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Academic-practitioner collaboration in the neoliberal university

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ABSTRACT

Collaborations between academics and practitioners working in international development hold significant potential to increase the impact and effectiveness of development research and practice. Innovative and successful collaborations can undoubtedly offer rich benefits to all parties involved. At the same time, it is worth noting that calls for increased collaboration are part of broader economic trends that include shrinking financial support for both the higher education and the overseas development assistance sectors. High-level structural and institutional changes that place partners under increased stress can make effective collaborations more difficult to achieve and maintain and can make them costlier from the perspective of human wellbeing.

RÉSUMÉ

Les collaborations entre universitaires et praticien-ne-s travaillant dans le domaine du développement international offrent un grand potentiel pour augmenter l'impact et l'efficacité de la recherche et de la pratique du développement. Des collaborations novatrices et réussies peuvent sans aucun doute offrir de riches avantages à toutes les parties concernées. En même temps, il est intéressant de noter que les appels à une plus grande collaboration font partie de tendances économiques plus larges qui incluent la diminution du soutien financier au secteur de l'enseignement supérieur et à celui de l'aide publique au développement. Des changements structurels et institutionnels de haut niveau, qui imposent un stress accru aux partenaires, peuvent rendre plus difficiles la réalisation et le maintien de collaborations efficaces, et peuvent les rendre plus coûteuses du point de vue du bien-être des personnes.

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Introduction

Successful partnerships between academics – whether associated with universities, colleges, think tanks, or other research institutes – and development practitioners working with non-governmental organisations (NGOs) stand to make a major contribution to the effectiveness of research, policy and practice that promote human rights, poverty reduction and sustainable development internationally (Martel, King, and Baruah *forthcoming*;

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Shucksmith 2016; Smales 2016). Academics, with their expertise in producing objective, rigorous and highly trustworthy knowledge, are an ideal complement to the applied expertise of development practitioners (Green 2017). Working in tandem, these two groups have much to gain from one another in terms of delivering high-quality knowledge, programmes, and policy that can make a meaningful difference to the lives of people living in marginal or deprived situations. Such benefits are not limited to the development field; since the mid-1990s there has been a growing emphasis in academia and beyond on the importance of partnerships between, within and across sectors and disciplines (Van Huijstee, Francken, and Leroy 2007). In the development sector, this emphasis includes calls from funders for research with demonstrable impact on real-world problems on one hand and, on the other, for evidence-based development practice grounded in sound research (Cottrell and Parpart 2006; ESRC 2018; Williams 2013).

At the same time, complementary strengths are not the only factors leading to increased pressure for cross-sectoral partnerships. Calls for greater collaboration, common to a range of disciplines from management research to accounting to community policing (e.g. Henry and Mackenzie 2012; Amabile et al. 2001; Donovan 2005), coincide with an increasingly pervasive neoliberal ethos and the requirements for civil society organisations to do more with less in an era of corporatisation and shrinking government support. Broadly speaking, neoliberalism involves the integration of a competitive market ethos into all aspects of social, political and economic life – a shift which often involves concomitant changes to social values and practices (Springer, Birch, and MacLeavy 2016). Drawing on the writings of Karl Polanyi and a series critical works produced from 1989 to 2002, McCarthy and Prudham (2004) define neoliberalism as the ideological and political centrality of the “self-regulating market,” which becomes “the governing mechanism for allocating all goods and services, and central as a metaphor for organizing and evaluating institutional performance” (276). In particular, the roll-back of state functions and administrative capacities demanded by a market-oriented ethos holds potentially “dire implications for the equitable delivery of public services” as “collaboration and partnership become the new mantras of regulatory relations between capital and citizen (underpinned by the discursive re-birth of capital *as* citizen)” (McCarthy and Prudham 2004). In the development sector, declining overseas development assistance budgets, growing volumes of foreign direct investment, and the increasing importance of private-public partnerships in achieving development outcomes are evidence of neoliberal ideologies that add to growing pressure for academics and other civil society actors to work collaboratively (Mougeot 2017).

This article explores the complex interplay of neoliberal tendencies and the need for academics and practitioners working in international development to respond to calls for increased collaboration. The present work builds on two earlier reports that I undertook with the Canadian Council for International Cooperation (CCIC) and the Canadian Association for the Study of International Development (CASID) on the topic of academic-practitioner collaboration in Canada and the United States (McGiffin 2017, 2018; Martel and Kindornay 2020). My research found that knowledge on the topic is sparse on the whole, but that valuable information exists on ways to promote successful collaborations and overcome the barriers that can hinder them. In compiling these reports, I also noticed that while cross-sectoral collaborations can no doubt create many synergies and win-win scenarios, there is a need for more critical scrutiny of current workplace

trends, their effect on worker health and wellbeing, and implications of these trends for cross-sectoral collaboration. Specifically, I found that the existing literature on partnerships between academics and other civil society organisations in the development field has not engaged significantly with the growing, multi-disciplinary body of literature on the profound changes taking place within the academic sector. This latter literature indicates that at universities worldwide, neoliberal and corporate restructuring has created conditions of low pay (Bothwell 2018), rampant stress (e.g. Loveday 2018a; Catano et al. 2010), and lack of job security (Foster and Bauer 2018) resulting in a precarious and hypermobile workforce (Ivancheva 2015). These factors, which are particularly pronounced in the United States, have clear implications for the frequency and success of partnerships within and beyond the academy.

