

The Hidden Emotional Work of Boundary Spanners in Higher Education: A Conceptual Paper with an Integrative Framework

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Abstract

Boundary-spanning roles (BSRs) in higher education institutions (HEIs) encompassing academic administrators, student services professionals, industry liaison officers, research development managers, and widening participation coordinators occupy a structurally distinct and emotionally demanding position at the interface of multiple constituencies. Individuals in these roles are required to simultaneously navigate institutional demands, student expectations, external partner obligations, and collegial norms, all while managing and regulating their own emotional displays and inner states. Despite a burgeoning literature on emotional labour (EL) within service industries and, more recently, within academic settings, BSRs in higher education have received surprisingly limited conceptual or empirical attention as a distinct category of EL workers.

This conceptual paper addresses this gap by developing an integrative theoretical framework that synthesises foundational EL theory (Hochschild, 1983), boundary-spanning literature (Ancona & Caldwell, 1992; Williams, 2002), conservation of resources theory (Hobfoll, 1989), and identity theory (Stets & Burke, 2000) to illuminate the unique emotional demands, regulatory strategies, and consequences encountered by HE boundary-spanners. The framework identifies four primary antecedent domains: role ambiguity, constituent multiplicity, institutional hybridity, and relational asymmetry and maps these onto surface acting, deep acting, and natural acting strategies. Outcomes are theorised across individual well-being, role performance, and institutional effectiveness dimensions, moderated by professional identity coherence, institutional support, and relational density.

The paper advances four theoretical propositions, offers implications for institutional design and human resource practice in higher education, and charts an agenda for future empirical inquiry. By positioning BSR professionals as a substantively distinct category of emotional labourers, this paper contributes to both the sociology of higher education and the broader EL literature.

Keywords: emotional labour; boundary-spanning roles; higher education; professional identity; surface acting; deep acting; role ambiguity; well-being

1. INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions (HEIs) across the globe are in the midst of profound and accelerating transformation. Driven by massification, marketisation, internationalisation, and intensified accountability regimes (Deem et al., 2007; Marginson, 2016; Saunders, 2010), universities are no longer bounded, self-contained communities of scholars. They are complex, multi-stakeholder organisations that must simultaneously manage relationships with students, industry partners, government bodies, local communities, and international networks. The institutional interface that liminal organisational space where the university meets the world has grown vastly in scope, strategic significance, and human complexity. Yet the professionals who staff this interface, who must navigate its competing demands day after day, remain among the least examined in higher education research. These boundary-spanning professionals, widening participation officers, industry liaison managers, international partnerships coordinators, and community engagement leads are on the front lines of institutional transformation. The emotional cost of that position is rarely counted. Understanding the emotional labour of these professionals is therefore of urgent importance to university leaders, human resource practitioners, and policymakers seeking to build sustainable, equitable, and effective higher education institutions.

Prior research on emotional labour, defined as the management of feeling to fulfil the emotional requirements of a job (Hochschild, 1983), has established its significance across professional services, healthcare, and education. Important contributions have examined the emotional demands of frontline student service work (Constanti & Gibbs, 2004),

academic identity and teaching (Ogbonna & Harris, 2004), and customer-facing labour more broadly (Tolich, 1993). Yet this body of literature has developed primarily around single-domain workers: those who engage primarily with one type of counterpart, students, patients, or customers, within a relatively stable interactional register. Boundary-spanning professionals in higher education present a structurally distinct case that existing frameworks are ill-equipped to address. Within a single workday, a widening participation officer might engage compassionately with a disadvantaged prospective student, negotiate assertively with a sceptical faculty dean, and sustain collegial warmth with a community partner. Each interaction calls upon a different emotional repertoire, a different mode of self-presentation, and a different calculus of authenticity. The theoretical challenge is that no integrated conceptual framework yet exists to account for these multi-domain, context-switching emotional labour dynamics. Existing emotional labour theory does not adequately theorise the antecedents, strategies, or consequences of emotional labour performed across structurally discrepant social domains within a single role. To address this gap, we draw on boundary-spanning theory (Aldrich & Herker, 1977) and the multi-employer network perspective (Marchington et al., 2011), emotional labour theory (Hochschild, 1983; Grandey, 2000), and role theory (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993) to construct an integrative conceptual framework specific to the higher education boundary-spanning context.

