

Beyond ‘Aware and Paralysed’: Governance, Research and Leadership at the Nexus of Academic Development and Corporate Universities

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Abstract: The corporatisation of the higher education institution poses challenges for relational human-connected academic development. The academic developer is caught between corporate structures and narratives which conditions inaction and an inevitable professionalisation of their portfolio. This article argues that without supporting faculty agency the role is still not fully realised. It highlights how the corporate university conditions staff and students and reasserts student/staff partnership as a conduit to reposition the institution and its governance for democratic society. Through a novel synthesis of research literature, and theoretical positioning, new ways for academic developers to ‘see’ their work and reassert ownership and hope are suggested.

Keywords: Academic Development, Corporate University, Staff Agency, Partnership, University Governance

1. Introduction

Academic and educational development in higher education is a contested and tumultuous academic space. Across institutions in Australia, and around the world, the role of the academic developer has repeatedly transformed with recent moves towards supporting institutional priorities and structures (Knapper, 2016). Though, in spite of assertions that academic development is becoming recognised as a bona fide academic field (Knapper, 2016), the role of the academic developer is hurtling towards compliance officer, project manager or an agent of improvement for competitive market-positioning (Ling et al., 2013). Concomitantly, institutionally, higher education’s narrow focus and contorted sense of possibility under the managerialist, capitalist, for-profit business-style apparatus conditions academic work in specific modes which amplify and freeze value-unaware agency for positive change (Marginson & Considine, 2000; Slaughter & Leslie, 1997). Academic developers in this arena are particularly subject to these top-down market driven forces partly through the structure of their organisational units, typically relatively ‘close to the top’ under a Pro-Vice Chancellor (PVC) or in some instances directly a Deputy Vice Chancellor (DVC) who may struggle with identity and purpose themselves (Denney, 2022; Smith & Adams, 2008), and partly through the expectation implicit in their role, as the ‘change maker’ and/or ‘executor of policy’ (Manathunga, 2007).

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With the university sector broadly enduring an age of radical transformation and repurposing (Benson & Boyd, 2015; Bonnell, 2016; Cuellar et al., 2021) there is substantive need to consider how this conditions the academic development apparatus which, at least in stated purpose, is responsible for supporting one of the fundamental purposes of the institution: its teaching and learning. Recent scholarship has focussed on the public role of the university sector, from its position as a democratic space (Brennan, 2010; Evans et al., 2019; Tapanila et al., 2020), to the role of academics as public intellectuals and stewards of robust thought and progressive thinking (Benson & Boyd, 2015; Fraser & Taylor, 2016; Giroux, 2014). However, the role of the university is frequently undermined, or usurped, by alternative agendas under ailing capitalist structures (Giroux, 2014) and staff under these transformed structures are left reeling after continued erosion of the fundamental purpose of their institutions, arcane changes to metrics which transform scholarship, and increasingly troubling employment conditions (Cornelius-Bell & Bell, 2021; Rogers & Swain, 2021; Rogers et al., 2020; Walker et al., 2022).

Here, the academic developer straddles two worlds: betwixt the imperative to develop policy, enact ‘transformational change’, create/manage the development of new learning materials quickly (McInnes et al., 2020) and navigate challenging employer-employee relations whilst working with staff to support their development of teaching/research praxis, and themselves subject to changing employment conditions, precarity, and changing value systems toward which they have varying degrees of ‘acceptance’, lest they risk their employment. Finding space for agency, then, between institutional agendas set by corporate governance which (Aronowitz & Giroux, 2000; Bonnell, 2016; Zipin, 2019) emphasises metrics, efficiency and performance measures and what academics *need* to do to educate, research and live meaningful lives becomes an increasingly tricky space. Indeed, academics broadly respond differently to the presence of academic developers from seeing them as meddling, controlling or harbingers of everything wrong with the institution, to seeing them as allies, supporters and leaders, much of which comes down to individual relationship management and dispositions (Kinash & Wood, 2013; Manathunga, 2007; Mori et al., 2021). Following this, understanding that academic development is both about supporting collaboration, consistency, communication, and positive transformation (often a question of “for who?”) and supporting the development of policy, practices and institutional agendas which *should* enable this work then the imperative for an ‘activist’ or, at least, agentive academic developer becomes clear for meaningful action to be possible. Alas, conditions shaping the work and role of the academic developer are akin to a vice-grip, rather than open, honest and encouraged transformational work which bridges the lived reality “on the ground” with the policy aspirations of the corporate university, under this the academic developer is marginalised or constrained into paralysis – *except when they are not*.

