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

ABSTRACT

Despite the growing size of the academic precariat in the tertiary sector, this exploited group of workers lacks a voice in either their universities or their national union. In this article we draw on our experiences of transitioning from a small activist group to a broader research collective with influence and voice, while forging networks of solidarity. Through reflecting on developing the *Precarious Academic Work Survey* (PAWS), we explore how action research is a viable way of structurally and politically (re)organising academic work. We argue that partnering with changemakers such as unions as co-researchers disrupts their embedded processes so that they may be (re)politicised towards pressing issues such as precarity. Further, we highlight how research can be used as a call to action and a tool to recruit powerful allies to collaborate on transforming universities into educational utopias.

KEYWORDS

academia, neoliberal, precarity, tertiary education, unions, universities

In September 2021 the first ever survey of fixed-term and casual academic work in Aotearoa New Zealand (hereafter Aotearoa) was launched – the *Precarious Academic Work Survey* (PAWS). The number of responses (760 in four weeks – far more than anticipated), illustrated the prior exclusion of precarious voices from debates around the academic workforce in Aotearoa, while the quantitative data highlighted the long-term, ongoing nature of their exploitative conditions. This exclusion reflected a growing acquiescence towards the issue of precarity in universities and, troublingly, the national union. Indeed, despite the growing reliance on the academic

precariat in the tertiary sector, the precariat's voice and agency are rendered invisible in conversations about the structural and political organisation of academic work.

As authors, we are 'insiders' (Winter 1998) to precarious academic work and activism, and in this article, we draw on our experiences with initiating and writing about the PAWS to explore how action research can be a viable, strategic way of collectively (re)organising the academic work which normally disempowers and divides us (Fleming 2021). With the term '(re)organise', we dually reference the *logistical/structural* and the fundamentally *political* organisation that we see as necessary aspects of reimagining our sector. In this way, action research provides an opportunity to give voice to, and create alternative knowledges with, marginalised communities such as the academic precariat, and include them in reimagining the sector and crafting solutions for change.

We propose action research as a strategic and 'creative maladjustment' (Spooner 2017) to corporatised universities (Gayá and Brydon-Miller 2017). Action research seeks to tackle real-world problems and improve conditions in participatory, collaborative and cyclical ways by producing both knowledge and action (Bradbury 2015; Winter 1998; O'Leary 2007). Inspired by Marc Spooner (2017), who proposed reappropriating aspects of audit culture for resistive purposes, we argue that the pressure to 'publish or perish' can also create opportunities for engaging in, documenting, and prompting further collective action under the banner of research. In our case study, we demonstrate how we leveraged our activist and academic affiliations to bring together a cohort of representatives from multiple universities, unions, and advocacy groups to design and conduct the inaugural PAWS.

We consider the power of action research to transform the current neoliberalised system through collaboration and utopian imagination (Egmose et al. 2020; Gayá and Brydon-Miller 2017; Peeters 2013). In imagining an educational utopia, we combined our loftier goal of long-term sectoral transformation with pragmatism. We strategically used the findings of the PAWS in ways that played to their strengths: feeding fetishised quantitative metrics back into the neoliberal machine to reawaken the collective conscience of academics through contributions to literature. We highlight how this approach worked to gain support from powerful allies, who could be subsequently brought in to co-create actionable solutions that will work towards our educational utopian aspirations of a sustainably funded tertiary education system oriented towards the public good, rather than private profit.

Firstly however, we briefly outline the neoliberal systemic pressures which have come to dominate academia in Aotearoa, creating a tension between audit culture's focus on the social good of production and the legislated requirement for universities to 'accept a role as critic and conscience of society' (Education and Training Act 2020: 268). This tension, we argue, ingrains a two-tiered system which relies on the labour of the academic precariat while structurally impeding the emergence of their voices. At the same time, the national union works primarily to protect the jobs and conditions of its permanent membership, contributing further to the erasure of the voices of the precariat.

Background: Neoliberal audit culture, the two-tiered system and union inertia

Public universities globally have long faced increased pressures to become neoliberal institutions, combining obligations to be a social good with capitalist objectives such as profit generation (Connell 2019; Shore 2010). In Aotearoa, this pressure is complicated by the legislated requirement for universities to 'accept a role as critic and conscience of society' (Education and Training Act 2020: 268). The conflation of 'social good' with 'high performance' has led to an intensification of audit culture, which uses research impact metrics and institutional ranking systems to establish value (Beer 2016; Shore 2008; Shore and Wright 2004). Higher education's audit culture has received extensive criticism (Cruickshank 2016) for introducing externally defined and assessed 'performance excellence' metrics that impose a *'relationship of power* between scrutinizer and observed' (Shore and Wright 1999: 558). This iniquitous power relationship is felt most acutely by precarious staff who are forced to compete against their peers (by out-performing them in the relevant metrics) to attempt to secure the few permanent positions available (Spooner 2017).