Against the backdrop of these gaps and our proposed solution, our objectives are: (i) to theorise the structural position of boundary-spanning role (BSR) professionals in HEIs as a distinctive category of emotional labourers; (ii) to identify the antecedent conditions institutional, relational, and individual that shape their emotional labour demands; (iii) to map the emotional labour strategies they deploy across interactional domains; (iv) to theorise the consequences of those strategies for individual wellbeing and institutional outcomes; and (v) to present an integrative conceptual framework, accompanied by formal theoretical propositions, that synthesises these elements into a coherent and empirically generative model.

We thus expect to make the following contributions. For research, we advance emotional labour theory by extending it beyond single-domain work settings to multi-domain boundary-spanning roles, introducing the concepts of interactional domain-switching, emotional repertoire breadth, and cross-domain surface acting as theoretically novel constructs. For researchers, we provide a formal integrative framework and a set of testable propositions that can guide future empirical inquiry, quantitative, qualitative, and longitudinal, into the emotional lives of higher education professionals. For practitioners and institutional leaders, we offer a theoretically grounded account of why boundary-spanning roles are emotionally demanding in ways that differ from other professional roles in universities, and why conventional well-being and human resource interventions may need to be recalibrated to address the specific structural conditions these professionals face.

2. Theoretical Foundations

2.1 Emotional Labour: Foundations and Extensions

Hochschild's (1983) The fundamental theoretical contribution to the study of emotional labour is *The Managed Heart*. First described in relation to flight attendants and debt collectors, Hochschild's definition of EL is "the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display" (p. 7). She made a distinction between deep acting, which actually aims to feel the necessary emotion and aligns inner and exterior emotional states, and surface acting, which modifies external emotional presentation without changing interior feeling. In EL research, this distinction continues to be the predominant analytical lens (Grandey, 2000; Hülshager & Schewe, 2011).

Grandey (2000) reconceptualised surface and deep acting as types of response-focused and antecedent-focused regulation, respectively, by synthesising Hochschild's dramaturgical framework with emotional regulation theory (Gross, 1998). By portraying EL as a resource-intensive process with consequences for burnout and well-being, this regulatory framing allowed for interaction with organisational stress research. Diefendorff et al. (2005) later discovered a third tactic, known as "genuine or natural acting," in which there is no regulatory burden because the role's display standards align with the person's genuinely experienced affect.

According to Wharton (2009) and Grandey and Melloy (2017), EL is sociologically embedded, meaning that it is both produced by and constitutive of larger occupational and organisational frameworks rather than just being an individual regulatory activity. This social aspect is especially important for boundary-spanners in higher education: the institutional position they hold fundamentally creates the emotional demands they encounter, not just the individual traits of service recipients.

2.2 Boundary-Spanning Roles: Conceptual Architecture

Aldrich and Herker (1977) introduced the idea of boundary crossing to organisational theory, highlighting the significance of individuals who connect their organisations to the outside world. Information processing, which involves filtering, translating, and conveying intelligence across organisational borders, and external representation, which involves managing the organization's reputation and connections with external constituencies, are the two main roles that these people play. Boundary activity in work-team situations was further developed by Ancona and Caldwell

(1992), who identified the ambassador, task coordinator, scout, and guard roles, each of which involved distinct patterns of cross-border contact. Williams (2002) extended boundary-spanning theory to the public sector, identifying relational and structural forms of boundary work and emphasising the centrality of trust, diplomacy, and interpersonal competence in collaborative professional contexts. In higher education specifically, Whitchurch (2008, 2013) has developed the construct of the "third space professional", an academic-related practitioner who occupies the contested interstice between academic and administrative domains as a manifestation of HE boundary-spanning work. Whitchurch's conceptualisation is particularly germane here because it highlights the identity ambiguity, professional vulnerability, and relational complexity that characterise HE boundary-spanning work.

For the purposes of this paper, we adopt a synthetic definition: a higher education boundary-spanning role is one in which the incumbent is structurally required to engage in sustained, purposeful interaction across two or more organisational, professional, or institutional domains, managing the informational, relational, and affective consequences of such cross-domain engagement as a core component of their role.

2.3 Conservation of Resources Theory

Hobfoll's (1989, 2001) conservation of resources (COR) theory provides a theoretical bridge between the structural conditions of boundary-spanning work and the individual-level consequences for emotional labourers. COR theory posits that individuals are motivated to acquire, retain, protect, and foster resources defined broadly as objects, personal characteristics, conditions, and energies that are valued by the individual or that serve as a means for the attainment of other valued resources. The central corollary is that resource loss is disproportionately salient compared with equivalent gain, and that threatened or actual resource loss is the primary instigator of psychological stress.

