

# A career in activism

## A reflective narrative of university governance and unionism

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This paper examines what it means to be an activist and to do activist work in the Australian contemporary university. In a context of globalisation, massification and marketisation, what does academic or scholar activism look like? In a time of political uncertainty about fee deregulation, further cuts to public funding and changes to the income-contingent loans scheme, what does it mean to be an activist or to do activist work? And what happens when activist attention turns to the higher education sector and the operations of the university? This paper examines these broad questions at an intimate level, presenting a reflective narrative of an individual career in academic activism marked by a long-standing scholarly interest in the nature and work of universities, academic and professional roles, teaching experience in multiple disciplines and involvement in union representation. In this paper, the reflections of an individual academic activist, Rosie, are embedded in a contextual discussion of university governance, regulatory and auditing frameworks, the academic workforce, gender inequality, and learning and teaching in higher education in Australia.

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This paper examines what it means to be an activist and to do activist work in the contemporary university. It takes as its context the big picture trends of neoliberalism in Australian and international higher education over the last three decades: globalisation, massification and marketisation. The extent to which these factors are causes or consequences of each other is arguable, but makes little difference to their observable impact on what is now the 'business' of higher education.

Massification refers to the global phenomenon of increasing participation in higher education. Australian higher education is now a mass participation system (30-50 per cent of the school-leaver age cohort enrolled in higher education) and may move into high participation status (>50 per cent enrolled) in the near future (Marginson, 2015). On its own, massification should lead to greater demand for academic staff and opportunities for continuing employment. But at the same time, governments have systematically withdrawn per-student public funding from universities, substituting secure base

funding with contestable funding reliant on market-like competitive mechanisms. This marketisation reorients higher education towards competitive markets on local, national, regional and global scales. It is largely the result of public policy underpinned by an assumption that market or quasi-market mechanisms are effective tools for the efficient regulation of higher education (Meek, 2000). Simultaneously, the increased global mobility of information, finance and people, and the formalisation of regional trading blocs, removal of trade barriers and establishment of a range of free trade agreements have impacted higher education. These aspects of globalisation have enabled the establishment of global, national and local markets in higher education and provided an opportunity to supplement domestic funding with full-fee-paying international students (Marginson, 2004).

Together the forces of globalisation, massification and marketisation have resulted in a higher education system marked by increased regulation and reporting (Vidovich, 2002) and widespread casualisation of the

academic workforce (May *et al.*, 2011). Casual staff appointments, also known as adjuncts, contingent, non-tenure track and sessionals, now dominate the higher education sector. Increased labour market flexibility is a key feature of the economic ideology underpinning the systemic intersection of globalisation, massification and marketisation. The negative impacts of casualisation for individuals are significant and well documented: multiple jobs; high teaching workloads, limited or no research time, low pay, lack of job security, marginalisation in decision-making, last-minute appointments and minimal professional learning opportunities (Harvey, 2017). The proliferation of terminology to describe casual or sessional employment in higher education is illustrative: 'tenuous periphery' (Kimber, 2003), 'frustrated career' (Gottschalk & McEachern, 2010), 'post-doctoral treadmill' (Edwards *et al.*, 2010) and 'academic aspirants' (May *et al.*, 2011). The related shifts in public policy directions influenced by neoliberalism and 'new public management' principles are felt at all levels of higher education, from macro (national/sectoral) and meso (institutional) to micro (institutional unit and individual).

This paper asks: What does academic or scholar activism look like in this context? In a time of political uncertainty about fee deregulation, further cuts to public funding and changes to the income-contingent loans scheme, what does it mean to be an activist or to do activist work? And, in universities marked by corporate management structures and audit culture, what happens when activist attention turns to the operations of the higher education sector and the organisation itself?