The present study begins to address this knowledge gap by drawing the large and growing literature on current issues in higher education in North America and the UK into the discussion about academic-practitioner collaborations. The study does not purport to be an exhaustive study of the academic workplace or collaborative partnerships but instead investigates specific concerns identified during my previous research that warrant further critical discussion. This analysis is particularly cogent to the question of academic-practitioner collaboration in development for three key reasons. First, development studies are, on the whole, deeply concerned with human wellbeing and with identifying and critically interrogating situations of exclusion and inequality and the exploitation they can give rise to. The casualisation of academic teaching has produced what has been termed a “reserve army” of teaching staff on short-term or otherwise irregular contracts who often live below the poverty line – as this paper will show, this situation is clearly of concern from the perspective of human rights and wellbeing (Ivancheva 2015). Second, research indicates that successful collaborations rely heavily on emotional intelligence that is foundational to other intangible skills such as attention, clear communication, and mutual respect (Roper 2002; Cottrell and Parpart 2006). Yet it is becoming increasingly clear that the neoliberal university is not conducive to emotional health (Loveday 2018a; Berg, Huijbens, and Larsen 2016; Hall 2018). Work to develop strong and successful collaborations must therefore also consider how the emotional labour of academic workers is increasingly exploited by the academy even as workplace trends have been shown to drastically reduce academic workers’ emotional wellbeing. Finally, there are gendered aspects to all of these concerns. Studies indicate that women suffer more greatly from the high stress levels that characterise contemporary academic life and in the US female professors receive a salary that is on average 21 per cent lower than that of their male counterparts (Snyder, de Brey, and Dillow 2019). Since expectations of emotional and relational labour differ between women and men, it is crucial that increased collaboration doesn’t increase these workloads for women or disproportionately affect their chances of career success.

In the sections that follow, I begin by briefly presenting a definition of academic-practitioner collaboration and an overview of the various forms it can take. I then draw on recent literature on institutional changes within the higher education sector to identify and discuss topics particularly relevant to cross-sectoral collaborations: the effects of an increasingly precarious nature of the academic workforce on community partnerships; the rise of a culture of audit and assessment and its effects on employee wellbeing; the emotional aspects of collaboration and how these are compromised by trends that

erode mental health; and the importance of diversity within the academy, particularly within development studies, and the effect of these trends on diversity. Finally, I conclude by discussing what this all means for the future of academic-practitioner collaboration and what steps can be taken to improve the frequency and success of collaborations.

Partnerships and collaborations between organisations *can* succeed and can offer unequivocal development benefits. Certainly, as workers within institutions that may be much better resourced and more secure than development NGOs, particularly those operating at the grassroots level, academics arguably have a responsibility to ensure that both knowledge and knowledge production is shared with communities beyond the ivory tower. By raising these questions and concerns related to the environments and contexts in which collaborations occur, in no way do I mean to negate or undermine the value of seeking new ways of working together. On the contrary, as well as contributing to improved development research and practice, a push toward greater collaboration could serve as a valuable corrective to the increasingly individualistic and competitive terrain of corporatised work environments.

The nature of collaboration

Academic-practitioner collaboration can take a wide variety of forms. Examples include student study placements or internships with development NGOs, oversees volunteering by academics via NGOs, academic-NGO research collaborations or commissions, NGO input into university curricula, or visiting lectureships by practitioners (Chernikova 2011). Less formal partnerships could include activities such as NGO staff training or other capacity development programmes created by academics. Tighter alliances could see an academic embedded within an NGO or a practitioner placed in a university secondment. Close partnerships could also involve fundamental transitions in the strategic direction of both the NGO and the academic body as the partnership is formalised and becomes integral to institutional structures and operations of both organisations (McGiffin 2018).

When it comes to research relationships linking academics and NGO-based practitioners, my research with CCIC and CASID found that a number of factors contribute to the overall success of these undertakings:

- Coproduction: Ensure that both parties have an equal say in the design and production of research to identify and address divergent perspectives and priorities early on.
- Improve access to university resources: this can be through what Chernikova (2011) calls “bridging experts,” engaged and approachable academics who create entry points into what can otherwise seem to be impenetrable institutions
- Open communication: The nature of transparent and inclusive communication free of specialised jargon cannot be overemphasised (Shucksmith 2016; Cottrell and Parpart 2006; Roper 2002).
- Infrastructure: Networks, forums, conferences, and other events facilitate dialogue and learning, while structural or physical spaces, such as offices, meeting rooms, and research centres are important places that enable dialogue and learning to take place (Chernikova 2011; Zingerli, Michel, and Salmi 2009).
- Targeted funding: Collaborative research partnerships may be driven by donor requirements and preferences (Stevens, Hayman, and Mdee 2013; Aniekwe, Hayman, and

Mdee 2012). Even where funding programs don't explicitly require collaborative partnerships, many donors recognize that projects involving both academic and CSO partners are likely to be robust and effective.