When applied to emotional labour, EL strategies have been repeatedly theorised and empirically shown to be resource-depleting, leading to emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation (Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002; Maslach et al., 2001). This is especially true of surface acting, which entails the masking or modification of genuine emotional expression. For boundary-spanners, the COR lens draws attention to the amplified resource demands imposed by multi-constituency emotional management and the particular vulnerability to resource depletion that follows from sustained cross-domain affective regulation. Importantly, COR theory also directs attention to the role of organisational and social resources notably supervisor support, role clarity, and professional community as buffers against EL-induced resource loss.

2.4 Identity Theory and Professional Self-Concept

Identity theory (Stets & Burke, 2000; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) provides the fourth theoretical pillar of our framework. Emotional labour is inherently bound up with questions of identity: who one is, or is expected to be, in a given interactional context, and what one feels as a consequence of identity confirmation or disconfirmation. For boundary-spanners, whose role demands that they adopt and manage different identities or at least different aspects of a complex professional identity across multiple constituencies, identity coherence (the degree to which different role-related identities are experienced as integrated and consistent) becomes a significant moderating variable.

Research on identity work suggests that individuals operating across multiple social and professional domains engage in ongoing processes of self-construction and adaptation. Ibarra (1999) demonstrates how professionals develop "provisional selves" as they navigate changing role expectations, while Pratt and Foreman (2000) highlight the tensions that emerge when multiple identities coexist within organizational settings. In higher education, boundary-spanning professionals frequently occupy liminal positions between academic, administrative, and external stakeholder domains. Thornton et al. (2012) connect this to institutional logics, noting that practitioners who span institutional boundaries must manage competing institutional pressures and their attendant identity imperatives.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1 Emotional Labour in Academic and Higher Education Settings

Academic staff and frontline student service workers have received the most attention when it comes to the examination of emotional labour in higher education. Among the first to carefully study emotional labour in higher education teaching were Constanti and Gibbs (2004), who contend that surface acting demands on academic staff are increased when the student-teacher interaction is commercialised. In a similar vein, Ogbonna and Harris (2004) discovered that academics in the UK underwent increased emotional work related to the performance of enthusiasm and accessibility in increasingly controlled environments, frequently concealing irritation, disillusionment, or intellectual scepticism.

The concept of "customer-oriented bureaucracy" was introduced by Korczynski (2003) to explain the structural contradictions faced by service workers who must simultaneously enact bureaucratic control and emotional labour. This tension is directly applicable to HE professionals who manage institutional rules and individualised student expectations. The gendered aspects of emotional labour in higher education have been studied by Broadbridge and Hearn (2008) and Leathwood and Read (2009), who found that women are disproportionately employed in positions with high EL demands and receive less institutional credit for this work. Academic advising has been characterised by substantial

emotional labour demands, requiring practitioners to regulate emotions while supporting students and navigating complex interpersonal interactions. These roles share characteristics with our BSR construct but have not been theorised as a coherent category, nor has their boundary-spanning character been explicitly connected to their EL demands.

3.2 Boundary-Spanning in Higher Education Institutions

Whitchurch's (2008, 2013) influential work on third space professionals in higher education provides the most directly relevant empirical foundation for our conceptualisation of HE BSRs. Whitchurch identifies a diverse range of professional roles spanning academic development, student experience, research development, widening participation, community engagement, and industry partnership that share a common structural characteristic: they are located between, and must negotiate relationships with, academic, administrative, and external domains.

McNay (1995) and Shattock (2010) examined the managerial and governance dimensions of HE boundary work, noting the increasing professionalisation of boundary-spanning activity as universities developed more complex external relationships.

More recently, Whitchurch and Gordon (2010) and Ylijoki and Henriksson (2017) have examined the implications for professional identity of boundary-spanning and hybrid roles in higher education. Their work highlights the challenges associated with role ambiguity, contested professional recognition, and the need to navigate multiple institutional expectations. However, while identity-related tensions have been well documented, the emotional labour involved in managing these tensions has received comparatively limited theoretical attention.

