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Heroic aspirations: The emergence of academic development in a New Zealand university

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Abstract

The emergence of academic development as a mode of institutional and/or academic and/or human capital building activity in universities is a relatively recent development in the history of Western universities. Nevertheless, in the twenty-first century, academic development has become a central, though contested, part of the business of most higher education institutions. Despite this, the work of academic development in the contemporary university is beset with tensions that arise from the academic autonomy at the heart of an academic’s identity. Using different kinds of history making, this article takes a case-study approach to explore the beginnings of academic development at the University of Auckland. Together the divergent accounts provided by the three forms of history serve to illustrate that the tensions that attend academic development today were evident at its beginnings.

Keywords: University teaching, developing institutions, educational development.

Introduction

Academic development in universities is an ambiguous project. As a mode of institutional and/or academic and/or human capital building activity, it has its roots in the progressive mission of the university and a culture of enquiry into problems wherever the institution may find them, even in its own backyard. The first academic developers were appointed in Western universities approximately 40 years ago at a time of major policy change. Arising independently in each university, academic development’s organisational structures and practices were created and evolved to meet varying institutional imperatives and perspectives. This uneven trajectory, and the appointment of developers from a range of disciplinary backgrounds, has led many to suggest that academic development is a “fragmented” and contested endeavour (see Clegg, 2009; Harland and Staniforth, 2008). Nevertheless, in the twenty-first century, it has become a central and taken-for-granted aspect of university work.

In this article, three modes of history are deployed to offer a case study of the emergence of academic development in one New Zealand university in the early 1970s. By engaging in different kinds of history-making – traditional archival analysis, oral history and genealogical reading – we seek to offer diverse and divergent interpretations of the conditions of this emergence: as coordinated and rational institutional planning; as serendipity; and as the strategic negotiation of relations of power. Blending different modes of history-making offers a richer, more multi-layered account of the arrival of a complex and, to this day, contested academic phenomenon (Grant, B., Lee, A., Clegg, S., Manathunga, C., Barrow, M., Kandlbinder, P., Brailsford, I., Gosling, D., & Hicks, M 2009) than any one kind of history can do alone. While such different histories do not fit neatly together, their juxtaposition is a fruitful one, offering different insights into the issues at stake in academic development’s genesis and shedding light on some of its enduring dilemmas.

Questions of student admission and survival

In the post-war era of New Zealand higher education, two questions vexed New Zealand academics and policy makers: who should be admitted to university and how do students fare in their first year? (Parkyn, 1959, p.vii). While New Zealand prided itself on its “open entry” university admission system, dissident voices queried the poor academic quality of new students. Defenders of open access claimed that attempting to weed out potential first-year failures would likely exclude successful students too. So open entry “remained an accepted policy. Indeed it was almost the only policy and one that survived perhaps only because full advantage was not taken of it” (Malcolm & Tarling, 2007 p.127). Politicians in the late 1960s, however, began questioning the financial burden of underwriting open entry.

Two important studies, George Parkyn’s Success and Failure at the University (1959, 1967) and John Small’s Achievement and Adjustment in the First Year at University (1966), addressed the impact of teaching quality on student admission and survival. Parkyn prefaced his summary on teaching with the comment: “From time
to time the question has arisen whether the quality of some of the teaching in the universities may have been a cause of [student] failure” (Parkyn, 1967, p.116). More research “with technical assistance from a research unit devoted to university problems within each university” (Parkyn, 1967, p.120) was called for. Small, in his study, recorded comments from first-year students detailing instances of lecturers who “were teaching in ways which irritated or confused students” (Small, 1966, p.35). He concluded, “there seems to be some room for improvement in the methods of teaching, and also sufficient resources, in the form of certain highly skilled teachers, to provide the necessary correctives” (Small, 1966, p.81). Clearly there were numerous factors affecting student performance and teaching quality appeared to be one of them. What was lacking was evidence.

