Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic intensified anxieties among temporary workers in New Zealand tertiary education, particularly those affiliated with universities reliant on the lucrative market for international fee-paying students. As national borders closed and states started looking inward, these same learning institutions began to more visibly express the language of market logics for which they had been remodelled in recent decades, adapting to declining revenue through austerity-like budget cuts. The communication of these cuts to the academic precariat has been mixed, with some institutions resorting to cold, forceful determinations delivered as matter-of-fact restructurings, while others have preferred an oblique recasting of the pandemic's disruption as an opportunity for social responsibility. This paper is a collective self-reflection on the activism undertaken by the newly formed Tertiary Education Action Group Aotearoa (TEAGA) during the COVID-19 pandemic. It begins by contextualising the reforms rolled out in response to the pandemic in relation to the 'neoliberal turn' of higher education and examines how career pathways for early-career academics have transformed into a continuous cycle of precarious employment. We argue that the idealised 'early career' identity has been lost, and that through a process of mourning we can regather ourselves and embrace our lived realities as members of the academic precariat. We detail how the pandemic acted as a catalyst for this 'productive mourning' and enabled us to begin mobilising discontent among the academic precariat. Finally, we reflect on the extent to which we were able to challenge existing structures that are responsible for the exploitative nature of precarious academic work.

Academic Activism in the Wake of a Pandemic: A collective self-reflection from Aotearoa / New Zealand

New Zealand's relative success in managing the COVID-19 pandemic has drawn praise from around the world (see Friedman, 2020; Lux, 2020). Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern was the topic of much adulation for her leadership throughout 2020, ensuring that her governing Labour party was re-elected later that year by an unprecedented margin (Stoakes & Berger, 2020; Wilson, 2020). The Ardern government's success has been attributed to decisions made early in the pandemic that prioritised public health while buttressing sectors of the economy impacted by border closures, and subsequent nationwide lockdowns (Wilson, 2020). However, financial support for New Zealand's eight universities was noticeably less forthcoming in the 2020 government budget and subsequent expenditure announcements, despite tertiary institutions in New Zealand being reliant on international fee-paying students to balance budgets. Instead, the government suggested that these institutions could draw on existing financial reserves or set aside the government requirement to run a 3% operating surplus to make up the financial shortfall (Tertiary Education Union, 2020).

Universities, for their part, highlighted the disruptive nature of the pandemic as justification to freeze recruitment and foreshadow potential job losses, exemplifying the already dominant logics of neoliberal austerity and crisis capitalism (Roper, 2018). By the final quarter of 2020, six of New Zealand's eight universities had signalled that the number of permanent full-time academic roles would be reduced. However, the true extent of job losses remained unclear

due to the increased casualisation of academic work. The scope of casualisation in New Zealand is difficult to quantify, though Sutherland & Gilbert (2013) suggested that 40% of those teaching in Higher Education were non-permanent staff. Those who are temporarily employed have no ongoing entitlement to work and few avenues to challenge job losses when contracts finish and are not renewed. Diminishing amounts of temporary work in the wake of COVID-19 has led to rising anxieties among staff who were reliant on the patching together of such income for survival; typically postgraduate and doctoral students and recent doctoral graduates (see Stringer, et al., 2018).

Even prior to the COVID-19 pandemic the conditions and expectations surrounding temporary academic work had become exploitative (Connell, 2019; Ivancheva, 2015). Traditionally, these roles were taken up by 'early-career' academics, defined "in terms of research capability in the five years following PhD completion, with career progression from post-doctoral appointment to tenure, promotion and beyond" (Bosanquet et al., 2017, p. 890). However, the pathway towards secure academic employment is no longer the norm (Connell, 2019). Rather, it has been replaced by a treadmill of precarity, as evidenced by the sheer volume of staff who have been employed by universities for years and have yet to secure a permanent appointment (Stringer et al., 2018). Indeed, universities now actively cultivate this easily exploitable pool of precarious workers who are relying on the diminishing likelihood that full-time academic employment would arise through completing a PhD and building a resume of research and teaching experience.

As temporarily employed academic staff, the five authors of this paper represent those workers experiencing labour precarity in New Zealand universities. Three have completed their doctorates in the past three years while the other two are due to complete theirs in the next 18

months. In all five instances, none of us have guaranteed ongoing employment at a university, despite spending consecutive years as tutors, researchers, and fixed-term lecturers while navigating postgraduate and doctoral study. Due to our concerns regarding budget cuts, the evaporating amount of work available since the pandemic began, and the subsequent impacts on research and teaching, four of us were part of a wider group which formed the Tertiary Education Action Group Aotearoa (TEAGA), with the fifth author joining later. After a short period of operating anonymously, we established a presence in the media and used email and social media to launch campaigns to advocate for, and highlight the difficulties faced by, temporarily employed academic staff.