Audit culture, through its emphasis on efficient production by individual(ised) academics, has also contributed to the increased use of casualised labour (Cruickshank 2016; Spooner 2017). The pressures to produce 'high quality' outputs contributes to a two-tier system that divides permanent from non-permanent staff, as the job security of permanent staff 'is underpinned by casual teachers and research assistants whose labour lifts those above them' (Thomas et al. 2020: 30–31).

In Aotearoa, the hegemonic ascendancy of audit culture was solidified by the introduction of the Performance Based Research Fund (PBRF) in 2003 that ring-fenced 20 per cent of the public research funding pool for a contestable fund, allocated based on the assessment of 'the performance of each *individual* staff member' (Shore 2010: 19) every five years. Notably, the PBRF guidelines stipulate that staff must be employed for a minimum of twelve months to be included in the assessment (Tertiary Education Commission 2018), which encourages institutions to optimise their potential PBRF score through casualisation. Accordingly, there has been an increase in casualised teaching-only roles that – in theory – reduce the burden on PBRF-assessed staff, so that they may focus on their research outputs (Curtis and Matthewman 2005). Moreover, externally funded, multi-year fixed-term research-only appointments are useful for institutions because these roles tend to have high research outputs, resulting in a higher potential PBRF ranking and thus increased funding.

For the academic precariat, increased casualisation within a two-tiered system has translated to them spending years – sometimes entire careers (Stringer et al. 2018) – cycling through contracts that leave them with little autonomy and vulnerable to changes in work (Oldfield et al. 2021; Thomas et al. 2020), with little hope of ever rising to the top tier. And since 2020, the conditions for precarious staff in Aotearoa's universities have further worsened through increased workloads and job cuts, as universities scramble to recoup financial losses associated with the COVID-19 pandemic (Oldfield et al. 2021).

While we might have hoped the national union would act to protect this vulnerable, marginalised group, instead it retreated into protectionist mode, attempting to guard the jobs of permanent academics while accepting the fate of the precariat. Like other unions (see Gall et al. 2011), tertiary unions can become controlled by the voices and interests of the most powerful (i.e., permanent academics) and become too closely aligned to management structures, leaving insufficient space for the voices and interests of the most vulnerable and marginalised, thereby discouraging their membership or participation (Chatterjee et al. 2008).

This exclusion is further sedimented through Aotearoa's neoliberal anti-union employment law framework, instigated by The Employment Contracts Act (1991) which restricted union striking rights to stalled collective agreement negotiations. Hence, all industrial action became focused

on the periodic bargaining of a collective contract, which condenses the very different demands of professional staff, permanent academics, and precarious academics. Unsurprisingly, the demands of the least powerful, most transient group, who have the lowest union participation rates and smallest voice in the union, tend to be side-lined, meaning issues relating to casualisation are de-prioritised in favour of the majority. This means that only members of the academic precariat who work for the two Aotearoa universities who do not cover casual workers under their collective agreement (University of Otago and Victoria University of Wellington) have the power to take industrial action over their exploitative conditions. At the same time, that 'power' is severely curtailed by their isolation from both precariat in other institutions and more experienced permanent staff in their own.

It therefore became apparent that precarious academics, who are relied on to sustain an otherwise unsustainable system which exploits and marginalises them, had no voice to challenge their status as second tier and expendable, either in their universities or through their union. Thus, in our view, any movements towards changing the system must be inspired by the voiced experiences of precarious academics themselves.

Action research and (re)organising universities

Action research encompasses a raft of methodologies that seek to address complex problems and implement practical improvements in the researcher's area of study (Bradbury 2015; Winter 1998). Traditionally, action research was associated with managerialist, workplace optimisation projects (Winter 1998) that tasked workers with evaluating themselves and the systems they were engaged in, to develop and implement improvements based on their findings. Action researchers are reflexive insiders; professional experts both privy to the internal logics of the ecosystems under examination and committed to the improvement of them (Bradbury 2015; Winter 1998). Problematising easy dichotomies between researchers and passive participants from whom data is extracted, this more ethical approach to research builds solidarity by generating alternative knowledge and engaging with relevant stakeholders as *co-researchers* (Bradbury 2015; Courtois and O'Keefe 2015).

There is therefore a strong argument for critical applications of action research, particularly on issues of social justice and inequity, with the goal of achieving radical social change for marginalised groups (Gibbs et al. 2017). Notably, Patricia Gayá and Mary Brydon-Miller (2017) proposed

that action research within higher education settings could be a strategic way of one day dismantling increasingly corporatised universities. Critical action research enables higher education researchers to envision a future educational 'utopia' of dismantled neoliberalism and decommodified public education, while tied to more realistic, achievable goals in the present which work to get us there (Gayá and Brydon-Miller 2017). This is analogous to 'non-reformist reforms', which link the particular to the universal by being both unashamedly utopian but also 'grounded in real tendencies of the world today' (Srnicek and Williams 2015: 108).

