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The impact on academic staff of the collaboration between a pathway provider and its partner university: An Australian case study.

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Keywords

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New educational models such as those involving a third party educational provider linked with an official university for purposes of providing a bridge (a pathway program) into a mainstream university degree, particularly for international students, have become part of the higher education landscape capitalising on the international demand for tertiary qualifications from Australia and other English-language-based universities. The perceptions of teachers employed in one such pathway program are the focus of this current paper – a research area that to date has been understudied. Such data are of great value in furnishing an in-depth view of the challenges involved in an educational model that is highly commercialised and the impacts it has on teaching and learning, especially on academic identity in terms of the specific key relationships – between teachers and third party provider, between teachers and partner university, between teachers and international students. Some of the more concerning issues revolve around the extent to which market imperatives impinge on pedagogical concerns, on teachers' professional commitment to their vocation, on international students' capacity to acquire an authentic tertiary education that supports rather than detracts their transition to mainstream university, and on whether such educational models can be genuinely sustainable long term.

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Introduction

This paper investigates the experiences of academics teaching international students in a pathway program offered by a third-party (for-profit) educational provider in formal collaboration with a partner university. As casualised employees, these academics face the same challenges as casualised staff in the higher-education sector generally, with the added complexities arising from working in a commercialised institutional environment permeated by imperatives strategically aligned with the corporate world. Far-reaching ramifications for these teachers' academic/professional identities and the quality of the education offered to international students will be explored, and will contribute insights regarding this specialised (but little-studied) sub-sector of higher education in Australia.

Educational-commercial partnership models, such as the one that is the basis of the current study, are now an established part of the Australian higher-education sector, taking advantage of a robust international demand for tertiary qualifications from Australian universities¹. These new educational partnerships are not without their detractors, particularly regarding concerns over the quality of academic standards (Choudaha 2017). The data from this case study of a private higher-education provider (PHEP) sheds new light on the impact of such partnerships on teaching and learning as viewed by the academics who are key to this process. In particular, “the internationalization of education and the changed nature of the student body raise fundamental questions about our role as educators and researchers” (Harris 2005, p.429). Such identity issues are likewise highlighted by Ball (2003), who believes the side-effects of a focus on the “market, managerialism and performativity” (p.215) not only change what educators do, but indeed “who they are” (p.215).

This paper is based on a case study investigating a collaboration (essentially a commercial arrangement) between a for-profit, third-party higher education pathway provider (de-identified as PHEP) and its partner university (Met_U); both were located in Sydney, NSW, with PHEP operating from Met_U's campus. PHEP is one of a stable of pathway institutions in Australia (and overseas) owned and operated by an education-management corporation. It is of note that PHEP is characterised by its exclusive reliance on the employment of casual academics for teaching.

The Australian higher-education sector of the 21st century is characterised by ever-increasing pressures to be self-sufficient due to reductions in government funding, and a rise in managerial corporatisation within universities (Marginson 2000) as a cost-effective means to curtail expenses. This has meant the increasing employment of casualised academics (May, Strachan & Peetz 2013). Some sources (for example, Kwok 2017) estimate that between 2004 and 2016 insecure academic employment in Australia increased significantly to stand at approximately 63%. Others (Lazarsfeld-Jensen & Morgan 2009) claim a much higher figure of 80%, mainly involving undergraduate teaching.

At the same time, the international student market in Australia has become a financial lifeline for the sector. At the higher end of the scale are the University of Wollongong, with 40.5% international students; Murdoch University (Western Australia), with 40.6%; Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT) University (Victoria), with 46.3%; and the Federation University (Victoria), with 48.9% (Australian Education Network 2017). Understandably, such cataclysmic

¹ For a comprehensive overview of both the positive and negative effects of such an expanded international student body in university campuses see Leask and Carroll (2011).

shifts (Billot 2010; Archer 2008) in the higher-education landscape, especially the intense competition that has been generated in attracting international students, have led to the emergence of new types of educational organisations and hybrid partnerships. One such partnership is that between a mainstream university and a third-party private provider, the latter facilitating the academic progress of international students into a degree program, usually where such students would be unable to enrol directly into such a program due to lower English-language skills.

The rise of international education – as illustrated in the emergence of corporate pathway provider-university partnerships such as the one being investigated in the current study – is seen as part of a global rise in trade within a highly competitive environment (Gillett 2011) that affects a multiplicity of higher-education institutions internationally, as well as the academics and administrators working within them. Redden (2014) notes the huge demand for such joint ventures in America to attract full fee-paying foreign students at a time of diminished public funding of universities. For more exact figures, Choudaha's (2017, p.27) recent report "Landscape of Third-Party Pathway Partnerships in the United States" claims that 45 American universities are involved in joint partnerships. The challenges that have become evident in the United States mirror concerns in the present study: specifically, the inadequate preparedness of international students entering pathway programs and the subsequent pressures on faculty to inflate grades (Redden 2014). That such partnerships frequently rely on adjunct or contingent academics as the main providers of instruction in pathway programs also appears to be a concern in the American context (Winkle 2014).