This paper combines personal narrative and political commentary. These broad questions are examined at an intimate level through a rich reflective narrative of an individual career in academic activism embedded in a discussion of university governance, leadership of learning and teaching and the contemporary and historical context of higher education in Australia. Connelly and Clandinin (1990) coined the term 'narrative inquiry' to describe analysis through story-telling. Developed to challenge researcher objectivity, narrative inquiry foregrounds lived experiences of a phenomenon. Jones (2011) utilises narrative to articulate the 'messiness' and multiple layers of academic practice and affect. 'Messy' seems an apt descriptor for the relationship between academic and activist work. We have chosen not to name the individual in this case study as the narrative is not intended to represent a singular story. We use the pseudonym Rosie in a nod to the iconic Rosie the Riveter, who represented women's participation in the workforce during World War

II. This paper demonstrates opportunities to influence change within a values-based conception of academic identity and purpose.

### That little voice that annoys

Rosie's academic and activist career is marked by a scholarly interest in the nature and work of universities, academic and professional roles, teaching experience in multiple disciplines, and involvement in union and political representation. The experience of serving on national policy committees of the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) and participation in local and national advocacy work triggered a particular interest in university governance and the political, social, economic and human factors that impact on the practice and effectiveness of university governing bodies. With experience as an academic in Statistics and Education, her current professional role leads the coordination of internal and external teaching development and quality assurance indicators and analytics across the university. Looking back over fifty years to her childhood, Rosie reflects that her stance on social justice and equity, and her identification as an activist, started in her childhood in the 1960s:

My parents were quite progressive politically and my father had little lessons he'd pronounce every so often. One of them was, you should always do the right thing. He had this very strong sense of justice – and he said, if you see something wrong, you should stand up for it, even if you're the only one. I think this came from his wartime experiences, because he was a child of the Holocaust ... born in Poland. They were Jewish and ended up fleeing Warsaw and ... they ended up in labour camps in Siberia ... I think he saw the rise of fascism as popular scapegoating of a whole group of people. He said there were people who knew it was wrong and lots of people didn't speak up ... My mother ... always said she was politicised when I started school ... She started to think, why are kids being taught this way? What are they being taught? What does it mean? ... She was always very insightful, she's very intelligent and ... she's a thinker ... We were otherwise a fairly traditional family. She was at home caring for kids, my dad went to work ... When I went to high school she decided she would go to university and, thanks to Whitlam's change to make it free, she could go.

Fast forwarding through the post-World War II modernisation of Australian higher education, we encounter the capacity-building agenda of the 1940s and 50s, the establishment of recurrent Federal funding in the late 1950s, formalisation of the binary system (universities and colleges) in the 1960s and the establishment of several new universities to absorb increasing demand

from the baby-boomer generation. Rosie's mother, and subsequently Rosie, started university after the Whitlam Labor Government abolished tuition fees in universities and colleges in 1974. In 1989 student tuition fees were reintroduced, albeit in the form of income-contingent loans to be repaid through the tax system on the student's attainment of a particular income level, the Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS) (Forsyth, 2014). Like her mother, Rosie's nascent activism was fuelled by education during this time:

When I first went to uni (then an Institute of Technology) ... there were a lot of real lefties in there ... It was actually in the middle of ideological warfare in the School. The university had appointed this conservative Professor as the Head of the School to sort it out because it had become a hotbed of radicals. The students, of course, were on the side of the hotbed of radicals and there were mass meetings and strikes and walk-outs and arguments and fights and people throwing things at this guy. It was quite turbulent.

In subsequent studies at another university in her mid-twenties, Rosie became more closely involved in student representation:

In those days, it was a very low distance organisation. You got to know your lecturers quite well if you were involved ... I've got a very good academic record, so I was noticed I guess ... I was a student representative on Academic Senate and [other committees] and supported union strikes and actions and things like that.