The many obstacles that can inhibit successful transdisciplinary collaborations are well documented (Shucksmith 2016; Green 2017; Chernikova 2011; Cottrell and Parpart 2006; Lang et al. 2012; Habermann and Langthaler 2010; Roper 2002). Interestingly, many sources suggest that barriers to successful collaboration tend to be cultural and institutional rather than logistical. Authors comment that academics and development practitioners often face challenges in working together that are largely linked to differing priorities and working styles. For instance, the differing concerns of the two groups may call for divergent research design and outputs, yet these can be difficult to navigate – particularly if there is a lack of transparency or otherwise unclear communication between them. Collaboration may be further undermined by “competing logics, incompatible styles of discourse and attitudes towards authority, or inaccessibility of methods and results” (Roper 2002). Listed below are some of the most prominent barriers to collaboration located in the literature.

- Differing orientations: Academics and practitioners differ markedly in terms of their priorities, incentives, objectives, organisational cultures, and degree of financial security. Furthermore, NGOs may prioritise practical, tangible change and may view academics as being preoccupied with theories, approaches and outputs that are largely unhelpful in resolving real world problems (Garrett and Islam 2004). Differing priorities may also call for differing research design and methodologies (see Cottrell and Parpart 2006).
- Different skill sets: while the skills of the two groups may complement each other, differences can pose challenges. Both the nuanced relationships that NGOs have with their communities and complex academic information may be difficult to explain, leading to a degree of isolation and possible misunderstanding between the two groups (Ahmed and Palermo 2010; Shucksmith 2016).
- Power differentials: Differing social and financial status, whether perceived or real, can lead to tension and discontent that can disrupt collaborative efforts, particularly in the absence of good communication (Hynie, McGrath, and Young 2014; Cottrell and Parpart 2006).
- Financial considerations: These can take a variety of forms, ranging from power imbalances linked to different levels of financial security to substantial funding cuts within the overall development ecosystem (Toukan 2020; Chernikova 2011; Tiessen and Smillie 2017).

What I explore in the following sections are additional challenges that, while well-documented elsewhere, are not present in the literature on academic-practitioner relationships. The additional challenges of academic precarity and hypermobility, anxiety and overwork are symptoms of broader institutional trends that may exacerbate many of the challenges listed above.

Collaboration and the nature of the precariat

Successful student placements and innovative research partnerships, like other forms of multi-sectoral collaboration, require a skilled and visionary academic staff prepared to challenge existing norms, explore new terrain, and put in time and effort well beyond the day-to-day demands of their jobs. However, a growing body of evidence indicates that trends within universities are reducing these very capacities within the professoriate. While conditions vary from one country to another, literature from across Europe and North America documents the negative implications of a market-driven ethos on post-secondary institutions throughout these regions (Taylor and Lahad 2018; Robertson and Fyffe 2018; Luka et al. 2015), including the rise of an increasingly precarious and overburdened workforce. Not only are these workplaces increasingly staffed by academics on part-time, sessional, or limited term employment contracts, but also the job security of even permanent staff is being called into question by new regimes of audit and surveillance (Stahl 2015). These and other conditions are likely to make collaboration more difficult, in some cases impossible, and at the very least create a range of disincentives for academics to seek out collaborative relationships.

At the most basic level, a high turnover of academic teaching staff reduces the latitude for collaboration by making long-term, stable partnerships more difficult to establish and nurture. “High turnover” may be putting it mildly. In a recent study of higher education in the UK found that 34 per cent of academic staff were employed on fixed term rather than permanent contracts, indicating that pervasive job and financial insecurity affect over a third of the staff body (HESA 2018). Yet these numbers only tell part of the story; the University and College Union estimates the full extent of casualisation in the UK to be much broader. Reporting that “when the use of atypical academic staff is factored in, 54% of all academic staff and 49% of academic teaching staff are on insecure contracts” (University and College Union 2016, 1). In the US, as many as 50–75 per cent of faculty now hold casual, part-time contracts that may pay less than \$20,000 a year (O’Hara 2015, 2016). The figures are particularly bleak for early career staff. The proportion of entry-level lecturers, research fellows, researchers and teaching fellows on fixed-term contracts sits at about 58 per cent in the UK; the number rises to 76 per cent of UK teaching and research assistants (Grove 2016a). An increasingly casual workforce that sees “professors coming and going from university to university, with no offices to call their own, let alone time to gather in faculty lounges or even learn the names of their colleagues,” is bound to work against collaboration as such conditions force academic workers farther from collegiality and toward increased isolation (Tuch 2014). In addition, studies show that these isolated and disconnected work conditions, which are becoming common for increasing numbers of academic staff across Europe and North America, are highly detrimental to health and wellbeing. Research has found that holding repeated fixed-term contracts over an extended period can result in feelings of shame, exclusion and social marginalisation, poor mental health and negative impacts on family life (Foster and Bauer 2018).