An overarching issue in corporate/university partnerships is quality assurance (Adams 1998; Fiocco 2005; Gillett 2011). Gillett explains, "It is essential that quality be maintained whilst sustaining the commercial viability of the programs" (2011, p.13). In other words, both the education and commercial imperatives need to have equal weight and deserve equal attention. Because of the nature and context of these collaborations, such a delicate balance may not be achieved. Choudaha (2017) indicates that the major reason for American universities *not* undertaking such an arrangement is the fear of undermining the quality of academic standards (65% of respondent universities).

This paper will use Andrade's (2006, p.134) definition of international students: "individuals enrolled in institutions of higher education who are on temporary student visas and are non-native English speakers (NNES)". A casual employee is defined as one in short-term employment and, crucially without the entitlements associated with permanent employment, including sick leave, long-service leave and protection against unfair dismissal (Burgess, Campbell & May 2008). This definition will be of particular importance when considering the exclusive reliance on casual academics in the pathway program that forms the case study of this paper. Such a definition encompasses what Standing (2011, p. 11) labels the new dangerous class in society: "the precariat", whose members lack long-term contracts and protection against loss of employment, experience ongoing job insecurity and receive only precarious income.

For the purposes of this paper, the definition of "quality" is taken from Harvey and Green (1993, p. 11): that which "can be viewed as *exceptional*, as *perfection* (or consistency), as *fitness for purpose*, as *value for money* and as *transformative*" (original italics). The key focus will be on "fitness for purpose", which is related to whether the education (in this case, that provided to international students within the PHEP pathway program) is achieving what is intended (successful preparation of those students for mainstream university). The institutional role in terms of "quality" will be considered in relation to institutional values as elucidated in the Teaching and Learning Quality Indicators Project in Australia (Chalmers 2008).

Looking at the wider context of higher education, especially in the Anglosphere (UK, North America, Canada, Australia, New Zealand), MacFarlane (2011a, 2011b, 2015, 2016) has investigated the consequences of factors affecting academics' identities and roles. These include the massification of education, increasingly diverse student populations, a greater role for technology in education, increasing use of contract/sessional academics, the rise of the performativity culture and the blurring of the distinction between academic and administrative roles. Based on extensive literature, MacFarlane (2011b) asserts that the role of the academic has been "hollowed out" due to excessive fragmentation. He notes that against the background of a performativity culture (2015), where academic performance (both for staff and students) is continually judged, the traditional role of an academic, featuring teaching, research and service, has been fragmented by the rise of a class of para-academic specialists (2011b). He claims this is having a deleterious effect on the student experience. In effect, the rise of the contract/casualised/sessional academic demi-monde has diluted academic identity and status, which were closely related to research and scholarly activities. Despite efforts to improve the status of teaching, the bifurcation between the (high-status) academic researcher and the (lower-status) academic teacher is as robust as ever (MacFarlane 2011a), even in the differentiation between "pedagogic" research (concerned with teaching and learning) in favour of "subject-based" research, which is perceived as "serious, scholarly and well-respected" (p.127).

While numerous studies (including Coates, Dobson, Goedegebuure & Meek 2009; Kimber 2010; Lama & Joullié 2015; Crawford & Germov 2015) have looked at the casualisation of academics in higher education, this has generally been within universities. There is a paucity of research on the casualisation of academics within private higher-education pathway providers and how this (and other factors related to a highly commercialised educational context) affect the nature of the teaching and learning experience. This paper presents a selected case study of one such organisation, offering insights into academics' experiences, and suggests implications for the quality of education offered to international students.

Theoretical framework

Academic identity is undergoing "continual reconstruction within a complex environment" (Billot 2010, p.711), particularly with the development of the "enterprise university" model (Marginson & Considine 2000), which has dramatically reshaped the university into a corporate institution. Henkel (2005, p.155) recalls the historical continuity of academic identity for most of the 20th century, when "it was plausible to think of academics as members of interconnected communities, notably disciplines and higher education institutions, which afforded them stable and legitimising identities". Building on this notion of interconnected communities as a way of defining academic identity, the current study applies the theoretical framework of social identity theory based on seminal work by Tajfel (1974) and Tajfel and Turner (1979). This theory provides a perspective on the collective self and the role of groups and group processes that aim to maintain a positive social identity. This positive distinctiveness is based on differentiation between the favoured in-group and any outgroups, implying an evaluation of one's own group in comparison with others and thereby generating a meaningful identity for the in-group members. This theory has enjoyed widespread acceptance in various disciplines, including education. Henkel (2005), for example, claims that academic identities are both distinctive and socially embedded, and emphasises that these identities are "shaped and reinforced in and by strong and stable communities and the social

processes generated within them” (p.157). Taylor (1989) labels such a community a *defining* one, and emphasises the centrality of “values” to identity formation within this perspective. He further writes that an associated moral framework includes dimensions such as obligation to others and fulfilment or meaningfulness, as well as notions of dignity, respect and self-esteem.