Rosie's studies coincided with a period of rapid change in Australian higher education. The 'Dawkins revolution' (named for the Labor education Minister from 1987-1991), post-Dawkins expansion and acceleration during Howard's Prime Ministership (1996-2007), resulted in new challenges for university management and governance, with the rise of multi-campus universities formed through amalgamations of Colleges of Advanced Education, Teachers' Colleges and Institutes of Technology, expansion of student enrolments, a greater level of accountability required by governments, a shift from State to Federal accreditation and regulation, opening up of new markets for education, the (re)introduction of a 'user-pays' model for student contributions and an accompanying decrease in direct Commonwealth funding for universities (Marginson & Considine, 2000; Meek & Wood, 2002; Forsyth, 2014). This era laid the foundations for subsequent higher education policy directions, creating the conditions for massification, growth in international student enrolments, increased reliance on market and performance-based approaches to funding, and the shift from public to private funding sources (the latter being

principally individual students and their families) (Pick, 2006). Recent proposed reforms have focused on fee deregulation for Commonwealth-supported students (to date effectively resisted politically); reduction in the level of funding per student enrolment (with further reductions proposed in the 2017-18 Federal Budget); and the extension of government-subsidised places to private providers and sub-Bachelor awards (Marginson, 2013). Rosie has been active in questioning these reforms and their impacts on universities:

I use the language of higher education management a lot. You'll hear me say some fairly horrific things. It sounds like I'm saying management's horrific things and I'm not, I just play the language game sometimes to make sure I'm heard by people who speak that language... Because of my research and because of my knowledge of the sector ... that comes from the work I did with the union ... I tell people straight about the horribleness of it. But it's speaking truth to power. You've got to do it. These are my small targeted acts of resistance. That's what I do. Just that little voice that annoys everyone ... but also pricks consciences about passive complicity in the neoliberal agenda. There is a neoliberal agenda, but it's not just neoliberalism. There's a rampant individualism that's being encouraged ... That's shifted the way government handles public policy, from handling public policy as a provider of things to handling public policy as a purchaser of services on behalf of the people ... That's been reflected in universities by ... regulatory pressure and continued cuts in funding and the cost shifting of what we do onto students. That turns education into a much more commercial transaction than it's ever been, for both students and the university. Once you're looking at commercial transactions, then you have interests other than the traditional interest in quality education taking over.

As Rosie points out, the accountability and regulatory regimes that Australian universities currently work under are manifold, with an increased emphasis on efficiency, effectiveness, quality and performance of higher education systems and institutions, accompanied by development of metrics, regulatory reporting, quality audits and standards for qualifications, institutional operations (including governance) and (in some disciplines) learning outcomes (Stensaker & Harvey, 2011). Sector-wide, they include the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA), established in 2011 as an independent statutory authority, whose role is to regulate the Australian higher education sector. TEQSA takes a standards-based and risk-proportionate approach to accreditation and audit, using the Higher Education Standards (HES) framework to identify the minimum acceptable institutional conditions, arrangements and levels of performance for the

provision of higher education and for the granting of self-accrediting status (traditionally a defining characteristic of universities) to higher education providers. To date TEQSA has granted full or partial self-accrediting authority (SAA) to only 11 the 123 non-university higher education providers operating in Australia (TEQSA, 2017).

Most broadly, government influence on universities works politically through the mechanism of funding. Standards are also applied through the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) for all formal qualifications in Australia, which ensures learning outcomes and levels of attained skills are consistent across institutions; and the Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA), a metrics-based research evaluation program intended to evaluate the quality of research in Australian higher education institutions and allow for international comparisons. In addition to these, there are also national surveys of students and graduates (employment, course experience, engagement); various professional bodies that accredit or register professional degree programs; and international rankings schemes (Croucher *et al.*, 2013; Marginson, 2013).

