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Foundational principles for the academic profession in the context of greater systemic accountability

John Daniel Kenny
Faculty of Education, University of Tasmania, Launceston, TAS, Australia

Michael Bird
College of Science and Engineering, James Cook University, Cairns, QLD, Australia

Jill Blackmore
Deakin University, Melbourne, VIC, Australia

Robyn Brandenburg
Institute of Education, Arts and Community, Federation University, Ballarat, VIC, Australia

Dianne Nicol
Faculty of Law, University of Tasmania, Hobart, TAS, Australia

Kurt Seemann
Faculty of Health, Arts & Design, Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne, VIC, Australia

Bing Wang
Department of Physiology & Nutrition, Charles Sturt University, Wagga, NSW, Australia

Trevor Wilmshurst
College of Business and Economics, University of Tasmania, Launceston, TAS, Australia

Abstract

The impact of global systemic changes over 40 years in higher education (HE) have typically focussed on efficiency, cost-reduction and the needs of the economy. This has usually involved 'command and control' change processes and corporate accountability practices aimed at reducing university autonomy and bringing academics under greater institutional control. We draw on systems research to consider factors related to the effectiveness of a HE system, as opposed to its efficiency, and propose a reform process based on learning as the basis of effectiveness. This requires greater

Corresponding author:
John Daniel Kenny, College of Arts, Law and Education, University of Tasmania, Private Bag 44, Hobart, Tasmania, 7001, Australia.
Email: John.Kenny@utas.edu.au

differentiation between the important roles played by key stakeholders such as government, university corporate leaders and academics. A lack of definition of the academic role in the managerial university makes it difficult for the profession to present a counter-narrative to the neo-liberal reform agenda that has led to an 'unbundling' of academic work. We propose four universal foundational principles to underpin the academic professional in a context of greater accountability and argue these should be universally applicable to HE systems around the globe. We introduce an action research project to test these ideas using the Australian HE context as a case study which may provide a model for colleagues in other HE contexts.

Keywords
Systemic reform, academic profession, policy coherence, shared governance, effective higher education reform

Introduction and context

French Philosopher Jean Francois Lyotard predicted knowledge would become a key source of national competitiveness and power following the end of the cold war. Lyotard (1984) foresaw systemic change in higher education (HE), driven by the 'performativity principle', which he described as a process of optimising the system's input/output performance, or efficiency. Around the globe, neoliberal reformers embraced the 'performativity principle' for HE and governments urged universities to adopt entrepreneurial and commercialising principles for the knowledge economy and to 'encourage' academics to surrender 'any pretence to intellectual autonomy and any responsibility to undertake basic or curiosity-based research' (Kenway et al., 2004: 334). The structural, governance, funding and accountability mechanisms applied in HE were gradually re-designed to increase government control over universities and to 'encourage academics in *all disciplines'* to change 'in the manner prescribed or risk being seen as academically and economically redundant' (p. 336).

A utilitarian view of knowledge was widely advocated which privileged 'codifiable standardisable and commodifiable knowledge over tacit situational understanding' and led to national policy reforms that disadvantaged social sciences and humanities in favour of applied and technical sciences and threatened the nexus between university teaching and research (Blackmore, 2023; Kenway, 2014; Kenway et al., 2004; Norton, 2023). Further, Lyotard (1984) also predicted the use of 'language games' to control the discourse in universities and increasing use of forms of 'terror' (p. 67) to silence opposing views through the power to 'override' rather than refute (pp. 63–64) and which, he claimed, would sound the 'knell of the age of the Professor' (p. 53).

While it understandably took the Academy time to adjust, nearly a decade after Lyotard's predictions, in the United Kingdom, Barnett and Middlehurst (1993) described a less trusting relationship between academics, government and their institutions, and that the profession seemed at a loss about how to deal with the situation. Within two decades, in the United States, Alexander (2000) described a 'new reality' (p. 428) with the widespread use of 'performance-based accountability reforms' and 'devices' such as league tables, ranking systems that enabled 'governing officials to compare institutional performance measurements' (Alexander, 2000: 419). Although intended to allow policymakers to compare institutional research performance for funding purposes, many universities applied similar performativity practices to gauge the research performance of individual academics, through a focus on measurable outcomes and revenue earning potential (Brenneis et al., 2005; Jolly, 2005; Kwok, 2013) and thereby limiting broader notions of

scholarship, as envisaged by Boyer (1990) and TEQSA (2022). Kenny (2017) described this move as 'under-conceptualised' and disconnected from the actual work of many academics while others claimed it encouraged 'gaming strategies' that threatened the values underlying academic work (Carnegie, 2022; Houston et al., 2006; Jayasuriya and McCarthy, 2021).

While individual researchers criticised these reforms, in the United Kingdom, Barnett and Middlehurst (1993) lamented the inability, or unwillingness, of academics, as a professional group, to define their professionalism and present a coherent and conceptually clear response to the neoliberal reform agenda in HE and its impact on their work:

> If the professionalism of academics has come under attack, … and if that attack has succeeded, to what extent is this outcome the result of a failure of academics to explicitly define their professionalism? (p. 127).

Emerging from this focus on efficiency, especially in the anglophone countries, was a gradual process of de-professionalisation through casualisation of academic labour and a loss of tenure, academic freedom and autonomy (Blackmore, 2023; Magney, 2006; Shattock, 2014). While it is difficult to compare staffing data across countries in a recent report on the state of academic careers, the OECD (2024) suggested precarious employment in higher education 'is a world-wide phenomenon', with the United States and Australia leading the way in its use. Further, the OECD argued precarious employment is 'more pronounced' in higher education than other equivalent industries and disproportionately impacts on younger academics (OECD, 2024: 18–19). This manifested as an 'unbundling' of teaching and research (Magney, 2006; McCarthy et al., 2017; Ryan, 2012) and a deterioration in working conditions that has reached the point where the sustainability of the academic profession is at risk and increasingly unattractive to younger academics (Archer, 2008; Acker and Webber, 2017; Benjamin, 2015; Coates and Goedegebuure, 2012; Kenny, forthcoming 2025a; Magney, 2006; OECD, 2024).