This article explores the role and possibility for the academic developer in the contemporary university. Drawing on lived experience and empirical literature some of the current terrain will be elaborated and the possibility for agency and change explored. Starting with the rapid transformation of the higher education sector from universities as a public good, for some, towards massified and corporatized institutions which serve capitalistic intents and moving through the role of policy, politics, resistance and transformation this article will explore two modes which academic developers take to ‘grow’ academic practice: both their own, and their colleagues. The article will juxtapose policy and history with practice and ways of thinking and working under, against and with institutional priorities which may provide first steps towards a more agentive, and ultimately activist academic development praxis. Importantly, this article positions ongoing

theoretical debate about the role and nature of the university in contemporary times without intending to cast those working *in* higher education in any particular frame. Indeed, the internal struggle of the academic developer is akin to that of the PVC, the learning designer, the academic, the dean, and so on in that individuals' best judgements about how to advance education and research, collegially, through an accelerated late-capitalist world are negotiated, value driven and based on fundamentally good intentions – and, indeed, not 'new' conversations. Here, roles, functions and power are differential but can be enacted in a variety of ways under various types and ideologies in regimes of complex higher education institutions and this article seeks to elaborate *a* way of maintaining collegial work, development and collaborative high quality thinking and working in the contemporary university that also understands, meets and enhances understandings of 'quality' and 'performance'.

2. Reorganisation of the Institution

Universities in Australia are governed by founding 'acts' of parliament, a legal document which structures the nature and purpose of the institution (Cornelius-Bell, 2021a). These acts, across Australia, structure universities as public institutions which are for the advancement of educational ends, and frequently describe the core purpose of universities as the home of research and/or education which advances civil society. From the 1900s Australian universities, which were founded on unceded Aboriginal lands, have been the home to reproduction of western episteme but have largely acted for the public good and, while subject to transformation, typically opened up to more students and created more educated, analytical and activist citizenry (Cornelius-Bell, 2021b). Since the late 1990s, these public institutions have been taken by rhetoric which centres the 'business' of being an institution as being a business (Aronowitz, 2004; Bessant, 1995; Shermer, 2021) and continues to be a source of consternation and active debate in academic circles. The fundamental transformation of the nature of the university has been documented around the world, as increasingly private institutions rise to address growing market demand for specific educational ends, and the public sector moves towards increasingly private models across the litany of formerly governmental services (Connell, 2013). While administrators, politicians and business leaders position the service model of universities *qua* businesses there is stark retaliation from ideological academics and members of the public who view the transformation of universities to business models as fundamentally anti-democratic. Importantly, university administration itself is under significant pressure to conform with business rhetoric and managerialism as the recipient of increasingly corporatized public governance (Giroux, 2002; Marginson & Considine, 2000) led by overly performative vice chancellery (Brabazon, 2021). Indeed, this entire transformation to 'business' and concomitant corporate capture, managerialism and privatisation which had its genesis in Australia through the 1980s (Humphrys, 2019) has continued to polarise and generate conflict in the public sphere and particularly amongst students (Altbach & Cohen, 1990; Barnhardt, 2012; Bateson & Taylor, 2004; Brulé, 2016).