This article is a collective self-reflection on both our activism and the changing nature of our identities as 'early career' academics that was catalysed by the COVID-19 pandemic. We begin with an exploration into the neoliberal transformation of universities within Western countries. Conceptually, we draw on a range of critical perspectives from sociology, cultural studies and critical education studies, which explicitly articulate the detrimental effects of such changes to universities and higher education more broadly (e.g., Caivano et al., 2016; Heath & Burdon, 2013; Morrish, 2017, 2020; Pan, 2020; Schwartz, 2014; Shahjahan, 2014). We argue that these neoliberal shifts have fundamentally changed the realities faced by 'early career' academics such as ourselves. We consider ourselves as no longer fitting within the idealised early-career identity, but instead as part of a wider academic precariat, whose prospects of full time, permanent employment in the sector have dwindled, and we argue that such loss must be mourned in order to collectively move forward.

This literature grounds the discussion that follows, where we outline the events that led to our activist response. It highlights how the pandemic accelerated and intensified the pre-existing

exploitation of workers and students and brought the need to 'productively mourn' to a head. We argue that these changes were predicated on the established norms of the neoliberal university, which prizes the individualism that has inhibited solidarity among staff. The lack of collective action is now evident in the academic body; spanning permanent staff, the national union, and an emerging academic underclass. Some aspects of our academic activism were unique, reflecting the difficulties faced with mobilising during the COVID-19 pandemic. We conclude by outlining our successes and the problems faced nurturing solidarity, pointing to structural issues within the academic labour market that impinged on our ability to effect change more comprehensively.

The Neoliberal University and its Academic Precariat

The austerity measures rolled out in the tertiary sector under the banner of COVID-19 were unsurprising in that they merely accelerated the long-term structural issues inherent within the neoliberal academic landscape (Pan, 2020). For some time, public universities globally have been expected to be fiscally profitable 'businesses' by maximising student tuition revenue and decreasing operating costs (Schwartz, 2014; Shore, 2010). Such capitalist objectives can be challenging to balance against the wider responsibility of universities to be a social good; not only as sites of education and knowledge production, but, in New Zealand, their legal requirement to be the "critic and conscience of society" (Education Act 1989, s 162). As a result, the more transformative implications of this mandate are left to be taken up by individual academics, as institutions work to preserve the structural relations from which they benefit.

The 'neoliberal turn' of higher education has involved the stagnation of public funding (Schwartz, 2014); the introduction of managerial, corporatised governance strategies (Curtis &

Matthewman, 2005; Shore 2010); the streamlining and – in some instances – cutting of research funds; the introduction of tuition fees and competitive metrics; and the growing trend of casualised teaching and research staff (Bauer, 2017; Ivancheva, 2015; Ullrich, 2019).

For example, in New Zealand, the introduction of the PBRF [Performance-Based Research Fund] in 2003 divided the existing public funding pool available to higher education providers between research and student enrolments. Under the PBRF, institutions are ranked, in part, on the basis of individual academic research outputs; encouraging them to gamify their workforce to optimise their ranking and thus secure more funding (Curtis & Matthewman, 2005). For instance, staff on temporary contracts of less than twelve months are exempt from PBRF assessment (Tertiary Education Commission, 2018, p. 17). Casualisation is therefore a means for university administrators to reduce the visible accounting of non-research staff; if institutions casualise their teaching workload, permanent staff can focus their energy more directly on their research outputs, and the institution benefits from an increased ranking (Curtis & Matthewman, 2005).

The separation of research and teaching roles alongside the increase of casualised staffing in our tertiary institutions is not an isolated phenomenon. In countries such as the United States, the majority of academics are temporarily employed, with "up to 75% of frontline teaching [undertaken] by 'sessionals' or non-tenure-track faculty" (Stringer et al., 2018, p. 171). A similar story is found in Australia, where 40% of the academic workforce are employed on a temporary basis; double the rate of casualisation in the wider Australian economy (Connell, 2019).

While not the primary focus of this paper, it should be noted that this precarity is not experienced equally. Similar to other industries, the bulk of precarious academic work is

undertaken by women, and disproportionately features Māori (New Zealand's indigenous population) and Pasifika women in particular (for a more focussed analysis, see: Naepi et al., 2020). Thus, COVID-19 belt-tightening measures will undoubtedly have disproportionate impacts on these groups.

From tenure-track to treadmill: Unpacking precarious academic labour

Reflecting on the changing structure of academic employment once enjoyed by her generation, Connell (2019, p. 69) described the offer of secure, tenured employment following the conferring of a PhD as 'inconceivable' now. In its place, a 'reserve army of workers' in the form of the academic precariat has arisen: a highly skilled, highly qualified population characterised by "job insecurity, precarious labour and, ultimately, poverty" (Ivancheva, 2015, p. 39). The academic precariat are a fragmented, hyper-flexible population that cycle between being unemployed, underemployed, and overworked but underpaid (Natalier et al., 2016), clinging to tenuous contracts in the hopes that a fabled, permanent full-time position will become available.