The academic literature and media reports on the casualisation or “adjunctification” of the academic workforce is abundant, particularly in the United States, yet many pieces gloss over the nuances and complications within this broader trend. In a recent article Phillip Magness points out one particularly important source of confusion:

a number of reputable media outlets have reported that adjuncts comprise as much as 76 per cent of the academic workforce – an inaccurate claim that actually represents the total percentage of ‘contingent’ faculty, a category that also includes all faculty in untenured and non-tenure-track positions, whether full or part time. Others use the terms “adjunct” and “contingent” interchangeably, failing to acknowledge that each group faces unique and, in some ways, highly divergent challenges. (Magness 2016, 50–52)

While contingent faculty may be offered full-time positions with reasonable salaries and benefits, the same is not necessarily true of adjunct instructors, who are instead more likely to work in part-time, low paid contract positions without benefits. Magness goes on to provide a close reading of data presented in the 2013 *Digest of Education Statistics*, noting that although the total number of full-time faculty in the United States has grown at a fairly steady rate over the past fifty years – from a total of 69,000 in 1970 to 791,000 today – the overall percentage of full-time faculty has declined, owing to the much more rapid increase in the number of part-time faculty (Magness 2016, 53). However, this trend has not been even across the higher education sector; at traditional public institutions tenure rates have remained relatively stable over the study period while a boom in for-profit higher education may be responsible for “over a quarter of all adjunct growth in the last twenty years” (Magness 2016, 54).

These numbers are borne out by the 2017 *Digest of Education Statistics*, which shows an overall decrease in the percentage of institutions offering a tenure system from 63 per cent in 1998 to 54 per cent in 2016–2017 (Snyder, de Brey, and Dillow 2019). This shift is largely the result of a disproportionate rise in the total number of for-profit post-secondary institutions. For instance, from 1998 there was a slight decrease (3%) in the number of public institutions and the total number of private non-profit institutions fell by nearly a percentage point; meanwhile, the number of for-profit institutions grew by 57 per cent (Snyder, de Brey, and Dillow 2019). Between 1998 and 2008, enrollment at for-profit institutions grew by 225 per cent as compared to only 31 per cent in all degree-granting institutions (Lee 2012). The figures reported in the 2017 *Digest of Education Statistics* also indicate that these for-profit institutions are realms of workplace precarity and gender inequality. Within for-profit institutions, only 17 per cent of all full-time faculty is tenured (20% of men versus 15% of women) as compared to 48 per cent at public institutions and 42 per cent at non-profit institutions (Snyder, de Brey, and Dillow 2019). Among full professors, both male and female, 90 per cent at public universities are tenured; at for-profit institutions this number drops to 71 per cent of male professors and only 51 per cent of female professors (Snyder, de Brey, and Dillow 2019).

The boom in for-profit education peaked in 2010–2011 and was followed by a sharp decline that included the bankruptcy of the Corinthian Colleges Group in 2015 (Magness 2016, 54). This reversal has added to the instability of employment in what was an already disproportionately precarious subsector. Since 1998, 11 public institutions have closed their doors (Snyder, de Brey, and Dillow 2019). Compare this with 459 closures in the private sector (112 of these in 2016–2017 alone), the majority of which were for-profit rather than non-profit institutions (339, or 74% of private university closures) (Snyder, de Brey, and Dillow 2019). While discussing the causes and consequences of such closures is beyond the scope of this report, it is worth pointing out that this insecurity among for-profit institutions exists alongside average CEO salaries of USD 7.3 million and average tuition of USD 35,000 per year even as many of these universities

received government assistance in the form of Pell Grants and government-backed student loans offered to students in need of financial assistance (Lee 2012).

Although private universities make up a relatively small part of the higher education landscape in the US with only about a tenth the number of students of public institutions nationwide, there is no doubt that they affect the entire post-secondary ecosystem in the United States and beyond. While so far for-profit higher education institutions have been largely a US phenomenon, the UK government promises to make it easier for new providers of higher education to set up shop in that country by removing barriers to entry. In a recent white paper, the UK Department for Business, Innovation and Skills stated, “in order to enable greater competition, we will simplify the regulatory landscape. We will create a level playing field with a single route to entry and risk-based approach to regulation. We will seek to reduce unnecessary barriers to entry” (Secretary of State for Business 2016, 9). Such an approach also contributes to the sharp rise in online learning that dispenses with traditional classroom settings altogether (Ovetz 2017). While online learning opens many new pedagogical opportunities and broadens access to higher education (for example, see discussions by Porter 2015 and, Kim 2015), it is not without human costs. In particular, the rise of Massive Open Online Courses and other on-demand learning options has led to what Gary Hall has termed the “uberfication” of the academy as state regulated services are replaced by private information and data-management companies (Fitzgerald and Gunter 2017; Hall 2016).

All of these trends raise a number of questions when it comes to the formation and maintenance of collaborative partnerships, perhaps the foremost being: Who is going to undertake this work? Given the instability and mobility of early-career (and, increasingly, mid- to late-career) scholars, it appears as though the bulk of the work of developing sustainable partnerships will fall to the shrinking proportion of tenured faculty who are physically present in bricks-and-mortar universities that conduct research. While temporary academic staff may be able to take part in various forms of short-term or ad hoc collaboration, the current nature of much contract employment, in which sessional or adjunct instructors spend their semester shuttling between jobs at several institutions in a scramble to make ends meet, hardly seems conducive to this work. Furthermore, the prospect of engaging on an ad hoc basis with a string of harried and anxious contract academics is unlikely to appeal to the better instincts of development practitioners, who must also take mental health and self-preservation seriously. It is also worth considering how non-tenured faculty spend the bulk of their time. According to a report by the American Association of University Professors, “the overwhelming majority of non-tenure-track appointments are teaching only or teaching intensive,” leaving little time for innovative, collaborative research (Besosa et al. 2010). These contract faculty are also spending considerable time travelling and worrying about the bills, since “non-tenure-track faculty and graduate students teach the majority of classes at many institutions, commonly at shockingly low rates of pay” (Besosa et al. 2010).

