Teamwork and regional universities

The benefits for women of a third space

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This article reports on the findings of a study that explored the benefits and challenges for women of working at an Australian regional university in early 2020 before the COVID-19 pandemic. It examines whether living and working at a regional university with dispersed campuses presented particular challenges for women and whether it had an impact on their career progression. Twenty-one women supplied written responses to a list of questions provided by the researchers. The main finding was that women enjoyed working in teams and preferred flexibility, autonomy and positive teamwork environments. To address challenges identified in the study about working across dispersed campuses and the limitations of virtual communication, particularly in the current pandemic, the article investigates the feasibility of a blended approach to teamwork using the concept of a third space.

Keywords: gender, working in teams, career mobility, dispersed campuses, third space

Introduction

This article examines the experiences of academic and professional women working in teams across dispersed campuses at an Australian regional university. Staff with 'professional', including administrative, roles are those not employed to undertake academic work. It uses a gendered lens to analyse the issues raised in the literature review about the challenges of working in teams and leadership and boundaryless careers, while exploring a third space framework in response to the issues raised in this research in which diverse groups could form democratic collaborative teams and meet in a blend of physical and virtual environments as a means of potentially resolving these challenges.

Regional universities make an important contribution to and are closely linked with regional economies and communities as well as national development (RUN, 2021). They attract and retain diverse cohorts – including first-in-family and regional and rural students and staff. As Goriss-Hunter and Burke (2015, p. 112) note: 'a regional university can act productively as a hybrid space that bridges the known (rural working-class experience) and the unknown or unreachable option (metropolitan university) for some people, particularly ... people like ourselves who come from rural working-class backgrounds'.

Literature Review

The literature review examines women working in teams including the strategy of intentional invisibility, career theory, the concept of a third space as a way of building collaborative workplaces, and the challenges of this approach.

Working in teams

Working in teams has become an integral industry strategy (Lau *et al.*, 2014) especially in higher education (HE) amongst professional and academic staff (Burgess, 1994; Gast, Schildkamp, & van der Veen, 2018; Koeslag-Kreunen, M. & Van der Klink, M. *et al.*, 2018; Posthuma & Said, 2012). This is particularly relevant to women in universities who have demonstrated preference for working collaboratively and are generally employed as professional staff or as lower-level academic staff (Cullinan, 2018; Francis & Stulz, 2020; Kuhn & Villeval, 2013). The term 'team' might focus on

collaborative teamwork; groups dependent on leadership authority and guidance; groups comprised of different members constructing diverse knowledge; and democratic collectives. Thus, a team could be defined as 'a collection of individuals who are interdependent in their tasks, who share responsibility for outcomes, who see themselves and who are seen by others as an intact social entity embedded in one or more larger social systems [for example, a business unit or a corporation], and who manage their relationships across organisational boundaries' (Cohen & Bailey, 1997, p. 241). A general definition of 'university teams' could then be a group of two or more staff who are working together to complete university business or a specific project. While tertiary institutions themselves could be considered to be a 'team' or group of individuals working together towards a common purpose, universities encompass a range of what could be called formal and informal teams – faculties, departments/schools, research groups, informal collegial collaborations and joint ventures with external stakeholders.

The ability to form teams within a university could be different for academic and professional staff. Academic teaching is usually an autonomous and lone activity (Koeslag-Kreunen, M. & Van der Klink, M. *et al.*, 2018). Individual achievement for academics is often privileged over teamwork regarding teaching evaluations, tenure, and promotion policies and processes (Burgess, 1994) which contrasts with women's preference for collaborative teamwork (Kuhn & Villeval, 2013). There is a body of literature concerning professional (also known as administrative) staff, most of whom are women in Australian universities, and their membership of teams, especially on what might constitute effective leadership and teamwork (Burgess, 1994; Kezar *et al.*, 2020; Koeslag-Kreunen & Van den Bossche, P. *et al.*, 2018). In general, it is argued that good leadership is evident in functional teams and effective teamwork is demonstrated in cohesive teams where the cooperative collaboration generally preferred by women is foundational and the knowledge, skills and performance of team members are enhanced by developing planning, communication, problem-solving and negotiating skills (Burgess, 1994; Kezar *et al.*, 2020; Koeslag-Kreunen & Van den Bossche, P. *et al.*, 2018; Lau *et al.*, 2014; Müceldili & Erdil, 2015).