3.3 Emotional Labour in Boundary-Crossing and Multi-Constituent Roles

The emotional labour demands of multi-constituent professional roles have been examined in a limited number of adjacent literatures. Katz and Kahn's (1978) seminal work on role theory established that individuals occupying boundary positions face amplified role demands and role conflict, both of which have been subsequently connected to emotional labour burdens (Brotheridge & Lee, 2002; Morris & Feldman, 1996). Research on emotional labour further indicates that sustained surface acting is associated with higher burnout risk and emotional exhaustion (Hsieh et al., 2012; Mesmer-Magnus et al., 2012), with consistent findings of heightened surface acting demands, complex deep acting requirements, and elevated burnout risk. The concept of emotional dissonance, the conflict between felt and displayed emotion that characterises surface acting (Hochschild, 1983; Morris & Feldman, 1996), is particularly relevant to BSR workers, who face not one but multiple, often contradictory, display rule systems. A research development officer, for example, may be required to display enthusiasm to industry partners, scholarly gravitas to academic colleagues, and political sensitivity to senior management, within a context in which these display systems may not be mutually consistent. The management of this multi-system emotional dissonance has received no specific theoretical attention in the HE literature. Shuler and Sypher (2000) and Zapf (2002) have examined the macro-level conditions that intensify EL demands in service work, identifying organisational display rules, customer (or service-recipient) power, and role ambiguity as key structural amplifiers. Each of these conditions is pronounced in HE boundary-spanning roles, which are subject to multiple, sometimes competing, sets of display expectations from different constituencies, and in which the boundaries of appropriate emotional display are frequently unclear, contested, and unstable.

4. The Integrative Framework: Emotional Labour in HE Boundary-Spanning Roles

Drawing on the four theoretical traditions reviewed above and the assembled empirical literature, we propose an integrative framework for understanding emotional labour in higher education boundary-spanning roles. The framework is organised around four analytical levels: antecedent conditions, emotional labour strategies, outcomes, and moderating factors. Figure 1 provides a schematic representation of the framework, and the following subsections develop each component in detail.

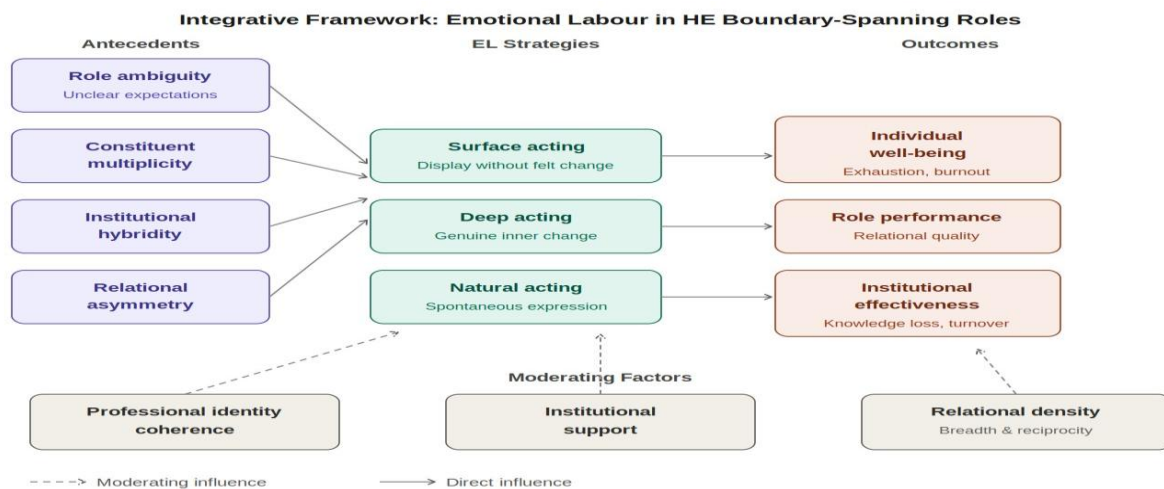


Figure 01: Proposed Integrative Framework

4.1 Antecedent Conditions: The Structural Sources of EL Demand

According to the paradigm, emotional labour demands in HE BSRs are generated and shaped by four fundamental antecedent domains. These antecedents are structural rather than individual in nature: they are produced by the institutional position occupied by boundary-spanners, not by the personal characteristics of the individuals who occupy them. This structural framing follows Wharton's (2009) sociological approach to EL and Hochschild's (1983) own concern with the political economy of emotional management.