On the assumption that the HE sector cannot function effectively without a clear understanding of the role the academic profession plays (Bentley et al., 2013), in this paper, we set out to review over 40 years of enacted neoliberal policy reform in higher education around the globe, with a particular focus on how it has impacted the academic profession and, more importantly, to suggest a way forward. Our over-arching research question was:

> How can the academic profession define itself in a more accountable HE environment while retaining the fundamental aspects of the role?

Such a broad question spanning over 40 years necessarily opened-up a wide range of interrelated and pertinent concepts and topics many of which have their own significant body of research literature. This range of topics includes the rise of managerialism, university governance, systemic change, organisational effectiveness, academic leadership, academic professionalism, academic workloads, accountability and performance measurement. Our approach here was to move beyond critique of conceptual nuances to critically review HE policy and reform as it has been enacted and evolved over time. To do so, we chose to undertake an argumentative review, a process which aims to synthesise the ideas from a diverse range of literature into a coherent and plausible argument.

From this we hoped to identify some universal 'foundational principles', which could be used to outline a platform for further research. We then outline a program of research to implement these 'foundational principles' using the Australian HE context as a case study (Kenny et al., 2024; Kenny, forthcoming 2025a, 2025b) in the hope the findings might be useful for researchers wanting to undertake similar work in other contexts around the globe.

Policy coherence for more effective systemic reform in higher education

The aim of neoliberal reforms in HE has been to bring universities under greater control of government so they would be more efficient in their use of resources and more accountable for meeting the needs of the economy and society (Alexander, 2000; Blackmore, 2023; Furlong, 2013; Marginson, 2025; Norton, 2023). In this endeavour, governments have tended to rely on 'command and control' change processes to ensure predictability of outcomes (OECD, 2017) and policymakers and university managers have tended to view the professions as a barrier to greater efficiency (Hanlon, 1999; Lyotard, 1984). Thus, stakeholders at lower levels in a system or organisation tend to be treated 'instrumentally' and given limited choice 'to which they instinctively object' (Chapman 2004: 67–8).

As the term suggests, 'command and control' approaches to change rely on measurable outcomes considered important by policy makers as indicative of the HE system becoming more efficient, but research suggests these are unlikely to lead to the system becoming more effective (Kenny, 2008; Kenny, forthcoming 2025b; OECD, 2017). Indeed, according to systems research, this approach to educational reform is ineffective because it ignores the less obvious relational and values-based aspects of the other stakeholders in the system which are claimed to be more impactful for systemic reform (Kania et al., 2018; OECD, 2017).

In terms of educational reform, this distinction we have drawn between efficiency and effectiveness as a policy outcome is highly significant but under explored (Kenny and Cirkony, 2022). Where an efficient organisation functions well and minimises its use of resources, an effective organisation does *what it is meant to do* and aims to do it efficiently (Kenny, 2008; Kenny, forthcoming 2025b). In other words, an effective organisation addresses important value questions about what it should be doing and designs its processes and practices to achieve these outcomes as efficiently as possible. Thus, if an organisation or system is aiming to be effective, its efficient operation, while important to avoid unnecessary wastefulness, is a secondary consideration (Kenny, 2008) and, in terms of judging the performance, or effectiveness, of such an organisation, attention needs to be paid to the values underpinning these judgements (Smart & St John, 1996). Further, given universities operate under a shared governance model, this requires a reconciliation of the 'competing values' of both the academic and corporate stakeholders and a more inclusive approach to organisational change (Kenny, forthcoming 2025b; Schulz, 2013; Smart & St John, 1996).

From a systems research perspective, HE and universities can be viewed as examples of *Complex Adaptive Systems* for which 'command and control' processes are considered unsuitable, because the outcomes of reform in such systems are inherently unpredictable. By contrast, effective reform relies on reducing uncertainty through a change approach based on incremental action-based learning and feedback across all levels within the system (Chapman, 2004). This enables the less obvious, but more impactful, relationships and diverse values perspectives of different stakeholders to influence change as it progresses (Chapman, 2004; Checkland, 2012; Gore et al., 2023; Kania et al., 2018; Kenny, forthcoming 2025b; Kenny and Cirkony, 2022; OECD, 2017). Indeed, the complications associated with this approach to change, along with the associated uncertainty and potential short term political ramifications, probably explains why the focus of neoliberal reform has been on efficiency through command and control (OECD, 2017) and why Viljoen (1994) argued it may be far more difficult to create an effective organisation than an efficient one.

Further, the effectiveness of systemic educational reform has been linked to what Kenny and Cirkony (2022) referred to as 'policy coherence' that is, the alignment of policies, practices and accountabilities with the intended outcomes of the reform. Similarly, much earlier, Smart & St John

(1996) claimed organisational effectiveness relies on the alignment of the organisational values with the implemented policies and practices. This, they argued, is achieved through an iterative reform process focussed-on learning by, and feedback from, the academic stakeholders to shape policy, and which notably, is consistent with the learning process advocated by systems research (Checkland, 2012; OECD, 2017).

So, in contrast to neoliberal reform focussed on command and control, this research suggests effective reform in HE requires an approach to change that is inclusive of the voices of, and relationships between, the various stakeholders at multiple levels within the system, which requires a more iterative approach to change (Chapman, 2004; Checkland, 2012; Gore et al., 2023; Kania et al., 2018; Kenny, forthcoming 2025b; OECD, 2017).

Additionally, Smart and St John (1996), identified four 'culture' groups within a HE institution, the Academic, the Entrepreneurial, the Bureaucratic and the Corporate, each with its distinctive values perspective from which they approach decision-making. Quinn and Rohrbaugh (1981) suggested these groups compete from their different values positions, with the values of the most powerful group tending to prevail in decision-making within an organisation.