Action research also connects the particular to the universal by being a cyclical process in which producing knowledge and changing social systems takes place simultaneously (Bradbury 2015; Winter 1998). It thereby seeks to reconfigure audit culture and the two-tiered system's parameters of 'the possible' (Rancière 1999) through democratic collaboration and utopian imagination (Peeters 2013; Gayá and Brydon-Miller 2017; Egmose et al. 2020). Action research is then prefigurative, conflating ends with means by 'aim[ing] to instantiate radical social change in and through practice' (Törnberg 2021: 84). As Gayá and Brydon-Miller noted, 'prefigurative practice emerges from within the field of lived, embodied experiences, from alternative knowledge, politics, practises, and forms of organising made manifest in the here and now' (2017: 38).

Set in opposition to the neoliberal trend towards a superficial performance of consultation which emphasises impression management, conflict containment and the narrowing of the terms of engagement (Futrell 1999; Ombler et al. 2016), action research emphasises genuine collaboration and solidarity between members of marginalised groups. Not only is this fairer and more democratic, but it produces meaningful, long-lasting change with worker buy-in, as opposed to the top-down reforms that have previously fallen short and even worsened conditions (Levin and Greenwood 2016). Indeed, action research has already been levied against issues such as precarity (e.g. Courtois and O'Keefe 2015; Graham and Papadopoulos 2021; O'Keefe and Courtois 2019) to (re)politicise and (re)democratise higher education outside of traditional activism and advocacy. However, the approach should not be considered an 'off the shelf' methodology which can be applied to any context in the same way and produce the same results. More often it emerges as a complex, iterative, messy process which is context specific and therefore firmly grounded in the conditions specific to a particular conjunction of structural forces. In the following section we outline how

we came to inadvertently apply it to the context of post-pandemic academic precarity in Aotearoa.

Action research and the academic precariat in Aotearoa: A case study of broadening collaboration

While in this article we propose action research as a deliberate and strategic way of (re)organising academic work, our venture into it was borne out of necessity. Within our respective neoliberal universities, we fulfilled the roles expected of an 'early career' academic: conducting and publishing research, teaching and giving service to our departments, while receiving scant recognition, or formal career development due to our structural positions in the second tier. While performing most of the tasks undertaken by permanent staff, unlike them we were only paid for our time spent teaching and marking. Resultingly, we were forced to take on multiple contracts to build a liveable wage – an average of five contracts for each author in 2021 alone – often across multiple institutions. Because of the two-tiered structure of audit culture, this meant that most of our available time was, and continues to be, spent on work that predominantly benefits the careers of our permanently employed colleagues (see Thomas et al. 2020), and that our own research, publishing and activist efforts were unpaid, in what little time we had to spare. There is additional hidden labour in working across multiple universities, as each institution has its own processes (e.g., recruitment, time sheeting and semester dates) that must be repeatedly navigated. Even union membership is tied to the tenure of individual contracts and institutions, resulting in a continuous requirement to re-enrol as one agreement ends and another begins.

Our initial activist efforts as the Tertiary Education Action Group Aotearoa (TEAGA) were limited by structural, legal and situational constraints. Not only is lawful strike action difficult in Aotearoa but striking over casualisation curtails the already limited incomes of the people who rely on this work (see Oldfield et al. 2021) and would likely jeopardise already tenuous employment opportunities going forward. Additionally, as a small group, we lacked the resources (e.g., time, money, critical mass) to make significant inroads politically and legislatively without the support of established groups such as unions and academic networks. During 2020 and early 2021 we concentrated our efforts in establishing a voice for the academic precariat that had been denied them by their universities and

their union. Hence, we employed traditional activist lobbying tactics, including an open letter, writing newspaper opinion pieces, creating a website and social media accounts and maintaining regular contact with education reporters. However, while our group's campaigning enjoyed some early successes and garnered occasional media coverage, it appeared to have little effect on the prevailing structure and was largely ignored by the universities, the national union and government.

Contributing to this lack of structural impact was that the academic precariat was not yet an 'object of knowledge' (Foucault 1972) widely recognised as problematic, thereby prompting investigation by institutions with more capacity and resources than our own. The naming of an identity itself performs political work (Rancière 1999), and before our advocacy 'early career' researcher (which included both permanent and precarious academics within seven years of PhD completion) was still the dominant term within government, universities and the union, thereby occluding the exploitation of the precarious majority.