The need to do something concrete about student performance came to a head in 1968-9 when Finance Minister, Robert Muldoon, repeatedly addressed the cost of student failure (Gustafson, 2000). Based on Treasury sources, he estimated the 33% first-year failure rate cost $10m per year (Gustafson, 2000), an expense he felt the country could no longer afford. Muldoon’s view brought the prevailing assumption that “all qualified young people should have the opportunity for university education” (Currie & Kedgley, 1959, p.10) under the spotlight at a time of rapid increases in government expenditure for tertiary education in the 1960s and a severe economic downturn.

A meeting of senior academics in October 1968 charged Canterbury University’s Neville Phillips and Otago’s E. Alan Horsman with the task of compiling a report on the quality and performance of students. Their April 1969 findings responded to Muldoon’s claims about the economic cost of student failure. Phillips and Horsman defended open entry, questioning Muldoon’s statistics and the true extent of failure. When other factors were taken into account, New Zealand’s full-time students performed nearly as well as their more select British counterparts. Rather than closing the wide-open door, they instead suggested three areas to support student achievement: improving teaching standards, changing examining methods and course requirements, and academic reorganisation. In line with overseas developments, they proposed establishing units that would study higher education generally and gather data relevant to particular institutions (Phillips & Horsman, 1969). Their paper suggested the following mandate:

Together with research and the dissemination of the results, a need has been recognized for offering services to university departments, e.g. advice on teaching and examining methods, curricular design and other problems suggested by the departments themselves, as well as the sponsoring of courses and seminars on subjects of interest to both academic and administrative staff. (Phillips & Horsman, 1969, p.46)

This article explores the University of Auckland’s response to the national debate, examining the creation of the Higher Education Research Office (HERO) in mid-1973 and the arrival of the first research officer, Dr John Jones, who took up his position in November 1974. HERO was the third such unit on the New Zealand scene, following those established at Canterbury University and Victoria University of Wellington (Clift & Imrie, 1978). In what follows, we offer the reader three necessarily brief histories. Each history illuminates different contingencies and currents in the emergence of HERO and the higher education context in which it was embedded. Together they serve to illustrate early tensions around the role of academic development, as institutional managers, committees, individual academics and the academic developer sought to define the role of academic development in the institution.

### The archival history: preparing the ground

The first history rests on traditional archival enquiry, a methodology that foregrounds evidence from “primary sources as the starting points for history, rather than unifying theories or themes” (Grant et al, 2009, p.84). This particular history draws on documents including minutes of Senate, its subcommittees and working parties, Senate discussion papers and reports which are held in the University of Auckland’s own archives.

### Defining the problem: understanding contemporary students

Early evidence of the University of Auckland’s desire to know more about its students in the way alluded to by Parkyn, Small and Phillips and Horsman is found in mid-1967. In that year the Faculty of Science raised with questions as to why “academically talented” students were shunning biological and earth sciences in favour of physics and mathematics. A faculty meeting on 20 March 1968 noted that: “In a scientific sense little or nothing is known with any degree of certainty about this matter at the present time. The information could be gathered with the advice of the liaison officers and others competent in this kind
of enquiry” (Faculty of Science, 1968). When the University’s Academic Committee discussed this matter in April 1968, it asked the Faculty of Education to explore ways in which the university might better research its students.

In mid-1969, education Professor Ralph Winterbourn presented the findings (Academic Committee, 1969). In a covering letter dated 3 July to the Deputy Vice-Chancellor, he listed ten possible areas for a research unit to engage with. The first three – transfer from school to university study, problems associated with first year of study and special problems of foreign students – had, Winterbourn noted, been the subject of recent research and discussion: “Some action has been taken, such as the establishment of the counselling service. However, there remains a lot we don’t know, and there is scope for impartial evaluation studies of what we have done.” Drawing from activities in Australian units, Winterbourn then listed seven areas of new activity: staff-student communication problems; student selection and correlates of academic performance; questionnaire design and interviewing techniques; examination of attrition rates by sex, age, subject and faculty; investigating staff-student ratios; assisting departments on specific tasks (such as subject-specific teaching methods, use of audio-visual aids, examination and assessment, exploring particular forms of teaching and learning for different student personality types and relation between lecturer’s personality and different teaching methods); and offering a confidential consultation service for staff.

