



## University 'Values' and Neoliberal Marketisation

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*He aha te mea nui o te ao? – He tangata, he tangata, he tangata.*

As this issue of NZJTW was prepared, collective agreements at all eight universities in Aotearoa New Zealand ran out and were (or partly still are) renegotiated between unions and universities. The stark discrepancies between what unions and staff asked for and universities were offering led to various strike actions of some 7000 staff—academic and non-academic—across the nation (Muru-Lanning, 2022). In this editorial, we want to draw attention not to the actual and perceived injustices of this particular process, but rather to the impact this mechanism of the neoliberal marketisation of universities can have on university culture, the standing and authenticity of universities, and their role as critic and conscience of society.

To start, it is necessary to provide some context of the overall environment in which universities operate, as well as outline the background of the current situation, to shed some light on the impact this bargaining round could have on the university landscape and culture in Aotearoa New Zealand. Our universities are, simply put, funded mainly through two income streams: student fees (supplemented by the government) and research income (through the governmental PBRF fund and external funding sources). As such, universities in New Zealand operate under a marketisation model of receiving payment for services rendered, i.e. teaching of students or conducting and disseminating research. While this might make sense on the surface, this method exposes universities to market forces outside of their own control, such as rising or declining student numbers in any given year due to external circumstances. The global pandemic, or fluctuations in the country's (un-)employment levels are further current examples. This competitive market model, while arguably suitable to commercial business situations, can be problematic for a national educational infrastructure necessary to meet domestic understandings of civics and governance, fulfil vital training requirements in skilled and technical industries, promote abilities to think critically and innovatively, and to ensure Aotearoa New Zealand remains competitive in the global knowledge economy of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Shore, 2010).

However, moving beyond the larger environment, a short summary of the reality of university staff in the recent past and present also contributes to our

evaluation. As such, the reader does not have to be reminded that at the time of this editorial, we are at the tail end (hopefully) of a global pandemic that has taken a significant toll on many people personally and professionally. University staff have dealt with significant additional demand in supporting students, colleagues and their workplace in many different ways. Teaching staff had to move courses online and, depending on university context, swap between online, face-to-face and hybrid teaching, or completely move online for a prolonged period of time, with all the complexities that either arrangement and change to the 'norm' require. Staff at some universities were discouraged from working from campus and had, for many months, to work from their own home regardless of the impact that would have on their personal and family well-being. Student needs also increased—understandably, considering the life complexities during the pandemic—and put further pressure on teaching and non-academic staff. It needs to be acknowledged here that many have gone above and beyond in caring for and supporting students during this period. At the same time, university staff in some universities have had to take marginal salary increases over the last two years which have become effective pay cuts due to increasing inflation rates, and have again received an offer by their employer well below the increase in living costs (although some clever reporting distorts the picture when numbers are portrayed over multiple years or include adjustments that were due to staff as part of past negotiations) (Gerritsen, 2022). In places, offers also include a 'claw back' of privileges universities had agreed to in previous collective agreements with unions, which significantly signifies the apparent value, or lack thereof, that management places on university staff, which Peters (2022) reports suggests a view of teachers, teaching, and supervision predominantly as a 'cost' rather than a fundamental contribution to the university. Without staff, there would not be a university.

While these offers are argued by university management to be the best that can be done without further funding from the government (Muru-Lanning, 2022), they send a certain message to staff about the value that university management attributes to them. We deliberately make a distinction between management and 'the university' here, as we would argue that a university is made up of all people, academics, non-academic staff, management and students alike—in the spirit of the knowledge community universities are and should be. In this spirit, students have supported staff in their strike action and advocated for better conditions for staff and students alike. Without wanting to dwell on the complexities of this situation too much, we also need to mention the process of bargaining that has played out in recent months as we see this as at least as problematic as the offers made. While management at universities have acted differently in response to strike actions or planned strike actions, some have responded in openly punitive ways, threatening to or outright deducting pay for short and longer periods. Somewhat disproportionate responses, one might argue, in the case of threatening to 'locking out' staff for two weeks without pay for not entering student grades, which would likely amount to no more than half a day of work per person. It also shows how university management either does not understand, or ignores, the reality of academic work, which will see striking staff effectively make up for lost time at some point as the work itself has to be done anyway (some selected tasks excluded) (Peters, 2022). Actions to deduct pay for strike action in an environment where many staff work more than contractually required in any given month, and often every week, also seems