The lack of data capturing the extent of precarity in Aotearoa's university system contributed to this issue. Although the problem of precarity is well documented globally, in Aotearoa, academic precarity has predominantly been studied qualitatively or on a small scale, such as within a specific role or institution (e.g., Naepi et al. 2019; Stringer et al. 2018; Sutherland 2009, 2015). In the context of a system and an audit culture that fetishises statistical measurement, the absence of quantifiable data on precarity is significant (Shore and Wright 2015) and suggests the academic precariat had not yet garnered the attention of governments and unions. From our advocacy efforts, personal experiences of precarity and evidence in existing literature, we understood the problems faced by the academic precariat and foresaw a series of stalemates if we approached activism through traditional channels.

This realisation led us to think about how we could creatively use research to highlight the experiences of the academic precariat, while more indirectly and subtly (re)organising universities and unions in relation to them. One strategy highlighted by Spooner (2017) is to reappropriate facets of audit culture, such as the quantitative assessment mechanisms that support the systems of reward and punishment in the tertiary sector, for our own resistive purposes. Researchers can use research as a 'creative maladjustment' (Spooner 2017), exposing injustice and building solidarity by conducting their own auditing research (e.g., staff satisfaction surveys)

on the university systems they inhabit. Inspired by this logic, we argue that the increasing expectations to conduct interdisciplinary research and the culture of 'publish or perish' provide opportunities to collectively 'deform the form' (Spooner 2017) through action research, by treating these expectations as opportunities to engage in, document, and prompt further collective action.

One such opportunity arose when our politicisation of the academic precariat in Aotearoa and the exploitation of student labour captured the attention of the national student union, who we then worked with on campaigns relating to research funding and scholarship stipends. Government ministers responded to this collective lobbying and began consulting with our group to establish how we could help advise on future sector reforms. This response represented the first time we received recognition from the government; however, they remained dominated by the current neoliberal system's structural negation of precariat voices. Specifically, the problem of sector-wide casualisation in teaching was deprioritised in favour of addressing the research sector only, which tends towards slightly less problematic, fixed-term contracts linked to grants for 'early career' researchers. Hence the two-tier system by which research is enabled through the casualisation of teaching remained unaddressed. Nevertheless, we resolved to leverage the new combined strength of our group and the national student union to conduct our own survey research, independent of government, on precarious academic work.

By July 2021, the national union had learned of our intention to design a survey to establish the issues, concerns and aspirations of precariously employed academics in Aotearoa's universities. Noting this survey would overlap with the union's role of conducting research into these issues among their membership (they conduct periodic 'state of the sector' surveys but had never undertaken a survey specifically on precarity), they arranged to meet with us. This meeting allowed us, as part of the academic precariat, to air our frustrations over the historical lack of concern for the plight of precarious staff. The union acknowledged some issues and offered to collaborate on the survey and fund a report of findings. We also recruited support from permanent academic staff who were sympathetic to our advocacy and had expertise in areas of critical higher education and surveying. By September 2021, after several months of collaborations and negotiations on the content of the survey, the PAWS was finalised and approved for launch by these external collaborators.

In developing the PAWS survey, we drew on our insider knowledge to formulate questions about how precarious academic workers navigate Aotearoa's neoliberal universities. This allowed us as academic activists to build an empirical basis around four areas we felt were critical to (re)organise our university sector. The first was to illuminate the experiences of the many 'early career' academic workers who were trapped in a cycle of precarity, thereby highlighting the problem of precarity as a sector-wide issue, building solidarity, and uplifting voices. The second was to establish the structural disadvantages participants faced based on their class position, age, gender, ethnicity and sexuality, buttressing pre-existing arguments in this space (e.g., Naepi et al. 2019; Stringer et al. 2018). The third was to investigate how issues that university managers should have more control over (e.g., addressing bullying in the workplace or the impacts of remote teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic) impacted participants' careers. The fourth was to ask participants what firstly universities, then government, and finally the national union could do to improve their conditions, using open-text boxes. Given the lack of precarious voices in debates on the future of the academic sector, and in line with action research principles of empowering participants to create alternative knowledge through envisioning better futures, we felt it important to allow space for participants to express themselves how they chose in a qualitative format.

Additionally, we knew that to effectively subvert the exploitative structures of academia, we needed to turn the focus of the better-resourced national union toward the issues of precarious work. As both partners and critics of the union, we sought and received permission to ask participants how the union might ensure equity, autonomy and respect for precarious academic workers in the open-text box. As research partners, the national union's logo (along with that of the national student union) was added to the survey materials, meaning that while participants understood they were participating anonymously, their honest views would be fed back to the union.

The PAWS ran for four weeks between September and October 2021, and in that time received 760 completed responses, with representation from all eight Aotearoa universities. Broadly, the survey's findings debunked common rejoinders used to downplay the impact of precarity, such as its association with young age (the myth of the 'early career' researcher who progresses to a permanent position after a two-year post-doc), as over one-third (36.4 per cent) of participants were aged thirty-five or older. The

survey also highlighted the dire conditions that many people experienced over the course of their precarious employment in stark numeric terms (see Simpson et al. 2022). This quantitative evidence worked to establish the academic precariat as an 'object of knowledge' (Foucault 1972), capturing the attention of government and new stakeholders. In addition, the open-text data provided strong, direct feedback from the academic precariat regarding what more could be done for them by the national union.