The rapidly changing landscape of teamwork in universities has been impacted by globalisation, managerialism, neo-liberal narratives and funding cuts (Blackmore, 2020). Now the challenges from COVID-19 and boundaries between teams and team members' positions in the institution have led to a re-thinking of how teams might work in higher education. Various perspectives have emerged that might be useful for women working in higher education, and particularly in the university investigated in this study that operates with a blended delivery of services edging towards online delivery, spread across dispersed campuses. These elements include collaborative leadership and teams operating within a third space that combines the expertise of both academic and professional staff.

Groups and Teams

Women working in universities have demonstrated a preference for collaboration and teamwork (Cullinan, 2018; Kuhn & Villeval, 2013). Eveline's (2004) study of leadership in an Australian university identified what she called 'ivory basement leadership' and 'intentional invisibility' as women spoke about the devaluing of their work. These administrative staff, research assistants and junior academics, who increasingly are casual workers, were forging an almost invisible exercise of leadership that valued personal relationships, loyalty and diversity and was creative, flexible and collaborative.

Ballakrishnen, Fielding-Singh and Magliozzi (2019) argued that some women employ an 'intentional invisibility' strategy that rejects traditional concepts of the sole leader who takes charge of a group (Wassenaar & Pearce, 2012). Instead, they adopt a collectivist approach to working so that they can retain a sense of self-respect by working 'in the background' and therefore have the capacity to balance professional and personal responsibilities and argue that:

> By remaining behind the scenes and valuing communal, collaborative work, women who embrace intentional invisibility reject—rather than seeking to embody—the masculine norm of the ideal worker … (women) who embrace invisibility often acknowledge that doing so may limit their opportunities for advancement, but nonetheless turn to the strategy to avoid conflict, project an authentic self, and gain a sense of stability (Ballakrishnen *et al.*, 2019, p.26).

Thus, women employ this strategy despite the risk of losing visibility, which is conventionally perceived to be vitally important for career advancement (Correll & Mackenzie, 2016).

Career Theory

Career theory focusing on career progression and personal evaluations of success can elucidate women's work preferences and styles. It is acknowledged that general approaches to careers and employability are changing (Arthur *et al.*, 2005; Hamori, 2010). Sullivan & Arthur (2006) developed the idea of a boundaryless career by identifying two forms of career progression: physical and psychological mobility. The former refers to employees changing jobs and occupations and/or shifting between organisations. The latter focuses on the individual's own understanding of available career structures and their perceptions of how these frameworks and processes might enable or constrain their mobility as well as how they might transcend any perceived limitations.

Having a successful career is a dominant theme in the literature in this field. Researchers such as Hamori (2010) have tended to focus on the physical dimensions of mobility, for example measuring career success in terms of factors such as salary and job title. It could be argued, though, that to understand what factors comprise a successful career, more subjective elements of day-to-day working life need to be taken into consideration. These elements include emotional investment in the job, a sense of happiness, agency and autonomy, employees feeling valued, the development of positive work relationships, and maintaining work-life balance (Arthur *et al.*, 2005; Sullivan & Arthur, 2006).

Other research has suggested women prefer to work collaboratively in teams (for example, Kuhn & Villeval, 2013) but at the same time demonstrate 'less confidence about their own abilities' (Thompson, 2013). While male workers tend to favour working by themselves 'women are generally more focused than men on collaborative work and personal rather than physical work conditions and career mobility in what could be described as boundaryless careers based on co-operation and teamwork' (Thompson, 2013).

Regional universities also provide a variety of physical, social and cultural features that enable a range of students to establish themselves as successful learners.

Third Space

A 'third space' is derived from Homi Bhabha's (2004) concept of a territory in which two different cultures intersect and, drawing on elements of both groups, a unique culture is established. This 'in-between' space enables the formation of new identities and suggests different ways of moving beyond binary thinking, especially in terms of the lived experiences of group members (Soja, 1996). There are democratic and collaborative aspects to this concept where elements from both cultures are equally drawn upon and valued. The dynamic and cooperative nature of third spaces reflects the type of collective teamwork that women prefer (Cullinan, 2018; Kuhn & Villeval, 2013). Technology can also play a significant role in establishing third spaces (MacFarlane, 2011; Schuck, Kearney, & Burden, 2017) which may be especially relevant in a world that is still coming to terms with COVID-19.

