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# Thinking beyond the third space: how can we conceptualise the position of Associate Lecturers in Higher Education?

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## ABSTRACT

This paper aims to conceptualise the changing nature of work within Higher Education that continues in response to a number of drivers, not least the impact of neo-liberal ideas. One important aspect of the discourse on changing work practices is the blurring of historic boundaries between academics and administrators as universities search for more efficient ways of managing resources and inter-disciplinary teams. In particular, the idea of the ‘third space’ has been put forward to explain the emerging dynamics within Higher Education – but how inclusive is this conceptualisation of the working environment within universities? This paper reports on the perceptions of Associate Lecturers of their position within a Business School and suggests that we may need to think beyond the third space in order to understand their experience of work, and explore the possibility of a fourth space. The research was conducted through interviews and informed by Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. The findings support the idea of a fourth space to locate Associate Lecturers and inform a conceptual framework centred on the key findings of context, contract, communication and coherence.

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Associate Lecturer; third space; fourth space; Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

## Introduction

The idea of third space in Higher Education (HE) has generated much research into the changing nature of work in universities across the globe (Whitchurch 2008, 2009, 2010, 2013, 2015) but do we need to provide further development of the idea of space as a concept to understand the diversity of employment in Higher Education? Whitchurch’s thesis is predicated on the confluence of academics and administrators in interdisciplinary working environments in response to competitive pressures. In bringing together the first space of the academic with the second space of the administrator, Whitchurch argues that the third space not only blurs the traditional boundaries between professionals but also offers opportunities for the emergence of new forms of professionalism in HE. This paper aims to make an original contribution by focussing on a gap in the literature, with reference to a set of academic labour that has not featured in Whitchurch’s analysis of HE professionals, namely Associate Lecturers (ALs). This research investigation calls for the exploration of a fourth space within which peripheral academic labour work. Hitherto, the work on academic labour has focussed on those career academics who are subject to short-term contracts (Perez and Montoya 2018) or gender bias (Zheng 2018) but little attention has been paid to those who are not career academics, and have a different career life history. Universities are increasingly characterised by fragmented forms of labour with diverse roles and contractual relationships as professions are being re-moulded under

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neo-liberalism (Schinkel and Noordegraaf 2011; Noordegraaf 2016). This paper sets out to address a key research question: How can we conceptualise the space within which ALs work if not in the first, second or third space identified in the literature? In order to address this research question, the research involved semi-structured interviewing based on Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis methodology and was concluded shortly before the Covid-19 emergency. The idea of a 'fourth space' that is characterised by the individuated nature of work, isolation and the particular contractual contexts within they work makes an original contribution to the discourse on changing professional boundaries under neo-liberalism.

## Literature review

In addition to placing HE within the changing nature of work under contemporary capitalism, this literature review explores three key issues in relation to the re-conceptualisation of 'space' as a way of understanding casualised employment in HE: the impact of neo-liberalism on universities, the changing nature of professional boundaries, and the idea of space as a conceptual tool of changing professional boundaries. This introduction to the idea of space as a bounded employment domain is then followed by a clarification of the role of Associate Lecturers.

### *The changing nature of work under contemporary capitalism*

The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) (2015) report that approximately half the jobs created during 1995 and 2013 were linked to the casualisation of labour and that this process had accelerated over time. In many instances, the casualisation of labour is the result of organisations outsourcing their workforce and the employment of short-term agency staff. Advocates of neo-liberal approaches emphasise the potential for individual agency and career progression. Although Wheaton (2020) recognises that this is seen by many academics as deleterious, there are some academics who find this approach attractive in their search for a work-life balance. Importantly, Kalleberg and Vallas (2018) view contemporary labour markets are characterised not only by changes in the composition and size of the workforce, but also differences in those rewards provided by employers for different categories of employees, which has led to a significant increase in inequality. This 'New Structuralist' approach (Vallas and Prener 2012, 337) has drawn 'attention to organizationally rooted structures and processes that impinge on the inequalities that workers experience on the job'. New Structuralism has therefore offered an alternative theoretical interpretation to that put forward by advocates of neo-liberalism who focus on individual choice in increasingly fluid labour markets (Barley and Kunda 2004; Osnowitz 2010). The casualisation of labour is a significant feature of the impact of neo-liberalism on employment patterns.