In short, approaching systemic HE reform from the perspective of its effectiveness, would therefore require a significant re-focus for HE policymakers, because it is based on value questions about what an organisation, or system, should be doing, and emphasises striving to achieve all the intended outcomes, not just those deemed important by the government. In universities, which operate under a shared governance model (MCU, 2020; TEQSA 2019a, 2019b, 2023), this point is highly significant. Kenny (forthcoming 2025b) argued the two most pertinent culture groups in a university are the Academic and the Corporate, as these are specifically recognised in these high-level policy documents. He argues the entrepreneurial and bureaucratic cultures are derived from these two. If so, thento be effective, a university needs to ensure the decision-making process reflects both academic and the corporate values, with, if anything a 'leaning' towards the academic.

In support of these arguments, we note also that, in Australia, a recent government-initiated review of HE, the *Australian Universities Accord* (AUA, 2024) made numerous similar recommendations, such as calling for a wider range of stakeholder voices in the formation of HE policy. AUA (2024) also commented that for many years, government policy departments have 'prioritised responsiveness to ministerial and government priorities' and lacked 'stewardship-focused bodies that are able to provide continuity and deep historical knowledge of the system' (p.226) and that, since 1988, there has been a lack of 'deep thinking and clarity of direction' in Australian HE, which has been characterised by the system 'not making effective use of its education institutions' expertise or of the resources it commits to the system' (p. 226).

In the remainder of this paper, we attempt to explore what policy coherence might mean in relation to systemic HE reform focussed on effectiveness rather than efficiency. To do so, we firstly need to be clear about the purposes of HE, as documented in HE policy, and the important, but different, roles played by key stakeholders such as government, university corporate leaders and academics in building a more effective HE system.

The purposes of universities

In Europe, policy documents such as the Bologna Declaration and the Magna Chart Universitatum (MCU, 2020) and the recent report of Australian Universities Accord (AUA, 2024) have re-emphasised the importance of universities not only for national development and competitiveness but also for the advancement of society socially and culturally and the maintenance of democratic values. These documents underscore the importance of the

independence of universities, academic freedom and democratic (shared) governance as distinctive elements of universities as organisations.

Further, the MCU (2020) is made up of 960 signatory institutions from 94 countries, which have each declared that the continued credibility and distinctiveness of universities, as trusted organisations, relies on their highly ethical approaches to teaching and research, the integrity and expertise of their staff and their capacity to nurture and share multiple perspectives and forms of knowledge. MCU (2020) claimed therefore, the independence of universities from government should be 'vigorously defended' (MCU, 2020, n. p.), but a report of the European Higher Commission, EHEA (2018) demonstrates that many governments have difficulty accepting this independence, so there is a 'continuing need to be vigilant' (p. 46).

This fits with Lyotard's (1984) warning that the purpose of the 'performativity principle' was to 'subordinate the institutions of higher learning to the existing powers' (p. 50). Around the globe, this has manifested as a lack of policy coherence in the form government policies which extol the independence of universities, yet impose political and financial mechanisms designed to limit their autonomy (Gibbs, 2019; Lyotard, 1984; Marginson, 2011) and through the use of accountability and audit mechanisms that preference economic outcomes and the interests of industry over the broader social and cultural purposes of universities (Alexander, 2000; Carnegie, 2022; Kenway et al., 2004).

In Australia, for example, according to Croucher and Woelert (2021), both conservative and progressive governments have imposed reforms aimed at increasing 'the efficiency and accountability of public universities' to ensure greater value for expenditure outlaid (p.4). These reforms were accompanied, over time, by reductions in public funding for universities from around 90% of operational revenue in the late 80s to less than half by 2018, along with external accountability measures such as targets, standards and tied funding that forced universities to become more entrepreneurial and grow their revenue base. Between 1997 and 2017, this led to student numbers in Australia more than doubling to over 1.4 million. However, the fragility of this 'business model' was exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic when overseas student numbers collapsed, leading to an estimated loss of 10.4% in operating revenue over 2020–21 and the shedding of thousands of jobs across the sector (Carnegie et al., 2021; Jayasuriya and McCarthy, 2021; Universities Australia, 2021). Similar pressures have emerged again as government in Canada, United Kingdom and Australia impose caps on overseas student numbers which have impacted on university income (e.g. University World News Report, 2024).

Thus, a focus on efficiency simultaneously leads to under-resourcing universities and imposition of accountabilities that satisfy the short-term political needs of government for measurable results while undervaluing the social and cultural purposes of universities (Carnegie, 2022). This downplays cultural, non-commercialisable outcomes of HE preferencing income potential of science, health and technology and by default devalues the humanities and social science disciplines (Blackmore, 2023). From a systems perspective, therefore, the 'performativity principle' entrenches a lack of policy coherence into the HE system that is unlikely to promote trust and buy-in from many academic stakeholders nor lead to effective systemic reform (Kenny and Cirkony, 2022; Kenny, forthcoming, 2025a; OECD, 2017).

University governance

Incoherence can also be observed in governance policies which proclaim governance of universities as a shared responsibility between the corporate and the academic leadership (MCU, 2020; TEQSA, 2019a, 2019b, 2023), but which, in practice, are dominated by the corporate leaders (Harman, 2003; Rowlands, 2015; Yielder and Codling, 2004). In general, universities, tend to operate under a hybrid

form of governance in which some senior academics are appointed to managerial positions in the hierarchy. While some researchers argue this hybrid model is a way of retaining academic power over decision-making (Belloc, 2003; Carvalho and Videira, 2019), others have concerns that it blurs the boundaries between the academic leadership and managerial leadership roles (Harman, 2003; Rowlands, 2015; Yielder and Codling, 2004).