The third space in contemporary universities is defined by the authors as a territory where new or re-invented forms of university activities that exceed traditional academic and professional portfolio binaries and conventional work identities can form democratic collaborations across physical and technologically mediated space.

With the growing encroachment of administration and management into academia, and professional staff becoming more involved in projects that include research and teaching, the notion of hybrid third spaces as territories that include diversified teams of academic and professional staff engaging with boundary crossing projects is gaining traction (MacFarlane, 2011; Whitchurch, 2018). Maintaining traditional work boundaries is increasingly perceived as not being conducive to an efficient working environment (Sebalj, Holbrook, and Bourke, 2012). Whitchurch's (2018) recent study found that new work roles had been created for both professional and academic staff who were expected to be highly mobile and flexible. Exploring third spaces therefore provides a useful means of examining the perceptions and experiences of staff who work across traditional boundaries in HE institutions (Whitchurch, 2008; Locke, Whitchurch & Marini, 2019).

A third space is particularly useful when conceptualising regional universities as territories where multiple discourses co-exist. As Goriss-Hunter and Burke (2015, p. 112) note:

> Interconnections between the regional university, a diverse student population, and the local community interactionally construct a collective Third Space in which students ... are enabled to re-imagine themselves as participants in higher education and translate these re-imaginings and fantasises into real life experiences.

Regional universities also provide a variety of physical, social and cultural features that enable a range of students to establish themselves as successful learners. In these diverse and flexible discourses of regional universities, third space territories create new options for learning, teaching and collaborative project work with various teams. So, the concept of a third space might enable universities to provide space for women to work more often in the collaborative manner they prefer.

Challenges

There are nevertheless challenges for teams working collaboratively in higher education. One is ensuring that workloads are evenly distributed and fairly allocated (Kyndt *et al.*, 2011). Group members can perceive that they have been assigned a greater workload if their task is overly complicated (Gupta, Li & Sharda, 2013). To ensure they do not feel overloaded when assigned complex tasks, it is important to communicate with them and understand their analysis of what is entailed (Braarud, 2001; Kyndt *et al.*, 2011). Another challenge is achieving genuine team cohesiveness (Michalski & King, 1998; Müceldili & Erdil, 2015). Thus, creating and maintaining a positive working environment for teams can itself be an issue (Seppälä & Cameron, 2015).

Methodology

This study uses an inductive approach to analyse participants' written responses to questions (Denshire, 2014; Thomas, Thomas & Smith, 2019; Tomaselli, 2013) about the benefits and challenges of working at an Australian regional university with dispersed campuses.

The participants responded to an email the principal researcher circulated through the university e-newsletter inviting all women employed either full time, part-time or as casuals to participate in a research project titled 'The challenges for women working in Australian regional universities' which had approval from the university's Human Research Ethics Committee.

In total, 21 women participated in the study and returned written responses addressing the list of questions that was emailed to them (see Appendix 1). The responses were anonymised, analysed and common themes identified. In the article, direct quotes from participants are identified by the letter P followed by a number. For example, P4 stands for Participant 4.

Findings

Ten of the 21 participants were professional staff working at Higher Education Worker (HEW) levels 2, 5, 6, 7, 8 or 9 (a senior role). One was a teacher in the vocational education and training division. Ten were academics, half of them at Level B or lecturer level. The study clearly demonstrated that traditional notions of linear career progression have been replaced by strong preferences for boundaryless careers (Thompson, 2013).

Workplace benefits

Participants identified the chief benefits of their work as flexibility, autonomy, financial rewards, a regional workplace, and a positive working environment which included productive and enjoyable teamwork, as discussed below.