These regulatory and competitive pressures on universities are the result of many factors in the intersection of globalisation, massification and marketisation, but also serve to uphold these processes. From 2000, one driver of the approval process for national standards for higher education (now the responsibility of TEQSA with agreement of the States) was to uphold Australian higher education as a 'brand' of high standing and integrity internationally (TEQSA, 2017). This has stood Australia in good stead in the competitive international markets for students and staff. Accountability and regulatory systems operate in this way at the macro and meso levels, and are becoming more apparent at the micro level outcomes (Stensaker & Harvey, 2011). The academic work of individuals, especially research output which is readily quantified, is increasingly subject to the measurement of defined metrics (e.g. specific annual targets for research funding, number of publications and citations, grant income) (Tyler & Wright, 2004). As Burrows (cited in Pereira, 2016) argues, this means that auditing procedures function to 'enact competitive market processes' within the university itself (p. 104). To echo Rosie's words, interests other than quality education dominate at all levels.

### Holding the line

Blomley (1994) defines academic activism in relation to West's concept of 'intellectual vocation', identifying

several categories of activism within and beyond the academy:

The first he terms the oppositional professional intellectual ... [which] directs us to do political work where we are, in the academy, perhaps through critiques of the production of knowledge and the regimes of truth ... A second, related position is that which centres on the building of critical groupings within the academy, using academic resources to build comradely networks, sustaining and nourishing oppositional intellectual communities ... So, what of the academic outside the university? ... First is the position of the professional political intellectual. Here the call is for direct critical intervention by intellectuals in public debate ... Finally, ... the critical organic catalyst [who] ... function[s] inside the academy ... whilst also being grounded outside the academy in progressive organisations (p. 30).

As a representative on university academic governing bodies, a passionate teacher, a union leader and a political party member, Rosie's activism brings together political work within the academy, networking across the sector, and participation in progressive and political organisations outside the university. The descriptor of 'critical organic catalyst' seems appropriate. Shaped by her experiences as an activist across these spheres, Rosie upholds a philosophical and ideological approach to education that values university as a public good:

We are a public good-producing institution operating in ... an increasingly unrestrained market capitalist society worldwide ... Holding the line on the meaning and importance of a public good in that context is increasingly difficult, but ... has never been more important ... It's about maintaining this great institution as a public good ... My activism in university governance stems from ... my intellectual interest in the structures and organisation and politics of it all, and my ... more emotional and ideological commitment to education as a public good, and the value of education – the intrinsic value of it – to a society and to people ... Education, if done well, can make you a better person, I believe. It makes people better, more insightful, more active, more engaged citizens.

The systems of globalisation, massification and marketisation – with their emphasis on regulatory pressure, cuts in funding, cost shifting to students, and commercial interests – work against universities as a public good (Marginson, 2011). In an indication of the tensions and contestations for academic activists, the language Rosie uses to describe graduates – insightful, active, engaged citizens – is the same as that universities emphasise in statements of graduate attributes. Graduate attributes are the skills, capabilities and knowledge universities want students to have achieved by the

completion of their studies. The language of graduate attributes is a complex blend of market-driven and social reform agendas. A synthesis of the graduate attributes literature reveals various conceptions of their purpose: employability, lifelong learning, preparing for an uncertain future, acting for the social good, managing change and community leadership (Winchester-Seeto *et al.*, 2012).

University policies and strategies evoke an uncertain future characterised by rapid technological advancement, climate change, resource constraints, political instability and social surveillance. In order to manage these challenges, graduates require particular capabilities, including the capacity to manage ambiguity, complexity, flexibility and creativity to solve complex problems, underpinned by a commitment to social justice, community service and a preparedness to enact and lead change (Bosanquet,

Winchester-Seeto & Rowe, 2014). Recent research on citizen scholarship reconsiders the purpose of graduate attributes and advances their role in maintaining universities a public good rather than a private benefit. Arvanitakas

and Hornsby (2015) are explicit that citizen scholarship has a critical social mission: 'we believe that a central purpose of higher education is to improve the societies in which we live and foster citizens who can think outside of the box and innovate with the purpose of community betterment' (p. 11). This opens up the possibility for enacting social and political change:

[I am] definitely an emancipist ... There's no point saving the world for the interests of capital. If you don't upset the systems of power and oppression and control, then you're not really going to advance ... I want everyone to go and be a revolutionary in one way or another ... I don't push an ideology, my strategy in teaching is to get [students] to think .... What's good for you? What's good for your family? What's good for your world? What's good for your neighbour? What's good for the society as a whole? What's good for people you never see? ... Our privilege actually comes from someone else's dispossession. Don't ever forget that. You've got a duty. Being educated puts you in debt to society.