Proponents of the hybrid model, such as Carvalho and Videira (2019), point to an academic 'elite' involved in key decision-making in universities and assume this elite will represent the interests their academic colleagues. Research, however, indicates that because this elite is selected and appointed by the corporate hierarchy, they tend to align more with the views of the corporate leaders. Consequently, academic leadership, as enacted through key bodies such as Academic Senate, is diminished to an advisory or quality assurance role as they pertain only to 'academic matters' (Harman, 2003; Pekkola et al., 2017; Rowlands, 2015; Smyth, 2017; Yielder and Codling, 2004).

Consequently, Kenny (forthcoming, 2025b) argues the external government accountabilities and controls imposed on universities are derived from a corporate values perspective, and tend to preference short-term measurable and commercial outcomes over longer-term outcomes more consistent with academic values. This view is supported by other researchers (OECD, 2017; Pounder 2001; Yielder and Codling, 2004). If, however, shared governance is inherent to universities, both the corporate and academic roles are important, but for different reasons, and the values of both groups should be reflected in decision-making. So, from a policy coherence perspective, we argue what is needed is a clearer distinction between the academic and corporate leadership roles in universities, coupled with a more even balance of power to facilitate shared decision-making. By contrast, the hybrid approach blurs these distinctions and leads to the domination of corporate values in universities (Giroux, 2002; Harman, 2003; Rowlands, 2015), thereby reducing policy coherence and skewing the criteria used to determine organisational effectiveness towards a focus on efficiency (Giroux 2002; Gibbs, 2019; Kenny, forthcoming 2025b; Smart & St John, 1996) and preferencing productivity over social and cultural goals (Carnegie, 2022).

From an effectiveness point of view, therefore, the answer is not to sub-ordinate the academic role within universities, but to view it as an inherent strength that distinguishes universities from other types of organisations (Gibbs, 2019; Giroux, 2002; Marginson, 2011). In a shared governance culture, tensions should be expected to arise between the 'competing values' positions of academic and corporate leaders (Benjamin, 2010; Schulz, 2013; TEQSA, 2023; Yielder and Codling, 2004). Indeed, Smart and St John (1996) argued university leaders should 'develop the knowledge and skills that are essential to the management of an academic culture' (p. 233). It then follows that decision-making processes in universities should be purposefully designed to reconcile these two fundamentally different values perspectives (Kenny, forthcoming 2025b).

The need to re-empower the academy

In the literature, the response of the academic profession to neoliberal reforms can, at best, be described as ambivalent (Acker and Webber, 2017; Huisman and Currie, 2004; Jedemark and Londos, 2021; Kenny, 2018) or at worst, as Smyth (2017) claims, 'complicit and compliant in constructing a culture that is toxic to the very nature of their critical and inquiring being' (p. 19). With little guidance offered at the level of the profession, individual academics have been left to cope as best they can (Billot, 2010; Ryan, 2012). Those with less status, such as early career academics, with low job security and/or in disciplines less amenable to commercialisation, feel

isolated and exposed to inappropriate accountability demands, which directly challenge fundamental notions about their work (Acker and Webber, 2017; Archer, 2008; Billot, 2010; Blackmore, 2023; Henkel, 2005; Kenny, forthcoming, 2025a; Magney, 2006; OECD, 2024). This gives oxygen to the 'ontological heart of neoliberalism', where self-interest comes to overshadow higher purpose (Roberts, 2013: 40) and encourages opportunistic behaviours. This situation has been further complicated by the rise of third-space professionals in the managerial university, such as academic developers; practitioner scholars and those involved in experiential learning, whose roles do not easily fit into the traditional binary academic and non-academic divide, many of whom are left to negotiate their own career pathways (Thorpe et al., 2024; Whitchurch, 2023).

In a university dominated by corporate values, because the focus will naturally be on control, compliance, competition and efficiency (Giroux, 2002; Kenny, forthcoming 2025b; Schulz, 2013; Smart & St John, 1996), the academic processes and professional interactions necessary to support the critique and challenge at the base of scholarly academic activity (Marginson, 2011) will be undervalued. In our view, to legitimately assume their role for shared responsibility for the effectiveness of the HE sector and their universities, the academic profession must be able to clearly articulate the values which underpin their role, be able to explain how they contribute to the effectiveness of the HE system and its universities and be clear about 'to whom' and 'for what' they are to be accountable (Bovens, 2007; Kearns, 1998; Kenny, 2008; Kenny et al., 2024).

Although the pace of adoption of neoliberal polices in education occurred at different rates in different countries, dependent on their historical and political contexts (Furlong, 2013; Hansen et al., 2019; OECD, 2024), the impact of the focus on efficiency on the academic role is evident across the globe (Blackmore, 2023; Magney, 2006; OECD, 2024; Shattock, 2014) with the widespread de-valuing of the moral dimensions which underpin their professional responsibilities and autonomy (Hanlon, 1999; Shore, 2024; Yeatman, 2018).

Schulz (2013) noted widespread confusion amongst academics about their role in universities, which manifests as 'role conflict' and 'role ambiguity' as major causes of dissatisfaction and stress. While 'role conflict' refers to the situation where academics experience competing demands on their time, 'role ambiguity' refers to a lack of information within the organisation to perform their role adequately. As mentioned above, this confusion has been exacerbated by the emergence of third space professionals who are unsure of where they fit (Thorpe et al., 2024; Whitchurch, 2023).

Sutton (2017) described universities as 'dominated by the measurement of process' where performativity has come to override 'the moral purpose' which is 'central to academic labour' (p. 627). Smyth (2017) claimed academic work has been 'hollowed out' (p.18) and Ball (2012) says academics have become 'performative professionals' (p. 19). Further, Kidd et al. (2021) described how the 'impact agenda' has come to corrupt 'academic virtues' of curiosity, honesty, sincerity and truthfulness through the infiltration of perverse incentives and structural constraints that weaken social norms of academia and have challenged the foundations academic work (Henkel, 2005). Overall, these changes negatively impact on how individuals see themselves professionally (Billot, 2010; Jolly, 2005; Kenny, 2017; Kwok, 2013; Salinas, 2023; Sutton, 2017; Yeatman, 2018).