The key benefit of working at the university was flexibility, mentioned by 12 of the 21 participants. This encompassed flexible work hours, working from home (which was particularly appealing for women with young children), and not being micro-managed. These findings reflect earlier research (Lewis Campbell & Huerta, 2008; White, 2014;). One participant commented: 'My job also allows me flexibility, such as working at home one day a week, which is important while the children are still young' (P18). Flexibility played out in several ways, as another explained: 'I have a 'wiggle room' to meet the expectations of the role. I can happily work at home at night, or on weekends – I work hard to ensure I am fulfilling all my duties as I am grateful for the ability to have the role' (P9). It was clear that this staff member was conscientious about getting the work done, even when working from home, and appreciated having the job. Several reported that they could bring their children to work if necessary. Generally, working in higher education provided 'flexibility, variety, opportunities that don't occur in industry' (P8).

Some participants considered that autonomy was a key benefit; for example, providing 'freedom, independence and forcing me to be creative' (P7), 'There is a fair amount of autonomy to determine my goals and how I achieve them' (P4) and 'autonomy, and the ability to choose which days I work' (P10). These responses resonate with Riordan's (2011, p. 118) observation that freedom and autonomy 'encourage, retain and accelerate the success of academics'.

Working at a regional university was crucially important, reflecting Wallace's (2005) research, as one participant described: 'The opportunity to live and work in a regional location and to be able to work flexibly as needed when family and other circumstance require this' (P16). Others said that the university being close to home was a benefit; for example, as it was 'local, [and] not travelling [to other cities]' (P13).

A further benefit was a good working environment which included meeting interesting people and 'great team, opportunities for professional development' (P2). There were also advantages in 'always learning' (P1); 'being in a learning environment which I really enjoy' (P3); the 'ability to have a stimulating, challenging and fulfilling role' (P9); 'Every [sic] changing roles that provide new opportunities that keep me interested and motivated' (P14); and 'unexpected challenges that feels like problem solving' (P7).

Working with other staff was another benefit; for example, 'I enjoy the university community' (P4); 'good colleagues' (P13); 'collegiality' (P16); 'mental stimulation [and] working with other academics' (P15); 'networks of colleagues ... making a difference in my field' (P10); 'supportive and hard-working colleagues amongst both the academic and professional teams' (P14); and 'a good team to work with that is well-organised' (P3). Job satisfaction and internal and external engagement were also important: 'contributing to the academic and local community, promoting STEM for women, industry collaboration' (P21).

Interaction with students was an additional bonus: 'It allows me to work in an area I'm passionate about, to teach students who share my passion, to read widely and think deeply' (P18). Others identified 'being in a learning environment which I really enjoy, supporting students' (P3) and 'making a difference to students' (P15) as important, while the following participant thoughtfully reflected on her part in the students' educational development: 'I get to be part of the students' journey. I can see them change from the first week to the end of their first semester. I know that the university will change their life' (P6). Being student focused had benefits for staff: 'Finding a solution for those challenges translates in help for students which gives

me a sense of personal satisfaction and purpose' (P7). These responses echo various studies that have demonstrated the benefits of student-centred approaches to learning (Asoodeh, Asoodeh & Zarepour, 2012; Laal & Ghodsi, 2012).

In summary, staff valued the flexibility that working at the institution provided. They also enjoyed working at a regional university because it was close to where they lived. Further, autonomy, not being micro-managed and being challenged by their role were important. They were generally positive about their working environment, although one observed that 'some people in middle management like to control your hours even though I have great work outputs' (P12). Interaction with students was a key benefit for several participants – watching them develop, helping them and making a difference to their lives.

Working in Teams

Participants were asked to describe their work team/s (past and present, if relevant) and their relationships within the team. Most reported that they worked in productive teams and enjoyed working with their colleagues, for example:

> I work in a great team. There are about 12 at my location within the broader team and I get along with everyone. I find them supportive and friendly. Members of the team at other locations are also friendly and helpful. We meet via Skype regularly and I feel connected to them (P2).