**Devising a structure: a research unit**

Winterbourn's report suggested the establishment of a Higher Education Research Unit staffed by a research professor in Higher Education assisted by at least one research officer (preferably a Senior Lecturer in Higher Education). This unit would be an independent department within the Faculty of Education reporting to Senate through the Deans’ Committee. As well as meeting the proposed research and support activities, the unit’s staff would also undertake classroom teaching and research supervision in order to maintain their academic credibility and status:

> The inclusion of resource teaching is justified on the grounds that it would brighten the image of the Unit if its staff were seen to keep in touch with the work of certain departments, thereby fostering morale and good working relationships. In any case, opportunities to teach and carry out independent research should be provided to safeguard the careers of staff members. (Academic Committee, 1969)

The report included the comment from the Chairman of the Centre for the Study of Higher Education at the University of Melbourne that: “Desirable educational change is more likely to occur when the ‘client’ is actively engaged in the study. Often the most useful outcome of an investigation is not the written report, but in the changed attitudes of the teachers and administrators who have been involved and in the resulting practical changes.”

Given this founding philosophy, the report proposed the unit have four core activities: provide consultation and research service for departments, faculties, student organisations and individual lecturers; initiate its own research; offer limited teaching and thesis supervision; and assist with induction and in-service training for university teachers. The unit was to focus “on a few things well done rather than work spread too thinly over a number of areas” (Academic Committee, 1969).

Minutes of the 28 July 1969 Academic Committee meeting reveal a division of opinion about the focus of research activity despite the general agreement that a unit was needed. It was resolved to circulate the report to heads of department to canvas opinion on three alternative research priorities: the transition from school to university; or problems internal to the university; or problems relating to the transition from university to employment and post-university activity. After this consultation, Senate noted that the balance of opinion favoured attention to problems internal to the University. Academic Committee also informed Senate “with imminence of the imposition of the 10,000 [student] limit, the problems of initial selection will be highly difficult and contentious” (Academic Committee, 1969).

Senate approved the establishment of Higher Education Research Unit (HERU) in principle in November 1969 but over the next 12 months no action seems to have been taken. In early 1971, Wendy Adams, the Auckland University Student Association’s (AUSA) education officer, advocated for a “teaching research centre” along with regular teaching courses that would bring together lecturers and students. She also endorsed moves for students to formally assess their teachers via anonymous questionnaires (Adams, 1971). Soon after, the recently appointed Vice-Chancellor, Colin Maiden, informed Senate of his desire for a
higher education research unit to be set up within two years (Senate News, 1971a). At the same time, Faculty of Education records show that HERU “was not to be implemented in 1972 because of the financial situation. The comment was made that it was unfortunate that at a time when the University desperately needs data to assist its decisions regarding selection of students for entry, it has seen fit to delay setting up this unit” (Faculty of Education, 1971).

Senate gave Academic Committee the responsibility of re-examining the matter and a sub-committee was duly established. After a few months’ deliberation, including another round of consultation with department heads, the committee reported back in October 1971. The working group had considered fundamental questions: “In view of the other pressing claims on university finance, is there a real need for a Higher Education Research Unit at the present time? If so, what would be its functions? What would be the status of its director and to whom should he be responsible?” It unanimously recommended the establishment of a higher education research unit with a single officer (of senior rank) at its head. The committee saw a “genuine” need for this unit to investigate:

Methods of student selection where enrolment is restricted; the effectiveness of various pedagogical (e.g. audio-visual) aids and methods of teaching (e.g. language laboratories); the causes of success and failure of various student groups; the reliability of examining and assessment procedures; and many other matters relating to the teaching and examining functions of the University. (Senate News, 1971b, p.8)