### *The impact of neo-liberalism on universities*

Neo-liberal ideas have influenced the policy trajectory of the British State and provided a rationale for changing work practices in the wider economy for four decades. The justification for the adoption of neo-liberal policies has often been justified by reference to traditional liberal principles of freedom and individual choice associated with Victorian liberals such as John Stuart Mill (1869). However, in practice the trajectory of State policy reflects the distinction made by Buchanan (1975) between the 'negative' and 'positive' role of the State in the economy, and for Olssen and Peters (2005, 316) became a 'disciplinary technology for the public sector'. In relation to HE, neo-liberalism has re-oriented the relationship between the State and universities through changes to funding, the expansion and diversification of its student body, and the promotion of performative audit cultures (Desierto and de Maio 2020; Spooner 2020; Erickson, Hanna, and Walker 2021). These changes have been contextualised within an increasingly competitive marketised environment within which

institutions, departments and individuals have become subjects of scrutiny (Ball 2015). It is within this policy context that HE is assessed in terms of 'quality-driven' initiatives such as the Teaching Excellence Framework that grades institutional teaching and the Research Excellence Framework that reports on the research undertaken in universities (Tierney 2019). For Marginson (2004, 2018), the adoption of neo-liberal ideas has, however, not created a fully developed market but rather a state-led quasi-market for HE that is regulated by elite status and the agencies of the regulatory State (Dunleavy 2014). This delicate balance between being market-driven and conscious of wider societal imperatives imposed by the State is evident in such competitive projects as outreach initiatives, employability projects, or well-being programmes. Such is the range of activities that universities are now expected to undertake, that they have been driven to reappraise how they deploy labour in pursuit of their corporate goals. As universities search for ways of mediating through the complexities of this quasi-market, they are changing traditional models of employment and looking at how they deploy their workforce in the most efficacious and efficient manner (Wheaton 2020).

### *The changing nature of professional boundaries*

Scholars have described in differing contexts how the classical model of professionalism has been reappraised following changes in the mode of production under neo-liberalism (Evetts 2009, 2011; Noordegraaf 2016). Noordegraaf (2016) highlights the increasing volatility that exists within professional fields and how professional work is re-configured. This re-assessment of what constitutes professional labour, is reflected in the way professionals work together through the development of cross-professional teams. This shift from vertical forms of professional status and leadership to varieties of horizontal, project-oriented collectives (Thylessfors and Persson 2014) that share responsibility is a significant development that challenges the established boundaries that professions aim to maintain. The implications of Noordegraaf's (2016) are important and infer that we must re-conceptualise the way professionals work and interact with other workers within their organisational fields. This re-appraisal of professional contexts and work shifts our focus away from hierarchical modes of interaction towards more complex forms of connective and interdependent working environments. In asserting the principle of 'boundary-crossing' (Dawkins 2011) in the use of human resources, it undermines the sacred territory of the professional and their claim to legitimacy as the expert in any field. It is within this context of change that the bounded nature of professional work and identities are increasingly blurred.

### *The idea of the third space as a conceptual tool to understand change*

Historically, the work of academics was dissociated from that of others, such as administrators, in HE. However, the idea of academic work as located in a 'protected space' (Anderson 2006) with little interaction beyond research and teaching is increasing moribund. This 'first space' in HE was seen as a sacred domain within which academics exercised autonomy in an egalitarian 'republic of scholars' (Bleiklie 2018). Administrators were assigned to a second and implicitly inferior 'second space' within the topography of employment. This historic separation between first and second spaces has changed in response to demands to develop new forms of team-working and core competencies across institutions (Conway 2012). Whitchurch (2010) offers a conceptualisation of the changing boundaries between workers within HE through the 'third space', 'which is characterised by: contestation, where positioning between competing interests takes place; reconciliation, where collaboration between different categories of worker is fostered; and finally, through reconstruction where some semblance of co-existence is formalised'. For Whitchurch (2008, 2009, 2010, 2013, 2015) such a transformative process involves the emergence of 'blended' professionalism that combined a range of skills and attributes from two or more occupations. Whitchurch (2009, 2010) has cited the practise of integrating administrators and academics together within project-oriented teams for a defined purpose, such as

**Table 1.** A summary of Whitchurch's typology of emergent HE professional identities (Whitchurch 2008).

Category	Characterised by
Bounded professional	Clearly defined and demarcated roles aligned to specified functions
Cross-boundary professional	Extension beyond established work boundaries through flexible working practices in order to foster greater organisational capacity
Unbounded professional	Traditional work boundaries are dispensed with in order to facilitate broad-based organisational initiatives
Blended professional	Specific job roles that span both academic and administrative working environments

marketing, widening participation and knowledge transfer initiatives. For example, Conway (2012), Berman and Pitman (2009) and Veles and Carter (2016) report on the changing nature of administrative roles in a blurring of the first and second spaces in Australia. Those forms of emergent HE professional identities described by Whitchurch (2008) are described below in Table 1.