This paper uses Briggs’s (2007) model of professional identity, which he asserts is composed of three key aspects: professional values (those that one professes); professional location (the actual profession to which one belongs) and the professional role (one’s role within the institution). Thus, the concept of the “community” as central to identity formation is one that still holds sway (Quigley 2011).

However much academics have a professional identity, it is fair to claim that this is of a very particular kind, as it differs markedly from the roles undertaken by other professionals in that the main work of academics is teaching (Harris 2005). Key to academic identity is the relationship between teacher and students. This key relationship with students uniquely identifies academics and directly affects successful pedagogy. Naidoo (2016, p.39) claims that “marketisation of higher education and the reconceptualisation of students as consumers is expected to impact on universities by altering the rewards and sanctions traditionally operating in higher education and changing behaviour”. In particular, she specifies that “the pedagogic relationship is construed into one that is dependent on the market transaction of the commodity” (p.41), with students being consumers of services and the lecturers being commodity producers. She finds this gravely concerning because it bypasses “the fundamental importance of the relational and collaborative aspects of learning and teaching, including a high level of trust” (p.41). Similarly, White (2016, p.93) upholds the ethos that “academics carry legitimate authority and therefore necessarily hold more power than students” based on the moral dimensions of authority, trust and commitments. He contends that the marketisation of higher education has diluted this ethos.

The other key challenge for academics in this commercialised educational environment is that academic communities are experiencing transformation in their values and ethos. If social identity theory promotes (academic) communities as sources of support for an authentic identity, then what are the consequences for this relationship when casualised academics (at PHEP) must compete with each other for classes for their professional survival in “the new culture of competitive performativity” (Ball 2003, p.219)? When academics seek support and professional resonance within their community, this can potentially lead to conflicted identities when alignment to the community standards and ethos can jeopardise career prospects.

Method

This paper is part of an extended case-study project using student surveys, student focus groups, teacher interviews and document analysis to examine the academic identities of international students and their teachers in a pathway program. The teacher interviews represent an initial exploration of the perceptions of academics working in one such pathway provider. One-on-one interviews were conducted with 10 current and former PHEP teachers. Drawing on social identity theory, the questions addressed the teachers’ academic identities, professional esteem and shared values, as well as the extent to which they felt a sense of belonging to PHEP and Met_U. They were asked directly about the impact of the partnership between PHEP and Met_U on teaching and learning staff working in areas affected by this partnership.

The teachers were encouraged to be as open as possible and explore any aspects of their experience at PHEP that had been significant for them. Most of the teachers had spent several terms (from four to 14 years) teaching diploma courses at PHEP; these courses were for-credit, first-year units (identical to those at Met_U) that prepared international students for second-year entry into the mainstream university. The teachers are identified as T1, T2 etc. Of the 10, eight were females and two were males. They taught a cross-section of diploma units, including English-language units, business units and culture and media units.

A thematic analysis was generated using the qualitative data from the teacher interviews. Key themes were identified via the iterative reading of the transcripts, coded line by line and crosschecked for reliability with the research participants.

Results, discussion and implications

Based on participants' reported perceptions and experiences, the findings demonstrate the potential impact on learning and teaching of a casualised academic workforce at a third-party provider for international students. The corporate framework and entrenched commercial ethos of the third-party provider seemed to pervade every aspect of teaching and learning, leading to ongoing friction between the pathway provider and the university, marginalisation of academics by both PHEP and Met_U, and fractured teacher/student dynamics that jeopardised the authority and influence of academics to the detriment of teaching and learning.

Casualisation of teaching staff

One of the key ways in which the corporatisation of PHEP manifested itself was in the employment structure. Kimber (2003) labels employment status at universities as being bifurcated into the "tenured core" and the "tenuous periphery". At PHEP the status quo for *all* academics was as the "tenuous periphery" (namely, casual employees). This was in direct contrast to the full-time employment of PHEP administrators (T8). Hence, the division was not between different types of academic status, but between one's status as either an administrator ("core") or academic ("periphery"). As noted by MacFarlane (2011b), this scenario within an academic context stressing performativity also resulted in academics being devalued because of their "hollowed out" role as teachers without recognition of the research component of academic identity.

According to participants in this research (T1/T/T8), demand (in terms of student enrolments) and/or whether a teacher was in favour with those in authority determined how many classes teachers were allocated. All academics on the teaching staff, without exception, were on three-month contracts, each PHEP term being 13 weeks, with three terms per year (T1 to T10). Towards the end of each term, teachers reported being extremely anxious and vying for re-employment (T1/T8/T10), a scenario not unusual in a casualised academic environment (Lama & Joullié 2015). As allocation of classes was based on enrolments, teachers could never be sure they would be allocated sufficient classes to earn a reasonable income (T1).