In this way, after we investigated and identified contributing factors to the problem of insecure work in academia in Aotearoa, the research process shifted to a utopian phase wherein the widened researcher collective began to co-imagine utopian future possibilities, such as orienting the sector towards serving the public good, supported by sustainable funding streams.

In the authors' view, both teaching and research should be viewed as social goods in and of themselves, rather than merely instruments for generating economic benefits. Teaching and research should be engaged with issues seen as important to the local communities, while retaining academic freedom and creative space to think for those longer-term projects that may not be viewed as immediate priorities (see also Connell 2019). There needs to be a move away from the dominance of audit culture within Aotearoa universities (see previous discussion of the Performance Based Research Fund), which narrows the role of contemporary academics to publishing in 'high impact' international journals. Linked to this, there needs to be a re-valuing of teaching, including an honouring of 'the statutory requirement that requires degrees to be taught mainly by people engaged in research' (Universities NZ 2017). The previously discussed rise of casualised teaching-only roles in Aotearoa universities has made a mockery of this requirement, for which university vice chancellors have not yet been held to account. Furthermore, we would like to see far more accountability for senior leaders, much more transparency around finances, and the democratisation of decision making, giving more power to grassroots university workers.

At the same time, we recognise that undoing forty years of neoliberalisation will not happen overnight, and the utopian phase which involved imagining long-term sector transformation needed to be combined with pragmatic solutions to immediate problems, making our work simultaneously aspirational and actionable (Gayá and Brydon-Miller 2017; Egmose et al. 2020). Examples of these 'non-reformist reforms' (Srnicek and Williams 2015) can be found on the Aims page of the Tertiary Education Action Group Aotearoa (TEAGA 2022) and relate to the more immediate issue of

improving the working conditions and wellbeing of precarious academics. These range from the specific (reintroduction of a student allowance for postgraduate students) to the more aspirational (equity for Māori and Pasifika) while all being tied to our utopian kaupapa (principles).

An important part of this prefigurative practice was recognising the opportunity we had with PAWS to prompt mobilisation and the political (re)organisation of academic work in Aotearoa (Gayá and Brydon-Miller 2017; Peeters 2013). We understood that this would require challenging the corporatist structure that had normalised our predicament as precarious workers in a way that did not alienate the national union nor undermine our position as activists under advisement. For example, when drawing up our report of findings, we decided to focus primarily on the quantitative results and omitted discussion of the free-text data. This decision deliberately played into the fetishisation of statistical metrics (Shore and Wright 2015) by acknowledging that quantifiable findings would be a more powerful tool for (re)organisation in this kind of output.

Additionally, this approach meant that the qualitative data we collected could be used in ways that amplified its strengths as a tool in our (re)organisational efforts: as a form of independent feedback to the national union, the basis for a call to action with our collaborators and co-researchers, and as a contribution to academic discourse. Although we have not had the space to discuss it here, it should be noted that scholarship is an important avenue for (re)organising exploited academics, because it can work to reawaken a collective conscience around the more political academic precariat identity and inspire productive mourning of the depoliticised 'early career' researcher (see Oldfield et al. 2021). The decision to present the free-text findings separately to the national union had the added benefit of maintaining a cordial relationship with them and meant that we could approach this interaction both as union members and as provocateurs of change.

Our collaborative efforts provided us, as academic activists, with a sense of optimism. Despite what seemed to be an ongoing unwillingness on the part of universities to alter their hiring practises, or the government to legislate fairer employment conditions for sector employees, the outcomes from the PAWS were galvanising. The knowledge that our own experiences were not exceptional but indicative, inspired confidence that we were advocating as part of a large, marginalised, previously voiceless community, while opening further opportunities to produce change. This was evidenced by the positive feedback we received throughout this project from fellow

precarious academics and upon the release of a report outlining the quantitative PAWS data. Indeed, many who contacted us thanked us for our efforts, citing that they felt seen and heard for the first time as casual academics in Aotearoa. Widespread interest in the PAWS report encouraged us to host the findings on an open-access university repository, thus situating our work as not merely that of disgruntled activists but casually employed academic staff, capable of producing the same high impact deliverables expected of permanent staff. Less than three months after becoming available online, the PAWS report had 1,800 online views and 500 downloads, gaining interest from both inside and outside of the tertiary education sector.