4.1.1 Role Ambiguity

Role ambiguity, uncertainty about the expectations, requirements, and evaluation criteria associated with a role, is a pervasive feature of HE boundary-spanning work (Whitchurch, 2013; Ylijoki & Henriksson, 2017). In the absence of a clear role definition, BSR incumbents must engage in active and ongoing interpretive work to determine what emotional displays are expected, appropriate, and effective in each interactional context. This interpretive labour is itself emotionally demanding and creates conditions in which emotional dissonance is both more likely and less resolvable through recourse to organisational guidance. We propose that higher levels of role ambiguity are positively associated with emotional labour intensity in HE BSRs.

4.1.2 Constituent Multiplicity

Constituent multiplicity refers to the number and heterogeneity of social groups with which a BSR professional is required to engage. Unlike single-domain service workers, HE boundary-spanners typically maintain sustained relationships with students, academic staff, professional service colleagues, senior management, external partners, government bodies, and community representatives. Each constituent group carries distinct display rule expectations, norms about what emotions should be expressed, in what manner, and with what intensity (Rafaeli & Sutton, 1987). The management of multiple, non-isomorphic display rule systems constitutes a form of emotional labour amplification that has no theoretical equivalent in single-constituency service work. Higher constituent multiplicity, particularly when constituent groups hold discrepant emotional expectations, is theorised to intensify both surface and deep acting demands.

4.1.3 Institutional Hybridity

Following Thornton et al. (2012) and Battilana and Lee (2014), institutional hybridity refers to the co-presence of multiple, partially incompatible institutional logics within a single organisational field. Contemporary higher education institutions are characterised by at least three partially competing logics: the collegial logic of the scholarly community, the managerial logic of administrative effectiveness, and the market logic of the student as consumer and the university as service provider. BSR professionals, by virtue of their position at institutional boundaries, are exposed to all three logics simultaneously and must manage the affective implications of navigating between them. When interacting with students, acting in line with the market logic may need emotional displays (such as enthusiasm, service orientation, and accessibility) that go against the standards of the collegial logic when those same individuals must interact with

academic colleagues. We refer to this unique type of deep-acting demand as institutional register-switching because it requires altering emotional registers across logics.

4.1.4 Relational Asymmetry

The power imbalances that define many of the interactions that HE boundary-spanners manage are referred to as relational asymmetry. BSR professionals often have to communicate with people who are significantly more powerful than themselves within the relevant institutional hierarchy, such as senior academics, senior managers, and significant external partners, in contrast to peers interacting inside a single professional community. According to Hochschild (1983), emotional labour norms are asymmetrically distributed by power, meaning that people with less power are usually expected to perform more emotional labour in more demanding ways than people with more power. Relational asymmetry is structural and multidirectional in HE BSRs: BSR professionals may be expected to simultaneously manage the emotions of weaker students and show emotional deference to senior academics. This creates a unique kind of emotional sandwiching that increases the need for surface acting.

4.2 Emotional Labour Strategies

Following the established tripartite framework (Diefendorff et al., 2005; Grandey, 2000; Hochschild, 1983), the framework distinguishes three primary EL strategies available to HE boundary-spanning professionals.

4.2.1 Surface Acting

Surface acting involves modifying the outer emotional display without changing the underlying felt emotion. In HE BSRs, surface acting is most prevalent in interactions characterised by high relational asymmetry and constituent multiplicity, where the required emotional display diverges substantially from the practitioner's natural affective state. The resource-depleting properties of sustained surface acting (Grandey, 2003; Hülshager & Schewe, 2011) are exacerbated in BSR contexts because the practitioner may be required to maintain contrasting surface performances across a rapid succession of interactions without adequate recovery time between them.

4.2.2 Deep Acting

Deep acting, involving genuine modification of inner feeling to produce authentic required emotional displays, is theorised to be the dominant strategy in boundary-spanning interactions of high relational significance, notably in academic partnership development, industry liaison, and community engagement contexts where a sustained authentic relationship is a precondition of role effectiveness. Deep acting is less immediately resource-depleting than surface acting but carries distinct long-term risks, particularly when the emotions being cultivated are incompatible with the practitioner's core values or professional identity. The requirement to genuinely internalise enthusiasm for institutional priorities that may conflict with the practitioner's own professional commitments, a common experience in widening participation and marketisation contexts, may generate a particular form of deep acting cost that we term identity attrition.