Rosie's teaching is driven by a passion for social change. Defining a social reform perspective on teaching, Pratt and Collins (2000) refer to teaching as a collective process that examines values and ideologies implicit in social practices and challenges the status quo. The critical pedagogical role of the teacher is to 'disturb the student's current

epistemological understandings and interpretations of reality by offering new insights' (Skelton, 2005, p. 33). For Rosie, whose teaching focuses on the study of leadership and management in higher education organisations, this means examining the political, social and economic purposes of higher education from multiple perspectives, and asking who is included and excluded from participating. Rosie makes this explicit, starting classes and meetings with an acknowledgement of country, in recognition of the fact that learning at university, and the privilege it bestows on a daily basis and across a lifetime, is the result of the ongoing displacement of the traditional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander owners of this land.

Rosie describes herself as teaching from an emancipatory interest, following Habermas's (1972) theory of knowledge-constitutive interests. An

emancipatory interest strives for empowerment, rational autonomy and freedom, freeing others from 'false ideas, distorted forms of communication and coercive forms of social relationships which constrain human action'

(Kemmis & Fitzclarence, cited in Fraser & Bosanquet, 2006). Teaching is a shared struggle towards emancipation and functions to challenge common understandings and practices, and to enable students and teachers to change the constraints of the (learning) environment. The end result of an emancipatory interest is 'a transformation of consciousness in the way one perceives and acts in the world' (Grundy, cited in Fraser & Bosanquet, 2006). Two aspects of transformative learning have particular application to teaching as activism: consciousness-raising (based on Freire, 1970), where students are encouraged to critically reflect on the world and their part in it; and change in perspective (based on Mezirow, 1991) where students are urged to analyse key assumptions within which their perspectives and world views are constructed. Transformative learning involves notions of empowering students as agents of social change (Winchester-Seeto *et al.*, 2017). In other words, students become insightful, active, engaged citizens – Rosie's 'revolutionaries'.

### A place that used to suit me

In her doctoral thesis, *Activism in the Academy*, Lawless (2012) argues that 'activism is essential to the lifeworld of the university and that universities need activists and their

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activism in order to engage with communities, educate the next generation and generate new knowledge' (p. viii). She identifies the work of numerous academics who have 'persisted in preserving and celebrating [the university's] role in civil society and its lifeworld against the encroachments of neoliberal inspired systemisation of market logics' through their teaching, research and community engagement (p. 54). Rosie recognises this encroachment at a personal level:

Being a student representative on Academic Senate, that's where I learnt a lot about how the university really works. I've always been fascinated with how things work and how education works and I've always been interested in education. I tutored kids younger than me, even when I was at school. I guess as I got older, not just education itself, but the politics of education, what makes it what it is. There was sort of no question in my family that I wouldn't go to university. I mean, it was assumed I would and I have to say it's a place that suits me, or used to suit me. Maybe not so much now.

Rosie learnt about the structures of university governance from within the academic board or Senate. From a political perspective, governance distributes power through organisations. The rules and policies are mechanisms or technologies for distributing power and ensuring accountability for the exercise of power at different levels. Another perspective frames governance as being about value creation, with growing external (i.e. government) expectations of the social and economic value extracted from institutions (Huse, 2007). Governing bodies also have an important cultural role, involving interpretation between different constituencies and stakeholder groups. For the Council, sitting in the contested space that is both 'inside' and 'outside' the university, a key role is explaining the value and work of the university to its external stakeholders, and interpreting the demands of the outside world to its internal constituencies. For the academic board (Senate), the meaning-making occurs particularly between academy and executive, and between parallel structures like faculties, and between the University's constitutive elements – students, staff and Council (Rytmeister & Marshall, 2007).