Collaboration and market imperatives in the neoliberal academy

It is in some ways ironic that increasing calls for collaboration, and by extension the cooperation and mutual support that collaboration entails, are occurring alongside a precipitous rise in competition that is redefining relationships within and between academic

institutions and their staff. What should ideally be a profession based on collegiality and collaboration is too often characterised by competitive relations. A UK government white paper doesn't mince words on the matter: "Competition between providers in any market incentivises them to raise their game, offering consumers a greater choice of more innovative and better-quality products and services at lower cost. Higher education is no exception" (Secretary of State for Business 2016, 8). According to the report, conditions in the UK's higher education sector were not yet competitive enough, stating that "there are strong arguments to encourage greater competition" (Secretary of State for Business 2016, 8).

While the report's emphasis on increased competition is aimed at institutions, the market orientation requiring institutions to "raise their game" places much of the burden of doing so on individual workers and students. The raft of audits and performance assessments that has emerged within the post-secondary sector aims to measure the contribution of teaching staff toward institutional and sectoral targets. While demonstrating effectiveness is not unimportant, it is also not without repercussions for students and staff. For instance, the provincial government of Ontario recently unrolled a budget proposal that would see 60 per cent of university funding linked to institutional performance (OCUFA 2019). The Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations cautions against such performance-based funding, claiming, "by design, performance-based funding threatens education quality as it rewards institutions that meet specific performance targets while penalizing those that do not" (OCUFA 2019). In particular, such an approach "punishes students studying at already cash-strapped institutions" who then face further funding cuts under a funding scheme that "will further incentivize the rise of precarious academic positions" (OCUFA 2019).

Performance-based funding also contributes to an oppressive institutional culture of continual performance evaluation that generates significant stress and a heightened sense of job insecurity. Vik Loveday shows that the marketisation and corporatisation of the academic sector, marked by ongoing audit processes and performance evaluations, have contributed to rampant levels of workplace anxiety (Loveday 2018a). Participants in Loveday's research felt little sense of control over the nature and direction of their working lives apart from "taking personal responsibility for productivity, success, and 'excellence' through the pursuit of student satisfaction, publications, or external funding – often achieved through chronic overwork fuelled by anxiety" (Loveday 2018b).

Loveday's findings are supported by a 2016 workplace survey of UK universities conducted by Times Higher Education. The study found that "half of academics are worried about redundancies related to metrics-based performance measures" (Grove 2016b). Of the 1398 academic staff who responded to the survey, 57 per cent also felt that their job had a negative impact on their health. Respondents reported working "100 hours a week" or "unspeakably long hours," called the workload "unmanageable," and pointed to "poor work-life balance" (Grove 2016b). One respondent said, "I don't think I can realistically keep this up until retirement without making myself seriously ill from stress" (Grove 2016b). One lecturer is quoted as saying,

I am constantly being asked to do more with less, which translates into longer and longer working hours. As a result, the level of compensation is completely incommensurate with

the working hours reasonably needed in order to do everything that is demanded. (Grove 2016b)

Meanwhile, performance targets are felt to have a “corrosive effect on departmental morale” as they may be accompanied by “direct and explicit threats of dismissal.” This adds to a pervasive climate of stress and insecurity in which 40% of academics don’t feel secure in their jobs (Grove 2016b).

Findings such as these may reflect broader societal conditions as the workforce of industrialised countries feels increasingly overburdened and time-constrained. However, studies indicate that the academic sector is particularly afflicted and that academics suffer higher than average levels of workplace stress (Catano et al. 2010; Guthrie et al. 2017). Even as they grapple with above-average levels of workaholicism and anxiety, academics are often held to be in the enviable position of doing work they love, a notion now widely fetishised in contemporary western culture. However, as Richard Hall argues,

Selling academia as a labour of love enables those in-power or with power-over the world to entreat educators to give everything ... It obscures the ways in which academic labour is increasingly proletarianised, as its demands are grounded in competition and performance management, so that outcomes-focused, routinised work becomes the norm. (Hall 2018, 5)

A precarious and extremely competitive work environment can inhibit collaboration because these relationship-building activities, which can be costly in terms of time, money and energy, are not necessarily rewarded when it comes to tenure, promotion, or even an entry-level position. The current academic job market has further heightened the “publish-or-perish” outlook that has long characterised academia. With secure academic jobs few and far between and with tenure and promotion closely tied to publication in peer-reviewed journals, creating publishable research quickly is a priority for academics that often isn’t shared by their practitioner counterparts. Co-production and clear communication can indeed help both parties find common ground and undertake work of mutual benefit. However, if such activities aren’t recognised by academic institutions when it comes to tenure and promotion, they become highly costly from an employment perspective, leaving little incentive for untenured academics to undertake them.

