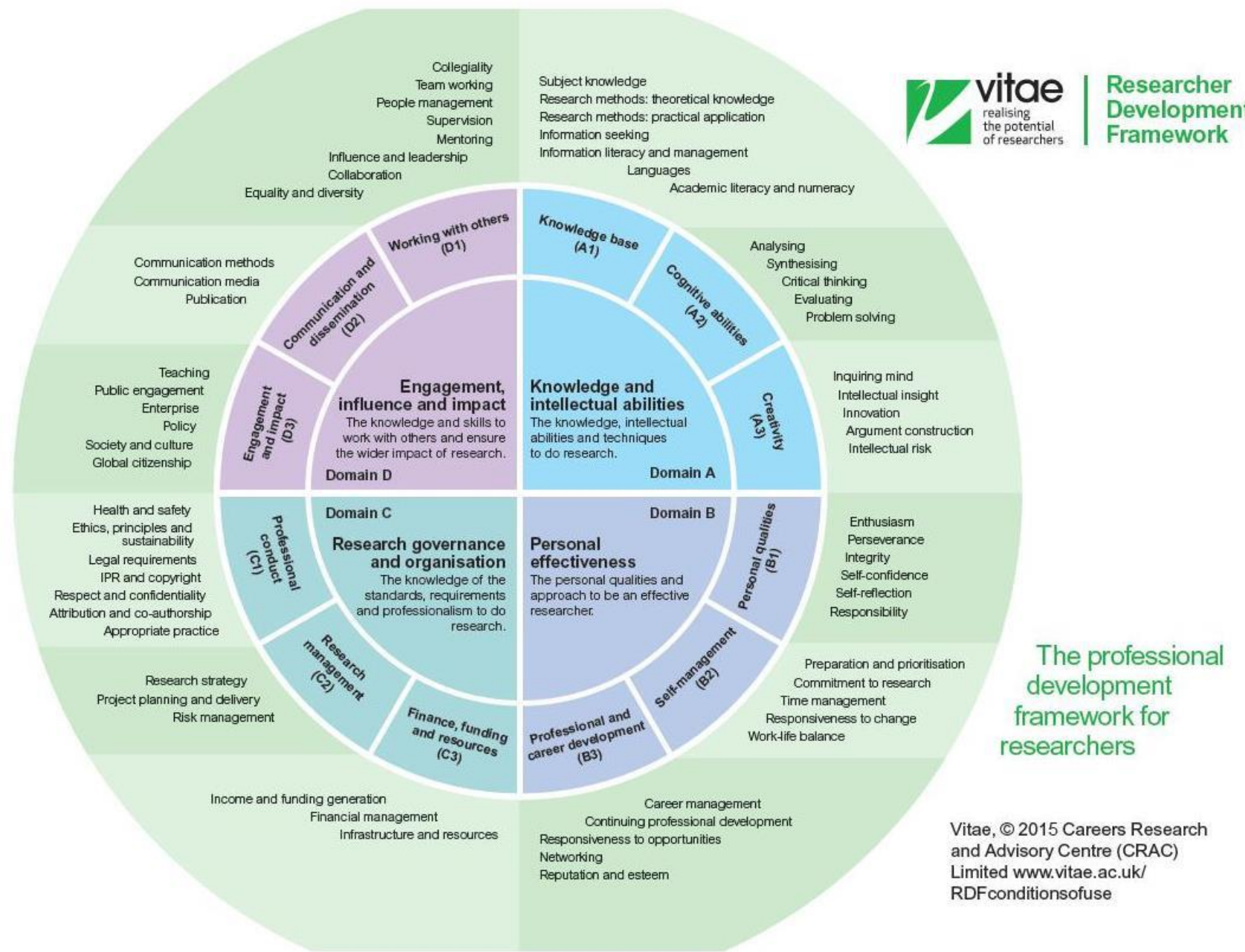
- Independent space: often unstructured, bottom-up driven and arises, at least initially, out of individual collaborations and networks on a temporary or one-off basis for a specific purpose, at least in the beginning remaining under the organisational radar.
- Semi-autonomous space: recognition is granted by the institution to a specific project, has a certain degree of independence and autonomy, e.g. through full or partial self-financing. This can be a transitional phase before full integration
- Integrated space: recognised by the institution and embedded in organisational structures. With clearly defined expectations, it enables individuals to potentially take advantage of their status in the Third Space, working with academic and institutional agendas.

Space for innovations

Areas of Third Space workers

continuous professional development; career counselling; university policy and strategy development; quality assurance; institutional research; widening participation; regional partnership building; public engagement; outreach; knowledge exchange and technology transfer; contributing to the digital transformation agenda; open Science; open innovation; online and blended learning; development of awareness and measures in the context of well-being; securing external funding; ...

Relevant skills needed to operate successfully in the Third Space. (?)



My Recommendations

- Use the fluidity and often vague description of roles and structures to initiate and promote innovative projects in the third space
- Use the lack of protocols and structures to try out new ways of working and experiment with new forms of collaboration.
- Use evidence to prepare for informed decision making by conducting and communicating institutional research and referring to international practices.
- Be aware of the pitfalls, guide others carefully into the third space and create career paths into and out of the third space.

Burning Questions

- What **characterizes** a *Third Space* worker? Is it maybe just an apparently more attractive term for modern administration?
- Can working in the *Third Space* offer a **rewarding career** or is it more of a plan B? Can we prepare for this? Which positions should require a PhD?
- What can we do to ensure that work in the *Third Space* receives the **appropriate recognition**?
- What must we do to **avoid tensions** between administration, *Third Space* professionals and academics?



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