Within the neoliberal landscape, it makes sense that the casualised method of employment relations is looked upon favourably by university management. Casual staff are a lucrative, cheap alternative labour force that circumvent the competitive benefits, salaries, and tenure-pathways that universities must offer to attract permanent hires (Cadambi Danial, 2016; Courtois, & O'Keefe, 2015; Natalier et al., 2016). In such arrangements, the majority of employment-related risk is shouldered by the individual temporary staff members, who have to rely on "multiple part-time and casual contracts to create an income to meet expenses" (Nissen et al., 2020, p. 10) while spending countless unpaid hours lining up future funding sources. Moreover, when offered employment, the processes of getting 'signed on' are often slow,

unreliable, and involve poorly integrated systems (Natalier et al., 2016); experiences which only add to the emotionally corrosive nature of insecure academic work (Stringer et al., 2018).

Temporary roles do not usually carry a high degree of official responsibility, autonomy, or prestige either. The consequence of this undermining of professional legitimacy is, as Natalier et al. (2016) argued, "that an individual might work for a university for many years and still experience marginalisation because of their contingent employment" (p. 2). Staff occupying temporary roles are often not recognized as members of the institution and disciplinary communities, they do not sit on decision making committees, and are largely ineligible for study and research leave (Cadambi Danial, 2016; Natalier et al., 2016; Ryan & Bhattacharya, 2012; Connell, 2019). Thus, if casual staff wish to advance their research profile by attending conferences, publishing academic manuscripts and so on, they must be willing to do this work unpaid and in their own time (Sutherland, Wilson & Williams, 2013; Stringer et al., 2018).

Undoubtedly the lack of publishing support obstructs career development in an era of "publish or perish" (Graber, Launov, & Wälde, 2008, p. 457). These hurdles are likely to be worsened by the pandemic for academics who are already time-poor. Indeed, research has already demonstrated that the academic productivity of women decreased in 2020 (e.g. Kibbe, 2020; Pinho-Gomes et al., 2020). In-person conferences were also cancelled, reducing opportunities for academics to network and present their research, and teaching and administrative workloads increased with the shift to online learning and work-from-home arrangements. These factors combined put a veritable squeeze on what was an already difficult career environment, and forces us to ask: where is the resistance?

Academic Resistance to the Neoliberal University and Precarity

The broad sweep of scholarly literature detailing neoliberal reforms in universities, while substantive, offers little discussion about strategies for resistance (Shahjahan, 2014; Lucas, 2014). Heath and Burdon (2013) argue that the lack of organized academic resistance to neoliberal management results from the hostile, precarious and overloaded nature of academic work. Such conditions further strain, divide, and hierarchize staff on the basis of their employment status, creating class conflict between permanent and non-permanent staff by positioning their interests as at odds with one another and thus reducing solidarity (Courtois & O'Keefe, 2015; Hoeller, 2014; Ivancheva, 2015; Kalfa, Wilkinson & Gollan, 2018; Schwartz, 2014).

Further, the scope for resistance is getting narrower due to increased managerial control, surveillance, and automation (Webb, 2018). Lucas (2014) notes that the process of 'quality assurance' is used as a disciplining technique by the management which in turn shrinks the space for resistance. A cluster of academic writing has suggested the potential of individual, passive (Anderson, 2008), and subversive (Shahjahan, 2014) resistance to neoliberal reforms in universities. Anderson (2008) suggested that informal and individualized resistance which is "everyday", or "routine" in nature can be effective against the managerialism of neoliberal universities (p. 266). Perceiving power in such a relational manner, wherein resistance is always possible, expected even (Foucault, 1978), can be emancipatory; particularly for groups who might otherwise perceive themselves as powerless. For us, the recognition of our capacity for resistance, combined with the cold reality of the state of academic labour in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic helped us to mobilise in spite of internal and external voices encouraging us to remain silent.

Understanding experience through collective self-reflection

In order to explore our experiences as precarious academic activists, we opted for a collective self-reflective method often described as collaborative auto-ethnography (CAE) (see Blalock & Akehi, 2018; Chang et al., 2016; Ellis et al., 2011; Pitard, 2019). This method communicates to "investigate shared stories and balances the individual narrative with the greater collective experiences" (Blalock & Akehi, 2018, p. 94). By framing our experiences as a rich source of information and data, this method enabled us to reflect on our collective "existential crisis" (see Denzin 2014; Pitard, 2019) of precarity and subsequent mobilisation.

Following Ngunjiri et al. (2010), we used the concurrent model of data collection in which researchers select topics for data collection, independently collect autobiographical data, and then gather to share and review their stories and probe each other to extract further data. For us, this involved individually generated self-reflective accounts that captured our "present thoughts and perspectives as well as [our] past" (Chang et al., 2016, p. 78), on the issues of academic precarity, career uncertainty, and the formation of TEAGA.