Often a class was cancelled, so it was not uncommon for a teacher to turn up in the first week to find that the class had been cancelled! A very stressful situation. (T1)

On one occasion, my class of 25 had magically expanded to 30 rather than the institute creating another class, presumably to be cost-effective. This was strange since PHEP

advertised small classes as being one of the advantages for international students, so they would receive more personalised teaching. (T8)

A succession of tri-monthly contracts was the optimum outcome to which PHEP teachers could aspire (T8). Collinson (2004) describes such tenuous employment prospects as part of a suite of disadvantages suffered by casualised staff, including poor salary structure, limited (if any) holiday and sickness entitlements and serious handicaps regarding career progression, with few being able to achieve promotion to better pay grades.

Teachers at PHEP reported that sick leave and holiday pay were non-existent:

Since income is dependent on the hours a teacher was given, the work life was always full of uncertainty. This level of uncertainty can affect one's health as it was important that you did not become unwell, as there was no sick pay or holiday pay. (T1)

One senior administrator adopted a particularly draconian approach to absenteeism, and emailed a "name and shame" spreadsheet to teachers, pointing out how much time each had been absent over several terms. Most teachers were horrified at this strategy and quite insulted; e.g. one teacher was obliged to be away for a few weeks due to her teenage daughter undergoing major surgery. (T8)

MacFarlane (2015) claims that the prevalence of presenteeism – employees feeling obliged to work longer hours than those for which they are officially paid – as a feature of the modern workplace including academia, even in instances where employees are ill. He links this with the rise of the performativity culture (2011b), where employees feel pressured to continuously *appear* to be performing satisfactorily for fear of jeopardising their future employment.

Likewise, little protection was in place to enable academics to challenge these conditions:

It is notable that PHEP, in its contracts, insisted that it had no professional relationship with the academics' union and therefore was not beholden to them or was in any way obliged to factor in any strike action on the part of academics. The union was simply not recognised. While I did join, I felt it was best to keep this a secret from PHEP management, fearing negative repercussions re employment should they find out. (T8)

Part of the PHEP contract was that even though there was a union for teachers, and even if we were union members, we were bound by contract to work and could not take part in any union activity, such as "strike actions" for fairer or better conditions. (T1)

In essence, those who continued to teach at PHEP described becoming habituated to being in a unsupportive environment as a tradeoff for generating income. One respondent remarked that the best thing about PHEP was "being paid on time" (T4) while another summarised the environment and the consequences for one's ethical well-being:

All in all, it was a very particular type of work environment and you had to be very hardy to survive when many didn't. If you were unable to deal with the flack and spin doctoring from management like water off a duck's back and took everything to heart, you were doomed! The ones that survived to work there for several years were the ones that had devised a strategy to not be overly affected emotionally by all that was happening,

especially things that were blatantly unethical – you had to park your ethics under the doormat before entering the establishment! (T8)

One respondent said:

The casualisation of teaching is a consequence of this late capitalism which entails no long-term commitments, [as well as] instability and insecurity, leading to mistrust, absence of solidarity and even competition between teachers. (T7)

In their examination of the implications of casualisation in higher education, Savage and Pollard (2016) note a series of negative consequences, including compromised professional identity, risks to the quality of students' learning experiences and compromised university-wide teaching and learning programs. Another longer-term concern is the increasing potential for more highly qualified academics who rely on insecure casual employment (and all the accompanying negative professional and personal aspects) to make the decision to look for more stable employment outside academia (Barcan 2017; Bexley, Arkoudis & James 2013). This was the case for T6, who accepted full-time employment in education administration. Higher education risks losing many experienced professionals who take invaluable knowledge with them (Cahir, McNeill, Bosanquet & Jacenyik-Trawöger 2014). The consequences are longer-term, in particular jeopardising the implementation of effective change within educational institutions (Cahir, McNeill, Bosanquet & Jacenyik-Trawöger 2014). Meanwhile, as the experiences of academic staff in this study illustrate, those academics who do persevere may risk burnout as they try to cope with fractured employment in multiple workplaces (T1/T8).

Student/teacher dynamics

In this case study, the situation of international students paying a substantial amount of money to study at PHEP, and PHEP valuing them as “customers” that had to be kept happy, resulted in distorted student/teacher dynamics:

As PHEP and Met_U had a business relationship, the impact on the educators within that organisation was very much one of constantly reminding us that the "students" were not to be treated as students, but rather as customers, consistent with the model of a business [respondent's emphasis]. (T2)

The fundamental driver in the privatisation of services is money and, indirectly, pass rates as companies are aware that student satisfaction depends on their pass rates. The presence on social media of students constantly rating the institution means that the customer is always right, so new students do that much research before enrolment. We see this reflected in pass rates, where the student is always right irrespective of their response in examinations. (T5)

Such perceptions align with research into universities' transformation of higher education into a “marketplace and university education as a marketable service”, effectively privileging the student (customer/buyer/consumer) in an effort to gain competitive advantage (Brown & Mazzarol 2009, p.91). Woodall, Hiller and Resnick (2014), in their research into the student-as-customer phenomenon, warn how concerning this is to higher education, especially as “the sense that marketing, and the customer metaphor, marginalise and trivialise core academic principles is never far away” (p.51).