University governance has changed greatly over the last two decades. In particular, the enterprise imperative (Marginson & Considine, 2000) and the adoption of structures and practices from the commercial corporate world (Bennett 2002; Shattock, 2002) have changed the relationships between the university governing board (Council), executive management (Vice-Chancellor and senior managers of the university) and the academic

board (Senate). The devolution of decision-making from Government to institution, often referred to as 'steering at a distance' (Marginson, 1997; Vidovich, 2002) has increasingly required a separation between the functions of these groups. This separation ensures seemingly contradictory aims are achieved simultaneously: strengthening the university governing board's internal oversight role to support external accountability, as a proxy for direct governmental control of the institution; maintaining internal accountability and control via a corporate management structure; and preserving the academic board as a symbol of the core values of independence and autonomy that define the institution as a university. This is how Rosie describes this in practice:

A good example: the quality indicators [for learning and teaching] we just devised through a working group went to Senate ... All Senate could do, or was empowered to do, was approve the academic worth of using these quality indicators. Operationalising the quality indicators has budgetary implications, because people have to spend money to achieve the outcomes ... and that is not the business of Senate, that's for the University Executive ... Senate used to argue over budget when I first joined as a student rep, but that's now entirely off the agenda... So the nuts and bolts of my activism is often around calling out that pressure, making it explicit. I don't think we can stop it, but I think people on Senate who are making decisions ... should be cognisant of the budget implications of its decisions ... If they can then be completely thrown out because there's a budget contingency, then what's the point? They've got to be meaningful.

This example of Senate's responsibility for the academic worth of quality indicators, but not their budgetary implications, demonstrates how the roles of governance and management in universities are increasingly separate but inter-related action systems, although the boundary between them remains indistinct and subject to contestation (Rytmeister, 2009). It is not only the blurred boundary between governance and management roles that makes attempts to draw distinctions between them somewhat problematic; the language used to delineate these action systems is also imprecise. For example, while the term 'governance' may be used holistically to refer to the entire system of academic administration, inclusive of boards, executive managers, department heads and committees, it is also used more specifically to refer to the function of, and activities undertaken by, the overall university governing board. In the latter case, 'management' activities are seen as the preserve of the Vice-Chancellor and Executive or senior administrative group (Rowlands, 2013).

Over the last two decades, the NTEU, the industry union open to all higher education and university employees, has played a key advocacy role in higher education policy in the areas of regulation and governance, workforce issues, funding, legislation, and the key areas of university work: learning and teaching, research and community service and engagement. The Union's broader objectives include maintaining staff participation in governance, ensuring universities work in the public interest, and defending the principles of academic freedom. Rosie has played a leadership role in these union actions:

I just gradually moved into union work through campaigning and bargaining and being friends with people. I joined the branch committee. I was on the national Women's Action Committee ... I was ... state Assistant Secretary for a term. I was lead bargainer, joint lead bargainer, on the Branch committee all that time, Vice President, and then I became President six and a half years ago. I just stepped down from that six months ago. I was also on the state executive for several terms and the national executive for one ... At Branch level, we ran some really good strike actions ... We had exam result bans and people went out. Some people were out for two weeks and they were taken off the payroll. It was awe-inspiring ... We had around 60 or 70 members off the payroll and they stuck to it ... It was a big action to take. It was very brave and they stuck to it and I was absolutely utterly humbled by it. It was incredible.