The lack of clarity, particularly in relation to the leadership and moral aspects of the academic role in universities, we argue, undermines the effectiveness of the HE system and hinders the ability of the Academy to put forward a robust and conceptually coherent counter-narrative to the neoliberal agenda. Such a counter-narrative would justify why society should trust academics and clearly explain how the privileges and resources they claim are necessary to undertake their role.

To promote a more effective HE system through policy coherence, we suggest the following foundational principle concerned with academic governance and leadership should apply in

universities to ensure the academic voice is genuinely influential in decision-making and policy formulation:

(1) Enhanced academic decision-making power to participate in shared leadership, policy setting and resource allocation to ensure universities maintain academic standards and a focus on their broader social purposes.

Re-empowerment of academics through professionalism

The first foundational principle is needed to restore a balance between corporate and academic values in university decision-making. In the United States, Gerber (2010) linked the professionalisation of the Academy to shared governance and academic freedom. Freidson (1999) linked professionalism to shared values, autonomy and a commitment to a higher purpose. Thus, professionalisation is the common thread that links governance, autonomy, academic freedom and shared values to the higher purpose of a university as espoused by policy documents such as MCU (2020). Within the academic literature, however, while references to 'the academic profession' abound (e.g. Ball, 2012; Barnett and Middlehurst, 1993; Benjamin, 2010; Billot, 2010; Henkel, 2005; Jolly, 2005; Sutton, 2017), it remains a contested and under-explored idea. Indeed, Williams (2008) suggested it is largely an assumed notion and there may be 'no single professional academic group' (p. 539) while Shattock (2014) doubts modern Academia qualifies as a profession.

The 'first step' to improving this situation is, as Jolly (2005) suggested, for academics to become 'conscious and critical' of what is happening to their profession (pp.8-9). We argue the lack of a clear definition of academic professionalism, as noted by Barnett and Middlehurst (1993), has left a vacuum regarding how the role fits into the more accountable HE system; a vacuum which has predictably been filled by governments and university managers, for whom '"value" falls to the level of the market and the freedom to explore is constrained by expediency' (Gibbs, 2019: 509). This has left the Academy open to manipulation, if not exploitation, in an environment where the language of their accountability is defined by the needs of others and not reflective of the reality of their actual roles (Bovens, 2007; Gibbs, 2019; Kenny, 2017; Kenny and Fluck, 2022; Lyotard, 1984).

To re-conceptualise the professional academic role in the more accountable HE environment, researchers such as Barnett (2004) and Williams (2008), along with Sutton (2017, p. 633) have called for the restoration of 'normative measures concerned with moral purpose' and an emphasis on creativity and autonomy as central to academic work. These researchers along with Marginson (2011), suggest the critical and ethical dimensions of academic work, devalued by managerial thinking, are in fact central elements of the role.

Essentially, from the above, the decades long process of driving change through the 'performativity principle' in HE can be seen as a crude attempt by governments to force the 'square-peg' of academic work into the 'round-hole' of managerial thinking. There has been a gradual shift in perceptions of the Academy, from predominantly a group of 'independent professionals' to what Magney (2006) described as 'a sub-ordinate class of "managed professionals"' (p. 45). As managed individuals they have less power to resist the policies that challenge their professional norms.

In much of the policy literature, the widespread adoption of a corporate model for universities is predicated on a view of independence and academic freedom as an institutional right for the university (AUA, 2024; MCU, 2020). The OECD (2024) has suggested, however, that institutional autonomy needs to be de-coupled from the notion of academic freedom associated with individual members of the academic community and points to a strong link between individual academic

freedom and 'contributing factors like participation in institutional governance, employment security and financial security' (p. 74). The need for this distinction becomes more evident where proponents of the managerial university interpret institutional 'independence' as freedom of the university leadership to implement 'a system of incentives for motivating staff to undertake different tasks that may be requested of them' (Belloc, 2003: 33). From this perspective, constraints placed on freedom of inquiry can be justified on the basis that scholarly efforts do not align with the strategic goals of the organisation (Belloc, 2003; Billot, 2010; Henkel, 2005), a view which ignores or attempts to override the essentially intrinsic motivational and autonomous aspects of academic work (Houston et al., 2006; Kenny, 2017).

Typically though, little is said in HE policy documents about how institutional independence should relate to the autonomy of academic staff undertaking the teaching and research necessary for the HE system to be effective. Indeed, it seems to be widely accepted by many researchers that the modern university has more influence over academics than has traditionally been the case and the rise of third space professionals has added to this perception.

In the absence of a clear definition of academic professionalism, there seems to have been a disturbingly high degree of acceptance of these institutional limits on individual academic freedom and autonomy within the literature (Barnett, 2004; Belloc, 2003; Billot, 2010; Carvalho and Videira, 2019; Coates and Goedegebuure, 2012; Harman, 2003; Henkel, 2005; Huisman and Currie, 2004; Rowlands, 2015; Shams, 2019; Tierney, 2001; Watermeyer and Tomlinson, 2022; Williams, 2008). Further, Tierney (2001) argued, the 'ideal of academic freedom', where individuals have a significant degree of autonomy in how they conduct their work, 'has always been circumscribed' (p. 13) and others have expressed similar views (Barnett, 2004; Henkel, 2005; Williams, 2008). Additionally, both Benjamin (2010) in the United States and Henkel (2005) in the United Kingdom also pointed out that the ability of individual academics to exercise academic freedom has never been equal for all, especially for those with 'lesser reputations or in fields less open to commercial exploitation' who may have to shift their agendas or 'pursue agendas constructed by others' (Henkel, 2005: 96).