Based on the respondents' comments, it appears that one of the key challenges for PHEP academics was the difference between the nature of international students' qualifications that PHEP is prepared to accept for enrolment purposes and their actual ability. PHEP academics reported being faced with the prospect of having their employment jeopardised if ill-prepared students perform poorly or even fail their units. This relates directly to the hardcore commercial imperatives (attracting as many students/customers as possible) espoused by the PHEP institution, and to which the administrators (directly and/or indirectly) held teachers (rather than students) accountable.

A recent Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC) report (2015), "Learning the hard way: Managing corruption risks associated with international students at universities in NSW", clearly identifies that this tension is now widespread within a corporatised higher-education system:

There is pressure for some international students to pass courses that are beyond their academic capabilities, pressure on the staff within universities in NSW to find ways to pass students in order to preserve budgets, and pressure created by an increasingly competitive market that makes recruitment targets difficult to meet (p.4).

Additionally, the ICAC report highlights other negative side-effects of this capability gap: increased plagiarism, exam cheating and reliance on contract cheating, all of which pose challenges to academic integrity. A recent paper on contract cheating (Kaktiņš 2018) explores the dimensions of this particular aspect of academic misconduct, especially in relation to international students within the Australian context.

Participants in the current study reported pressure to "adjust" students' assignment marks:

Students were also given more consideration than the tutors, particularly when students challenged results; therefore staff experienced a good deal of stress in relation to assessments and integrity in marking. (T9)

PHEP encouraged us to pass students despite blatant evidence of plagiarism. (T7)

....when students were flagged by lecturers at PHEP [for] having plagiarised and copious evidence produced, lecturers were not believed and they were treated dismissively and as if they were persecuting and targeting international students. The lecturer was considered a problem, not the student. This was frustrating and nugatory and showed there was no professional trust in PHEP staff. (T6)

At a time when universities are particularly anxious to curb breaches of academic integrity, not least to avoid the reputational fallout (Brimble & Stevenson-Clarke 2005; Brimble & Stevenson-Clarke 2006), PHEP's less-than-robust approach to plagiarism and ghostwriting, which has become a greater concern in more recent years (T8), rendered a disservice to students who might well approach their studies at Met_U with similar unrealistic expectations. In this regard, the "fitness for purpose" requirement as part of a definition of quality (Harvey & Green 1993) was far from evident.

"Quality" measures of teaching at PHEP were limited:

...a teacher would be at the mercy of what students wrote in surveys and [the teachers'] work depended on receiving favourable reviews. (T1)

This over-reliance on student input shifted the emphasis from developmental evaluations to performance-based (T10). Respondents (T1/T8) noted that on one occasion new students (who had not previously studied at PHEP) were made to undertake a student-satisfaction survey of the previous term's units just to make up the numbers that PHEP required.

Participants reported that many pedagogical concerns were dismissed due to commercial imperatives:

When teachers suggested to management that more English support classes were needed for the lower-level students, management's response was that this had to be approved by the marketing team! In other words, if the customers did not like it, PHEP was not going to promote it! (T8)

Marketing constantly sought to boost enrolments irrespective of academic or language level. The knowledge that enrolments meant income (and not graduations) created a drive to enrol. (T5)

It is the marketing team that directed the policy of which students would be accepted for courses. Although it was well known that students with low literacy levels would have other students take their IELTS exam for them, there was never a test given to the student when entering PHEP. In fact, this was discouraged by the marketing team. Their one goal was to get "bums on seats". (T1)

These quotes support MacFarlane's (2015) contention that a commercialised performativity culture in higher education affects both students and staff. University teachers (like those at PHEP) are being continuously scrutinised for performance due to student evaluation questionnaires and other indicators, a situation viewed negatively by those who are targeted. "Teacher performativity is widely characterised as an unwarranted assault on the professionalism and autonomy of academics" (MacFarlane 2015, p.338), as well as a source of resentment due to increased workloads relating to audits and self-reporting procedures. MacFarlane (2016) claims that similar demands are made of students, leading them to value certain aspects such as regular attendance over genuine effort, as noted below.

When there are students who consider themselves customers, their belief is that having paid so much money to study at PHEP, their very presence in class should be rewarded with a pass. (T1)

In a business relationship, the "customer is always right" approach is a default setting. However, treating these 18- to 25-year-old overseas students as customers gave them the power to judge a teacher's effectiveness by overseas standards, which usually entailed: "I spent my time in the class, I should pass". Often this was in spite of attendance, punctuality or any culturally appropriate example of effort having been applied by the student to the course work or demonstration of achieving the learning outcomes of the courses designed. (T2)

While T2 attributes such attitudes to “overseas standards”, it could also have been due to the reinforcement such students received from the PHEP environment and the performativity ethos projected.