Alongside these reflections, we engaged in group conversations. These interactions enriched our understanding of our own experiences, transforming them from individual stories of struggle and anxiety to a more nuanced collective experience of identity, mourning and activism. The process was, as Ngunjiri et al. (2010, p. 6) suggested, "One researcher's story stirred another researcher's memory; one's probing question unsettled another's assumptions; one's action demanded another's reaction." We met regularly over Zoom for these discussions, in which we recalled memories and experiences and then, probed, questioned, scrutinised, and affirmed each other's reflective accounts, (see Chang et al., 2016; Roy & Uekusa, 2020).

In preparation for this paper, we drew upon a mixture of internal records and archival data that we created and accumulated over ten months (March 2020 to January 2021) as part of our advocacy (see Chang et al., 2016; Hernandez et al., 2017; Reedy & King, 2019). Our internal records consisted of Zoom meeting minutes, Messenger group chats, and emails which helped the authors capture the pre-reflective experience as closely/accurately as possible (see Pitard, 2019). We also created and used a database of news articles covering issues related to how the pandemic impacted the tertiary sector of Aotearoa that we built during the course of our activism. The combination of internal and external data sources enabled us to build a comprehensive timeline of public and personal events, that we could then further reflect upon and analyse.

Mourning the Fantasy of the 'Early Career' Academic and Embracing the Academic Precariat

The process of (collective) self-reflection that we have undertaken led us to see our individual experiences as part of a broader problem of increasing academic precarity and diminishing career pathways. Despite the growing divide between the idealised 'early career' academic trajectory and the reality of academic precarity - one which has been furthered by the COVID-19 pandemic - there has been little appetite for organised, active resistance to our poor working conditions and future prospects. Drawing on Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, in this section we try to interrogate some of the subjective barriers to the politicisation of the academic precariat in New Zealand. We suggest that the 'early career' academic offers a comforting fantasy frame which is able to provide a degree of stability and agency in the context of

increasing ontological insecurity (Bloom, 2016; Giddens, 1991). One of the reasons it is comforting is that the agency it provides is able to provide a bodily-felt affective enjoyment, as well as pain and loss (Lacan, 1992). We then explore Stavrakakis' (2007) concept of 'productive mourning' as a possible strategy for "traversing the fantasy" (p. 281) of the 'early career' academic and instead fully embrace the identity of the academic precariat, which would enable new strategic alliances and (we hope), more active resistance.

Firstly, we outline the Lacanian concept of fantasy which differs significantly from its commonplace usage. Rather than an escape from reality, Lacanian scholars argue that fantasy plays an integral part in shaping our 'reality' (see Glynos, 2011). Fantasy provides explanatory narratives which support our 'reality' while offering affective enjoyment of those narratives (Glynos & Howarth, 2007). This enjoyment, termed jouissance (Lacan, 1992) is felt bodily, and can at least partly account for the durability, or "grip" (Glynos & Howarth, 2007) of an identification, despite seemingly overwhelming evidence to the contrary (Glynos, Klimecki, & Willmott, 2012).

Jouissance is manifested via affective investment in certain key signifiers and practices, which, through our imbuing them with the status of 'affective objects' (Ahmed, 2008) can lock us into unhealthy "patterns of repetition" (Hook, 2008, p. 399). In the case of the 'early career' academic (or indeed any subject), these objects, and the enjoyment they provide us, support our sense of ontological security (Bloom, 2016). Positive student surveys, paper acceptances, or Google Scholar citation notifications can provide a temporary buzz; a feeling that maybe "I'll make it in this game after all if only I get one more paper published in that top journal". This, we argue, traps the 'early career' subject in a repetitive cycle of work, rather than resistance, chasing

the next hit of jouissance, which provide us with temporary satisfaction and affective enjoyment, but which simultaneously evoke dissatisfaction, anxiety and pain (Lacan, 1992; 2014).

As noted by Alakavuklar et al. (2017), while the double action of pleasure/pain inherent in jouissance can trap us, it can also provide opportunity. The 'early career' academic will always be at least partly alienated from their work, and therefore open to alternative identifications. An alienated, or dislocated subject is much more likely to question the structures and investments which ultimately oppress them. As argued by Glynos and Howarth (2007, p. 117), certain 'dislocatory events', such as attacks by university managers on pay and conditions, can expedite this questioning. For example, Bauer (2017) in her ethnographic analysis of the 2015 University of Toronto graduate employee strike, shows how extensive casualization forced non-tenured academics to question the identity of "professor-in-training" (p. 281) and take action to form relations of political solidarity with each other and with other affected groups such as students.

While Glynos and Howarth (2007) note that there are no guarantees that the dislocatory event will lead to politicisation and resistance (indeed it often has not in the past, see Roper, 2018), the indications are that such events will become more regular. As noted by scholarship on the recent trajectory of universities (Kezar, DePaula & Scott, 2019; Hall, 2016; Le Grange, 2020) academic work is becoming increasingly similar to gig work, e.g. "temporary, unstable and patchworked" (Woodcock & Graham, 2019, p. 2), where levels of support and responsibility offered by the university are steadily decreasing. While obviously concerning, according to Stavrakakis' (2007) model, this could potentially accelerate the "shifting [of] attachments" (p. 274) necessary to breaking out of the aforementioned repetitive cycle of pleasure/pain and the formation of new relations of solidarity and resistance. Indeed, it is our experience as a group

that New Zealand universities' abrupt shedding of casual and fixed term staff during the Covid crisis, with little reassurances of further employment, accelerated this shift. We have been forced to confront the reality of diminishing contract offers and discourse from university managers which positions us as ultimately expendable in order to save permanent roles.