In the weeks immediately after release of the PAWS report, we were contacted by two government-funded institutions. The first, New Zealand's Human Rights Commission, intimated to our group a willingness to progress aspects of the PAWS report we felt needed the urgent attention of a government minister. The commission also drew to our attention the imminent launch of an inquiry into exploitative work practices, something for which our own report had substantively outlined within the tertiary education sector. Engagement with the commission, which was spurred by the release of the PAWS report, provided our group a stakeholder legitimacy which would heighten our visibility in the sector beyond that of activists, but also as agents of change. The second institution was the same ministry who were conducting the exploitation inquiry under the auspices of the government. To overcome the resourcing constraints of making submissions while managing teaching and research responsibilities, our group resolved to submit to the inquiry the full PAWS report with a note outlining what might be the most pertinent sections. By doing so, this returned to the bureaucracy a requirement that they substantively engage with our report, and perhaps draw further attention to it in the summation of their own findings.

Further, upon realising that we had obtained data with nationally significant implications, we engaged with a high-profile politician who agreed to, with support from both the union and the national student union, make arrangements for our report to be launched on parliament grounds.[1] Shortly after the public release of the report draft in January 2022, we were also contacted by the government department that oversees employment and research, requesting a meeting to discuss the data we had obtained and what else, beyond the scope of the report, could be advantageous to their knowledge of the sector going forward. These outcomes highlight how action research can disrupt the status quo by presenting alternative knowledges,

and through this disruption inspire key changemakers to listen and buy into future utopian reimaginings through tangible and actionable co-created solutions.

Conclusion

In this article, we examined how action research can be used to (re)organise universities, using our experiences of developing the PAWS as a case study. By (re)organise, we referred to both the practical and political meanings of organisation, and highlight the dual possibility for fresh, novel organisation as well as the revival of seemingly dormant organisation. As members of the academic precariat, venturing into action research enabled us to strategically address our activistic goals whilst keeping pace with the demands of the prevailing audit culture; effectively 'deforming the form' (Spooner 2017). Through research, we aimed to shed light on the existence and realities of precarity in Aotearoa's universities, to transform the status quo of the academic workforce by mobilising changemakers such as unions on the issue.

The possibilities for (re)organisation that accompany action research exist at various levels. At the micro level, (re)organising through action research involves reimagining problems beyond the bounds of our institutions (as sector-wide problems) and linking with a diversity of like-minded researchers to tackle them. Within a six-month period, our activist group matured from being a small, inexperienced, and largely ineffectual group attempting to force change from the outside, to collaborating with other academics, unions, and engaging with government from the inside. Practically, there was also support, safety and productivity to be found by working as a collective, and in doing so, solidarity was built, and academic silos were diminished.

(Re)organisation at the meso level includes partnering with organisational stakeholders such as unions as co-researchers, despite our criticisms. Doing so presents an opportunity to disrupt their engrained processes organised around periodic collective bargaining, which had produced a state of political inertia within the union movement in recent years, reawaken them to pressing issues, and through their public affiliation, secure their commitment to any change mandates that arise from the research. Importantly, in our case, the PAWS represented the first time we were at least partially funded for our research outputs; specifically, a report that – with union support – enabled us to subvert the neoliberal university while

adhering to the aphorism that one must publish or perish. The findings from our survey traversed several important areas, not least the role that a national union ought to play in supporting some of the most vulnerable people in the sector. Our case also highlighted how partnering with established groups can lend action research projects additional political clout which can be leveraged to further lobby governments and universities to change the way they are organised.

At the macro level, action research helped to galvanise Aotearoa's academic precariat, by building solidarity through shared experience and contributing to the reawakening of a collective conscience. By showcasing the realities faced by the academic precariat, we debunked myths and created alternative knowledges that established the academic precariat as an 'object of knowledge' (Foucault 1972) and captured the attention of high-profile political allies. These facets help in the political (re)organisation of precarious academic workers and in securing the buy-in of powerful structural allies such as the government in transforming our sector towards a utopian future.

Ultimately, the overall success and momentum of the PAWS, a collaborative project led by the academic precariat, and designed after hours with no initial funding (barring the commissioning of a report), demonstrates how action research can be a viable tool for (re)organising academic work in universities.

Aimee B. Simpson is an Independent Scholar with expertise in sociology, critical education studies and professional development in higher education. Email: aimeebsimpson@gmail.com

Leon A. Salter is a Postdoctoral Fellow at the School of Communication, Journalism and Marketing, Te Kunenga ki Pūrehuroa, Massey University. His research interests include the labour movement, digital technology, democracy and the gig economy.
Email: l.a.salter@massey.ac.nz

Rituparna Roy is a Research Fellow at Te Ngira: Institute for Population Research, University of Waikato. Her research interests include the sociology of migration, racism and ethnicity, intersectionality, critical higher education and social research methods.
Email: ritu.roy@waikato.ac.nz

Luke D. Oldfield is a Research Associate at the Public Policy Institute, Te Whare Marea Tātari Kaupapa, the University of Auckland. He was a senior research assistant on the 2020 iteration of the New Zealand Election Study. Luke's research interests are interdisciplinary, contributing to the fields of political science, criminology, sociology and critical higher education. Email: lukeoldfield@auckland.ac.nz

Apriel D. Jolliffe Simpson is a Teaching Fellow at Te Puna Haumaru, the New Zealand Institute of Security and Crime Science, Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato, the University of Waikato. Her research interests include the fields of forensic psychology, crime science, and critical higher education. Email: apriels@waikato.ac.nz

Notes

1. The launch was firstly postponed and then moved online due to the Omicron outbreak in New Zealand.

References

Beer, D. (2016), *Metric Power* (London: Springer). https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-55649-3.