4.2.3 Natural Acting (Genuine Expression)

Natural or genuine acting in which the enacted emotional display is spontaneously consistent with the naturally felt emotion provides relief from EL demands but is structurally limited in BSR contexts by the heterogeneity of emotional expectations across constituencies. It is most available in interactions with professional peers who share similar institutional values and professional norms, and in roles that permit a degree of professional autonomy in emotional expression. Enabling conditions for natural acting in HE BSRs include strong professional identity coherence, high levels of institutional support for the BSR function, and interaction patterns that favour sustained, authentic relationships over transactional encounters.

4.3 Outcomes

The framework theorises outcomes across three levels: individual well-being, role performance, and institutional effectiveness.

4.3.1 Individual Well-Being Outcomes

Consistent with COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989) and the accumulated EL literature (Grandey, 2000; Maslach et al., 2001), sustained engagement in resource-depleting EL strategies, particularly surface acting in conditions of high constituent multiplicity and institutional hybridity, is expected to generate emotional exhaustion, increased depersonalisation, and reduced personal accomplishment. The multi-constituency character of HE BSR work introduces a further dimension of well-being risk: the absence of a unified professional community and recognised career identity means that BSR professionals may lack the social and collective resources through which other professional groups buffer EL-induced

resource depletion. The result may be a particular form of invisible burnout experienced personally but not collectively recognised or institutionally addressed.

4.3.2 Role Performance Outcomes

Emotional labour strategy has implications for role performance quality. Surface acting, while protecting felt authenticity, may reduce the perceived relational quality of BSR interactions over time, undermining the trust-based relationships that are prerequisite to effective boundary- spanning (Williams, 2002). Deep acting, in the short term, may support high-quality relational performance but at the cost of progressive identity attrition. Natural acting, most conducive to sustained, authentic relationship is theorised to be associated with the highest quality role performance outcomes, particularly in long-term partnership contexts, but may not be available or sustainable under conditions of high institutional hybridity and low institutional support.

4.3.3 Institutional Effectiveness Outcomes

At the institutional level, the EL dynamics of boundary-spanning roles have implications for universities' capacity to manage external relationships, deliver student experience objectives, support research partnerships, and achieve widening participation targets. When BSR professionals experience high levels of emotional exhaustion, reduce their deep acting investment, or exit BSR roles entirely, the institutional costs are disproportionately high relative to the visibility of BSR work. The embeddedness of boundary-spanning knowledge, which is accumulated through sustained, trust-based relational engagement, means that BSR staff turnover generates invisible institutional knowledge losses that standard human capital accounting fails to capture.

4.4 Moderating Factors

The framework identifies three primary moderating variables that condition the relationship between antecedent conditions, EL strategies, and outcomes.

4.4.1 Professional Identity Coherence

It is hypothesised that the relationship between institutional hybridity and EL strategy choice is moderated by professional identity coherence, or the extent to which BSR incumbents perceive their professional self-concept as integrated, consistent, and favourably valued. In order to minimise the deep acting cost of institutional register-switching, people with high identity coherence are better able to balance the conflicting demands of many institutional logics from a steady sense of professional purpose. On the other hand, low identity coherence, which is linked to a lack of professional community recognition and an unclear professional identity, increases the EL cost of boundary-spanning work by eliminating a crucial resource for its management (Stets & Burke, 2000; Whitchurch, 2013).

4.4.2 Institutional Support

The association between constituent multiplicity and well-being outcomes is moderated by institutional support, which includes clear role description, career development opportunities, organisational provision of recovery resources, and supervisory identification of EL demands. According to data from service sector EL research (Grandey, 2000) and COR theory (Hobfoll, 1989), institutional support serves as a resource input that partially counteracts the resource depletion linked to prolonged surface acting. Importantly, institutional support for HE BSRs needs to address the professional identity and recognition deficiencies that define the structural position of boundary-spanning work, in addition to workload pressures.

4.4.3 Relational Density

The association between the EL approach and role performance results is moderated by relational density, which is the breadth, consistency, and reciprocity of the relationships upheld by the BSR professional. By facilitating organic emotional interchange within preexisting relational frameworks, high relational density lowers surface acting needs by fostering the growth of relational trust and shared understanding with important constituents. Regardless of individual EL capacity, low relational density, a feature of transactional, high-turnover interaction environments, maintains or increases surface acting requirements. The implication is that, regardless of individual capacity or support, institutional practices that promote relationship continuity and depth in boundary-spanning functions, such as long-term partnership roles, relationship management approaches to student experience work, and sustained community engagement, create conditions that structurally reduce the burden of EL.