Marginalisation of teachers by PHEP

Despite ongoing pronouncements (for example, in workshops and other gatherings) by senior management of the invaluable work done by the PHEP teachers and how indispensable they were to the organisation (T8), teachers reported feeling marginalised. For example, a locked door in the teachers’ staff room meant that while PHEP administrators could access teachers whenever they chose, this did not apply the other way; teachers saw this as “a physical demarcation of territory” (T1/T8). Separate toilet facilities were available for the exclusive use of administrators, while teachers were expected to share facilities with the students: “When teachers questioned this, they were told they *did* have their own facilities – the disabled toilets!” (T8). Despite repeated and longstanding requests from teachers, management refused to grant teachers institutional email accounts (T1/T8). Likewise, the refusal by administrators to allow teachers to use the institutional letterhead to write references that students had requested (to gain casual employment) was seen as petty and demeaning (T4).

Teachers in this exclusively casualised academic work environment described existing in a precarious “no-man’s land” (T1) and feeling powerless and vulnerable, as their every move was scrutinised (T6/T8/T9) for adherence to the institutional ethos. Punishment (such as being underemployed or denied re-employment entirely) could be swift (T9). One respondent even claimed that bullying was a key method used by PHEP administrators to compel unit convenors to inflate the pass rate (T5). One respondent also reported:

...coercion on the part of the student for the teacher to pass them. This could even result in a classroom confrontation between a student and a teacher. (T1)

As one teacher summarised the situation:

There were difficulties in achieving the required unit and learning outcomes expected in Met_U units [which were offered in PHEP’s diploma course as a way for students to gain credit points towards a Met_U degree]. PHEP’s student cohort’s entry was (obviously) lower than that of the Met_U students; however, the expectation (by PHEP) was that they would...achieve the learning outcomes required in the units. The level of expectation...often exceeded student capability. (T9)

Another expressed it succinctly:

There were only so many sows’ ears we [the teachers] could turn into silk purses! (T8)

Lama and Joullié (2015) observed the casualised academics in their study being prone to similar pressures. The ethical implications are substantial, in that qualified and experienced educational administrators in pathway programs are, in reality, rendering a great disservice to the students in their care by effectively offering them “false hope” (Redden 2014).

Despite the less-than-supportive environment created by PHEP management, the teachers themselves formed strong alliances to support each other academically, professionally and even personally. The “us-against-them” divide solidified this alliance and created a camaraderie based on teachers’ loyalty and commitment to their students and their chosen profession:

Interestingly, regardless of how we were treated by management, we were all sufficiently dedicated to always try to make the learning experience for students a meaningful and constructive one! (T8)

Bosanquet, Mailey, Matthews and Lodge (2017) found a similar phenomenon when interviewing early-career researchers, whose passion and dedication to academic work enabled them to cope with the challenges inherent in their professional situation. Nevertheless, collegiality became strained as PHEP academics (teaching similar units) had to invariably compete with each other for classes at the end of each term (T7).

Marginalisation of teachers by Met_U

PHEP teachers perceived themselves as being marginalised not only by PHEP management but also by the partner university. There was a prevailing attitude that Met_U academics had negative perceptions of both the PHEP students and the PHEP academics.

Prior to PHEP, I worked in one of the Met_U departments, and each time there was an examination meeting, many academics would invariably complain about the low level of PHEP students that they had encountered in their units. (T8)

Being a PHEP lecturer was like being a whipping boy where both sides could blame you for whatever displeased them, and justify it because you were not considered their equal. PHEP was treated by many Met_U lecturers as a "Mickey Mouse" outfit and therefore devoid of intellectual rigour. Applying for other work at Met_U was met with barriers because of this attitude, and even when the PHEP lecturers had superior qualifications to the Met_U lecturers, the PHEP staff member was still considered inferior and lacking sound professional status. (T6)

There was also a perception (from some faculties at Met_U – not all) that any tutor who worked at PHEP was not a “quality” tutor. What I really mean to say here is that the tutors at PHEP often weren’t respected by Met_U – this was primarily because of the perceived unethical practices at PHEP...associated with the inflated pass rates. (T9)

The semi-autonomous role in which teachers operated within a classroom meant that they were motivated to find ways to inspire and teach students to bypass the corporate approach taken by management. Both individually and collectively (where they taught similar units), teachers devised specific teaching strategies to accommodate the particular needs of international students. The full extent of this was neither acknowledged nor appreciated by PHEP, or indeed Met_U:

Students sometimes struggled with the content of diploma courses in terms of a lack of cultural understanding and familiarity, so it was imperative that the PHEP lecturers find appropriate equivalent examples that “spoke” to the predominantly Mainland Chinese students. This skill was never acknowledged either by Met_U or PHEP, in that PHEP lecturers had to understand their cohort and adjust content that was appropriate for maximum clarity of course content. (T6)

Barcan (2017) notes that while the level of discontent and angst among academics is often equated to similar challenges in other jobs and professions, she also adds a caveat that places the plight of academics in a context that directly affects their ability to exercise their chosen profession:

....academic professional discontent matters because the university is an institution like no other. Its crucial role in producing and reproducing knowledge, educating and training people of all ages and serving society more generally means that the well-being and creative potential of its core workers should concern everyone (p.11).