All of these trends raise questions where collaborations with the non-profit sector are concerned. Without a significant shift in institutional support, can an overextended, anxiety-ridden, and exploited academic workforce realistically be drawn into the service of another under-resourced sector as well? If calls for partnerships develop into standard job expectations, what checks and balances need to be put into place to protect an already overburdened workforce? How can excellence frameworks, tenure and promotion processes and other measurements of academic effectiveness shift to favour more holistic, community-oriented modes of collaborative knowledge production and sharing?

Emotional geographies of collaboration

Previous research on academic-practitioner collaboration has found that the two groups aren’t working together nearly as often as they could and that when partnerships did occur they often left one or both parties feeling less than satisfied (Tiessen and Smillie 2017). Indeed, Tiessen and Smillie (2017) comment that despite an enormous rise in International Development Studies (IDS) programmes across the country over the past three

decades, there remains a stark divide between Canadian development practitioners and their academic counterparts. Research has also revealed a variety of challenges associated with successful collaboration between academics and practitioners, particularly when it comes to research. These include large differences in approach and culture, differing priorities, and insufficient or unclear communication between partnering organisations (Cottrell and Parpart 2006; Roper 2002; Green 2017; Shucksmith 2016). Difficulties and divisions have contributed to a situation in which “development CSOs rely much more on the commercial consulting world rather than taking advantage of the rich, intellectual resource that Canada’s academic community offers in terms of research, monitoring and evaluation (M&E) and policy advice” (CCIC and CASID 2016).

Where academic-practitioner collaborations have been successful, in terms of creating positive, mutually beneficial experiences for both parties, this success is due in large part to the ability of those involved to cultivate healthy relationships based on mutual respect and clear communication. Healthy relationships, in turn, generally rely on a threshold level of emotional wellbeing. That is, emotional intelligence and wellbeing, a lynchpin of healthy relationships, are no doubt a key factor in determining whether or not a collaborative partnership survives and thrives. The skills and aptitudes needed to identify and confront the challenges that arise in collaboration therefore include not only managerial skill but also self-reflexivity and the intangible, human aspects of relationship building.

However, mounting evidence indicates that the neoliberal academy is not conducive to emotional health and the softer skillset reliant upon it. On the contrary, large numbers of people with the skills and passion to forge productive new collaborations are struggling with a raft of workplace challenges that drastically impinge on both physical and emotional wellbeing and inevitably reduce their capacity to develop and maintain collegial partnerships within and beyond the academic sector. Evidence shows that emotional health suffers in an academic environment that has become “a market-driven system emphasising performance measurement and individual accountability” (Hartung et al. 2017, 40). A major, unexamined barrier to increased collaboration between academics and NGOs in North America is therefore quite likely the saturated emotional capacity of academic labourers working within neoliberal institutions.

Specifically, as discussed in the section above, lack of job security, increased workloads, and pervasive assessment have combined to create situations of chronic anxiety that many academic workers report negatively affects family life and personal health. At the same time, shifts within the higher education sector, including growing corporatisation and the rise of private and online institutions, are moving the teaching profession toward a service delivery model in which the personality and reputation of academic staff are increasingly important. As various commentators have pointed out, institutional changes have recast students as consumers of educational services, and instructional staff as service providers. Speaking about the “reputation economy” that appears likely to become a growing part of higher education as online, on-demand learning combines with a culture of audits, assessments, student satisfaction surveys and online surveillance, Gary Hall notes,

Many academics are indeed suffering from stress, anxiety, loneliness, psychological exhaustion, depression, and distress. Yet circumstances will grow markedly worse for this workforce – a high percentage of whom are already in an insecure position – if a shift to a for-profit

sharing economy higher education ecosystem occurs, with its ever-present risk to individual teachers of their ratings falling. (Hall 2016, 26)

These ratings are not linked solely to high-quality research and teaching but also to student expectations of constant availability and appealing personality. Hall remarks, “[future academics] will also be individuals who are capable of performing the necessary emotional labor to achieve a good student rating: who are smiley, friendly, lighthearted, and ‘genuine’” (Hall 2016, 34).

While on one hand collaborations could serve as a much-needed corrective to the alienation and isolation of academic labour, on the other they demand a level of emotional labour that too often goes unrecognised and unrewarded. Also, it seems that the burden of emotional labour contributes to stressful conditions in the academy and that this labour burden is likely to be unevenly distributed. Specifically, emotional labour – a form of labour that looks set to increase should instructor reputation and customer satisfaction continue to become defining aspects of performance – is highly mediated by gender. Men and women are socialised to express their emotions differently and experience differing expectations regarding their emotional labour. Due to cultural beliefs about the emotions of each gender and the differing social status of men and women, the emotional rules and standards to which each of the two groups are held differ markedly (Lively 2013). In particular, studies have shown that where men and women fill similar professional roles, “women expect (and are expected) to be more emotionally engaged, whereas their male counterparts expect (and are expected) to be less affectively involved” (Lively 2013, 234).