Rosie describes how her work with the union contributed to feminist activism:

When we won parental leave ... it was the first time the women of the union really showed their power. It was when it became obvious that we had power at the bargaining conference [the Union's preparation mechanism for collective bargaining]. We'd had an exemplary lead up to it by going through all the state caucuses and coming to women's conferences and developing a claim of parental leave. We had a campaign. We had badges, we had the nappies on the clothes line hanging up ... But we had this campaign and it was running in all the states and everybody – all the branches – all the women were running it... I probably had a calculator, calculating these figures ... I madly calculated what this would cost roughly ... I got up and I said, look, ... I said, it comes to 19 million ... I said, it's peanuts. It's peanuts. I said, divide it by 40 universities. It's trivial. It is 0.05 per cent of the salary budget. Not of the university budget, of the salary budget. It's bugga all... I think it was the first time we'd used the strategy of leading sites with delegation to the national executive to settle the mandatory settlement point for a claim other than pay. I may be wrong about that, but it was a bit of a landmark thing.

Consistent with West's description of the 'critical organic catalyst' (cited in Blomley, 1994), Rosie is politically and socially active beyond the university:

I'd do polling booths at elections, and I did preselection counts and things like that, and I'm on the industrial relations working group of the Greens ... So local group meetings, going to state delegate councils. I've been elected to the Greens political education trust committee, which uses the money that the party gets for public political education. The other thing I do, which is a nice way of combining two things I really love, is sing in two activist choirs, so Ecopella [an environmental choir that sings about the beauty of our world and the struggle to protect it from exploitation and degradation] and Solidarity choir ... Solidarity's original repertoire was largely African songs from the anti-apartheid movement [which] expanded considerably to take in other international struggles for freedom and liberation ... We also sing a lot of union songs ... It's incredibly sustaining ... to be able to go and sing with people about people's struggles for liberation ... It kind of gives you that sense of international solidarity [and] solidarity through time ... What you're singing about is how strong we are in our diversity when we come together and act together. That's exactly what a choir does. You've got four parts, who all sound completely different, and when you sing in harmony it's magic ... You can see why music is really important to social justice movements.

For Rosie, singing in choirs is energising and uplifting, and at times this has sustained her through challenges in her university working life.

### Don't give up

Academic activism is often seen to involve conflicts and incompatibilities between activist and academic roles and standards, but 'current transformations in academia have ... actually created new possibilities for the development of forms of publicly and politically engaged academic practice' (Pereira, 2016). Rosie offers a nuanced view of the affordances and the challenges for her:

It's been a detraction from my career in a way, in that I couldn't really have a successful academic career ... [but] the [non-academic] job I've got now has stemmed from ... the knowledge of the sector that I've gained through my union work. My political awareness of how to negotiate in this job comes from those years of negotiation. I'm sure part of the reason I was chosen for this job was because the university needs an advocate and a negotiator in implementing the strategy. [There are] negative consequences [for] my family, I guess. My daughter ... knows that I'm committed to [activism] and I have to do it. She knows there's something in me that means I have to do it. But it's been hard for her. I've paid less attention to her than I should have and there have been consequences for her and for me. There's a bit of a cost to health ...

I quit my PhD ... It does feel bad. It does feel like a failure. It always will. You've got to forgive yourself ...

I did have the realisation – this was at the time of ... increases in fees, and the screwing over of universities, and cuts, and all that stuff. The horrible things happening here with management and just the rampant managerialism. I realised that researching governance, nobody cares ... I was writing insightful things about governance, but no one would take any notice. It wasn't going to change the way things were. So I went back to union activism because to me that seemed like a better way to raise the issues and try to fight for change. I'm not an academic anymore.

I want to make it really clear though, having said all that, I don't regret any of it. I don't regret any of it ... I don't regret being involved. I don't regret being active. I've gained more out of it qualitatively than it has cost me. When I walk away, I'll have two choirs to sing in, I'll have my guitar to play, I'll have more solo gigs to do, I've got more songs to write, and I'll have a rich, rich circle of friendship and comradeship ... I can slot into campaigns, community campaigns, Greens campaigns, whatever. I'll just slot back into being active and doing that and I'll have that richness of relationships around me.