petty (not to say bullying—particularly considering the aforementioned extra strain and drain on staff over the past two years of working under Covid).

Having established the context of neoliberal universities in Aotearoa and the current situation, the point we want to make about the current situation and the likely impact on universities in the short and potentially long-term future is that we are concerned about the impact these developments have on: (i) the climate within universities; (ii) their standing nationally and internationally; (iii) their role in our society as critical conscience of society; and, (iv) on the mental and emotional wellbeing of university staff. Starting with the latter point, it is not hard to imagine that human beings, who have endured the compounded stresses of the Covid pandemic in their personal and professional life, will be somewhat low on energy overall (to put it lightly) and in significant danger of burnout (TEU, 2022a). The adversarial situation playing out between university management and staff, and arguably disrespectful pay offers that see staff struggling financially through effective reduction of household means will certainly not improve the situation and might lead to further challenges for universities with increasing mental illnesses, and the high probability of staff leaving in the near and mid-term future for better conditions internationally. This process is further compounded in places, where a significant number of staff have been made redundant in recent weeks in a contested process, which will add further strain on everyone in that organisation (RNZ, 2022; TEU, 2022b).

To point (i) raised above, universities in Aotearoa New Zealand promote themselves as adhering to and promoting certain values. Among these are *justice, fairness, equity, manaakitanga*<sup>1</sup> [hospitality and care] and *whanaunatanga* [trusting relationships]. Neither the offers made by universities to date, nor the processes that have played out during bargaining, seem conducive to creating trusting relationships between staff and employer, nor will staff feel cared for and valued at our universities. We are concerned about the impact that a possible decline in the working culture at our universities might have on staff and subsequently on students and their experience. Staff working conditions are after all student learning conditions. Moving to point (ii), considering the vast income disparity existing at universities in Aotearoa New Zealand at all levels, including between management (who are not affected by the bargaining agreements) and all other staff, equity is also hardly apparent. Also, considering the context of the recent pandemic and the aforementioned significant additional efforts most or all staff have made in recent years, the offers and the bargaining processes can neither be considered *just* or *fair*. As such, we would argue that this situation can impact the standing our universities have within our society due to the inconsistencies in what they say they stand for, and actions taken. The potential decline of work and study cultures as a result of this ongoing managerial attack on academics might also impact the international perception of our institutions. This will trouble recruitment of international students and academics. These points also link to our third concern (iii), as the function of a critic and conscience of society requires academic staff to feel secure in their work environment to enable critical engagement with key issues

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<sup>1</sup> Please note that the Māori values mentioned here have broad and faceted meanings that are difficult to capture in translation. The translations offered here seem to us as most relevant in the context of this text.

facing our country, including our universities, that might go against the values we hold as the peoples of Aotearoa New Zealand.

Much more could be said and analysed in this context and the individual situations and actions of bargaining at each university could be looked at separately, and questions regarding Te Tiriti responsibilities could be asked. We hope that these questions might be picked up by others in future. For our purposes, however, we highlighted some of the issues that a neoliberal model to tertiary education and our universities can create, exemplified through the current environment and situation at our universities. If we want to maintain an education system that includes strong universities that uphold their institutional obligations, it might be time to review the setup on a national level, and for management in universities at present, to consider their own actions, strategic plans and their views of their fellow colleagues in our knowledge communities—that are our universities—and pose the potentially uncomfortable question: how do we honour our values in this situation and our actions?

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