While we do not dispute claims that limitations on the *ideal* notion of academic freedom have always existed due to structural inequalities in Academia and the prevailing political and economic contexts in which they operate, we do point out that setting limits on academic freedom and autonomy, without a clear understanding of the professional academic role in the managerial university and more accountable HE system, has been premature. With no real guidance at the level of the profession, decisions made on autonomy and academic freedom, will largely be determined by those who hold the power, which in the current HE environment, means from a corporate values perspective. This lack of definition will make it more difficult to identify at what point deviations from the ideal become counter-productive and be likely to undermine the essential nature of academic work. The literature above indicates we may have reached this point long ago.

More recently, the OECD (2024) offered a view of academic freedom as a multi-layered concept, like an onion, that also 'comes with a set of obligations and responsibilities' and that academics need 'to be accountable for the outcomes of their academic activity' (p. 74). So, a key question that remains to be addressed is: What does academic professionalism look like in this more accountable environment? Freidson (1999) claimed 'professionalism' arises naturally in relation to any form of work which has a higher moral purpose and exists in connection with the 'ideology of service' and trust (p. 127). He described the 'ideal' characteristics of professionalism as: control of the work by the profession, arising from an 'officially recognised body of knowledge and skill'. Professionalism is based on 'abstract, theoretical knowledge' which requires 'the exercise of discretion' and 'an occupationally controlled training program that is associated with a university' (p. 118); with a

commitment 'to some transcendent values'. These 'constants' of professionalism and are all pertinent to the academic profession, however, Freidson (1999) also recognised that the ideal is rarely attained, as these 'constants' are typically attenuated by 'contingent' variables such as organisational and governmental policies and 'the dominant ideologies of the time and place'. He also makes it clear, that only 'the state has the power to establish and maintain professionalism' (p. 123). So, for a given HE system to be effective, support of the government is needed to ensure resources are provided to enable the required 'degree of professionalism' to be attained in the sector (p. 122).

This leads us to propose a second foundational principle, which operates in conjunction with enhanced academic power, as outlined in the first principle, and is meant to ensure the autonomous and moral dimensions of academic work are not overwhelmed by efficiency-focussed policies and performativity demands. It proposes a conception of professional academic work that draws its legitimacy from:

(2) Systemic recognition that inherent to the professional academic role are defined common values that underpin their trustworthiness, emphasise autonomy and discretionary decision-making based on their expertise and recognise responsibilities that extend beyond any given organisation or government to their profession, discipline and wider society.

This principle is important to provide more clarity about the academic role within the accountable HE system and to clearly distinguish it from non-academic roles. How this principle applies to those undertaking academic work from within the third space needs to be specifically addressed by future research.

A broader notion of scholarship

Policy documents such as the OECD (2024), MCU (2020) and TEQSA (2023) recognise values and behaviours associated with scholarship in general such as honesty and adherence to expected 'standards and norms of the academic community' (OECD, 2024: 74) without specifically mentioning disciplinary differences. Further, in *Scholarship Reconsidered,* Boyer (1990) also did not mention disciplinary differences when he argued academic work encompasses a broad view of scholarship that recognises while '(t)heory surely leads to practice…practice also leads to theory' (p. 16). In this view, knowledge is not a static commodity but is continually created in a range of ways. He suggested four overlapping 'scholarships' of *Discovery, Integration, Application and Teaching*. The scholarship of *Discovery* or pure research is the 'commitment to knowledge for its own sake, to freedom of inquiry…wherever it may lead' (p. 17). The scholarship of *Integration* involves 'making connections across disciplines, placing specialities in larger contexts' to better understand some of the 'pressing human problems' (p. 21). It resonates with collaborative research of today. The scholarship of *Application* relates not only to the application of knowledge to society but also to what can be learnt from this. It encompasses the notion of 'service', which refers to activities that are rigorous, related to one's special field of specialisation, flows directly out of 'professional activity' (p. 22) and generate new understandings as 'theory and practice vitally interact' (p. 23). Finally *Teaching* as a scholarship not only ensures the 'continuity of knowledge' but also deepens our understanding of relevant pedagogies and the learning process itself. He considered *Teaching* to be the most important of the four scholarships.

This broader view places scholarship at the centre of academic work in teaching, research and service, and goes far beyond the narrow focus on research as selected measurable outcomes. It goes

to the complex process of knowledge creation and dissemination itself and how it may benefit society. There is clearly scope, in this broader notion of scholarship, for organisational flexibility in consideration of the academic aspects of the roles performed by third space professionals.

We argue these broad scholarships are applicable to any discipline to varying degrees. For example, while the scholarship of *Application* may arguably be more applicable to science of technology related disciplines, the arts and social science disciplines may be more applicable to meeting the cultural and societal goals of the university. From the above, we argue the notion of scholarship can be seen as central to academic work, regardless of discipline. Indeed, we argue, the expectation to be scholarly is *the defining characteristic* that unites all academics as professionals and distinguishes Academia from other professions, regardless of discipline, career stage or employment status. However, as already alluded to, under the performativity principle, the notion of scholarship has been curtailed considerably. This leads us to suggest a third foundational principle regarding the professional academic role in the more accountable HE system:

(3) Recognition that scholarship, broadly defined, is central to the academic role and provides the fundamental justification for individual academic freedom to pursue questions within their area of expertise and related fields, including the strategic directions and operation of the higher education sector and/or its institutions.

This principle links an expectation to be scholarly to all aspects of academic work including teaching, research and community engagement where being scholarly broadly means they possess expertise based on a deep understanding of what is known in a field (or fields) and that this knowledge is based on rigorous methodological and evidential processes, along with an openness to critique by peers to advance understanding in the field.

These first three foundational principles aim to define the professional academic role, how it is different to other roles and how academics contribute to the effectiveness of the HE system. Further, however, while similar in some ways to non-academics as employees of a university, these principles also outline specific responsibilities and scholarly expectations as inherent to the academic role, namely, academic leadership, professional responsibilities that transcend their institution, and which require autonomy and academic freedom, and which bring with them specific associated accountabilities.