Inherently, academics make value judgements about the nature, purpose and function of the university sector, and the perception of the university as a business has sparked particularly strong backlash from those who view the institution as a space of public good, public advancement, and public value. Indeed, the emergence of universities as developers of human capital (Chapman & Pope, 1992; Schultz, 1971) concomitantly advance the university as a producer of skilled persons who offer the market a value and as Brown (2015) argues, undermines the fundamental democratic purpose of the university. Rather than

developing people for the sake of an educated populous with sound understanding of the consequences of decisions, the role of a united democratic public and healthy open debate about politics, the view of the university as a business tends to lend itself to private development of persons who gain a competitive advantage through their attendance at a university. Competition, here, centres as the students compete with one another for places, graduate careers, and push against collaboration, cooperation, and communication. Completion of a degree, then, positions a graduate for ‘better’ work on the job market, though varying analyses do not universally support this assertion in its complexity (De Vries, 2014). There are important flow-on effects for this positioning in the learning/teaching space which is particularly relevant for academic development and academics broadly, in that the institutional messaging around the “value” of a degree positions students *prima facie* as customers, obtaining an education as the “delivery” of content and the lecturer as customer servant (Gravett et al., 2019; Naylor et al., 2021). This repositions the academic worker from their location as expert, pedagogue, lecturer and in some instances public intellectual towards that of entertainer (Hockings et al., 2009; Wong & Chiu, 2019). In addition, in a post-COVID educational world, the deprofessionalisation of online lecturers is more rapid, often left “delivering” courses written by others (McInnes et al., 2019), and less empowered to make active decisions about curriculum and assessment. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic proved to be a space in which significant organisational transformation could occur under the guise of ‘lost profits’ which themselves were scarcely the *bona fide* driver of these changes (Mott, 2022). Within the frame of a transforming university apparatus these professionalising or rather deprofessionalising changes can be situated within rising managerialist impulses which emanate from surrounding corporatized public and private institutions (beyond the university) with which the university must interface and directly condition or limit agency towards specific (not) for profit ends (Alvesson & Spicer, 2016; Archer, 2008; Arthur, 2009). There are also more direct institutional reorganisations both of structure and modes of academic work which have impacted both academic development and broadly the role of the lecturer in universities (i.e. Dollinger, 2020). This does not, however, end the conversation about change for the better.

3. Towards Change

With universities repositioned simultaneously by broader political forces and through the internal linguistic and cultural shifts towards corporatism and installation of managerialist administration (Aronowitz, 2004; Deem, 2001; Erickson et al., 2021), the capacity and nature of the equivalent ‘division of learning and teaching’ is transformed and repositioned. The university’s division/centre/unit for academic development which is frequently home to a mixture of academic and professional staff serves a litany of overlapping ‘services’ from professional development through web design and compliance and quality assurance through instructional design and development of virtual reality tools. These highly skilled multi-disciplinary units are regularly employed to create ‘innovation’ but simultaneously to ensure compliance and conformity with policy which the unit is often partly responsible for consulting on or socialising. These uncomfortable roles fit under corporatized innovation inspired by industry, while simultaneously importing quality and product control protocols. However, rather than focus on ‘innovating’ based on research literature, there are imperatives to support staff development of internalised quality control to augment customer experience (*vis-à-vis* student consumer) (i.e. Pratasavitskaya & Stensaker, 2010). Between quality assurance roles, educational quality-checkers, and compliance and accountability development there is little room left to create space for authentic staff engagement,

development, and collaboration. Moreover, with more universities moving to ‘teaching’/‘education’ focussed academic models for their academic developers there comes less imperative to engage with or undertake empirical research (even for educational quality and improvement). The focus of these units, then, in alignment with the corporate vision of the institution, positions the academic developer, and their colleagues, as a professional staff member (someone without formal position permission for scholarship and research, not any less capable of the practice). When the time comes to evaluate the ‘value’ of housing academic contracts in the unit, the foregone conclusion is that these units should be professional, as they already act in these modes – or are hurtling towards acting in these modes.