The team described here worked across several campuses. While the need to travel between campuses could be a challenge, team members were described as 'friendly and helpful' and one participant had a strong sense of connection with everyone in the team. Others also reported positive experiences: 'I have a good rapport and relationship with my current team. We work closely together, and I believe I am a good role model' (P20); 'we still enjoy excellent collegiality internally and with our diverse research partners' (P16) and 'We have a strong team marked by mutual respect and open communication' (P18). Interaction with the team could be so constructive that it led to socialising with colleagues:

> I have worked in some amazing teams during my time at the University and it is what keeps me here. The staff are amazing and having a supportive team has assisted me in challenging times as I have been heavily involved and personally affected by three major restructures during the past ten years. I have developed some close relationships at the University and the people I now consider to be friends and I now socialise with many outside work. (P4)

However, while staff demonstrated goodwill towards the university and students, it was felt that this was not always reciprocated, and this increased the levels of stress for staff.

Stress generated by high workloads could have an impact on work teams, as this participant described: 'Previously team teaching across campuses worked very well with goodwill on all sides, however with the latest iteration of workloads ... Cross campus teaching is not as easy as it once was' (P8). Thus, cross campus teaching could produce challenges for teams. For example, one woman explained: 'I work with my colleagues via email or phone. All interactions I have with everyone are really positive. However, sometimes, rather than feeling like we are a team, I feel like I am an outsider requesting things' (P7). Thus, working across campuses left her feeling like she was not part of the team and rather than choosing 'invisibility' as a strategy, she was rendered unintentionally 'invisible' by working on an outlying campus. Another argued that the university did not have appropriate policies and procedures to support such teams:

> The cross-campus school team has had some 'interesting' politics that directly relate to the differences between campus locations and student cohorts – it has been a positive experience but building relationships within this team has been a journey. The change in the upper management level over the past three years and the change in my role ... has added to the complexity of these relationships. I have found that the general university policies and procedures do not always seem to support multi-campus locations (P17).

The suggestion here was that constant change in management and in staff roles together with dispersed campuses had created more complexity in team environments and positioned them as what Gherardi (1995) described as 'outsiders on the inside'. Some of these participants therefore chose an 'intentional invisibility' as an agentic response to workplace reorganisation.

Changes in the structure and focus of work teams could also be challenging:

> Past work teams – have largely been faculty-oriented. They were very collegiate; inclusive, focussed on staff development and varied in projects. The current work team – more 'central' support. It is less varied and provides less opportunity for development and initiative (P19).

These changes had led to fewer opportunities for team members and suggested there was less job satisfaction which in some cases, could lead to the adoption of 'intentional invisibility' as a strategy of resistance and agency.

However, not all teams functioned collaboratively. For example, the following academic reported that: 'Most staff respect me because I am intelligent, but some treat me as an inferior being because I am sessional and do not have a PhD' (P6), indicating a two-tier academic workforce and collective rendering of 'invisibility' for the staff member. Another participant described how she worked with a challenging team member and deft management was required to achieve optimal results: 'I have always tried to bring maximum communication to each team to ensure common

understanding. One member of one team is not interested in their teaching, so interactions need to be managed carefully to ensure required action is taken by this team member, to achieve positive outcomes' (P15).

The broader organisational culture in which teams operated could also be problematic, as one participant explained: 'This university has [an] older culture of a boy's club. It values traditions and older ways of doing things. Whilst there is change, there is still a mindset, and it appears as though the men get more opportunities and promoted quicker and get valued more ...' (P12). What emerges here is an old boy's club with a 'mindset' that promoted its own (Bagilhole & White, 2011). A further participant experienced difficulty with some male team members: 'some of my male colleagues ... who have worked with me in a non-leadership role have difficulty accepting that I am now in a leadership role and are threatened and challenged by it' (P14). In this instance, these men could not accept the participant moving into a leadership role, again indicating that a masculinist culture was pervasive in some parts of the university.

In summary, almost half of the participants worked in positive teams where colleagues were supportive and communicated well. However, workplace stress resulting from organisational change could have a negative impact on teams, and some found cross campus teams could be challenging and noted tensions between sessional and ongoing academic staff in a team. There were also vestiges of a masculinist culture in the organisation that led to some team members having difficulty in accepting women in leadership roles. Despite these challenges, teams generally functioned well, and teamwork was an extremely positive element of jobs.

Impact of dispersed campuses on teams

We were keen to ascertain how teams across dispersed campuses functioned. Participants were asked 'Has the composition and location of your work team affected your ability to participate in events? What impact does this have on working relationships'?