Whitchurch's analysis of changing work practices in HE is redolent of transformation in wider society as a result of neo-liberal pressures to create ever-more adaptive and cost-efficient organisational systems that are able to respond to exigencies of a marketised HE environment. Such change has important implications for individuals. In her earlier work Whitchurch (2008) had suggested that this third space could provide opportunities for career development within HE as new forms of work role, such as the adaptive project manager, become embedded in organisational practice. However, in later work there is recognition of possible 'paradoxes and dilemmas' (Whitchurch 2015, 4) in which tensions exist between academic and administrators persist as academics defend their original space (Conway 2012).

### *The heterogeneous position of Associate Lecturers (ALs) in the neo-liberal HE labour market*

One example of changing patterns of employment in HE is that of ALs. Moreover, the case of ALs is important because their work does not fit into either the first, second or third spaces as defined by Whitchurch (2008). ALs provide a flexible workforce that can supplement faculty in a clearly defined and limited role. Although the practice of employing ALs varies across the HE system and its attendant nomenclature may vary between institutions, with the descriptors of associate academic, academic tutor, or 'fractionals' (Courtois and O'Keefe 2015) are variously used to describe the AL. For example, there are three different categories of AL employed at a Business School in the north of England that informs this paper. The first describes an AL recruited for a specific purpose and whose tenure is the least secure. Often Practitioner ALs are from other professions who look for occasional work, and are able to bring particular experiences and skills to their work. A second category of Post Graduate Researcher (PGR AL) is a PhD student who undertakes some seminar teaching or marking responsibility to supplement their income. The final category is the Graduate Tutor (GT AL) who is employed to teach up to 6 hours per week, and whose doctoral tuition fees are covered as part of their contract with the university. This particular role is less common in HE than the first two categories. Each has differing terms and conditions of employment, with the GT AL most secure with a five-year contract. The contractual context is important as it not only defines an AL's responsibilities but also their status within the institution. The exemplar of the AL serves as an important indicator of the complexity of the labour market within HE, and how casualised labour is employed.

## **Research method**

### *The pilot exercise*

This research reports on the views of three categories of AL at a single Business School in England. Prior to the main part of the research, a pilot exercise was carried out during 2019 in which 25 ALs were asked to describe their experience of being employed as an AL in an open response format.

Malmqvist et al. (2019) explain that pilot studies aim either to test the feasibility of the research or to pre-test the research instrument, and in doing enhance the quality of the exercise. The pilot comprised four open-ended questions that elicited extended responses from participants, indicating that the research project was feasible and that could generate interesting findings. It also served to refine the rudimentary approach by integrating the key themes generated into the subsequent interview schedule. In particular, this pilot proved useful in that it generated powerful qualitative insights that centred on: the conditions of employment, pay, access to training and poor communication with the wider institution. An indicative sample of these data are described in the Findings and analysis section.

### *The main research exercise*

The main part of the research exercise was conducted shortly before the Covid-19 emergency during 2019–2020 and involved six ALs (see Table 2). As this exercise adopted an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) methodology, the aim was not to collect data from a large sample but aim for in-depth data from a small cohort. IPA is recognised as an appropriate approach in exploring work-based issues such as stress (Gyllensten and Palmer 2006), bullying (Ahmad and Sheehan 2017), as well as identity and status (Gill 2013) and the psychology of meaningful work (Shim, Dik, and Banning 2022). As such, IPA represents a suitable methodology to investigate issues related to asymmetrical power relations within a work setting and the views of participants. Although Turpin et al. (1997) suggest that a sample size of 6 to 8 is ideal, Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) recommend that it range between 3 and 6 for IPA research. For Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009, 51), ‘the issue is quality, not quantity, and given the complexity of most human phenomenon, IPA studies usually benefit from a concentrated focus on a small number of cases’. Given these recommendations for IPA research, the sample is consistent with established IPA research methodology. The identification of potential participants had been purposive in nature in that ‘the aim was to construct a sample that would highlight similarities and differences in the phenomena of . . . employment practices’ across defined clusters of workers, and that would enable ‘convergence and divergence’ (Smith, Flowers, and Larkin 2009, 50). This approach corresponds to a multiperspectival IPA approach where there may be ‘a probable shared perspective upon the phenomenon of interest [and] that focus upon identifying the synthesis, integration, or resonance between the findings’ (Larkin, Shaw, and Flowers 2019, 182–186). Such an approach would not only enable the research to elicit the participants’ views but also the degree to which positioning was shared across the three categories of AL.