Two years on from the initial scoping report written by Education, the structure and reporting mechanisms of HERU had altered. HERU would have a single Educational Research Officer with a rank equivalent to associate professor, and a secretary. Requests for investigations were to be channelled from the Academic Registrar or departmental heads. Rather than being housed within Education, the sub-committee recommended that the officer report to a committee comprising the Vice Chancellor, Registrar or Academic Registrar, Chair of the Academic Committee and three members of the teaching staff. Finally, HERU would be “reconsidered, in the light of experience” after two or three years (Academic Committee, 1971).

Despite the second report, there was no immediate move to establish HERU. In September 1972, AUSA criticised the University for its perceived stalling (AUSA Annual Report, 1972) and six months later Senate established another sub-committee to consider HERU, prompted by information received on the University of London’s Unit and a submission from the Association of University Teachers.

The role defined: neither ‘cult figure’ nor ‘messiah’

In May 1973, Senate finally gave the go ahead. The sub-committee, reporting on the need for a unit in April 1973, stressed it was more pressing than in 1971. There were a growing number of educational problems across the tertiary sector for a research unit to deal with. The successful establishment of units at the Universities of London and Melbourne was cited as evidence of what could be achieved. The committee informed Senate of the urgent need for Auckland to have one of its own: “We believe that any further delay will be detrimental to the quality of this University” (Senate News, 1973, p.24). The mandate for the new unit was spelled out to Senate: “To improve – as a result of its research and other activities – the quality of university education in Auckland” (Senate News, 1973, p.24). HERO’s remit is worth quoting in full, as it shows the expectations of the working group and the expanded work activities from the second 1971 review:

It [HERO] would respond to requests from departments to investigate and report on such matters as: the basis and method of student selection, where enrolment is restricted; teaching and examining problems, including innovations and experiments in teaching and examining methods; the effectiveness of various pedagogical aids; the effective use of student and staff time in various learning and teaching contexts; the causes of success and failure of various groups; the reliability of examining and course assessment procedures; the effectiveness of various courses as training for the professions; and many other matters related to the teaching and examining functions of the University. (Senate News, 1973, p.24)

Moreover, this third review discussed the characteristics of the hoped-for appointee. Using intriguing language, the five-man committee advised: “Its [HERO] director should not become a ‘cult figure’ or messiah, and should exercise no control outside his own Unit. He should work – diplomatically and unobtrusively – to assist departments and thereby increase the efficiency of the University as a whole” (Academic Committee, 1973). The HERO position was advertised in Commonwealth countries at the end of
1973 with interviews held in April 1974. In June 1974, Dr John Jones’ appointment was announced in Auckland University News and his arrival was signalled for November.

The oral history: A hero’s tale

The second history is an oral one that foregrounds an informal and first-hand account of the emergence of academic development at the University of Auckland. The strength of this mode is that it “captures stories of individuals’ experiences that are unlikely to be written anywhere else” (Grant et al, 2009, p.84) and disturbs the formality of official records. The narrative below is presented in the interviewee’s voice. It is a semi-verbatim account of an interview conducted with John in his home on the shores of Lake Wakatipu in 2008. During the interview, John discussed his evolution from physicist to education researcher and staff developer and his time at the University of Auckland.

By way of introduction: John Jones completed a PhD in physics at the University of Wales in Swansea. After two years as a postdoctoral researcher, he was appointed to a lecturer’s role at the University of Malawi where he taught physics to undergraduate students. He then moved to the University of Papua New Guinea to take a post in a newly established education research unit attached to the Faculty of Education. There he was involved in various educational research projects that mainly enquired into school science teaching. At the end of 1974, John came to the University of Auckland to take up the new position of Higher Education Research Officer and sole member of the Higher Education Research Unit. He remained at Auckland for almost 20 years, after which he left to take up an academic development role in Hong Kong.