What made this experience productive and empowering, was the sense of collectivity and solidarity offered by our involvement in TEAGA, as well as other activist groups. This enabled us to blame politicians, university managers and the global neoliberalised academic system for our precarity (Connell, 2019), rather than our own inadequacies. Stavrakakis (2007), drawing on the work of Chantel Mouffe, terms this as the drawing of a 'political frontier' between the oppressed and the oppressors. While the drawing up of simplistic 'us vs them' boundaries can be ethically problematic (Salter, 2018), such boundaries are essential for the formation of relations of solidarity between 'early career' academics and also to other similarly oppressed groups within and outside the university (Bauer, 2017).

Group solidarity also made the process of shifting our attachments that much easier, which Stavrakakis describes as productive mourning. This is a process of loss, or grieving, whereby we gradually detach ourselves from the forms of neoliberal academic labour which entrap us. At first, this is experienced in terms of trauma, grief, and loss, dominated by feelings of self-hatred and continuing attachment to the objects which sustain our fantasy frame. Eventually, this mourning process (as with the loss of a loved one), can lead to re-orientation and attachment to new affective objects, and ultimately a new fantasy frame which can regulate our desire. It is a long, difficult process, but it must happen "in order to form new relations and attachments" (Stavrakakis, 2007, p. 274). The term 'productive' within "productive mourning" infers that, unlike melancholy, productive mourning is a process of looking forward, rather than

dwelling on the past. It is a process of shifting our identities, motivated by a desire for change, both for our internal selves and subsequently, our external, political environment. Productive mourning is characterised by outrage and anger projected externally towards the outside agents responsible for (in our case) precarity, whereas melancholy is characterised by anxiety and depression and is projected internally as personal failure. Importantly, outrage and anger have been linked to motivating and sustaining progressive political movements, supporting the utility of productive mourning for academic activism (Holmes, 2004; Castells, 2012).

Our experience has shown that unlike the individualised early career pathway, productive mourning does not have to be an individual process. Activist groups provide an important function of collectivising and modelling the experience of mourning, helping each other steer away from melancholy. They begin from, as one author stated, the feeling that "there is no alternative", while remarking on the bleak chances of obtaining even a temporary contract at a university in 2021 due to the impact of COVID-19. The knowledge that others are in a similar situation and are coping by projecting their anger at powerful agents and institutions, rather than their own deficiencies, provides a collective strength for the difficult process of altering our subjectivities, which then may allow us to affect political change.

The COVID-19 Crisis and Accelerated Change within Universities

In the preceding sections, we argued the rise of casualisation and temporary work in the tertiary sector has been a consequence of the neoliberal turn; a transformation that has undermined solidarity among precarious workers and their tenured colleagues. It was in this context that the COVID-19 pandemic emerged, elevating anxieties and pushing us to collectively

shed our identities as early-career academics. During this process of productive mourning we became conscious of our increasingly precarious employment and embraced the identity of the academic precariat (Stavrakakis, 2007). Our communications with one another led us to mobilize a cohesive response to the risk that business logics posed to our careers. No longer were we individual agents busily propagating the neoliberal fantasy of success through hard work, but a heterogeneous collective of academic activists.

Before any dramatic steps were required to control the spread of COVID-19 within New Zealand, a ban was placed on non-residents and citizens entering the country from mainland China. While the ban was yet to have any demonstrable impact on the wider New Zealand economy, universities began to warn in February, 2020, that it would impact their international student intake and have a flow on effect to their forecasted revenue (Lenihan-Ikin, 2020; Gerritsen, 2020a). With profitability in mind, moves toward austerity by university senior management were signalled. Multiple universities sought to minimise potential losses by reducing expenditure, specifically by mandating recruitment freezes (Chumko, 2020; Hope, 2020; Gerritsen, 2020b).

By the end of March, 2020, New Zealand had entered a nationwide lockdown; all businesses, schools, eating establishments and places of leisure were closed in an effort to eliminate the threat posed by COVID-19. The government advised that this comparatively strict lockdown would last at least four weeks and be extended if necessary. At the end of the first week, one of the country's largest universities announced that, because of the disruption caused by the pandemic, it would switch its semester structure from 12-week semesters to 4-week intensive blocks (Keogh, 2020a). According to staff at the university, the proposal itself was not new and had been considered in preceding years, but its mid-semester resurfacing during a

nationwide lockdown was indicative of the measures university management were willing to take in response to the financial pressures of COVID-19. For staff who were precariously employed, it meant the semester for which they were contracted until June of that year would be halted, compacted, and then restarted as late as November, 2020.

