Introduction to the Special Issue

Alternative forms of organising academic work in universities

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Alternative forms of organising academic work in universities

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This Special Issue emerged as a reaction to changes in the organisation of academic work that authors variously refer to as the managerial university (e.g., Laiho et al. 2022; Lea 2011), the McUniversity (e.g., Nadolny and Ryan 2015; Parker and Jary 1995), the neoliberal university (e.g., Davies et al. 2006), the corporate university (e.g., Angus 2007) or the entrepreneurial university (e.g., Marginson and Considine 2000; Slaughter and Leslie 1997). Following the neoliberal idea of a smaller state and more market in conjunction with New Public Management ideology, universities are increasingly managed along the lines of marketisation, hierarchising, measurement, auditing and control. In that regard it is powerful external stakeholders (e.g., politicians, industry, media, general public) and internal stakeholders (e.g., management and administration) rather than academics that debate and decide the legitimacy of higher education or make various claims about the purposes and the preferred outcomes of academic work (Weik et al. 2022). At the same time, the perspective on academic work has shifted from a validation and certification by peers (Huff 2000) towards a validation focusing on the practical usability of academic knowledge production (Grey 2001; Gulati 2007; Learmonth et al. 2012).

In light of these changes, a large body of literature critically discusses the proliferation of managerialism in universities and its often-deleterious effects on the organisation of academic work. This literature addresses, for example, the clash between academic and administrative logics (e.g., Bettis et al. 2005; Bunds and Giardina 2017; Mills et al. 2005; Wright et al. 2020) and the resulting disturbance of the temporal rhythm of academia (e.g., Keenoy 2005; Vostal 2016). It further claims the erosion of academic freedom (e.g., Bérubé and Ruth 2015; Hennessy and McNamara 2013), the emergence of an academic precariat (e.g., Hartung et al. 2017; Mauri 2019), the increase in levels of inequality in the managerial university (e.g., Baker 2009; Social

Sciences Feminist Network Research Interest Group 2017; Dale-Rivas 2019) and the negative effects on the working lives of academics (e.g., Kenny and Fluck 2021; Wray and Kinman 2022).

On the positive side, there are numerous and creative ways in which academics resist the perceived loss of autonomy and control (e.g., Anderson 2008; Clarke et al. 2012; Harding et al. 2010; Lorenz 2012; Worthington and Hodgson 2005). Concrete practical examples of such resistance are the Universities in the Knowledge Economy project[1] exploring the changing scope and roles of universities, the successful opposition to 'Raising the bar' at Newcastle University[2] as well as the autonomy and independence of Brisbane Free University.

Moving from resistance to construction, another burgeoning strand of literature discusses alternative ideas, concepts and examples of how academic work could be organised otherwise (Levin and Greenwood 2016; Newfield 2016). Scholars have elaborated on how to organise academic work by applying or re-designing co-operative values and principles (e.g., Boden et al. 2012; Dilger 2007; Neary and Winn 2019; Wright et al. 2011; Yeo 2015) while others have envisioned how new co-operative endeavours could be established in higher education (e.g., Haubert 1986; Neary and Winn 2017; Van der Veen 2010). In addition, the possibilities of implementing the co-operative idea at the department or research group level have been explored (e.g., James and Neuberger 1981). Still other authors address alternative forms of institutional leadership in universities. Co-operative leadership, based on participation, collegiality and democracy (Neary et al. 2018), democratic leadership (Winn and Hall 2017) and consensual leadership (Gornall et al. 2018) are some of the concepts that authors propose. In so doing, they seek to establish alternatives to autocratic academic leadership that rests on formal hierarchical positions and the disconnection of managers, administrators and academics.