Developing an interest in student learning

When I pitched up in Malawi I started out being a conventional physics lecturer. I prepared stuff, went into class and talked about it, I wrote things on the board. It soon became clear to me that the students didn’t have a clue what I was on about – I kept losing them. But they were very smart cookies; they had to be to have survived to this point in Malawi’s education system. So I started to think about how the students were learning and how I could influence that. This got me really interested in teaching and I decided I could spend the rest of my life doing this stuff. As a result I started my MA in education.

I could have stayed in Malawi for as long as I wanted but I saw an advertisement from the University of Papua New Guinea (UPNG) for researchers in a research unit they were establishing as a part of the Faculty of Education. I thought this would be a fabulous job, although as I hadn’t finished my masters, I imagined I would have little chance of getting it. So I also started applying for other jobs around the Pacific. As it transpired, UPNG offered me the job and I spent three years there. It was fantastic being able to immerse myself in research – mainly about learning in schools. This was where I came into contact with Ernest Roe and John Powell. Ernest and John (in particular) were researching their own teaching and were really interested in higher education as a discipline. Through my contact with them, I became infected with the same sort of curiosity and, when they got jobs in higher education units in Queensland and New South Wales, I started to think that there might be a bit of space for me in this area too.

The move to Auckland

There were lots of Australians and New Zealanders in PNG so when Auckland advertised for a higher education research officer I applied. It seemed a pretty ill defined job, and I was only 32 at the time, which now seems incredibly young to be shifting into a sole position but that’s what happened.

My impression on arrival in Auckland was that no one had much idea what I was to do – the job was as ill defined as the advertisement had suggested. I had lunch with the Vice-Chancellor, Colin Maiden, when I arrived. Colin came from a hard-core science background and it was pretty clear that he wouldn’t have wanted anyone who was a wishy-washy philosopher, sociologist type and that having a PhD in physics – with some pretty hard-core maths in it – clearly wasn’t going to go amiss. The VC said that he had given things a bit of thought that morning and he had scrawled a few things on a bit of paper that he thought I could take a look at – like failure rates in engineering being a bit higher than might have been expected, and like looking at some of the assessment that was being done in some areas.

At that point I wasn’t hooked into any formal University structure: there was no committee to report to and no great definition of what the role should be. So I spent much of 1975 figuring out what I should...
do. I went to see various heads of department to try to work out a programme of work and I found there was quite a bit of antagonism around and little suggestion from them as to direction.

The research and development paradigm in education at that stage was definitely a scientific one. It was my background both in physics and in my MA and matched the University’s vision that someone who could crunch numbers was what was needed. So that’s where I started.

Getting started

My first big project started in 1976. I decided to track new entrants to the University through their university career. This built on the work that I had done in Malawi and Papua New Guinea, but this time looking for possible predictors for success at Auckland.

At about the same time, I identified a network of staff across the University who were enthusiastic about their teaching. So, while there were many detractors, I found pockets of support and friendship amongst academic staff who acknowledged that they needed to treat teaching seriously. There were also members of staff in areas such as the already established Audio-Visual (AV) Unit who became a part of the supportive network that I began to develop in the institution. But there was still no institutional notion that people would reframe their conceptions of teaching and curriculum.

The development of the relationship with AV was important. We started out running some courses together; television was the big thing then (we thought it was going to transform teaching) so we started producing little programmes. But as well as quite a bit of joint activity, we started to talk about a possible merger of the Higher Education Research Office and AV. The merger did not eventuate, but the discussions appeared to alert the University to the fact that I was free-floating, in particular that I operated outside of any committee oversight or standard organisational structure. As a result, they established a Teaching Learning Advisory Committee (TLAC) and, in 1977, after two years in the role, I finally fitted into the University hierarchy. That is when things started to get a little more regularised and, from that point, all sorts of regular things started to happen. For example, people thought it would be a good idea to have teaching courses for new staff and I developed a regular half-day programme. Once we had established a proper structure, all sorts of things became more possible and lots of activities started.