Data was generated through a semi-structured interview that was supported by a schedule of eight questions. This schedule of questions was supplemented by targeted questioning that aimed to explore initial responses in greater depth. Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) describe the use of different types of questioning, such as the ‘structural’- *Tell me how you were inducted into this role?* The ‘probe’- *Tell me about the nature of interaction between you and other lecturers-* and the ‘evaluative’- *Do you feel that you have developed your professional repertoire as a result of working here?* The interviews were recorded and transcribed later, with participants validating the transcripts as authentic.

**Table 2.** An overview of the interview participants categorised by AL type and gender.

Gender	Practitioner- AL	GT AL	PGR AL
Male	<b>Fred</b> Worked as HRM manager	<b>Simon</b> Worked in an international car company	<b>Benten</b> Worked as a lecturer outside the United Kingdom
Female	<b>Sally</b> Worked in the retail sector	<b>Theresa</b> Worked in an international retail chain	<b>John</b> Worked in international banking

One possible limitation of this approach from the perspective of a non-IPA researcher, is that this paper did not set out to make claims based on nomothetic data but sought to elicit ideographic data. This prioritisation of an ideographic insight may be viewed by positivist scholars as limiting the transferability of these findings. However, there is a corpus of research that reports on the use of IPA in building theory in such diverse domains as public policy (Fade 2004), Counselling Psychology (Halvorsen et al. 2016), marketing (Thompson-Whiteside, Turnbull, and Howe-Walsh 2018), and management practice (Sengupta, Mittal, and Sanchita 2020). For Fade (2004), ideographic approaches can be useful in providing explanations of a phenomenon. In searching for links between the data and the identification of super-ordinate themes, relationships can be established that serve to develop theoretical understanding of the phenomenon researched. This approach can be tested through comparison with subsequent data and the level of confidence in the theoretical observations arrived at.

A second limitation that is directly related to the setting of the research is the positionality of the researcher. The author had chosen to undertake the research within their workplace as this provided access to a convenient and feasible sample population. The literature reports on the ethical and methodological challenges associated with undertaking empirical research with colleagues (Parry 2018; Wilson 2018; Stoten 2019; Collins and McNulty 2020; Holmes 2020). As an 'indigenous insider' (Banks 1998), the researcher was confronted with the challenge of insider research in the workplace. According to Parry (2018), this insider positionality is both dynamic and evolves during the research itself, and for Holmes (2020) this means that the researcher should engage in reflexive thought throughout. Table 3 includes extracts that include references to interview reflections which constitute part of this reflexive process. The working context to this research and the immediacy of the issues raised were, however, inescapable. It was within this context that the researcher deliberately chose not to close off lines of enquiry that had been generated by the participants, such as the issue of management supervision and communication. In giving voice to the participants, this research sought to align to Yardley's (2000) criteria of qualitative research that emphasises sensitivity to context and its transparency.

### *The interpretation and organisation of data*

The process of analysing interview data was conducted through an iterative reading of the transcripts. As Callary, Rathwell, and Young (2015) describe the analysis of data in an IPA study should take place on two levels. First, on the individual level where emergent codes are identified as in Table 3. This process is followed by a group-level analysis where the codes from each individual are tabulated into a consensus chart. During this process of cross-referencing between the data several approaches were followed to organise the data in a meaningful way. The collation and organisation of these super-ordinate themes is presented in Table 4.

## **Findings and analysis**

### *The findings from the pilot*

A number of issues were generated by the pilot. These issues were as follows: an inferior status compared with full-time academics, the lack of communication with senior management, the lack of professional development, and pay and conditions. Some examples of the comments are presented below:

Table 3. Extracts from the interview transcripts.