Bradbury, H. (2015), 'Introduction: How to situate and define action research', in H. Bradbury (ed.), *The SAGE Handbook of Action Research* (London: Sage), 1–10. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781473921290.

Chatterjee, M., M. Clinton, N. Lightfoot, S. Seikaly and N. Schiller (2008), 'If not now, when? The GSOC strike, 2005–2006', in M. Krause, M. Nolan, M. Palm and A. Ross (eds), *The University Against Itself: The NYU Strike and the Future of the Academic Workplace* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press), 149–158.

Connell, R. (2019), *The Good University: What Universities Actually Do And Why It's Time For Radical Change* (Victoria, Australia: Monash University Publishing).

Courtois, A. and T. O'Keefe (2015), 'Precarity in the ivory cage: Neoliberalism and casualisation of work in the Irish higher education sector', *Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies* 13, no. 1: 43–66. http://www.jceps.com/archives/2458.

Cruickshank, J. (2016), 'Putting business at the heart of higher education: on neoliberal interventionism and audit culture in UK universities', *Open Library of Humanities* 2, no. 1: 1–33. https://doi.org/10.16995/olh.77.

Curtis, B. and S. Matthewman (2005), 'The managed university: the PBRF, its impacts and staff attitudes', *New Zealand Journal of Employment Relations* 30, no. 2: 1–17.

Education and Training Act 2020 (2020), https://www.legislation.govt.nz/act/public/2020/0038/latest/LMS170676.html.

Egmose, J., J. Gleerup and B. S. Nielsen (2020), 'Critical utopian action research: Methodological inspiration for democratization?', *International Review of Qualitative Research* 13, no. 2: 233–246. https://doi.org/10.1177/1940844720933236.

Employment Contracts Act (1991), http://www.nzlii.org/nz/legis/hist_act/eca19911991n22280/.

Fleming, P. (2021), *Dark Academia: How Universities Die* (London: Pluto Press).

Foucault, M. (1972), *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. trans. A. M. Sheridan-Smith (New York: Pantheon Books).

Futrell, R. (1999), 'Performative governance: Impression management, teamwork, and conflict containment in city commission proceedings', *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 27, no. 4: 494–529. https://doi.org/10.1177/089124199129023316.

Gall, G., R. Hurd and A. Wilkinson (2011), 'Introduction: Labour unionism and neoliberalism', in G. Gall, R. Hurd, and A. Wilkinson (eds), *The International Handbook of Labour Unions: Responses to Neo-Liberalism* (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing), 1–12.

Gayá, P. and M. Brydon-Miller (2017), 'Carpe the academy: Dismantling higher education and prefiguring critical utopias through action research', *Futures* 94: 34–44. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.futures.2016.10.005.

Gibbs, P., P. Cartney, K. Wilkinson, J. Parkinson, S. Cunningham, C. James-Reynolds, T. Zoubir, V. Brown, P. Barter, P. Sumner, A. MacDonald, A. Dayananda and A. Pitt (2017), 'Literature review on the use of action research in higher education', *Educational Action Research* 25, no. 1: 3–22. https://doi.org/10.1080/09650792.2015.1124046.

Graham, J., and D. Papadopoulos (2021), 'Organizing the precarious: Autonomous work, real democracy and ecological precarity' *Organization*, 1–19. https://doi.org/10.1177/13505084211026874.

Levin, M. and D. J. Greenwood (2016), *Creating a New Public University and Reviving Democracy: Action Research in Higher Education* (New York: Berghahn Books).

Naepi, S., T. McAllister, P. Thomsen, M. Leenen-Young, L. A. Walker, A. L. McAllister, R. Theodore, J. Kidman, J., and T. Suaaliia (2019), 'The pakaru 'pipeline': Māori and Pasifika pathways within the academy', *The New Zealand Annual Review of Education* 24: 142–159. https://doi.org/10.26686/nzaroe.v24i0.6338.

O'Keefe, T., and A. Courtois (2019), '"Not one of the family": Gender and precarious work in the neoliberal university', *Gender, Work and Organization* 26, no. 4: 463–479. https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.12346.