While it was not an issue for a quarter of participants, many found that having work groups between dispersed campuses could be difficult. One described how:

> Having my coordinator based [at the central campus] is challenging at times as I cannot access them as readily as if they were at the same location as me. But I can contact them by phone/skype/email, and I speak to a colleague at my location if I need to (P2).

Another also needed to contact colleagues remotely but found there was no substitute for meeting them in person:

> Skype isn't ideal, but it allows for regular communication between teams spread across several locations. There's nothing like face-to-face communication, however, so I do try to catch up with colleagues in person when possible, even if only once a year (P18).

A common theme was that working with colleagues across dispersed campuses often made it difficult to build relationships in the work team. There could be various layers of complexity, as this participant explained:

> The events that are on other campus[es] can affect the ability to build relationships with the larger school team. While there are times that the team has met [at the central campus or other campuses] this results in more time travelling than time spent in meetings. Not travelling, and engaging in meetings via Skype often make it difficult to fully join the conversation as the technology will often drop out or we have problems hearing everyone in the meeting room and then end up talking over each other. This makes it harder to build relationships and demonstrate your value in a meeting. Working on other campuses also means that there is no opportunity for casual chats in the lunchroom or the ability to pop into someone's office and ask a question – if I have questions, they come across much more official in an email [P17].

It is clear from this account that joining meetings remotely was a poor substitute for being in the room with other colleagues, reflecting Herman and Hilliam's (2018) findings. Moreover, informal conversations did not happen if work colleagues were on dispersed campuses. The importance of these face-to-face meetings was emphasised: 'I feel we would all benefit from closer proximity to colleagues [at other campuses] or more regular in-person meetings' (P3) and 'As my teaching teams are physically apart in campuses hours away by car travel, I have found it invaluable to attend any events at another campus, to build face-to face relationships with other team members. Lack of attendance at these events would have inhibited the development of these relationships' (P15).

Therefore, working across dispersed campuses created extra challenges for teams. The following participant had worked at the university before it acquired dispersed campuses and observed that more campuses meant more problems in developing close working relationships for the team:

> ... in the past few years, I have found that we are less able to build good teams and undertake the activities that we need to do to build strong teams due to the time involved to get everyone together. When we were a single campus organisation, undertaking professional development activities and team events were more possible. As a result of the distance involved, many activities have ceased or been reduced which I believe has meant that some staff are left quite isolated from their teams ... The distance means that I have not been able to develop the close working relationships that I have in the past (P4).

This account suggested that the joined-up approach across campuses was not working effectively and that some staff

on outlying campuses were left feeling isolated from their teams and the organisation while experiencing a kind of 'unintentional invisibility'.

Others concurred, describing the negative impact on relating to their colleagues:

> I don't participate in the fortnight team meetings, Christmas dinner or just casual catch ups because of my location. For that reason, I don't get to build the level of working relationships that my colleagues have (P7).

> … … previously there was the ability to meet more often. Now there is a lot of 'distance' between staff. Working relationships in some regards are better, in other regards this has been difficult. … Hence it being a challenging aspect of the role (9).

The sense of isolation and estrangement from the team created by physical distance between campuses is clear in these accounts, as Herman and Hilliam (2018) and Thomas *et al.* (2019) also found.

Dispersed campuses were enormously challenging for some, and it was a matter of compromise on occasion. While it was not always possible to attend other campuses for a particular event, this staff member tried to be 'fair and equitable' in choosing when to go to another campus: 'Having staff on [several] campuses makes it difficult to attend every event whenever something is happening on a campus. I try to prioritise important occasions and when I choose to miss something, I try to be fair and equitable, so that it's not always the same campus missing out' (P11).

Organising team meetings could also be difficult: 'My work team is across [a number of] campuses. It makes it nearly impossible to have the team together to participate in events or share ideas. Technology such as Skype is used but is not as effective as being together. Some campuses work in isolation to others, which makes for challenges in the team' (P13).

In summary, for most participants dispersed campuses were challenging. They made it difficult to access team members who were on different campuses. Relying on a few forms of technology for meetings also had its challenges regarding access, connectivity and technical support. While virtual communication went some way to keeping teams together, there was no substitute for face-to-face meetings and for the informal conversations that occurred when team members were in the same room. Those on outlying campuses, at times, felt isolated from both the team and the organisation.

