

Theme: Compassion, collegiality and communities in higher education: challenging the discourse.

Research Domain: Management, leadership, governance and quality

Paper Title: Teachers and Nurses in New Zealand: The Harms from Stakeholder Capitalism

Abstract

This paper questions the premise of this conference theme - highlighting the negative impact of stakeholder capitalism on academic practice, work, careers and cultures (Edgington, 2023). Academics, students, professional service staff and leaders are complicit in accepting and repeating specific discourses, simultaneously silencing dissent (Martin, 1999; McCrabb et al., 2021; Shir-Raz et al., 2022). These powerful forces prevent compassion, collegiality and communities in higher education, creating instead a toxic university (Fleming, 2021; Smyth, 2017). In turn, this impacts on graduates' workplaces, where bullying and discrimination have been normalised for educationalists, healthcare professionals and others.

Set in the context of the covid era in New Zealand, an anonymous, mixed-methods online survey was sent to teachers and nurses whose employment was terminated due to the Covid19 Vaccination Order ('mandates'). Participants (n=282) were highly qualified. Research outcomes provide evidence of how elements of stakeholder capitalism, including propaganda, censorship and conflicts of interest, prohibits compassion, collegiality and communities in academic workplace culture and beyond.

Context

For over three decades, Critical University Studies literature has recorded the demise of professional and national identities, and the reduction in integrity and relevance for the university as the 'critic and conscience of society'. For example, in 1997, Readings wrote:

“It is no longer clear what role the university plays in society. The structure of the contemporary university is changing rapidly, and we have **yet to understand what precisely these changes will mean**. Is a new age dawning for the university, the renaissance of higher education under way? Or is the university in ***the twilight of its social function***, the demise of higher education fast approaching?” (Readings, 1997) (my emphasis)

What we understand now about those changes is that the nation-state is in decline and national culture is no longer perceived to be promoted or protected by universities. Furthermore, because of policy changes, instead of students' fees and academic outputs, universities' main stakeholders are now commercial entities (Ball & Youdell, 2008). New public, private, philanthropic partnerships (PPPPs) have formed, and the concepts of knowledge and culture, replaced. Ideologies are now driven by discourses seeking profitable outcomes from corporations manipulating market forces (Attkisson, 2015; Foot, 2004; Taplin, 2017). Smyth (2017) highlighted the negative impact of stakeholder capitalism on academic freedoms, free speech more generally, and even common sense. However, despite a plethora of research, awareness of the mechanisms of this fundamental shift in academia seems limited, surprisingly even within expert groups (e.g. Academics for Academic Freedom, 2025). Research investigating the links between stakeholder capitalism and its impact on individuals is absent, being itself subjected to the 'Corporate Playbook' (McCrabb et al., 2021). It is argued that regulatory capture of academia contributed significantly to unprecedented public policies like lockdowns and vaccine mandates during the covid era (Hughes, 2024). This research therefore offers a unique contribution to knowledge, specifically the experiences of those who suffered censorship, discrimination and exclusion as a result of the 'covid cover-up' (Martin, 2025).

Methodology

In March 2025, two online surveys collected anonymous views and experiences of members from support groups for teachers and nurses in New Zealand (NZ) whose employment contracts were terminated due to the Covid Vaccination Order (mandate) of November 2021. Members of NZ Teachers Speaking Out with Science (NZTSOS) and The Nurses Collective NZ (approx. 3000 individuals), were asked to share their lived experiences during and since the mandate. Responses were received from approx. 10% (n=282). Research ethics approval was approved by the Aotearoa Independent Research Ethics Committee. The surveys included multiple-choice options and free-text responses. Using a narrative analysis a thematic approach was used to tease out the repeated concerns, experiences and aspirations from the participants' responses.

Findings

The quantitative outcomes confirmed most participants were educated to postgraduate level and above and benefitted from over twenty years' work experience. These staff were dependent upon and closely involved with academic research and evidence-based practice. The narrative analysis identified broad themes, including emotional and physical harms; legal and financial issues; propaganda and censorship; role models and relationships; wasted expertise; unprofessional behaviour and resilience in adversity. The evidence within these themes included extreme trauma suffered by participants because of the mandates. This underscores the ways in which compassion, collegiality and communities did not exist in these toxic workplace environments. In particular, the discrimination, prejudice and censorship, silenced the voices of these highly qualified professionals and even blacklisted them from future employment opportunities when mandates were lifted.

These workplaces, which included clinics, hospitals, schools and colleges are closely interconnected with academia and cooperation and respect are essential for meaningful research outcomes. If compassion, collegiality and communities can even begin to have a firm foundation, significant issues need to be urgently addressed. Specifically, a wider awareness is needed of the harms of stakeholder capitalism. Universities control the narrative, and unethically 'nudge' public behaviour, censor dissenting voices and promote profitable commercial messaging (Dolan et al., 2010). Only when these strategies are recognised and understood, can they be stopped.

Recommendations are proposed from the research findings that could contribute to a transformation of these workplaces, towards an environment of compassionate collegiality. Firstly, a formal Government apology needs to be published for all staff negatively impacted by the mandates. A formal non-discriminatory policy should safeguard future risks of discrimination. A comprehensive, independent review is required of the role of universities and PPPPs in public policy. In conclusion, only when stakeholder capitalism is challenged can the rights of individuals to freedom of thought, speech, opinion, conscience and religion be prioritised.

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