Table 1: Summary of the Integrative Framework - Emotional Labour in HE Boundary- Spanning Roles

Antecedent Conditions	EL Strategy	Mediating Process	Outcomes	Key Moderators
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Role Ambiguity	Surface Acting	Emotional Dissonance	Emotional Exhaustion	Professional Identity Coherence
Constituent Multiplicity	Deep Acting	Resource Depletion	Reduced Performance	Institutional Support
Institutional Hybridity	Natural Acting	Identity Attrition	Burnout & Turnover	Relational Density
Relational Asymmetry	Register- Switching	Identity Conflict	Institutional Knowledge Loss	Organisational Recognition

5. Theoretical Propositions

To guide future empirical study, we put forth four formal theoretical statements based on the integrated framework:

Proposition 1: Higher education professionals in boundary-spanning roles have higher emotional labour intensity as measured by surface and deep acting frequency, emotional dissonance, and EL-induced resource depletion than professionals in comparable roles without boundary-spanning structural characteristics. Institutional hybridity and constituent multiplicity worsen this disparity.

Proposition 2: In HE boundary-spanning roles, professional identity coherence moderates the relationship between institutional hybridity and emotional labour strategy. People with higher identity coherence are less likely to rely primarily on surface acting and more likely to use deep acting and natural acting strategies, which lowers EL-induced resource depletion and well-being costs.

Proposition 3: According to the conservation of resources theory, the relationship between emotional labour strategy and individual well-being outcomes in HE boundary-spanning roles is moderated by institutional support. Specifically, high institutional support, which includes EL recognition, role clarity, and career development, attenuates the negative effects of sustained surface acting on emotional exhaustion and burnout.

Proposition 4: In HE boundary-spanning roles, relational density moderates the relationship between constituent multiplicity and emotional labour strategy. Higher relational density lessens the emotional display rule heterogeneity that BSR professionals encounter, allowing for a greater use of natural acting strategies and resulting in better role performance and well-being outcomes.

6. DISCUSSION

6.1 Theoretical Contributions

This paper makes several distinct contributions to the emotional labour and higher education literatures. First, it introduces higher education boundary-spanning roles as a theoretically coherent and empirically significant category of emotional labourers, thereby expanding the domain of EL theory to encompass multi-constituency professional work in institutional settings. Previous EL scholarship in HE has focused predominantly on teaching (Constanti & Gibbs, 2004; Ogbonna & Harris, 2004) or frontline student services, leaving the distinctive EL dynamics of professionally complex boundary-spanning functions unaddressed.

Second, the framework advances EL theory by introducing the construct of institutional register-switching, the requirement to modulate emotional registers across competing institutional logics as a form of EL demand specific to hybrid institutional environments. This extends Hochschild's (1983) display rule concept to encompass not merely organisational but institutional-level normative systems, and connects EL theory with the institutional logics perspective (Thornton et al., 2012) in a theoretically productive way.

Third, by integrating identity theory with EL theory through the moderating construct of professional identity coherence, the framework offers a more nuanced account of why the same structural conditions produce different EL burdens and well-being outcomes for different individuals. This moderating account moves beyond trait-level explanations (cf. Hülshager & Schewe, 2011) to offer an identity-structural account that is sensitive to the specific organisational conditions of higher education.

Fourth, by connecting COR theory with boundary-spanning scholarship through the construct of invisible institutional knowledge loss, the framework identifies an organisational consequence of BSR EL dynamics that is invisible in standard human capital accounting frameworks but has significant implications for institutional capacity and strategic effectiveness.

6.2 Practical Implications

The paradigm has a number of useful ramifications for HR management of professionals who cross boundaries, as well as

for higher education institutions.