	Interview reflections	Emergent themes
<p><b>Simon (GT AL)</b>                      I: . . . what do you do?                      S: It's completely different to my contract. My contract says that that I really should assist in the teaching rather than leading modules. Does that mean that you are being asked to do more than your contractual obligations? S: Well, what's frustrating is the difference between me and other academic staff is probably that they are paid more. I do you think that is because of your function as an AL? Do you think that they don't want to develop ALs? S: I think it depends on the type of AL; there are different types of ALs. For those ALs on the side there may not be, but for younger ALs who are perhaps doing a PhD. You mention type, do you mean a distinction between what I would call a 'pooled' [practitioner] AL and a PGR, or a GT? S: Yes. I do. Does that apply to all ALs, or just some categories of AL? So, do you think which categories of AL get professional development? S: Graduate Tutor contract. OK, so what about what I would call a 'pooled' AL- do they get access? S: No.</p>	<p>Workload is in excess to contract                      Professional development has access to training                      Category of AL                      Inequality in status                      HEA training and mentoring provided for PGR</p>	<p>Incompatible workload with contract                      Unequal pay                      Differences in importance of developing future academics in contrast to practitioner ALs</p>
<p><b>Theresa (GT AL)</b>                      I: You said voice. In a sense, the ALs' voice does not exist automatically. T: No, I would not think so. I think it is very individual. There does not seem to be a platform or a natural place for ALs to meet and discuss . . . There is no forum or structure or place where you could meet and express those types of concerns.</p>	<p>Lack of platform for an AL collective voice. Is this deliberate?</p>	<p>No forum or structure for expression</p>
<p><b>Benten (PGR AL)</b>                      I: How do you think full-time academic staff view ALs? Do they see them as equal? B: I don't think they see them as equal . . . because they come to relieve the demand of their job as permanent lecturers such that they now have time to commit to other things like research. I: Can you tell me about the opportunities for professional development provided to ALs? Do you get the same level of opportunity than an academic would? B: We were told about the HEA training, and after the training we were told that we would be allocated mentors.</p>	<p>Inequality in status                      HEA training and mentoring provided for PGR</p>	<p>Inequality                      Provision of Associate status of HEA</p>
<p><b>John (PGR AL)</b>                      I: Can you tell me what is like being an AL? J: You feel a bit isolated. So even if you are teaching on the same module as a full-time employee you always have his feeling of 'oh, we are not the same' . . . You know at the back of your mind you won't be paid the same as full-time employees. So, as I said before, though we do the same job as the full-time employees, we are not equal and treated fairly. I: Can you tell me about the opportunities for professional development that are provided to ALs? J: There is a lack of coherence. For example, when I became an AL, I was here for two years before they said there is an opportunity to get your associate's HEA.</p>	<p>Lack of team identity and equality in status</p>	<p>Isolated                      View of unfair treatment</p>

(Continued)



Table 3. (Continued).

	Interview reflections	Emergent themes
<p><b>Fred (Para Practitioner AL)</b>                      I: What do you think are the main differences between the role of an AL and other academics? F: I think that there are different levels of AL. Some have a voice, for others it is diluted. I think the example to which I alluded to before is the access to the staff survey, certainly, which to me must be the employee voice mechanism . . . . I just think that having that voice is not there, you know what I mean.</p>		<p>Different levels of AL. No access to staff survey and voice is limited.</p>
<p><b>Sally (Para-Practitioner AL)</b>                      I: How do you think the university views the purpose of the AL role? Sa: They just view them as people to give the extra work to or the work that can't be done, but I don't think they view it as particularly important. Again, because they are not permanent member of staff. It is almost like ALs come and go and it really doesn't matter because they're be somebody else to do it anyway. Practitioner AL's have been given an allocated work space . . . to work in. This means they are even more isolated from full time members of staff, as they hot desk and are not encouraged to work in the offices. . . . While the PGR students have a room designated for them, the AL area has a piece of paper blue tacked to a pillar saying ALs only . . . what message does this send out?</p>	<p>Peripheral function- to mark, not permanent and not valued                      Disparity in work space between practitioner and PGR ALs</p>	<p>Transience                      Pick up work that other people don't want                      Unequal resourcing for differing categories</p>

**Table 4.** Identifying recurrent themes across the interview data.

Super-ordinate theme	Benten	Fred	John	Sally	Simon	Theresa
Inequality	Yes		Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Plug-gaps	Yes		Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Fluid contracts		Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	
Cheap labour	Yes		Yes	Yes	Yes	
Absence of professional development	Yes			Yes		Yes
Absence of employee voice		Yes				Yes
Difference treatment for differing AL categories		Yes			Yes	

The lack of communication . . . . had a demoralising effect . . . never been involved . . . . Definitely feel like a second class citizen.

(Practitioner AL)

'The very nature of the AL contract makes it precarious.