The relational and emotional labour involved in creating and maintaining collaborations and the fact that this labour is borne differently by women and men indicates the need for a gender analysis of collaboration. Gender discrepancies linked to emotional labour are especially important in light of research indicating that young and female researchers are at particularly high risk of suffering poor mental health related to overwork (Inge 2018a). In terms of age factors, evidence suggests that conditioning to the emotional reality of the higher education sector begins early. Large numbers of graduate students suffer a variety of mental health challenges, ranging from depression and isolation to imposter syndrome and anxiety, all of which take a significant toll not only on their academic work but also on their personal lives. A recent Belgian study, “involving 3,659 PhD students, revealed that more than half (51%) experienced symptoms of psychological distress, while 32 per cent were found to be at risk of developing a psychiatric disorder” (Inge 2018b). An important role of supervisors is therefore to provide an emotionally supportive role to students grappling with these issues – a role that no doubt takes a further toll on staff wellbeing and that is also likely to vary markedly by age and gender.

Collaboration and gender and diversity in the academy

A significant additional point of concern is that the various trends described in this article are taking place within institutions that are still grappling with questions of diversity and gender equality and where the job-secure professoriate is predominantly white. While the overall numbers of women teaching staff are roughly equivalent to the number of men in both the UK and the US, the number of women faculty with tenure in the US was only 42

per cent in 2016–2017 compared with 55 per cent of men (Snyder, de Brey, and Dillow 2019). As the US Digest of Education statistics makes clear, gender differences are also reflected in pay: in 2016–2017, the average salary for male faculty (USD 91,900) was 21 per cent higher than that of their female counterparts (USD 76,000), a figure that has remained roughly the same since 1975 (Snyder, de Brey, and Dillow 2019). Interestingly (or alarmingly), this wage discrepancy increases with increasing rank; while the gender wage gap was only 8 per cent at the level of Lecturer and 9 per cent among Assistant Professors, it jumped to 17 per cent among full professors (Snyder, de Brey, and Dillow 2019). Furthermore, despite the differing workplace trends at public and private institutions discussed earlier, it is notable that public and private institutions are remarkably similar when it comes to gender wage gaps. Among faculty at 4-year private institutions, the gender wage gap of 23 per cent was only marginally higher than at 4-year public institutions (21%) (Snyder, de Brey, and Dillow 2019). Research also indicates that the shift toward precarious employment is also gendered, “with academic women typically over-represented in precarious academic employment and under-represented in continuing positions and vice versa for academic men” (Stringer et al. 2018).

Precarity and mental health issues within academia are also racialised. In 2016–2017, 15 per cent of UK academic staff were black or minority ethnic (HESA 2018). In the US, private for-profit universities score high on ethnic diversity; whereas the overall percentage of BIPOC faculty in US public and non-profit institutions ranges from 21 to 24 per cent, this number jumps to 30 per cent among private for-profit 4-year institutions and 40 per cent among for-profit two-year institutions (Snyder, de Brey, and Dillow 2019). It is noteworthy that diversity is highest at precisely the category of universities with the lowest rates of tenure and overall employment stability. Furthermore, while the overall number of BIPOC faculty at US and UK institutions is roughly representative of the overall populations of the two nations, the nationwide numbers obscure a high degree of variability between regions and institutions (U.S. Census Bureau 2018; Office for National Statistics 2012). They also obscure important trends such as low entrance rates of working class students in elite academies and the importance of a diverse faculty in ensuring the academic success of students of colour, who experience a range of social effects linked to marginalisation and racism and leave all levels of academia at above-average rates (Wei et al. 2010; Cokley et al. 2017). The aggregate figures also conceal a more nuanced breakdown of the role and job security of people of colour within the faculty.

Diversity-related issues are of particular relevance to development studies, a field that is primarily concerned with the wellbeing of people of non-white cultures and races. For instance, the broad and growing literature on student placements in the global South has raised concerns about the lack of race education and sensitisation among white students of development studies. Also termed “work-study abroad courses” or “international experiential learning,” these placements are the most common form of collaboration between academia and development NGOs. They fall within the broader ambit of study abroad programmes but are geared specifically toward providing practical experience in development contexts. Unlike other study abroad or international volunteer programmes, these partnerships by nature involve collaboration between academics (the students and their instructor(s)) and the NGO in which they are placed. However, the collaborating

NGO is often a grassroots NGO based in the global South rather than an international group based in North America.

The orientation, benefits, and shortcomings of student placements have been critically examined by numerous scholars (Thomas and Luba 2018; Tiessen and Kumar 2013; Tiessen and Huish 2014; Epprecht 2004; Charania 2011). For example, Tiessen and Huish (2014) offer frameworks and strategies for addressing ethical issues in diverse development contexts and argue that this form of collaboration should strive for the reflexive transformation of student participants. Epprecht (2004) offers a full descriptive history of the development of work-study abroad programmes as well as a critical analysis of ethical issues. As outlined in this special issue, Lepore, Hall, and Tandon (forthcoming), through the K4C Consortium, are committed to a decolonising approach to knowledge creation in contemporary education systems that remain dominated by a “Eurocentric epistemology that stipulates what knowledge is and how it is produced and validated based on particular conventions and practices” (Lepore, Hall, and Tandon forthcoming, 4). Charania (2011) and Thomas and Luba (2018) use post-colonial and critical race theories to arrive at similar conclusions: there are a variety of ethical concerns related to sending predominantly white and privileged youth to learn in developing country contexts. Without proper training in racial issues, power imbalances, and political structures, such programmes can risk conceptualising global development and social justice actions as activities that take place elsewhere (Charania 2011), while perpetuating paternalistic attitudes and unconscious racial biases (Epprecht 2004; Thomas and Luba 2018).