The framework emphasises how crucial it is for institutional leaders to accept EL as a valid and important aspect of boundary-spanning professional activity; role descriptions, workload estimates, and performance management frameworks should all specifically recognise this. Institutions are likely to consistently underestimate the demands placed on BSR professionals and provide insufficient support for their well-being if they perceive boundary-spanning work exclusively as an informational or relational function without acknowledging its emotional dimension. According to the framework, professional identity development, assisting BSR professionals in creating cohesive, highly regarded professional identities, is a crucial organisational investment that lessens the burden of EL and protects against burnout for HR and organisational development. This could be achieved through career trajectories that offer professional advancement without necessitating leaving BSR functions, professional communities of practice for BSR employees, and recognition systems that recognise the unique importance of boundary-spanning work. For supervisors of BSR professionals, the framework highlights the importance of providing clear role definition (reducing role ambiguity), enabling sufficient relational depth in key partnerships (supporting relational density), and creating recovery opportunities between high-demand multi-constituency interactions. The concept of emotional sandwiching, the simultaneous requirement to enact deference and care within the same workday, suggests that supervisors should pay particular attention to interaction scheduling and workload design. At the policy level, the framework contributes to discussions about the professional recognition and development of higher education professional staff, the so-called "third space" workforce (Whitchurch, 2013). It supports the case for dedicated professional frameworks, sector-wide communities of practice, and formal career structures for boundary-spanning HE professionals, arguing that the emotional labour dimensions of their work represent a significant and currently unrecognised cost that carries both individual and institutional consequences.

7. Limitations and Future Research

The integrative framework presented here is a conceptual paper; its empirical assertions are inherently speculative and rely on the strength of its theoretical underpinnings. There are a few limits to be aware of.

First, the framework synthesises theoretical traditions that were not intended to work together, and it's possible that conflicts between these traditions, specifically between the macro-sociological focus of institutional logics and the micro-psychological focus of EL theory, are not entirely resolved in the current synthesis. These cross-level relationships and their consequences for multi-level study design may be explicitly examined in future theoretical work.

Second, the framework was primarily developed with reference to higher education in the United Kingdom. Therefore, it is necessary to carefully consider whether its propositions can be applied to higher education systems with different institutional logics, professional identities, and labour market structures, particularly in continental European, North American, or Global South contexts.

Third, the paradigm does not specifically address the intersectional aspects of EL in HE BSRs, which are the ways in which the structural conditions of boundary-spanning work interact with gender, race, class, and other social identities to produce distinct EL demands and capacities. Future empirical research should address this significant restriction given the findings of gendered EL distribution in higher education (Leathwood & Read, 2009) and the disproportionate prevalence of racialised minorities in specific BSR functions.

Based on these limitations, we propose the following future research agenda. Qualitative studies using narrative inquiry or ethnographic methods are well-suited to illuminate the lived EL experience of HE boundary-spanners and to develop the conceptual constructs, particularly institutional register-switching and identity attrition, that are introduced here at a theoretical level. Survey-based studies could operationalise the proposed moderating variables and test the four propositions using structural equation modelling designs. Longitudinal designs are particularly important for examining the temporal dynamics of EL strategy, identity coherence, and well-being outcomes. Cross-institutional comparative studies would permit examination of how different organisational structures, professional recognition frameworks, and support systems moderate the EL burden of boundary-spanning work. Finally, intervention research examining the effects of professional identity development programmes, supervisory training, and workload design changes on EL outcomes would advance the practical utility of the framework.

8. CONCLUSION

This paper has developed an integrative theoretical framework for understanding emotional labour in higher education boundary-spanning roles. Synthesising emotional labour theory, boundary-spanning scholarship, conservation of resources theory, and identity theory, the framework identifies four antecedent domains (role ambiguity, constituent multiplicity, institutional hybridity, and relational asymmetry) that generate distinctive EL demands in HE BSRs, maps these onto surface, deep, and natural acting strategies, and theorises outcomes across individual well-being, role performance, and institutional effectiveness dimensions. Three moderating variables, professional identity coherence, institutional support, and relational density, condition these relationships.

The framework advances four theoretical propositions and makes a strong case for the recognition of HE boundary-spanning professionals as a substantively distinct category of emotional labourers whose work generates demands, costs, and institutional consequences that current theoretical and managerial frameworks in higher education inadequately address. By making visible the emotional dimensions of boundary-spanning work in universities, this paper contributes to a more complete understanding of the contemporary HE professional workforce and advances an agenda for both theoretical development and institutional practice.

The argument put forth here has a normative implication: the systematic underappreciation of emotional labour in boundary-spanning roles in higher education is not just a theoretical oversight but an institutional failure with actual repercussions for professional staff members' well-being and the efficacy of the institutions they work for. This work aims to promote theoretical clarity, empirical evidence, and institutional will in order to address this failing.

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