Whilst often ALs are given the impression that a full time contract may follow their work as an AL this is very rarely stated formally . . . . I have been a lecturer for nearly 20 years and use these skills on a daily basis but this is not recognised by the university . . . . Associate Lecturers are seen a stop gap measure to plug gaps in teaching as such, ALs tend to be allocated teaching roles more established staff don't want to do.'

(PGR AL)

'I feel that we are used to do the 'dirty jobs' that seniority do not wish to engage with (e.g. marking) . . . . The casualisation of HE is a real concern . . . . I am paid less than FT lecturing staff, yet in most cases have the same responsibilities.'

(GT AL)

'ALs are viewed as a cost, not an asset . . . . there is little or no perception of ALs'

professional standing on the part of the University . . . . There is little evidence of direct questions to managers being listened to, let alone their opinion from surveys.'

(Practitioner AL)

'Associate Lecturers do not get enough training/professional development opportunities. If opportunities are available they are often unpaid . . . . There are infinitely more opportunities for Permanent, Full Time Staff.'

(Practitioner AL)

'Totally ignored by senior leadership . . . as demonstrated by [the] staff survey, which was not distributed to all ALs.'

(Practitioner AL)

### **Reflection on the data derived from the pilot**

Importantly, the pilot generated significant levels of convergence across the sample. In particular, the data relating to being ignored and not having access to expressing their views in the staff survey was clustered into the theme of communication. This issue of poor or non-existent communication can be linked to perceptions of status. This was explicated through references to the lack of professional development, demoralisation, as well as the reference to being a second class citizen. However, at the root of discussions is the core issue of the AL contract which was evident in the idea of ALs being regarded as going work than academics did not want and inferior pay and conditions. Interestingly, at this juncture in the research, little appeared little divergence across the sample.

### *Extracts from the interviews*

Interviewing ALs was undertaken to provide triangulation with the initial findings from the pilot research. The organisation of the interview data was undertaken using IPA methodology as recommended by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) and Pietkiewicz and Smith (2012), and later modified in Stoten (2019). An indicative representation from the interviews using this approach is presented in Table 3.

An important aspect of the analytic process was to identify possible correspondence between the themes generated by the pilot and in the final data set. Those themes identified in the pilot were: inferior status, a lack of communication, the lack of professional development, as well as pay and conditions. Importantly, further elaboration on these initial themes would enhance the rigour of the research as well as providing a richer insight. In addition, the analysis of transcripts raised the possibility of identifying differences between ALs and their respective category. The process of coding, developing initial themes and identifying patterns within the data was conducted using abstraction, polarisation and contextualisation, which was then followed by the tabulation of super-ordinate themes as recommended by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009). Initially, 89 codes had been identified and these were subsequently coalesced into 25 clustered themes. These clusters were thematised into 7 super-ordinate themes that were then ranked in terms of frequency. The most common super-ordinate themes in order to frequency identified were: inequality; plug gaps; fluid contracts; cheap labour; absence of professional development; absence of employee voice; and different treatment for differing categories of AL.

There appeared to be a significant correlation between those themes generated by the pilot and the super-ordinate themes produced through in-depth interviews. For example, the issue of status and equality was replicated by discussions with Benten and John. Interestingly, lack of communication with management was further developed with concerns raised in relation to employee voice by Theresa and Fred. Concerns in relation to pay and conditions generated by the pilot were exemplified by comments from John and Simon. Importantly, the difference between different types of AL and their contractual positions emerged in discussions with Simon and Fred. The disparity in entitlement and support is also illustrated by Sally's reference to the provision of research facilities and accommodation provided for PGR ALs compared to that afforded to practitioner ALs. Finally, the issue of professional development highlights this disparity between ALs, with PGRs (and GT) ALs having access to mentoring for HEA accreditation whereas practitioner ALs are not provided with any training. This disparity in entitlement is indicative not only of different contractual relationships with the university but also of differing conceptions of practitioner ALs as transient labour and PGR and GT ALs as future academics.