Discussion

This article has focused on issues affecting women working in teams, a key emphasis of our project that investigated women professional staff and academics at an Australian regional university with dispersed campuses. The research was undertaken only weeks before the full effects of the COVID-19 pandemic forced the institution to transfer all programs to online learning delivery modes.

Our study found that working in teams at a regional university was mostly a positive experience for women. Both academics and professional staff considered their teamwork was productive and had social benefits while being enjoyable and establishing connections with other workers.

Nevertheless, we found that women were looking for new ways of working in teams and enthusiastically embraced the concept of contemporary job progression being developed in boundaryless careers. For instance, they reported having strong connections with other dedicated team members, being supported by them, and the team being characterised by friendliness and mutual respect. These factors all contributed to positive and collaborative work environments that fostered a type of career mobility the participants clearly preferred, rather than more traditional forms of career progression which include a focus on salary and job titles (Arthur *et al.*, 2005; Sullivan & Arthur, 2006). Consistent with other research, the data also demonstrated that women preferred flexibility, autonomy, and the regional workplace location (Kuhn & Villeval, 2013; Thompson, 2013) which were all positive factors in their working life.

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Consistent with other research findings, our study strongly indicated that traditional markers of career progression such as salary and job titles were not as highly regarded by women as the more intangible benefits of flexibility, autonomy and collaboration (Kuhn & Villeval, 2013). Thompson (2013) argues that women's preference for collaborative teamwork is partially due to their optimistic appraisal of their co-workers' abilities, in contrast to the more pessimistic appraisal of teams by male counterparts. It can therefore be concluded that women are generally more focused than men on co-operative teamwork and career progression based on mobility that focuses on positive workplaces and collaboration.

The feedback provided by participants suggests that a way forward for universities in building teams which cater for women's work preferences (Kuhn & Villeval, 2013; Thompson, 2013) would be to re-visit and re-design policies that target inclusive practices with a focus on gender equity. These women valued flexibility, autonomy, and the opportunity to work collaboratively in positive team environments because this enabled them to effectively combine work with care-giving responsibilities.

However, the requirement for travel at regional universities and the current use of communication technology could impede the new ways of working that these women preferred. Ongoing travel across dispersed campuses did not work for women, particularly those with family responsibilities, and often left them estranged from the team. Our findings also indicate that the way technology is currently used to enable teams to function is fundamentally flawed. Relying on a few forms of technology to connect team members on different campuses had shortcomings that encompassed access, equipment functionality, and operator knowledge and skills, as well as the level of technical support, that resulted in this technology not always enabling collaborative work.

With new ways of working especially since the lockdowns resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, universities may wish to explore implementation of policies to create a third space structure to address issues raised in this research about women working across dispersed campuses. It could include group members from various backgrounds breaking away from traditional notions of the separate work typically performed by academic and professional staff.

To address the challenges involved in travelling between campuses and an over-reliance on technology identified by women in our research, universities could establish diverse teams that would function in third spaces to enable group connections for fixed term projects. Third spaces rest on principles of democratic collaboration and in these higher education spaces, group agendas, goal setting, task distribution, deadlines, meeting schedules, and judicious use of different forms of technology could be driven by the group. This kind of space would enable women to work collaboratively for short, sharp time periods on small-scale projects or as a part of programs with members of the team meeting in both face-to-face and virtual modes. Professional learning opportunities and ongoing technical support would enable teams to use a range of technologies. These measures would address the major issues that arose from the data, as collaborative teamwork would enable a flexible work environment and meeting attendance could be cyclical and short-term, depending on the stage of the program. In addition, the use of third spaces might alleviate the tendency for some of the study's participants not to apply for or take up leadership roles due to a range of factors, preferring to 'fly under the radar' or remain 'invisible'.