A bleak outlook is omnipresent for the professionalisation of formerly academic tasks which appears to spread and proves another win for corporate models of higher education. Moreover, with universities such as the University of Adelaide moving their central academic support division to a professionalised unit (University of Adelaide, 2022), the transformation (shedding formal research capacity) has already occurred and is likely occurring in an institution near you. Here, the argument for fulsome academic function in central units supporting academic development must be clarified for their longevity. If academic activities are being undertaken in these units, the value of their function vis-à-vis as researchers must be valued, supported, and developed. If the role of academic development literature, as a discrete field from the scholarship of learning and teaching, is truly being valued (Knapper, 2016) in academic circles, then universities – as traditional centres of excellence for both teaching and research – must create spaces where high profile, good quality research can be conducted. Moreover, this research and these centres must be used to create real ground-up change for higher education – not just in limited ‘patches’. Importantly, research co-constructed by academic developers and academic staff which works to collaboratively direct the institutions policy, direction, and decisions is likely to support (re)development of collegial governance and a shared ownership of the institution which fosters positive engagement and a better balance between corporatized institutions and the feared socialist institution (Baldrige, 1971; Barnes, 2020). Indeed, if research sets the policy and action agenda of the universities, particularly research done with students and staff collaboratively (Ahmadi, 2021; Cook-Sather, 2018a), then the university sector may have a better opportunity to generate policy which can influence positive change because it is drawn from the people who comprise the institution.

4. Policy and Possibility

Policy frames the structure of the higher education institution, and the educational developer is often caught between influencing policy and influencing colleagues (sometimes binarized). Higher education in the anglosphere tends to be largely self-governing and creates large libraries of policy and procedure documentation to support this position (Heller & Heller, 2001; Karmel, 2001; Lisewski, 2021). Frequently policy in higher education institutions is criticised for a broad variety of reasons, from equity and inclusion (Bennett & Lumb, 2019; Brett, 2016; Clancy & Goastellec, 2007) through failings during disruptive change (Amoah & Mok, 2022; Ayton et al., 2021) and in ‘some’ cases through its disconnect from the practices and experiences of those working/studying in the institution (Bessant, 2002; Kift et al., 2010; Winter, 2009). The role for the academic developer sits somewhere between policy deviser, particularly in the spaces of academic integrity and teaching requirements/performance, and policy critic, constrained by rules they did not develop and had no say in (Di Napoli et al., 2010; East & Donnelly, 2012; Lisewski,

2021). The challenge, here, lies in navigating input on policy decisions, their enactment in strategic projects, and the being in of an academic role working with collegiate relationships across the university. With the policy direction of the institution affectively conditioning the work, structure, and role of those working within it, and the academic developer then also working to ensure the policies are enacted, can create a significant discomfort if there is substantive disagreement over policy design, purpose and direction. Moreover, considering the corporatizing impulse of the administration raised above, the policy development process can be seen as a written structural mode of conditioning academic and professional praxis across the university. Here, an awesome weight may create paralysis – the politics of the academic developer’s role and the possibility of producing something both (un)enactable and (un)popular can create dramatic tensions in the work and life of the academic developer. With the simultaneous roles of supporting staff development, building functional relationships, creating and/or enacting policy and researching in the institution politicises the academic developer, whether they fully realise this or not. Moreover, as noted, they are often managed by a PVC or DVC who has particular views about these modes of development and implementation which further conditions the political position of the academic developer, for better or worse. Having explored the broader political movement of higher education ideology and briefly considering the impact on policy development and deployment, this article now turns to an exploration of the spaces between (constraining) politics and (agentive) possibility.

Academic agency is a complex sociological field which has been discussed, conceptualised, tested and developed in many ways (Fremstad et al., 2020; Land, 2001; Omingo, 2019; Vähäsantanen et al., 2020). Of particular importance for academic development, it has been viewed as a ‘skill’ which may be developed, fostered and supported (Mathieson, 2011). However, as noted by Mathieson (2011, p. 252) the culture of the institution, and local unit, are essential in the fostering of agency: “centralised performance audit culture, combined with an individualistic departmental culture and a reluctance to discuss teaching and learning, left many new academics uncertain what was expected of them”. Broader questions, then, of the political forces conditioning what is considered affirmable agency should be examined in the context of the previous section. Moreover, various conceptualisations of academic development have been advanced which account for academic agency, possibility and the politics of being in development work (Fremstad et al., 2020; Land, 2001; Peseta, 2014) to the point at which administrators can justifiably develop the disposition that developers are naval gazers. It is in this space that considering some of the political forces for contemporary academic development may prove a useful collective action, and ‘waking’ those of our colleagues who appear to remain ideologically passive to these pressures, such that we may advance new collegiality and ways of working which account for the immense powers of political pressure while still enabling agency.