Academics who take on activist roles are increasingly vulnerable to formal censure. Academic activism is conditional, as Pereira (2016) describes it: 'Institutions embrace critical research and do not raise problems about academics' activism as long as they produce and keep producing [research outputs]' (p. 103). Flood *et al.* (2013) describe the obstacles faced by academics involved in activist work within and beyond university contexts, including risks to job security and advancement, and make suggestions for practical strategies to alleviate these risks. They note the particular challenges of meeting research output expectations for academic activists, due to the nature of their scholarly work and the intended audiences of their activist-oriented research, and offer practical strategies for navigating academic activist careers. Writing in the context of academics' involvement with community groups, Jackson and Crabtree (2014) articulate the challenge of conflicting priorities and pressures:

Community-based researchers must answer to institutional metrics and norms alongside the demands of the research and the expectations and agendas of non-government groups that are often under-resourced ... Generating impact is a complicated process ... and contributing to both scholarly understanding and the addressing of real-world problems is an extraordinarily difficult task (Jackson & Crabtree, 2014, p. 150).

For academics whose activism centres on the structures of the university itself, as in Rosie's case, these challenges have an additional layer of complexity as they navigate the tensions, competing priorities and perceived conflicts

of interest of institutional management, organisations such as unions, and individual academic and activist work. Throughout this paper, with a combination of personal narrative and political commentary, we have emphasised how the changing context of higher education both works against and fuels academic activism. The pervasive neoliberalism of academia is impactful for academic activism, both as a driver to repress the practices of activism and participation in activities that don't contribute to career advancement, and as a rallying site of resistance. Rosie offers her advice for those navigating this terrain:

Be brave. Be brave. Sometimes speaking out is your best defence. Passivity allows you to be pushed around. I know that nowadays it's a lot harder, because people are casual and it's their livelihood at stake if they speak out ... [Paraphrasing a well-known folk song] 'Join the union while you may. Don't wait till your dying day. That may not be far away, you dirty, blackleg academic.' Get as involved as you can and don't give up hope. Spend time with people who you feel believe the same things as you do, because that's affirming and strengthening, but balance that with spending time talking to people who don't, because that grounds you in reality ... Keep people around you who will challenge you. If you move into a position of power, if you have any power, own that power ... Everyone's got a scope of influence. Knowledge is power. Learn more and use it wisely and ethically. The only way to use power ethically is to be transparent about it and to be consultative about it ... Whether it's just in your classroom leading your students' learning, or leading an idea in your workplace, you can be a leader, you are a leader. If people are listening to you talk, you're a leader. Own that. It's power ...

I'm saying, be a moral person. That's my advice. Be aware that you will have compromises if you're going to be effective and sometimes you do have to do that ... You should agonise about them, because you should know exactly what you're compromising ... Know where your own line is ... And don't give up. You will have moments of despair. That's when you go back to your members, if you're a union activist, you go back to your members, spend time with your members, see what they're thinking, know that they are looking to you to help change their lives for the better, but that they have to do that themselves as well. Go back to the constituency. Go and look after yourself a bit. Take some time off. This is all advice I should take myself.

This paper has presented a reflective account of activism in university governance and unionism. This intimate voice has highlighted various tactics for activism in academic contexts, including using managerialist language, speaking truth to power, and engaging in small acts of resistance. The reflection also identifies impacts



and risks to career pathways, research activity, health and relationships with family. As with any reflective account, there are lots of stories that are not included, and which may form the basis for future reflections, including Rosie's role as a mentor and mentee, alliances formed, working with diverse stakeholders and union leadership. These stories are important. There is a legacy of unionism in higher education, and it's time to celebrate, remember and harness the energy of activism in academic contexts.

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