In the early days staff development wasn’t the norm in institutions. Our first attempts weren’t great and some of the feedback wasn’t that brilliant, but I worked with the feedback and polished the programmes. We pulled in expert teachers from departments to talk to new teachers, created interactive sessions for them, talked about small group teaching and assessing students and so on. Over time, things expanded and became very useful and we got fantastic feedback on our sessions. People who came to these sessions went back into departments and quite soon we had created a critical mass of people who interacted with us. After a while, people were starting to think that perhaps this HERO thing wasn’t as bad as they might have thought.

At the same time, TLAC was articulating institutional priorities and concerns. For example, in 1977 and 1978 support systems for Māori and Pacific students were being put in place. This was because of concern about the really poor pass rates for these groups that my research had shown up. The whole business of diversity of the student body was becoming important to the University and increasingly I was involved in more research about this – the research we did on the socio-economic background of students for example.

Being hooked into the University structure through TLAC certainly helped embed my work, but the resources were pretty thin. I had a half-time secretary and a small budget – I still remember it – 0.24 of an assistant lecturer’s salary. I used this to employ students for intelligent donkeywork, but I also tapped into other government schemes that were around at the time. Because there was quite a lot of graduate unemployment in New Zealand in the late 1970s, it was possible to get government money to employ graduate students for three months at a time so they could get experience and training. This was a brilliant scheme and at one stage I had five students working for me on various projects from research into students’ background to making a series of videos for students to improve their study skills.

So this is where we were at the end of the first five years of my tenure at Auckland. A solid foundation had been developed and the institution had started to establish structures and mechanisms for academic development. But the resource base was a thin one.
A genealogical reading: The thinkability of academic development

A third history of the emergence of academic development at the university draws on a close reading of a particular archival record: a short article published in University News (1975), the University’s in-house newsletter, announcing John’s appointment and arrival. A genealogical approach, as developed by Michel Foucault (e.g. 1984), offers a loose methodological framework that seeks to inform understandings of how the present has come to take the form and shape it has, in particular how our self-understandings have come about. In undertaking such a reading of this text, we are interested in probing the discourses that made the idea of academic development thinkable in its emergence and how those discourses were deployed. What kinds of subjects are constituted by this text? What kinds of power relations do we find between those subjects? More specifically, do we find evidence of technologies of domination, that is structures of coercion between institution, individuals or groups, and/or of technologies of the self, those “processes by which the individual acts upon himself [sic]” (Foucault cited in Burchell, 1996, p.20)? The full text of the article is reproduced here (line number identified) with a genealogical reading following.

University’s First Higher Education Research Officer

Dr John Jones arrived in Auckland toward the end of November to take up the newly established post of Higher Education Research Officer.

Dr Jones’ initial background was in physical sciences and after completing a PhD in physics he spent two years as a University of Wales Research Fellow at Swansea. A four-year period teaching physics at the University of Malawi, in East Africa, followed and during this time he was involved in a number of projects concerned with the selection and employment of post-secondary pupils and the success of science undergraduates. He also worked on the construction of a new secondary science syllabus. Since 1971, Dr Jones has been working in the Educational Research Unit at the University of Papua New Guinea, where he was in charge of a range of projects associated with teaching and learning problems within schools and universities.

On his role as Higher Education Research Officer, Dr Jones comments: “Over the past few years, a majority of universities throughout the world have been taking a fresh and much more critical look at the way in which they educate their students. In many cases a result of this inspection has been the establishment of some kind of research/service unit within the university with the broad intention of improving the quality of education in the particular institution. There are, obviously, a great many opinions concerning the ways in which an improvement in university education could best be effected and this, coupled with ‘local’ factors, has led to a considerable diversity in the kind of unit which has evolved in different universities. One of the first priorities I see is that of determining the kind of activity which a Higher Education Research Office or Unit could most profitably carry out in the Auckland context; and, to a large extent, this entails the determination of some sort of priority list of problems as perceived by university staff and students.