The nature of this announcement was unique in that significant changes in New Zealand universities usually paid lip service to participatory processes through consultation. In this case, the vice-chancellor simply claimed they had discussed the matter with student representatives who had in-turn supported the move (Keogh, 2020a), side-stepping staff input or that of the wider student body. When an organiser for the national union representing staff in the tertiary education sector failed to return phone calls, or formally state their position on the block teaching plan, it was left to those most impacted by the change, such as ourselves, to mobilize. This decision to act became the precursor to a more coordinated response from the authors on behalf of temporarily employed academics.

The government requirement to stay indoors unless exercising or shopping for essentials meant any attempt to challenge the university decision would be reliant on digital activism, which is often argued to be a less effective form of advocacy (Cabrera, Matias, & Montoya, 2017). As unaffiliated organisers, some of the authors created an anonymous letter against the block teaching decision using Google Forms and distributed it to staff, collecting signatures but not disclosing who had signed; promising to only release names should a critical mass of 300 staff signees join the ticket (Keogh, 2020a; Collins, 2020). To work around the laborious task of identifying staff email addresses in the institution and emailing persons anonymously to attract signatures, we contacted media reporting on the block teaching decision explaining our activism and providing a link to the Google Form so that it might be embedded in their follow-up

reporting. This media outreach proved successful, and led to 170 staff signatures being collected, alongside a Change.org petition from students which collected over 3,000 signatures.

By early April, the university decided against implementing block teaching and reverted back to a semester program, despite not a single staff member's name ever being identified as having dissented the vice-chancellor. While significant changes to the semester structure may have been resisted by staff and students irrespective of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is less clear if we would have been able to mobilize our concerns and have them syndicated in the media without the added pressure the pandemic provided. Because the proposed change in semester structure impacted temporarily employed academic staff, and effectively altered their ongoing employment, it gave impetus for collective action.

The proposal also brought into focus the role of the national union and gave credence to a view among temporarily employed academic staff that the union representing permanent staff might not be a reliable advocate for their employment rights and well-being. It was, as Rothengatter and Hil (2013) described, a sign of "the growing acquiescence to and normalisation of" (p. 57) inequalities faced by casual staff by continuing academics. With this in mind, we began to discuss alternative forms of action, outside of - but adjacent to - the established union movement. Given the shortfall of revenue, we then began to question the ability for universities to continue providing the level of services expected as public institutions without government support similar to the targeted help already being provided to the private sector. The government, for example, provided the horse racing industry with a bailout of $72.5 million dollars (Peters, 2020). When asked if the universities needed more money, the president of the national union responded by stating that they would "wait and see what happens", noting the universities had cash reserves (Morning Report, 2020). This cautious approach agitated relations further, as it

washed over the lack of real increases to tertiary education funding in the years which immediately preceded the COVID-19 pandemic, and again highlighted the divide between staff who could afford to 'wait and see' and those who could not.

By the end of April, another university featured in the national media, asking its staff if they would consider working on a bridging program free of charge (Keogh, 2020b). The union responded by telling its members not to work for free, but acknowledged that they were limited to what they could do for casual or fixed-term staff if their term of employment was about to conclude (Keogh, 2020b). While the request for unpaid labour was clarified to mean only permanent staff, temporarily employed staff in that program were later advised they no longer had work; some having taught subjects in the program for multiple years.

Following the semester restructure proposal described earlier, this work-for-free request was further evidence that the universities were willing to address revenue shortfalls through austerity. In May 2020, another vice-chancellor estimated that New Zealand's universities would suffer a collective loss of $397 million due to the pandemic (Keogh, 2020c). But unlike their counterparts in Australia who approached the federal government for potential assistance (Karp, 2020), the vice chancellors of New Zealand's universities appeared confident that cuts to operating expenditure would mean they could continue without the need for a cash injection. Indeed, they later cited that they were looking to avoid being "another burden on the taxpayer" (Keogh & Franks, 2020). That *public* institutions would position themselves as a 'burden' if they accepted additional funding exemplified the extent of neoliberal ideology in the tertiary sector. It suggests that the desire to remain financially independent - as requests for assistance would surely invite scrutiny into spending decisions - outweighs their role as a social good. Such demonstrations of an unwavering commitment to corporate philosophy solidified to us, as

representatives of the most expendable academic workforce, that the sector was unlikely to save us. It forced us to truly accept that our shared illusion of the 'early-career' academic was just that, and to face, embrace, and fight for ourselves as the academic precariat.

Formation of the Tertiary Education Action Group Aotearoa

The reluctance of the national union to address the increasingly tenuous position of the country's academic precariat resulted in our group formalising as the Tertiary Education Action Group Aotearoa (TEAGA). Due to the COVID-19 pandemic we remained online, deciding on a name, our aims as a group, a website, and publishing an open letter. The formulation of this open letter was our first significant public advocacy, outlining to the government's Education Minister what the group expected. The open letter was distributed on the social media platform Twitter, attracting 643 signatures from university staff throughout New Zealand. Notably, not only precarious staff signed the letter, but also tenured faculty including 114 professors and a further 287 persons with doctorates, some of which included lecturers and senior lecturers.