Furthermore, researchers point to opportunities to re-create the relationship between the university and the public. They suggest, for example, that the public should become enabled to speak for itself (Holmwood 2011), allowing universities to establish relationships with society in all its entirety and multiplicity. As Susan Wright and Davydd Greenwood argue, universities should be turned into 'organisations that promote and reward mutual respect and collaboration among all categories of participants' (2017: 23). This literature suggests re-constituting the university–society relationship in a way that allows academics to collaborate on equal terms with multiple

stakeholders in society. Recently, Pitman et al. (2020) investigated the possibility of ranking universities in terms of equity and fairness, not just on quality and performance criteria. They explore the benefits and problems of such an alternative ranking system and ultimately the possibility of assessing higher education equity performance through rankings.

This brief review shows that the world of contemporary universities, and with it, academic work, could be organised differently. In line with this discourse, this Special Issue addresses the question: 'Where do we go from here?'. In doing so, the Special Issue is inspired by Marginson, who argues that even if the future of academic work is uncertain, 'it is plain that more than one future is possible' (2000: 23). Rather than adding to the aforementioned ideas of how to re-organise universities and academic work, however, we have sought to present and discuss concrete practical examples of re-organisation efforts. This was done partly to 'test' the feasibility of some of the ideas proposed but also to inspire similar efforts of change.

The five articles collected in the Special Issue, therefore, present examples for incremental changes to overcome the deteriorating state of universities and bring forth solutions that allow academics to have their free space and create room for manoeuvre. We sincerely thank the editors of *Learning and Teaching* for providing us with the opportunity to let these examples from across the world become known to a broader audience with this Special Issue.

Parker: The university without walls: space, time and capacities

Martin Parker reflects on his own experiences as a university professor in charge of a small research institute trying to 'reach out' to various social initiatives in the university's home city of Bristol. Despite calls for 'impact', 'translation' or 'partnerships' that seek to reform the manner in which universities interact with their environment, Parker shows how the university remains embedded in, and keeps creating, a social infrastructure with boundaries that shape how a senior academic can and cannot interact with the non-academic environment. He specifically discusses constraints of space (e.g., 'intra-mural' vs 'extra-mural' activities), time (e.g., the slow pace of academic decision-making) as well as identity and capacity (e.g., the expectations that come with academic titles) undermining academic efforts to play a meaningful role in the local organisation of social change.

Le Vaul-Grimwood et al.: Tempered radicalism: a model for navigating academic practice and identity in the twenty-first-century neoliberal university?

Marita le Vaul-Grimwood, Vani Naik, Cameron Graham, Zack Moir and Fiona Smart invite the readers to follow their collaborative autoethnographic endeavour, during which the authors engage in a dialogue for making sense of the concept of the 'tempered radical'. We learn that their journey is informed by the authors' shared dissatisfaction with the contemporary higher education context. In their dialogue, tempered radicalism constitutes a vehicle for becoming aware of the possibilities to enact change from within. The authors highlight the varieties of understanding and enacting tempered radicalism and, thereby, the various possible identities of being a tempered radical in academia that the concept offers. They also narrate the struggles related to the motivation to promote change while partially, yet unavoidably, conforming to the higher education system. Le Vaul-Grimwood et al. show that becoming a tempered radical involves seeking possibilities for having agency while being aware of one's positionality. Furthermore, resisting dominant narratives and structures means handling the boundary between tempered and overt radicalism. Engaging in a dialogue with the concept of tempered radicalism, the authors speak and listen to the idea and each other, a conversation that can spark the interest amongst academics to reflect on their own criticality towards contemporary higher education and how that might translate into action.

Wallin: Humanisation of higher education: Re-imagining the university together with students

In his article, Patric Wallin proposes a critical dialogic teaching approach that combines concepts from students-as-partners and undergraduate research, rooted in critical pedagogy. The aim of this approach is to inspire new forms of higher education research and educational development. Wallin's study involves analysing students' work from a university course using qualitative document analysis and exploring how students envision future learning environments in their education. Wallin argues that a critical dialogic teaching approach can foster collaboration between students and academics, who work together to co-create knowledge and meaning. This approach positions students as active participants and knowledge producers

in higher education research, rather than as passive learners. By adopting a partnership mindset, teachers and students can create a space for collective cultures to thrive, challenging traditional power dynamics. Overall, Wallin's article makes a convincing case for the importance of adopting a critical dialogic teaching approach in higher education. By positioning students as partners and knowledge producers, this approach challenges traditional power dynamics and fosters a more democratic community within the university.