While the responsibility for sensitising students to issues related to whiteness and race is by no means the exclusive prerogative of faculty of colour, such faculty members bring to their work perspectives and knowledge that are inaccessible to their white counterparts. In doing so, they help reimagine “the politically democratic and socially transformative possibilities of higher education” in multiracial nations and a globalised world (Hamer and Lang 2015, 906). Faculty of colour are instrumental in validating the experiences of students of colour and assisting their participation and success within traditionally white institutions. For all of these reasons and many others, the heavy toll that neoliberal trends in the academy and the broader economy has taken on communities of colour is a concern for academics of all racial and cultural groups.

The road ahead

Institutional trends within the academy raise a number of questions when it comes to calls for increased collaboration with other civil society organisations. Is an emphasis on partnerships beyond the academy likely to promote more holistic ways of working or will it exacerbate trends toward unmanageable workloads and the stress and anxiety that come with them? What are the effects on the mental and financial wellbeing when an increasingly precarious workforce is expected to take on additional tasks? If collaborations are already few and far between, is it reasonable to expect an increase in healthy, productive partnerships in a climate of increasing precarity and casualisation within the academy? Within a competitive academic regime of performance assessment and job insecurity, what measures will enable human connectedness and collegiality to thrive? What institutional supports can be put in place to encourage innovation and dedication when

it comes to partnerships beyond the academy? How will such supports address specific issues related to gender and diversity?

The discussion presented here raises more questions than it attempts to answer. In doing so, I hope it makes clear that the complex array of institutional conditions that compels academics and other civil society organisations toward greater levels of collaboration simultaneously generates conditions that conspire against the success of such partnerships. Literature on changing workplace trends in the academy points to the defining force of university culture – both within individual institutions and across the sector as a whole – when it comes to determining the capacity of researchers to pursue innovative forms of research and collaboration. Collaboration is part of a suite of activities that respond to shifting economic conditions; while important, these activities must not overshadow the ongoing need for academics to engage politically within and beyond the academy through unions, political parties, or other organisations that uphold labour rights and demand improved working conditions for colleagues both at home and abroad.

Despite the value of partnerships in achieving more with less and maximising “value” for both parties, there are clear dangers in uncritically accepting the complex and overlapping imperatives brought on by current economic conditions and paradigms. While cross-sectoral partnerships can no doubt have important positive impacts on development outcomes, they must be undertaken with ongoing attention to the wellbeing of academic workers and their practitioner counterparts as this wellbeing ultimately determines the long-term success and productivity of collaborations. In particular, it is clear that collaborations must be synergistic, multiplying the strengths of overextended professionals on both sides, rather than exacerbating workloads and managerial systems that academic workers report finding both punitive and stress-inducing. Collaborations must not constitute an increased workload but rather a shift within existing activities, facilitated by recognition and support for this important work at the institutional level. As examples of such support, academic institutions can:

- provide key resources – time, financial support, and physical and online space – for collaborative work and partnership development beyond the academy;
- integrate collaborative work, including its “softer” aspects, into tenure and promotion frameworks;
- establish mechanisms for contract academic staff to share in the benefits of ongoing collaborations and long-term collaborative work;
- support the continuity of collaborations in the face of high turnover of contract staff;
- shift the matrix of values and rewards away from individual achievement and toward collaborative work by recognising and rewarding this work in performance assessment frameworks, whether at the institutional level or higher, such as in the UK’s Research Excellence Framework (REF) or Carnegie designations (that now includes a community engagement classification (Campus Compact [n.d.](#))); and
- respect collective bargaining processes and union demands for better workplace conditions that promote worker retention and wellbeing; take steps to reverse past decisions that have proven damaging to workers and their job security.

Collaboration is about relationships and relationships are about people – the wellbeing of whom is the ultimate goal of the development field. Erosion of unions, labour standards,

and job security within higher learning institutions of the global north is of particular concern for an academic discipline aimed at improving human rights and workplace conditions everywhere. Gary Hall's critical analysis of the socially-weakened form of capitalism known as the sharing economy emphasised current conditions in the university because "the university provides one of the few spaces in post-industrial society where the forces of contemporary neoliberalism's anti-public sector regime are still being overtly opposed" (Hall 2016). Indeed, many of the works cited throughout this article constitute both critical analysis of and resistance to conditions of exploitation within the academy. In a similar vein, the task of fostering new partnerships must not serve as a substitute for questioning and pushing back against the conditions that generate mounting pressure to create them in the first place. This includes the hard work of organising and advocating for better workplace conditions, for gender equality, for diverse workforces and for levels of job security and workload that enable all workers to live healthy, productive, and satisfying lives.

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