We again relied on the same media from our covert advocacy to carry our open letter further into the public domain. Because the group had a desire to control the narrative as best as possible, and maximise our chances of distilling a message that reflected the seriousness of the matter to us as precarious academic staff, we opted first to approach a journalist who had presented a cordial and sympathetic view in earlier interactions. We also believed that having a journalist within the same age range as ourselves (24 - 37) was necessary because it allowed a rapport between spokesperson and reporter based on a shared experience, in particular, an understanding of increasing job insecurity; a phenomenon prevalent in both academia and journalism.

It was a week after the open letter was syndicated throughout the national media, initially by the reporter, that an opinion piece from a university vice-chancellor appeared on the Universities New Zealand website, indirectly challenging our request for government intervention. Universities New Zealand, a communication lobby of the country's eight university vice chancellors, stating it was incumbent universities "lived within their means" and that they were "thinking creatively about how we can thrive—without immediate extra support" (Thomas, 2020). Along with the call for creativity, regeneration and budget restraint - all neoliberal logics wrapped in service to the country [taxpayer] - the vice chancellor who penned the opinion piece also suggested that it was a chance for universities to 'spotify the learning experience' (Thomas, 2020). This, it seemed, was a suggestion that the learning which had been shifted online due to the pandemic, could remain online permanently.

The acceptance that education could be improved by moving to an on-demand, piecemeal service - all features of the streaming music giant - signals the growing concern that universities will continue to shed their direct responsibilities through a process of 'Uberfication' beyond the pandemic (Le Grange, 2020). To 'uberfy', institutions build partnerships with private providers of online education, lending them their name and 'brand awareness' to secure students, while effectively outsourcing the day-to-day operations of education (Le Grange, 2020). In such arrangements, academic staff are akin to Uber's gig workers, becoming what Le Grange (2020) refers to as "microentrepreneurs of the self" (p. 4), further reducing expectations of stable work and solidarity among staff.

In May 2020, as TEAGA we wrote our own opinion piece and had it published in the national media (see Oldfield, 2020). This was an important opportunity for our group, still in its infancy, to set out the explicit threat to the quality of a university education in a public setting

including permanent online teaching; threats either borne out of the COVID-19 pandemic or aggravated because of it. The opinion piece also carried two secondary purposes; the first was that it gave a voice to the precariously employed and signalled to them it was a time for mobilisation, resulting in new group members and greater visibility among cognate groups. The second was that it provided an avenue to rebuff university Vice-Chancellors without taking a directly adversarial position (i.e., appearing in a news article where competing comments were sought by a journalist).

With a robust group of core activists, and a readymade mailing list from responses to our open letter, we then embarked on email campaigns and general media commentary. The email campaigns were perhaps less successful (e.g., requesting the doubling of the value of the flagship research funding pool colloquially referred to within New Zealand as the 'Marsden fund'). Part of the issue with this campaign was that it would require academic staff tied to the Marsden fund process, either as applicants or reviewers, to risk the objective nature of their role by supporting our initiative. This problem became a recurring theme; emails to our TEAGA Gmail account reflected what seemed a genuine level of support for a particular initiative, but usually included a caveat that they were unable to speak on the matter. In some cases, we were approached to take a position on something that a stakeholder themselves was unwilling to do. Such experiences consolidated a view within the group that while our ability to garner media attention had been a success, our ability to widen the focus of our advocacy and grow was limited by an overwhelming number of academic staff who still favoured a risk averse approach. Of the academic precariat, most still wanted or felt it pertinent to preserve a fantasy of securing full time employment.

Our relationship with the university management could be described as an intriguing game of semi-acknowledgement through polite and indirect commentary in official university communications. The institutions were themselves unwilling to directly engage, consult, or negotiate with our newly formed group, and when approached chose to ignore our emails. At least two universities used official communications in a way that informed their position on the group. The first university, in announcing that they would be continuing with academic promotions for full time staff, stated that they had "consulted the major unions", in the same week our advocacy had featured in the national media. The second university used a long all-staff Christmas email to thank a particular department for "keeping them on their toes"; the same department for which two of the authors were precariously employed. These microaggressions seemed to be strategic, acknowledging our presence within the academic ecosystem, but only so much that it did not validate our advocacy.

We understood the fruitlessness of regularly criticising university decisions, choosing to highlight only what we felt were the most egregious proposals, and often discreetly. Instead, our primary focus was the autonomy granted to universities by the government to make business decisions that further compromised both the quality of education and the career trajectory of the academic precariat. Maintaining a focus on government policies also filled a gap in the advocacy we felt had been abdicated by the national union, who were occasionally critical of university decisions but seemed less willing to criticise the government and mobilize its members against it. By focusing on governmental policies rather than university decisions, the group were also less concerned about the impact on their own careers.