### **Discussion**

The evidence generated infers that ALs recognise that their role and associated status is clearly defined and delimited status through their contract and that they feel disempowered. This finding corresponds with a New Structuralist perspective (Kalleberg and Vallas 2018; Kalleberg 2012) that aligns casualised labour to particular contractual relationships. Compared with main scale lecturers, ALs are not able to deploy similar amounts of social or cultural capital. For example, the contractual vulnerability of ALs means that they do not possess the same level of economic capital as unionised lecturers possess, nor the potential to engage meaningfully in collective bargaining. Their constrained role and lack of publications /doctoral qualification may also mean that ALs are less capable of utilising a similar level of economic and social capital compared with full-time tenured academic staff. In this respect, the findings appear to echo the view of Stoltenkamp, van de Heyde, and Siebrits (2017) who suggest that the vested interests of established professional boundaries inhibit significant boundary crossing (Dawkins 2011). As such, the role of ALs is inevitably restricted to the role of 'gap-filler' and with this their status. In terms of Whitchurch's typology of professional identities, the

findings approximate to the idea of the 'bounded professional' and serve to reinforce the idea of academia as being insulated from significant structural change (Anderson 2006). Given the nature of their work and status, ALs should be regarded as being a form of contractually determined peripheral and marginalised labour.

The purpose of the research exercise is to explore the validity of the third space as theoretical location for the working practices of ALs. It would appear, however, that the notion of the third space cannot adequately describe the marginalised nature of AL employment. Indeed, this research points to the limitations to the idea of an egalitarian republic of scholars (Bleiklie 2018) as ALs are not regarded as career academics. Moreover, working practices suggest that the notion of horizontal collectives (Thylessfors and Persson 2014) cannot be applied to the ALs' working environment as vertical hierarchies persist and characterise universities as workplaces. Instead, we should look to conceptualise the nature of AL's work in a separate way- as a 'fourth space'- not least in order to promote a future research agenda that could build on this work and previous research (Courtois and O'Keefe 2015). This fourth space is characterised in terms of insecure employment, little opportunity for professional development and isolation both from standard managerial and communication systems. The most prominent feature that emerges from the data is that those who work in this fourth space as ALs feel exploited and disregarded as professionals. Furthermore, we can see in the differences in the data generated by the three category of AL that there are variations in the internal dynamics within the fourth space that infer that this is not a uniform environment. In order to conceptualise the fourth space, and provide a framework for exploration, four key issues are identified in Figure 1. These issues are: the personal context of each individual; the nature of their contract with the institution; the nature of communication between ALs and the wider academic and administrative community; and the degree of coherence across ALs within the workplace. These observations have important implications for human resource strategy and management practices within HE in terms of equity, efficacy, and how workers are valued. Furthermore, the idea of the fourth space could be extended to other forms of zero-hour contract labour that are employed within HE. As such, the idea of a fourth space provides further scope for re-conceptualising the nature of employment practices within universities.

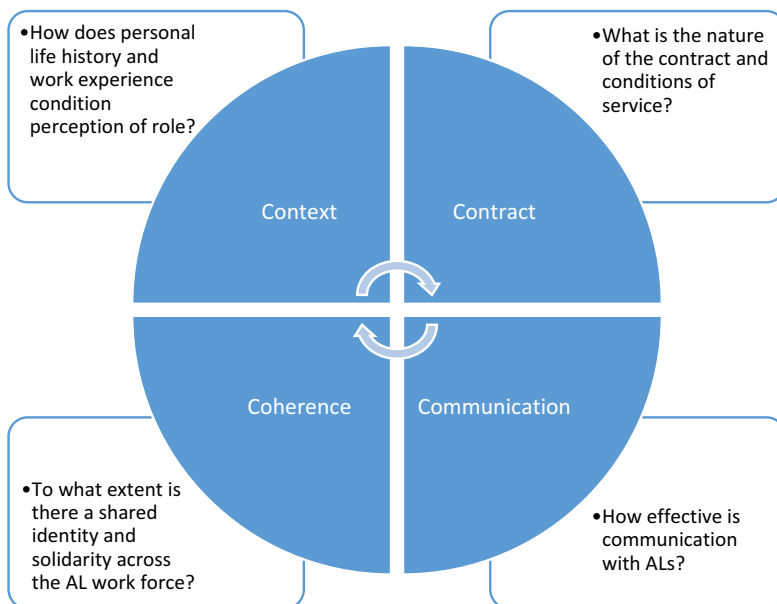


Figure 1. The key issues in exploring the fourth space.