However, while these aspects clearly distinguish the academic role from that of non-academic employees, they do not fit well within the current corporate manifestation of university culture (Schulz, 2013; Smart & St John, 1996). To be effective, universities, need to better manage the tensions likely to arise from the 'competing values' positions of corporate and academic leaders and not allow the corporate to dominate (Smart and St John, 1996; TEQSA, 2019a, 2019b, 2023). Safeguarding these fundamentals of academic work is crucial to ensuring the effectiveness of a university and, as the first principle has suggested, this requires academics to have sufficient power in decision-making and resource allocation within their organisation to ensure their autonomy (OECD, 2024).

Similar ideas led Benjamin (2015) to suggest academics need an employment relationship of a special kind, one more akin to that of 'appointees' such as judges, to be able, if necessary, provide a counterpoint to managerial thinking which can be 'invoked to justify a stance that is independent of, even opposed to, the demands of a particular political regime or client' (Freidson, 1999: 127). This leads us to propose a fourth foundational principle related to academic professionalism in the more accountable HE environment:

(4) Formal recognition of the 'special' nature of the academic employment relationship and agreement that this work must be adequately resourced, and appropriate accountabilities developed, that recognise that the professional responsibilities of academics extend beyond their institutions to broader society, their profession and their discipline.

This fourth principle considers what the system needs to provide so academics can perform their role and be accountable for their part in effectiveness of the HE system, as well as their contribution to their universities, their profession, their discipline and the wider needs of society. A clear acknowledgement of these elements of the academic role would also have an important secondary function: that of communicating to non-academic stakeholders, especially government, the unique characteristics of academic work that make it trustworthy and differentiate it from other professions.

Where to from here? A case study in application of the foundational principles

This project was initiated by the *Australian Association of University Professors* (AAUP), which established a working party to explore the impacts of neoliberal reform on Australian academics. The authors of this paper were members of that working party. We propose the four 'foundational principles' as universally underpinning the academic role in the context of greater systemic accountability. To test these ideas empirically, we obtained ethical clearance and established an action research project to implement the 'foundational principles' using the Australian HE context as a case study Appendix. As every HE system has its own historical, political and legislative context, systems thinking suggests these 'foundational principles' will need to be translated into a related set of 'enabling principles' to account for contextual factors that may apply within a given HE system (Kenny and Cirkony, 2022) and will help to determine the 'degree of professionalism' that should apply for academics within that system (Freidson, 1999; Hansen et al., 2019).

Over the first three iterations, between 2021 and 2024, a set of 'enabling principles' emerged and these have been incorporated into a *Professional Ethical Framework for Australian Academics (The Framework)*. The next two iterations of the project will seek feedback from the broader academic community to refine it further in the hope it will provide a robust and conceptually coherent systemic definition of the role of the academic profession within the Australian HE context. More detail can be found about this project in a recently published paper (Kenny et al., 2024). *The Framework* and information about this research project are also published on the AAUP website (https://professoriate.org).

We hope *The Framework* will also communicate more clearly to non-academic stakeholders the unique contribution the Academy makes to the effectiveness of Australian HE and that this work will provide a model which researchers in other countries find useful in applying the 'foundational principles' to their own HE context.

Conclusions

In this paper, we have proposed four foundational principles (see the appendix) that we believe are universally applicable to any HE context. We have outlined an action research project set up to test claim as a case study in which a set of 'enabling principles' have been developed to suit the Australian HE context and which have been incorporated into a Professional Ethical Framework for Australian Academics. *The Framework* aims to clearly articulate how the 'enabling principles'

underpin the essence of the academic role in the Australian HE context, justify why the role needs to be supported and protected by society, and to link them to practice.

We recognise that over 40 years of neoliberalism and managerialism has no doubt left its mark on the HE sector, so we are under no illusions as to the systemic challenges this work poses to governments, university corporate leaders and to the academic profession itself (Kenny, forthcoming 2025b).

In advocating for a HE system that is effective and efficient, we must ensure the policies, implementation practices, roles and accountabilities are aligned through a change process based-on building relationships and trust while working to a common goal, and learning along the way, as opposed to one based on power and dominance (OECD, 2017)! Indeed, evidence is already emerging of the usefulness of *The Framework* in providing a more professional perspective on issues such as the overuse of contingent academic employment (Kenny, forthcoming 2025a).

This research also raises many questions for further research in HE policy and reform such as: What does an effective HE system look like in any given context? How might university governance practices be changed to enhance academic leadership? How does casualisation fit within a professional conception of academic work? How could those working in the third space be incorporated into a professional conception of academic work? What implications does shared governance have for the role of corporate leaders in universities? What changes are needed to the legal, regulatory and industrial context to enable a 'special' employment relationship for academics? How can an enterprise bargaining process designed around productivity trade-offs with employees, enable greater differentiation of academic issues from industrial issues and the development and application of appropriate professional standards?

These questions pose real challenges for the academic profession, representatives of government, academic unions and university management (Kenny, forthcoming, 2025b). Ultimately, this work should also inform the development of appropriate accountabilities for academics that support their professional academic role and a more effective HE system.

In Australia, while the recent report of the government initiated Australian Universities Accord (AUA, 2024) offered some useful recommendations such as developing a more systemic approach and building trust within the system, through the establishment of an independent *Australian Tertiary Education Commission* (ATEC), unfortunately, consideration of the academic role was limited to addressing issues around casual teaching and research productivity in isolation, as opposed to how these issues relate to the longer term sustainability of the academic profession itself. In the long run, we urge the proposed ATEC to support research into these ideas to promote greater effectiveness of the Australian HE system.

We also recognise the national and global nature of these issues and hope our efforts and the case study to apply the foundational principles to the Australian HE context (Kenny et al., 2024; Kenny, forthcoming 2025a; 2025b) will prove to be useful to international colleagues in shaping the future of higher education reform and the academic profession within their own HE context.