This article contends that while there is a tendency, amongst those who feel attuned to the struggles and challenges facing colleagues and other academics in teaching/research roles, to feel helpless or disempowered (Kenny, 2018; Pretorius & Macaulay, 2021) that there remains significant opportunity to act as an agent of positive change – to the letter of our position descriptions – while still creating space for bona fide innovation, excitement, development, possibility and a collective future which sees higher education as a stronger space for its collectivised action. Away from the ‘performative’ notion of public intellectuality of which blame can be squarely apportioned to vice chancellors (Brabazon, 2021) towards

grounded “activism”, and away from conceptions of cruel optimism (Catterall et al., 2019) towards a truly possible future.

Across narratives of (1) ‘compliance officer’ or (2) ‘possibility creator’ are implicit assumptions about time, policy, negotiation, ability, and respect. In (1), the academic developer acts as an agent of policy installation though passively providing little guidance to the significant detriment of students learning experiences. This academic developer is deprofessionalised, their perspective is marginalised, and their possibility is undercut. The organisational culture is one of resistance, disenfranchisement and unhealthy scepticism after successive failings of institutional leadership, the academic developers themselves, and the policy makers. In (2) a story of possibility may emerge with the advantage of consideration, time and collaboration. Rather than limited bursts of engagement to ‘drop’ policy developments and walk away, the academic developer who works through co-construction, with teams of staff, to develop an approach which may subsume policy requirements under the umbrella of good pedagogy/praxis. Put directly, academic development requires serious attention to detail, a commitment to academic equity and advancement, but also an ability to navigate and be aware of politics, expertise, need, possibility, constructiveness, and humanity. When this is missed, lost or degraded there are immense consequences to the fundamental nature and purpose of the institution, and this may provide rationalisation for the further deprofessionalising of the academic developer, their institution and other staff.

In everyday exchanges academic developers challenge colleagues to think, write, and act differently. The bread and butter of academic development has been, or could be, the genesis of transformation based on good empirical research. Historically, this has been rooted in narratives of support, uplift and collegiality which support academics to try new things, be more effective, build learning communities, and even create stronger research; this is juxtaposed directly against the role of academic developer as quality assurer and policy enforcer (Knapper, 2016; Mooney & Miller-Young, 2021; Sayed, 1993). The quest for quality, in learning and teaching, and quality policy, to condition learning and teaching, has its lineage traced directly to the corporatizing of the institutions themselves, with federal agendas seeking to tighten definitions of education and measure quantitatively the outputs of ‘graduates’ equipped with particular skills (Brown, 2015). So strong has this narrative become that students are now positioned as co-quality assurer, beyond student as customer narratives which deactivate their learning power, the student can now through multifarious channels flag quality issues in their classes (Isaeva et al., 2020; Naylor et al., 2021; Uludağ et al., 2021). While these interactions are not inherently problematic, the ‘hermetically sealed classroom/lecture door’ (Boomer, 1991) is now full of holes not ‘controlled’ by the lecturer, and students alongside administrators are positioned, without active interrogation of values and experience, as drivers of transformation for the corporate university rather than as partners, collaborators and future decision-makers alongside the academic staff (Barrineau & Anderson, 2018; Cook-Sather, 2018b; Gravett et al., 2019). The challenge for academic developers here is to straddle the corporate inquisition on teaching practices, which may be (or have been) democratic and liberatory, and to continue to support those around them who genuinely desire to transform, change, or lift their teaching practices to be better practitioners. Here, this article argues, any uninterrogated value system of the academic developer positions them as the unwitting pawn to the corporate hegemony in such a mode that has significant detriment to the overall educational endeavour. With a solemn nod (or perhaps, eye roll) from those who have held the role, or have been keen observers of the sector, this narrative surfaces again. Now, as ever, the alternative seems