Importantly, although all three categories of AL shared some common perceptions that related to their security in employment, their lack of representation within the university and how they were treated as colleagues, there were also important divergences that were the consequence of their particular contractual relationship with the university. In particular, the position of the practitioner AL appears to be the most disadvantaged, especially in terms of the insecurity in their employment and lack of opportunities for professional development. Importantly, the very different nature of the contracts for each of these three categories of AL determines their potential for secure employment, training and employee voice. Whereas the GT and PGR possess some degree of protection as a consequence of their contracts, practitioner ALs are afforded no such protection and are employed on the basis of short-term periods that are often restricted to a semester. As practitioner ALs are not viewed as future academics, they are excluded from much of the training provided for GT and PGR ALs and often experience isolation from the wider community. This important observation reinforces New Structuralist ideas on how contractual relationships lead to differences across the workforce. The lack of skills development, insecurity in employment and insecurity in tenure, are important issues that should be followed up in future research both within Business Schools and across HE sectors internationally. Although ALs recognised common concerns, the data suggests that there was no semblance of an emergent solidarity or collective consciousness. This observation is unsurprising given the way ALs are recruited, employed, and managed.

## Conclusion

This paper set out to address a key research question: How can we conceptualise the space within which ALs work, if not in the first, second or third space identified in the literature?

This investigation points to differences in the experiences and opportunities available to differing categories of AL, and the need to conceptualise their work in context. In doing so, the findings echo New Structuralist thought, such as Kalleberg's (2012) stance on the bifurcation of labour into good and bad jobs under neo-liberalism. The findings also support the view of Vallas and Prener (2012) that new forms of inequality originate in the workplace because of organisational structures and practices. In short, the emergence of new forms of casualised employment is the by-product of both systemic and institutional change that is intended to reconstruct academic labour in HE.

The idea of the fourth space is proffered as a way of understanding the position of ALs in the HE employment context. Although the concept of the third space (Whitchurch 2008) has contributed to the reappraisal of working relationships within universities, it is limited in terms of focus. The contribution of Noordegraaf (2016) not only highlights the volatility of casualised labour but leads us to consider the changing nature of professional identity and what it means to be a professional. The fourth space is intended to provide a conceptual framework within which to explore the positions of those who are not included in the first, second and third spaces, and are therefore excluded from discussions on work practices and professional status in HE. The four Cs framework is proffered as a way of conceptualising the nature of this fourth space, and focusses on the core issues: context; contracts; communication; and, coherence. As future researchers explore the nature of casualised academic labour in HE, this conceptual framework will provide an issues-led way of encapsulating the discourse within the literature. For example, the issue of coherence will serve as an important indicator of the development of a shared identity across ALs.

In specific terms, the divergence between the Practitioner, PGR and GT categories is an important outcome that is ultimately tied to their contractual relationship with the university. As the GT role is predicated based on a five-year contract with specified hours of work, this category is the most secure of the three categories of AL. In contrast, both the Practitioner and PGR AL is employed on a short-term basis, invariably one semester at a time. The importance of the contractual relationship cannot be over-stated as it determines how far an AL is integrated into the university's managerial and communication systems, as well as their security in employment. The views of 'practitioner' ALs are not sought by the university in staff surveys, nor are they allocated a line manager as recognised

full-time and part-time academic staff are. Moreover, both the GT and the PGR AL enjoy a particular privilege that Practitioner ALs do not. Since both the GT and PGR ALs are doctoral researchers, they integrated into the wider research community within the university and with this the facility to network with others. This means that not only are Practitioner ALs isolated but and are also excluded from much of the activity associated with working in a university. Further research into the process of identity formation within casualised academic labour within HE could explore those barriers to shared identity and collective action.

This paper makes an original contribution to the discourse on working in Higher Education through this insight into the experiences of casualised academic labour and its conceptualisation through the fourth space. In adopting an approach based on IPA, this research exercise generated rich data that provides a multiperspectival (Larkin, Shaw, and Flowers 2019) insight into both the convergence and divergences between the experiences of ALs and the different categories of AL. This method could usefully be applied in future studies that explore issues in the workplace and that are related to inequality and exclusion. The idea of the fourth space provides researchers a conceptual frame within which to investigate evolving relationships within academic labour. Future research could explore, for example, the ways in which tenured full-time academics interact with ALs in multi-skilled teaching teams, or the contribution of specially trained ALs to online learning and module development projects. As universities look to outsource some of their provision, is there a role for ALs in delivering some of the curriculum so as to enable full-time academic staff to concentrate on research? Moreover, given that many ALs possess valuable professional experience, research could usefully explore how best to integrate this resource into applied forms teaching and learning. This research agenda could be applied to a variety of contexts within HE, including comparison between research intensive and research applied institutions in the UK, and internationally.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

## Notes on contributor

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