“So far I have managed to talk to a number of staff and have gathered some opinions about projects which could usefully be initiated. Among those which have been suggested are – factors associated with student failure (and the development of procedures to help obviate such failure); the evaluation of the effectiveness of various ‘traditional’ and ‘innovative’ teaching procedures; an analysis of the effects of continuous assessment; the mounting of in-service courses, seminars, workshops for teaching staff – and the list could go on and on. During 1975 I hope to be able to get a number of small scale and pilot projects under way, and also to work out some guidelines for longer-term work which could usefully be undertaken.

“I would be very happy to hear from anyone who has ideas concerning educational problems existing within the University, from those who have ideas on projects which could be mounted, and in particular from those who might be prepared to collaborate on work carried out”.

• Dr Jones has a temporary office in Room 208 of the Botany Building and his extension number is 641.

The subjects constituted by the text

The main subject of the text is the newly arrived “University’s First Higher Education Research Officer” (line 1) who throughout is mentioned formally with his academic title appended (“Dr Jones”). While his academic status is ambiguous (“Officer” is not usually an academic title), various textual moves position the new arrival as credible to the academic community: he has a PhD, it’s in physics (a traditional
discipline), he has in the past been a Research Fellow, and he has much previous work experience relevant to his new role. His is the main voice in the text (22 out of the 35 lines are apparently verbatim quotes from Jones). His full position title emphasises that he will be doing research (finding out about things) rather than changing people or things.

The other main subject is “university staff” (lines 22, 23), the target readers of this text. Staff are first mentioned halfway down the text, where they are joined with students as perceivers/determiners of the “priority list of problems” (lines 21-22) for the Research Office to research. Later, in relation to the suggestion to mount “in-service courses, seminars, workshops”, the more specific subject position of “teaching staff” (line 28) is named and here there is a subtle shift in subjectivity from staff who are active determiners of useful projects and so on to staff who will be “subjected to” workshops.

Two other subjects appear in the text. One incorporates the University’s students, evoked initially as subject to education processes that have recently received a “fresh and much more critical look” (line 13) but shortly after as capable agents who can contribute to determining “some sort of priority list of problems” (lines 21-22) that the new Office might address. The other is the “Higher Education Research Office or Unit” (line 20), the place from which the yet to be determined activities will be carried out. The way its name is described as “Office or Unit” suggests a certain kind of ambivalence on the author’s part towards the idea of an “office” – or maybe an awareness that the reader might feel this way. (In fact the name Higher Education Research Office stuck and eventually became over-written by its acronym HERO.) At this stage, the “Office or Unit” comprises a temporary office in a room in the Botany Building.

The power relations between Dr Jones and other academics

The power relations embodied by the text between Dr Jones and other University staff are ambiguous. Reading closely, we can see an unstable interplay between structures of coercion and the transformative practices of the self-characteristic of modern forms of governmentality (Foucault, 1988, p.19). The text works in subtly coercive ways by positioning Jones as authoritative: his title (and the article’s title that first mentions him) includes the word “Officer”, a word that suggests someone who has the power to command. In his previous work, Dr Jones is described as having taken “charge” (line 10) of the kind of activities he will be undertaking at the University. In addition, the first thing Jones says directly is that “a majority of universities throughout the world” have gone down the path of establishing units like his – thereby deploying the situation in other like institutions to give legitimacy and authority to his cause. In these moves, the instabilities of Jones’ position begin to emerge. Authority and legitimate cause are not enough: in an academic environment, the power to command and take charge is always up for challenge and the cause contains an implicit, at least, criticism of other staff (the education they are providing is not good enough and needs to be improved). This criticism is not overt – to make it so would have risked Jones’ working relationships with academic colleagues.