to be situated in the academic developer who ‘knows well’ the perils of the institution but is undermined, unable to act, and (de)professionalised is equally disempowered and disconnected. We must, for the good of ourselves, our colleagues, our institutions and the fundamental role of education catch this now and unite to share, build and research the possible. If we take for granted that at the core of quality education is quality research, and that quality bona fide innovation requires this synthetically challenging and territorial space to be wedded in some formation then we should consider that to continue to make scholarly contributions to our ‘renowned’ institutions we need co-design and we need scholarly attributes in our position descriptions, lest we become the police.

5. Conclusion

Academic development practice, now, can either reject *prima facie* corporate agendas, ignore those agendas at their own peril (to the collapse of their departments into professional quality assurance teams) or advance an activist/agentive modality which supports the attainment of the corporate benchmark while facilitating practice and teaching and learning processes which are congruent with high quality, democratic, participatory and active pedagogies (Barrineau et al., 2019; Cook-Sather, 2018b; Giroux, 2002; Kenny, 2018). From the latter, a new modality can be constructed which ultimately replaces this – a better education system for those within, from within. Getting there requires artful navigation. The PVC may decree many ‘almost good’ ideas: to form a university-level project to support collaborative teaching skill development; to create communities of practice which respond to coal face needs of academics; which reward those who share practices which work in complex (inter)disciplinary contexts, and so on under language which is identifiably corporate. Through conscious efforts academic developers and their colleagues can configure these decrees agentively such that staff who are ‘supported’ by these programs can also have agency in their adoption and genuinely share good practices. While measures of what works may be geared towards quantifiable outcomes: bums on seats, grades at standard distribution, learning outcomes modified, assessments compliant with policy, and so on there are agentive decisions which can enable these outcomes to be met in a relational and human mode rather than through brute force. Indeed, in many instances the PVC will identify that this mode will lead to better sustained practice. Naturally, however, there are practices which are better kept as subdued or perhaps even subversive which support fostering of communities which create better conditions in higher education, and navigating these tensions is a matter for academic developer expertise. Importantly, though, good ideas and strong collegiality held too closely can significantly harm both the productivity and the collaborative spirit of the portfolio/unit. However, if our own praxis is such that we silence ‘our marginal’, ‘our different’ and ‘our subversive’ activity we are likely not doing enough to challenge status quo with our colleagues, let alone with faculty and staff broadly. This isn’t to say that everything must be open and shared with immediate colleagues, but if our own practices do not support colleague academic developers, learning designers and so on to build their own agency, and to understand problematic value systems and educative predicaments, we have failed to secure a collective future which is enough to thrive under corporate hegemony and ultimately challenge that hegemony to create a better world.

This article proposes, then, a conscious praxis which interrogates the driver of the decisions made about where the institution is going next, and should it be possible, for us collectively to challenge the status quo, ensure marginalised perspectives are heard, and that we are facilitating the maximum agency within

each daily exchange wherever possible, without spending all our days ‘naval gazing’, or fretting every decision that may have inadvertently reduced agency or possibility for positive transformation. We must be undeniable pragmatists who seek to advance high quality learning and teaching, build quality research and research frameworks, collaborate across boundaries, and unite staff in passion for teaching and research. It is here we have been historically successful, and here where our position retains us as agents of hope, possibility and educational wonder – the future of the university as a human learning endeavour which respects, responds, and grows human practice. Ultimately, the assertion must here be made that if we are not enabling agency, opening possibility, creating dialogue, and advancing multiple perspectives (particularly in teaching and learning practices) then we are not creating a higher education landscape at the heart of the values asserted in the acts of the university structure. Rather, we simply advance a status quo, a hegemony, which silences diversity and retains praxis which is empty, meaningless, and entirely too quantifiable. May this be another catalyst to continue to connect, collaborate, challenge, interrogate, and reframe the thinking for a future that’s better for all in the institution.

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