Santos and Filner: Shared governance in the public university: A case study from the US Midwest

Jose Leonardo Santos and Matthew Filner explore the notion that a degree of shared governance is desirable, or indeed necessary, for the success of professional service organisations like universities operating in shifting, marketised external environments. The authors provide insights into the implementation of a shared governance model in a US higher education context. They document the challenges and opportunities presented by the model and show how communication and trust between academics and administrators are affected by the prevailing economic and political realities. They argue that academic success cannot be managed top down, rather it needs to be nurtured in an environment of mutual trust from the bottom up. Yet this has become increasingly hard to achieve as additional scrutiny, accountability and the shift towards neoliberal management practices have eroded the traditional view of higher education as a public good. The benefits and disadvantages of a unionised workforce are also explored from both academics' and managers' viewpoints. Santos and Filner show the gulf in cultures between the more deliberative, democratic, slower-moving academic and the professionalised, hierarchical, more dynamic managerial decision-making processes. While a degree of tension within the governance structure may indeed be both creative and beneficial, there must be scope for negotiation and compromise. The reader is shown academics and managers occupied in establishing the ground rules for shared governance when their joint interests might be better served in questioning funding and resource-allocation decisions made at state level. The extension of the shared governance mandate to currently unrepresented groups such as students and academic support staff is also mooted. This case study captures the complexity and challenges of a governance model which offers a more consultative, collaborative form of organising academic work in universities.

Simpson et al.: Less talk, more action: (Re)Organising universities in Aotearoa New Zealand

Aimee B. Simpson, Leon A. Salter, Rituparna Roy, Luke D. Oldfield and Apriel D. Jolliffe Simpson account for their own experience with activism by using critical action research, which they propose as a viable, strategic way to (re)organise academic work structurally and politically. The authors specifically address the challenges experienced by the academic precariat in a two-tier system where the academic precariat reduces the teaching burden of full-time academics who are under performance auditing. In this arrangement, the precariat is inhibited from achieving sufficient academic merits and is unable to compete for full-time positions leaving them with high job insecurity. Simpson et al. use their own first-hand experience as precarious workers in multiple universities and their comprehensive survey of fellow academic precarious workers in Aotearoa (New Zealand) to foreground the academic precariat's challenges. They aim to have powerful stakeholders take notice of and (re)politicse the pressing issues facing the academic precariat. The authors explain how activism works well when it takes place within the frames set up by the system you wish to critique and change (i.e., the systems' focus on research merits instead of teaching merits) and when teaming up with powerful changemakers (i.e., national unions). The benefits of action research in opposition to top-down reforms are according to the authors a fairer, more meaningful, and more democratic long-lasting change. The authors acknowledge the need for powerful collaborations to gain leverage of one's agenda in action research and get key changemakers to listen and act. They suggest that academics take individual action in their research through action research, hence, the change comes from below and not from a re-structuring of the organisation.

Overall, the articles show that there are indeed feasible alternative forms of organising higher education and academic work and various ways of creatively resisting the negative effects of neoliberal university management and organisation. However, we are left in no doubt that further practical action is required, and we encourage academic colleagues everywhere to seize the opportunity to engage proactively with their local decision-making processes and governance structures and seek, create and employ all available outlets (e.g., editorships, research and popular journals, conferences,

books, workshops) to publicise further experiments with alternative forms of organisation. The Special Issue, which also includes reviews of books about student activism and re-imagining academic writing, seeks to provide stimulating reading, while also contributing to paving the way to an alternative world of work in academia.

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Notes

1. UNIKE https://unike.au.dk/

2. https://www.staff.ncl.ac.uk/nick.megoran/HTML/rtb.html

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