Oldfield, L. D., R. Roy, A. B. Simpson, A. D. Jolliffe Simpson and L. A. Salter (2021), 'Academic activism in the wake of a pandemic: A collective self-reflection from Aotearoa/New Zealand', *International Perspectives in Psychology: Research, Practice, Consultation* 10, no. 4: 215–227. https://doi.org/10.1027/2157-3891/a000027.

O'Leary, Z. (2007), *The Social Science Jargon Buster: The Key Terms You Need To Know* (Los Angeles: Sage Publication).

Ombler, J., Russell, M., and Rivera-Munoz, G. (2016), 'Local councils and public consultation: Extending the reach of democracy', *Policy Quarterly* 12, no. 4, 20–27. https://doi.org/10.26686/pq.v12i4.4623.

Peeters, J. (2013), 'Can research realise a bit of utopia? The impact of action research on the policy of childcare in Flanders', *Early Years* 33, no. 3: 318–330. https://doi.org/10.1080/09575146.2012.701196.

Rancière, J. (1999), *Dis-agreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. J. Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press).

Shore, C. (2008), 'Audit culture and illiberal governance', *Anthropological Theory* 8, no. 3: 278–298. https://doi.org/10.1177/1463499608093815.

Shore, C. (2010), 'The reform of New Zealand's university system: "After neoliberalism"', *Learning and Teaching* 3, no. 1: 1–31. https://doi.org/10.3167/latiss.2010.030102.

Shore, C. and S. Wright (1999), 'Audit culture and anthropology: Neo-liberalism in British higher education', *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 5, no. 4: 557–575. https://doi.org/10.2307/2661148.

Shore, C. and S. Wright (2004), 'Whose accountability? Governmentality and the auditing of universities', *Parallax* 10, no. 2: 100–116. https://doi.org/10.1080/1353464042000208558.

Shore, C. and S. Wright (2015), 'Governing by numbers: Audit culture, rankings and the new world order', *Social Anthropology* 23, no. 1: 22–28. https://doi.org/10.1111/1469-8676.12098.

Simpson, A. B., A. D. Jolliffe Simpson, M. Soar, L. D. Oldfield, R. Roy and L. A. Salter (2022), *The Elephant in the Room: Precarious Work in New Zealand Universities* (Auckland: The University of Auckland). https://doi.org/10.17608/k6.auckland.19243626.v2.

Spooner, M. (2017), 'Qualitative research and global audit culture: The politics of productivity, accountability, and possibility', in N. K. Denzin and Y. S. Lincoln (eds), *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research,* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage), 894–914.

Srnicek, N. and A. Williams (2015), 'Inventing the future: Postcapitalism and a world without work', *Ruch Filozoficzny* 72, no. 3: 167–172. https://doi.org/10.12775/rf.2016.031.

Stringer, R., D. Smith, R. Spronken-Smit and C. Wilson (2018), '"My entire career has been fixed term": Gender and precarious academic employment at a New Zealand university', *New Zealand Sociology* 33, no. 2: 169–201. https://search.informit.org/doi/10.3316/informit.952640679087793.

Sutherland, K. A. (2009), 'Nurturing undergraduate tutors' role in the university teaching community', *Mentoring & Tutoring: Partnership in Learning* 17, no. 2: 147–164. https://doi.org/10.1080/13611260902860091.

Sutherland, K. A. (2015), 'Precarious but connected: The roles and identities of academic developers', *International Journal for Academic Development* 20, no. 3: 209–211. https://doi.org/10.1080/1360144X.2015.1066343.

Tertiary Education Commission (2018), *Performance Based Research Fund: Guidelines for tertiary education organisations participating in the 2018 Quality Evaluations.* https://www.tec.govt.nz/assets/Formstemplates-and-guides/PBRF/a7c29b5b70/PBRF-TEO-guidelines-April-2018.pdf.

TEAGA (Tertiary Education Action Group Aotearoa) (2022), 'Our aims', http://www.teaga.co.nz/our-aims/ (accessed 15 December 2022).

Thomas, A., H. Forsyth and A. G. Bonnell (2020), '"The dice are loaded": History, solidarity and precarity in Australian universities', *History Australia* 17, no. 1: 21–39. https://doi.org/10.1080/14490854.2020.1717350.

Törnberg, A. (2021), 'Prefigurative politics and social change: A typology drawing on transition studies', *Distinktion: Journal of Social Theory* 22, no. 1: 83–107. https://doi.org/10.1080/1600910X.2020.1856161.

Universities NZ (2017), 'The links between research and teaching', 10 August. https://www.universitiesnz.ac.nz/latest-news-and-publications/links-between-research-and-teaching. (accessed 15 December 2022).

Winter, R. (1998), 'Managers, spectators and citizens: Where does 'theory' come from in action research?', *Educational Action Research* 6, no. 3: 361–376. https://doi.org/10.1080/09650799800200072.