A third space structure is particularly appropriate in Australian universities where women comprise 66.4 per cent of professional (administrative) staff and 47.7 per cent of academic staff (Universities Australia, 2020). While a 'them and us' divide between professional and academic staff has been noted (Graham & Regan, 2016), with misunderstanding or misrepresentation of the scope of the work and decision-making authority of professional staff (Conway & Dobson, 2003), a third space structure would enable the implementation of projects and processes that traditionally have perpetuated boundaries between professional and academic staff. In a third space, the expertise of both groups could be used to undertake both short-term and long-term projects. This work would be cyclical, enabling the formation of teams to work on particular projects according to the academic calendar such as enrolments, student transitions, credit applications, assessment marking and finalisation, and Open Days and thus, further breaking down boundaries and improving outcomes.

There are two examples of informal teams already operating in a third space. The first involves academics and professional staff establishing working relationships in which they can call on each other for advice about student enrolments and credit applications and action the relevant paperwork. Academics provide guidance on program progression and professional staff advise on unit availability and prerequisites. Both sets of workers fill out relevant documentation. The second example is the often-contested issue of placement experiences/work integrated learning (WIL). Academics and professional staff have worked together in lectures and tutorials to give students timely and incremental advice on preparing for placements and then debriefing after the event. Having both groups present when discussing and completing practical activities enables students and staff to gain a deeper understanding of how placement is organised and assessed and how it fits into the program. In these examples of third spaces, students benefit from the expertise and co-operative teamwork of both academics and professional staff.

Our research suggests that third space teamwork would be welcomed by participants in our study as a way of implementing their preferred way of working in teams and improving communication. It could be a combination of virtual and face-to-face meetings with regular physical gatherings and virtual check-in sessions negotiated by the group. Such a framework might include research seminars, professional development opportunities, best practice sharing sessions, and collaborations on short terms projects like Open Day, as well as student transition experiences and support. Work on these projects could be undertaken on campus and virtually on a rotating basis. The importance of flexibility and versatility would be paramount as team members would need to be familiar with a few different work areas, so that the absence of a team member could be easily covered by other colleagues in the team.

Conclusion

The women at an Australian regional university who participated in this study worked in positive teams where colleagues were supportive and communicated well. However,

workplace stress resulting from organisational change could have a negative impact on teams, and some found cross campus teams could be challenging. Relying on a few forms of technology for meetings – with issues of access, connectivity and technical support – was no substitute for face-to-face meetings. Our research therefore indicates that implementing third spaces with support for technology use could not only be useful in developing teams in tertiary institutions, it could also be employed for a range of long and short-term projects. Based on difference and diversity, third spaces reject outdated notions of rigid boundaries, especially those between professional and academic staff. They make space for mixed groups of workers from a range of roles who work collaboratively and democratically on projects such as student enrolment, placement opportunities, funding applications and student support initiatives. Such collective, collaborative, flexible and democratic spaces create territory in which a variety of workers can drive and complete a project without being limited by traditional work role boundaries. Third spaces could also be extensions of the new ways of working being explored during the current pandemic. Our data suggest that these third spaces are the kind of hybrid territories that are important for the type of collaboration and teamwork that women wish to accomplish in their working lives at regional universities.

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Appendix 1

Questions: The challenges for women working in Australian regional universities

Section A: Identity

1. Where did you grow up?
2. What languages do you speak?
3. Do you identify as a carer? Yes No
4. If yes, for whom do you provide care?
   A child/children
   A child/children living with an illness or disability
   A person other than a child living with an illness or disability
   An elderly person/elderly people

Section B: The University

1. What is your employment level? e.g., Academic A, B, C, D, E or HEW level.
2. What is your employment status? Sessional, part-time contract, full-time contract, part-time ongoing, full-time ongoing.
3. For how many years have you worked as an academic/professional staff member?
4. What are some of the benefits of your job?
5. What are some of the challenges involved in your job?
6. Describe your work team/s (past and present, if relevant) and your relationships within the team.
7. Working at the University often requires travel, how easy do you find it to travel given your personal circumstances?
8. How has travel (or the inability to travel) affected your access to professional development and other opportunities, e.g., training, conferences etc.?
9. Has the composition and location of your work team affected your ability to participate in events? What impact does this have on working relationships?
10. What impact has the intersection of gender, personal circumstances, travel, access to professional development/other opportunities and team events had on your career progression?
11. Do you feel the terms of your employment (fraction, employment/contract-type) have impacted on your career progression?
12. Do you have any suggestions to reduce these barriers at the University?