That this rarely happened at PHEP attests to the distortion brought about by the entrenched corporatisation of this particular pathway provider.

An uneasy alliance and a necessary evil

Despite the significance of the relationship between PHEP and Met_U, participants reported that interactions between the two entities were at best uneasy, and at worse hostile. One of the principal causes was the ongoing friction between PHEP's goal of maximising the pass rate versus Met_U's goal of certain academic standards being met. One of the most common complaints from respondents was PHEP's habitual acceptance of international students whose academic and/or English-language standards were substantially below par (T1/T2/T3/T5/T6/T7/T8/):

....we began to see students in diploma courses [whereby students gained credit points toward their mainstream Met_U degrees] who just did not have sufficient English language to understand what the teacher was saying in class and required [same-country] classmates to translate for them. (T1)

Standards were not encouraged to be met, and in the interest of "more customers equals more tuition fees equals more income for the business", the standards for accepting the students constantly dropped over the six years I was teaching for PHEP. (T2)

The situation prevailed that the PHEP teacher was always torn between dealing with a very demanding and academically oriented syllabus and trying to coax along sub-standard students....who had very little comprehension, if any, of the text being used. (T3)

This led one respondent to remark that "Met_U staff must have thought all the teaching and learning staff at PHEP were asleep at the wheel from an educational standpoint" (T2), with the blame being misdirected at the teachers rather than managerial policy or culture.

Within this negative environment, it is unsurprising that on occasions when PHEP teachers met with Met_U academics/convenors, the outcomes could be less than productive.

The couple of meetings which I attended when Met_U dept staff came to talk to the PHEP teachers were conducted in an unpleasant, unproductive and unprofessional manner by the Met_U staff, who dismissed our concerns, were not interested to hear them and imposed their agenda on the meeting in a total display of we-know-better-than-you dominance. In the second meeting, the new coordinator from Met_U told us how she wanted things done, and any suggestions to the contrary were dismissed without discussion. (T3)

The outcome of this one-sided relationship [with Met-U] was that PHEP teaching staff felt somewhat unappreciated and powerless to improve the teaching and learning of their students. (T3)

It appeared that some Met_U moderators may have indeed considered PHEP as a “necessary evil” and responded in a manner that was, at least in some instances, not merely inappropriate but draconian and discriminatory. One respondent noted that a colleague teaching units in which high literacy standards were expected had experienced deflation of grades across the unit by Met_U moderators (even when the original grades were fully justified) simply on the basis of these students being international (T8). The same respondent noted that eventually that same colleague chose to leave PHEP in protest against such compromised ethics.

The unethical environment prompted one respondent (T7) to quote from Richard Sennet that “short-term capitalism threatens to corrode character, particularly those principles of character which bind human beings to one another and furnishe each with a sustainable self”. Her final comment is telling: -“I believe my character was being ‘corroded’ in that environment” (T7).

Academic identity

Relating the findings to the theoretical framework, it seems that social identity theory is being challenged on many fronts in the space occupied by the third-party provider/partner university relationship. It appears that the *natural* community to which the sessional academics working at PHEP would belong – the academic community of Met_U – is one that has marginalised them, and, at worst, rejected them outright. The many comments from respondents indicated the low professional esteem in which they were held by Met_U counterparts. At the same time, PHEP management was not only pressuring its sessional teachers to deliver unreasonable results but jeopardising their continued employment for non-delivery. Within this risky environment, the teachers existed in a separate *satellite* community in order to adhere, at least partly, to Taylor’s principles related to a moral framework; for example, obligation to others (other teachers and one’s students):

Working at PHEP meant working in an unethical environment (high fees for students who were incapable), thereby compromising my own moral standards in a very deep sense.
(T7)

These interviews revealed that PHEP academics’ professional values often appeared to be in direct conflict with their professional role within the institution. Academic professional identity crucially depends on having a respected place in the academic community. In this instance, the multiple communities, including PHEP and Met_U, to which teachers should rightfully belong denied them authentic membership.

Spears (2011) suggests various strategies within social identity theory to take a more activist role; for example, in bridging the divide between the PHEP academics (the lower-status group) and the Met_U academics (the higher-status group). However, achieving a more positive status by achieving greater *rapprochement* may not be realistic for the PHEP academics, especially as many of the issues are directly related to PHEP management policy (e.g. enrolling lower-level students) and, therefore, beyond their control. Other strategies, such as reframing themselves using “social creativity” strategies to improve their perceived negative status or engaging in some subtle form of resistance may also have limited potential (Tajfel & Turner 1979). Essentially, the performativity culture at PHEP and the tenuous nature of employment appeared to have made the teachers powerless to take on a more proactive form of resistance while they continued to work there.

