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Higher Education Practitioners' Experience in a Global Pandemic: Reflections on the Everyday and How to Bring in Critical Perspectives

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I am honoured by writing to you today from the unceded and traditional lands of the Coast Salish peoples. I am also humbled by the privilege of being safe from the catastrophic floods, landslides, and mudslides that many of our families, friends, and colleagues are navigating in the lower mainland of British Columbia at this time.

I write this reflection from my perspective as an international education practitioner and administrator, but also as a doctoral student in the Faculty of Education at Simon Fraser University. The intersection of these identities presents a perspective that is informed by my lived reality of what internationalization of higher education is, in the Canadian context. It is this space, between theory and practice of internationalization of higher education, where my research interests lie. I am specifically focused on the experience of higher education staff members. This is of particular interest in the current context of the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on the internationalization of higher education.

As we enter 2022 and are nearing the end of the second year of the pandemic, I am struck by the magnitude at which higher education institutions have adapted to this new reality. Emerging practices include [crisis communication, widespread shifts to virtual delivery of classes, alternative forms of student mobility, and internationalization at home initiatives](#). With each adaptation, new academic, pedagogical, operational, and administrative terrain has to be navigated.

Of particular interest is how staff members have to adapt, pivot, and be flexible to ever-changing circumstances. Celia Whitchurch (2015, 2018) has explored the emergence of new actions and understandings of staff roles and responsibilities in higher education institutions. She uses the concept of “Third Space” to highlight the negotiation of relationships and power dynamics as it applies to the higher education environment. Whitchurch (2015) also typifies the concept “Third Space Professional” as those that develop new knowledge in practice constantly by applying their expertise to complicated tasks. The “Third Space” in higher educational contexts is fraught with paradoxical situations. For example, staff need to respond to external pressures that meet both policy and academic needs and work through challenges, agendas, and perceptions of a range of interests that require negotiation and flexibility (Whitchurch, 2015). To successfully manage this, Third Space Professionals exhibit skills, such as adaptability, creativity, improvisation, and negotiation (Whitchurch, 2018). Working in this space, where something new emerges, Third Space Professionals work through frustration and challenges by involving a degree of struggle, negotiation, persistence, and courage (Whitchurch, 2015). And yet, much of this work

remains or has become increasingly invisible, a phenomenon observed by Szekeres, in studies on higher education staff roles in the early 2000s (Szekeres, 2004; 2006).

While this leads me to conclude that higher education staff continue to work and operate in a context where they are assumed, and indeed, expected to have the skills and navigate through tensions and challenges in their everyday work. Some of these tensions are navigating between policy and practice, while other tensions relate to personal values and ethical quandaries. Now is the time to ask ourselves, our colleagues, and our leaders some difficult questions. For me, posing these questions will bring staff members' experiences to light. This can lead to inclusive, ethical approaches to the operations and administration of internationalization of higher education. It also has implications for more equitable and just practices in our sector throughout the pandemic.

Some questions to reflect on include:

- How can we better support our practitioners?
- What supports, knowledges, or spaces do staff members need as they navigate through key paradoxes in their work?
- How can we empower practitioners to have more agency in their daily work?
- How can practitioners bring critical perspectives to their everyday work, without being marginalized?

How can practitioners make the everyday experience of internationalization of higher education, and the challenges that they navigate and work through to be recognized, honoured, and appreciated?

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