In order to negotiate such instabilities, some attention is paid to establishing Jones’ credibility as already noted. If this move is successful, it may be more likely that other staff will respect him and co-operate with his plans on their own merits. Moreover the text says that, while these kinds of units have been established elsewhere, local factors are important for determining what might be set up at this university, thus offering an implicit invitation for University staff to have a say in the nature and workings of the unit. There is also repeated emphasis (lines 22, 23-24, 31-33) on the importance of setting the Office’s agenda in collaboration with those staff. The last paragraph in particular is an extended invitation for “anyone” to get in touch with him and closes with Dr Jones’ telephone number. These moves position him as collegial and approachable, explicitly inviting the staff of the University to “transform themselves” by getting involved in the project that Jones is undertaking.

The thinkability of academic development

A genealogical reading of this text suggests that academic development per se was not thinkable in this university in the early 1970s. Certainly neither the term nor any of its cognates is ever mentioned. What was tentatively thinkable was the value of undertaking research into university teaching and learning because of the progressive need to improve the “quality of education” in universities at large. Such a calling could be identified with the academic research project at large, which seeks to throw light wherever ignorance currently exists. Its appeal was also strengthened by the claim of “normalcy”: other universities are doing it. From this text, it seems that the project was seen to be most palatable if those who did the research were well qualified academics from respectable disciplines, who were researching within an
acceptable paradigm (positivism) and if the topics for research came from the University’s own academic staff and students. Academic development as we know it in the present emerges only fleetingly in a passing reference to some others’ “opinions” (line 23) that “in-service courses, seminars, workshops for teaching staff” (lines 27-28) could “usefully be initiated” (line 24) along with the various research projects. That such courses would become a significant focus for HERO’s work and for the work done by its offspring (the Centre for Professional Development) is only faintly foreshadowed.

Conclusion

We have produced three distinctive histories of the emergence of academic development at the University of Auckland. Despite evidence of contingency, the traditional history records a series of formal institutional processes that continuously refined an original proposition until it matured into an event – the arrival of the first HERO, located within the formal committee structures and working to a well defined agenda. Against this, we have an oral history that shows the HERO’s arrival to an ill-defined environment where his agenda was apparently a random inspiration of the Vice-Chancellor’s, conceived during a lunchtime meeting. The article published in University News appears to support Jones’ version of the emergence rather more than that charted from the formal record. In yet another take, reading this text through a Foucauldian lens foregrounds the kinds of subjectivities and power relations that made the academic development project possible and, even more acutely, the kinds of coercive and/or self-disciplining technologies it could harness. These histories do not sit neatly together and we acknowledge they cross troubling epistemological breaks. However, they serve to illustrate the fragmentary and incomplete nature of any kind of history making and, in this case, the partiality of narratives of academic development’s origins.

Together the histories illustrate some of the tensions that marked the work of academic development at its beginnings and that continue today. The original mandate came from political attention to problems with student performance and the need for institutions to investigate these within their own walls. The possibility that this would lead to an expectation of change for individual academics was always on the agenda but was downplayed. When such an expectation was addressed, it was within the logic of autonomy: those who would change would, like John Jones, have reflected on their own teaching and seen the need for it. Thus, a fundamental source of the tensions within academic development is the condition of academic autonomy that lies at the core of academic identity. Such tensions are still manifest in the sometimes agonistic relationships between institutional and individual agendas, between activities aimed at improving teaching and those aimed at improving research productivity, between academic developers (who may or may not themselves be academics) and their discipline-based colleagues. For academic development to go on being thinkable for some academics and academic development practitioners, these tensions are often either disavowed, blamed on uncooperative discipline-based colleagues or resolved by asserting one agenda over another. We suggest that a better, although admittedly more difficult, way forward is to think about how to keep the tensions at play so that academic development maintains a self-critical stance towards its vital, if problematic, role as an agent of change within the walls of the contemporary university.

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