One instance of surveillance did arise, however. An Official Information Act request by a student union uncovered that university staff had been resourced to track, detail and report

commentary on the institution appearing on social media, including the making of fake posts to test opinion and dox those critical of university decisions (Meech, 2020). One of the authors of this paper was identified in this tracking and alerted to it by the aforementioned student union.

Our strategies placed TEAGA within a vacant grey space between the contemporary unions and activist social movements. The former prefers a corporatist structure of government, where they are acknowledged as key stakeholders; the latter value more traditional forms of activism, such as strikes and protests. While the pandemic forced us to mobilize online, which we did successfully, it is still unclear whether there is sufficient support for our cause to convert said support into a movement. We believe such a conversion is necessary if TEAGA is to affect real change. Nevertheless, we do know that our pragmatic brand of activism was conducive to media attention, and this has perhaps been the most successful aspect of our operations to date.

Conclusion

As New Zealand appears to have emerged from the COVID-19 pandemic relatively unscathed, with few deaths and less than 3,000 known infections, it became apparent that the Labour government, polling its highest ever numbers, was unlikely to act on proposed redundancies to permanent staff outlined by the respective universities, let alone their already in motion shedding of casual and fixed term workers. Furthermore, the government only provided tepid criticism of its eight universities, offering both a directive that they should act in good faith, but also declining to intervene should universities choose not to. Vice-Chancellors have themselves perpetuated this contradictory messaging. Indeed, one vice chancellor, having already joined the group claiming an ability to manage without government assistance,

subsequently shifted their position, stating that *because* of a lack of assistance, they were encumbered with the need to make further redundancies (Hope, 2020).

Our research has highlighted the barriers to collective action by the academic precariat, which raises the question: how then, did TEAGA form? Put simply, changes in the political, economic and social conditions within New Zealand during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the actions of the country's universities in response, set in motion a collective process of productive mourning. Already alienated from their work and conditions, 'early career' academics experienced a dislocatory event in the announcements from the universities that fixed term and casual staff were expendable, as well as the government's failure to intervene. The members of TEAGA were forced to confront and then accept the identity of the academic precariat, gradually shifting attachments and letting go of the comforting fantasy frame of the 'early career' academic. While painful in the short term, this process was ultimately empowering, allowing anger and outrage to be directed outwards, rather than inwards, and new relations of solidarity to be formed.

We discussed the potential for small and nimble resistance against neoliberal austerity reforms in universities, but its effectiveness against the austerity imposed by New Zealand's universities over the course of 2020 has been limited. One issue is that to subvert the alienating instrumentalist hierarchy of the neoliberal university, one must at least hold a lowly position within the structure. In response to the loss of international students, New Zealand universities have abruptly ended the contracts of temporary staff, meaning they are hardly in a position to effect resistance from the inside.

The hierarchy between the permanent and temporary-contract workforce is one of the key reasons for a lack of political solidarity against casualization and academic precarity (Courtois & O'Keefe, 2015; Schwartz, 2014). This pre-existing hierarchical divide explains why there has not been widespread collective action in response to austerity from university management in New Zealand, despite it also impacting permanent academic staff. These permanent workers are aware through the communication of senior management that the retainment of their positions has been dependent on the termination of temporary contracts at their expiry, a process that in 2020 preceded decisions to make some full-time staff redundant.

Although our success in challenging the actions of New Zealand's government and universities in response to the COVID-19 pandemic was limited, it was not absent. Members of our group successfully pushed back on a university using the pandemic as a stalking horse for changes to its semester structure. Upon forming, TEAGA's open letter attracted 643 signatures, and featured in national news media (Collins, 2020; Keogh, 2020c), as did our opinion piece. Likewise, our email campaign featured in the national conversation about research funding in light of the COVID-19 pandemic (Miller, 2020). Taken together, these small successes highlight the power of accessing the media. Ironically, it was through a channel that usually distributes the hegemonic narrative of the 'early career' academic pathway that we were able to spread our activism and challenge the status quo. Engagement with media might prove a necessary collaboration in the future, allowing us to link with others who also favour their sector prioritising back toward a social good. If we share a belief that the media, much like those in our universities, should work toward rolling back the market logics for they have been remodelled in recent decades, then perhaps to be successful, we should join together our advocacy with allies in those spaces.

Opportunities for solidarity may also exist beyond national borders. At the time of writing this paper, a nearly identical set of circumstances arose in Australia, whereby the casual academic workforce saw opportunities disappear due to universities cutting operating expenditure in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. A variety of activist groups representing the interests of casual staff have appeared on social media and in academic-focused media. Similarly to TEAGA, these groups have critiqued the government and the national union that is meant to be representing their interests. Some of these groups have communicated with TEAGA, and preliminary discussions have taken place about working cooperatively with the intent to globalise our conversations and activism regarding academic precarity. Over time, activist groups such as TEAGA or those in Australia must decide how to engage with their respective unions, and either seek to change the focus of these organisations from within, or look for opportunities to generate change outside of orthodox structures.

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