Firstly, we suggest a stronger voice for the Academy within a given HE system will provide the foundation for a more unified and sustainable academic profession and academic leaders will gain valuable experience in dealing with a range of stakeholders through more collaborative and/or networked governance environments (Avelar and Ball, 2023; Bolden et al., 2009; Wang and Ran, 2023). Secondly, these experiences will help to build expertise and confidence of academic leaders to be able to influence HE policy setting and governance within their home context, and this learning may open-up scope for more globally oriented academic networks to be established. Thirdly, networks of this nature would be capable of envisaging a more globally oriented focus for higher education as a 'global public good' as opposed to a national public good (Marginson, 2025). This

holds out the promise of a profession more ready to face the global challenges presented by issues which go beyond national and institutional boundaries such as global pandemics, climate change, the rise of misinformation and authoritarianism, etc. (Marginson, 2025; Peters et al., 2020).

Limitations

While we acknowledge the potential for bias is inherent in the argumentative review approach, to minimise this, we have aimed to be as inclusive with the literature as space would allow. Our goal was to articulate key issues related to many pertinent topics and to identify broad universal 'foundation principles' (see Appendix) which could be tested empirically in any HE system, concurrently, and refined through an action research program of iterative development to suit a specific context. We emphasise action research is an iterative process, and this is just the beginning, so there are likely to be gaps identified and unexpected findings arising from the on-going research which will emerge as the project unfolds.

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ORCID iD

John Daniel Kenny https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6456-6781

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John Kenny has extensive experience as a teacher and teacher educator. John initiated this research project and, as convenor of the AAUP ethics working party has led the research project and the development of the *Professional Ethical Framework for Australian Academics* and associated workshops, media articles and publications to this point. As researcher and project manager he will be the main point of communication for individuals and organisations.

Michael Bird trained as a geologist, obtaining a PhD in isotope geochemistry in 1988 from the Australian National University. Following a postdoctoral fellowship at the University of Western Ontario (Canada), he returned to Australia as Research Fellow, Queen Elizabeth II Fellow and Fellow at the ANU. In 2000, he moved to an Associate Professorship in Singapore then to the Chair in Environmental Change at the University of St. Andrews (Scotland) in 2004. He returned to Australia in 2009 to take up an Australian Research Council Federation, then Laureate, Fellowship. He is currently a Distinguished Professor at James Cook University.

Jill Blackmore is the Alfred Deakin Professor in Education, Faculty of Arts and Education, Deakin University, Australia, is also a Fellow of the Australian Academy of Social Sciences and President of the AAUP. Jill takes a feminist perspective in her research on education policy and governance; leadership and organisational change; innovative pedagogies and academic work, health and wellbeing. She is current President of the Australian Association of University Professors.

Robyn Brandenburg is a professor in the Institute of Education, Arts and Community at Federation University, is Past-President of the Australian Teacher Education Association and has held university research leadership roles. Robyn has published and presented nationally and internationally and recently received a Fulbright Scholar Award. Her interests include teacher education; ethical praxis and ethics research and reflective practice to enhance learning and teaching outcomes. Robyn is currently leading a national study of teacher attrition and co-leading a 1.4 million project on use of gaming to improve student retention.

Dianne Nicol was formerly the Distinguished Professor of Law and Director of the Centre for Law and Genetics (CLG) at the University of Tasmania in Australia. She continues as Distinguished Professor Emerita. Dianne held the role of Chair of Academic Senate at the University of Tasmania from 2013 to

2018 and spent a brief period as acting Provost in 2017-2018. In addition to her role as Chair of Academic Senate she has been a member of the University Promotions Committee and most of the University research and learning and teaching committees. She has received excellence and merit awards for her teaching and has held various research grants from the Australian Research Council, the National Health and Medical Research Council and the Medical Research Futures Fund.

Kurt Seemann (retired) is an adjunct at Swinburne University of Technology. Kurt has extensive leadership experience and a track record of innovation in Technology Education. He has led university research centres at and was the Foundation Director of the Centre for Design Innovation research at Swinburne University. Kurt also created the first remote Aboriginal Design and Technology curriculum, which won a National Curriculum Innovation Award and the first Technology Teacher degree at Southern Cross University.

Bing Wang, Bing received her Medical degree from Tianjin Medical University, China, and her Ph.D. in Nutritional Biochemistry from the University of Sydney. She led Nutritional Neuro-development Research programs in academia and industry before joining Charles Sturt University in Dec 2012 as professor of Physiology and Nutrition. Her research has been focused on elucidating the molecular basis of how nutrient components alter metabolic responses important in neuro-development and cognitive functions from foetus to late life and in translating basic science discoveries to clinic and industry. She has made major contributions to the field of infant nutrition, milk biology and nutritional biology.

Trevor Wilmshurst is a teacher and researcher in Accounting. He has published widely in the areas of corporate social responsibility and behaviour and motivation. He has studied the public sector, the evolution of reporting and environmental management systems and aims to link theory to corporate practice through an ethical lens. Currently he serves as Deputy Chair on the UTAS Human Research Ethics Committee and on several editorial boards for academic journals. He has held university leadership roles and brings a strong interest in education and the impact of governance structures on quality.

Appendix: Four foundational principles for defining academic work in a more accountable higher education context

(1) Enhanced academic decision-making power to participate in shared leadership, policy setting and resource allocation to ensure universities maintain academic standards and a focus on their broader social purposes.
(2) Systemic recognition that inherent to the professional academic role are defined common values that underpin their trustworthiness, emphasise autonomy and discretionary decision-making based on their expertise and recognise responsibilities that extend beyond any given organisation or government to their profession, discipline and wider society.
(3) Recognition that scholarship, broadly defined, is central to academic role and provides the fundamental justification for individual academic freedom to pursue questions within their area of expertise and related fields, including the strategic directions and operation of the higher education sector and/or its institutions.
(4) Formal recognition of the 'special' nature of the academic employment relationship and agreement that this work must be adequately resourced, and appropriate accountabilities developed, that recognise that academics have professional responsibilities that extend beyond their institutions to broader society, their profession and their discipline.