Conclusion

This paper is based on a single case study with a limited pool of respondents in a single third-party provider. Further studies need to be undertaken to confirm the findings. The present conclusions may not be generally applicable to other commercial and/or non-commercial pathway providers; however, the in-depth comments by the respondents and the commonality of key themes create a picture of an educational microcosm that may act as a springboard for future investigations in this understudied research area.

The third-party partnership is interesting in that the commercial provider (PHEP) reflects the ramifications of the increasing corporatisation of the higher-education sector generally. Judging by the interview responses this corporate model is contained, to a certain extent, by the professional and vocational dedication of the academic practitioners. Finding a reasonable balance between commercial imperatives and student competencies will be an ongoing challenge. As one respondent remarked, the situation of a highly corporatised educational institution such as PHEP claiming to provide authentic education was a “square peg in a round hole” (T8).

The same limitations may apply to Met_U. It would be naïve to suggest that the forces that have pressured the higher-education sector to morph into “the enterprise university” (Marginson & Considine 2000) and its “curtilage” (e.g. the providers operating on its periphery) have diminished. Reforms may be slow in coming and may well depend on the extent to which university leaders have sufficient courage and vision to initiate constructive change.

A crucial question is whether quality is achieved via the PHEP-Met_U partnership in terms of “fitness of purpose”. In expanding the notion of “fitness for purpose” as a means of judging quality, Harvey and Green (1993) note that this concept is related to both customer satisfaction and the attitudes of teachers and institutions. They add a serious proviso: “Rather than worry, in the first instance, about meeting customer requirements, quality can be defined in terms of the institution fulfilling its own stated objectives, or mission” (p.19). In the first instance, if a commercial organisation (such as PHEP and its parent company) has commercial imperatives, customer satisfaction is paramount, as noted by most of the respondents. On the other hand, Met_U, in its supervisory capacity over PHEP, has academic priorities related to the international students achieving adequate standards (both scholastically and linguistically) prior to their admission into mainstream Met_U degrees. That this friction was ongoing and intense is obvious from the respondents’ observations. As a consequence, the quality of the entire enterprise was in constant danger.

In essence, PHEP and Met_U had incompatible missions. Such institutional clashes compromise the institutional values set out in the Teaching and Learning Quality Indicators Project in Australia (Chalmers 2008). These values include, *inter alia*, the expectation that learning in a higher-education environment should be active, cooperative and intellectually challenging; that there is trust and openness at all levels; and that equity principles and practices should apply to both students and staff (Chalmers 2008). The marginalisation and exclusion of PHEP teachers (by both PHEP and Met_U) from major decisions violates a number of these key indicators.

Hammond and Churchman (2008) argue for a long-overdue application of the principles of social sustainability – equity, diversity, interconnectedness, democracy and governance and quality of life – to the academic profession, noting that casualised academics have had little opportunity to take advantage of such principles due to their temporary and precarious status. The authors argue

that universities (and by implication other educational institutions) would gain very real and long-term benefits by instigating institutional change. Despite numerous recommendations in the literature drawing attention to the necessity of addressing these fundamental issues and their effect on the nature and quality of academia, it is nevertheless salutary to bear in mind what Ryan, Burgess, Connell and Groen (2013, p.170) pointedly note: “awareness is not action”.

The commercialised setting of this case study can be related directly to many of the challenges experienced by the academics employed there. In this case study, the unrealistic demands made of the casualised academics to ensure a successful commercial outcome in terms of international students’ solid pass rates has widespread ramifications for the the academics’ relationship with their own employer as well as the partner university. Additionally, the academics’ precarious employment status at PHEP can lead to conflict with members of their “natural” community of fellow PHEP academics as they compete for re-employment on a regular basis. All these factors appear to negatively affect the delivery of education to international students, not in terms of the teachers’ commitment, but in the insidious manner in which those students may be misled and denied an authentic higher-education experience in the interests of PHEP’s commercial imperatives. A dramatic side-effect is the potential fracturing of the teachers’ academic identity.

Third-party-university collaborations, such as the one described in this case study, have emerged as a result of specific pressures in the educational landscape, particularly reduced government funding of universities, which have been forced to seek alternative means to generate income. There is little to suggest that these pressures will be mitigated in the near future. The emerging question of quality assurance might be addressed more successfully by the university taking a more commanding, but also more respectful, role in the oversight of the pathway institutions’ educational delivery. This implies that the collaboration should be more intense and interactive than that found in the current case study. A change in culture and governance instigated at the highest levels is required before more-constructive pedagogical changes can be implemented within and between both entities.

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