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A leap of faith: overcoming doubt to do good when policy is absurd

Fiona Margetts ^a, Stephen Jonathan Whitty ^b and Bronte van der Hoorn ^c

^aSchool of Business, University of Southern Queensland, Toowoomba, Australia; ^bSchool of Business, University of Southern Queensland, Springfield, Australia; ^cSchool of Built Environment, University of Technology Sydney, Sydney, Australia

ABSTRACT

University institutional policy is poorly understood. While policy is required by law for universities to accept funding and is revered for articulating values, mitigating risk, and guiding practice, policy is frequently considered absurd and resisted in practice. This is the policy-practice divide. To gain a better understanding of this divide and the nature of the resistance, we asked policy actors to describe their experiences with policy development, implementation, enactment, and review. We asked: *If policy is absurd, what is the nature of the relationship between policy and university management, and how do those who enact policy deal with this absurdity?* We discovered that university management has an infinitely regressive self-fulfilling relationship with policy because they intentionally exclude the workforce from policy-making and see themselves as solely responsible for policy interpretation and implementation. However, when Kierkegaard's concepts of absurdity, faith, hope, and doubt are applied to policy actors' experiences, we see that resistance can be characterised positively as a 'leap of faith', where those who enact policy overcome their doubts and reinterpret it to achieve some semblance of good. This is an unintended consequence for managerialism, as deliberately creating a policy-practice divide solicits resistive 'good' practices from policy actors.

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Introduction

Policy is absurd! This paraphrasing of both Ball (2021) and Webb (2014) is simultaneously declarative, imperative, and exclamatory, as it expresses the problem encountered when discussing the subject and nature of an acknowledged policy-practice divide within the Anglo (North America, United Kingdom, New Zealand, and Australia) university sector that suffers the embrace of managerialism (Marginson 2013a; Shattock, Horvath, and Marginson 2019; Deem 2004; Croucher and Lacy 2020). The Camusian subtext of the statement infers that 'we rational beings are the problem', as it is we who experience the tension between yearning for an explanation as to what policy is and the indifference policy has to satisfy this

CONTACT Fiona Margetts  fiona.margetts2@usq.edu.au  School of Business, University of Southern Queensland, Toowoomba, Queensland 4350, Australia

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yearning. It is a plea then, to resolve the situation – please! It also conveys our strong emotions and feelings about the complex and political nature of policy, particularly in the education (Ball 2015b; Ball et al. 2011; Ball 1998, 2003; Clarke 2012; Taylor 1997) and higher education sectors (Meek et al. 2010; Marginson 1992; Trowler 2002a; Raaper 2017; Marginson 2013b; Gale 1994).

The perception of policy absurdity is influenced by the current state of higher education, which is characterized by its global, regulated, market-driven, and performance-based nature. Reputable reviews of the history and present condition of the Australian higher education sector (T. Gale 1999; Marginson and Considine 2000; Marginson 2011; Croucher and Lacy 2020), all indicate that neoliberalism overlooks how universities contribute to society's common good. This 'good' emphasizes the importance of promoting the overall well-being of society. Moreover, in response to universities' corporatization, the Anglo university sector's leadership has embraced a form of managerialism referred to as 'new public management' (NPM) and 'new managerialism' (NM) (Deem and Brehony 2005; Rowlands and Rowlands 2017; Parker, Martin-Sardesai, and Guthrie 2023), with negative impacts on the identity and well-being of the academy (Winter, Taylor, and Sarros 2000; Morley 2001; Naidoo and Jamieson 2005; Anderson 2008; Kinman 2014; Warren 2017; Connell 2019; Bottrell and Keating 2019; Bosetti and Heffernan 2021; Wheeldon, Whitty, and van der Hoorn 2022b, 2022a).

In the quest to find meaning in policy, thereby answering the question of what is policy to 'policy actors' (Ball et al. 2011, 626) and reconcile ourselves with the 'policy is absurd' declaration, Ball (2021) invites us – calling on Camus – to *engage* with the absurdity of policy. We believe that this appeal to Camus requires investigation. According to Camus (1955), absurdity is an experience that manifests from discordance. To experience the absurd, mix one intrinsically irrational world with one person attempting to make sense of it. Absurdity is therefore located in the tension between our yearning for unity and the indifference the world has to this yearning, as the world is uninterested in our theories (Camus 1955). To *engage* with the absurd Camus (1955) offers three choices, of which he recommends the third. First, commit physical suicide; life is too much. Second, take a leap of faith, which for Camus is a form of philosophical suicide because it rejects both physical suicide and rationality. Third, abandon faith in favour of acknowledging the impotence of our theories and rebel against them; embrace anxiety and live with mystery.

Tragically, some academics have committed physical suicide as a means of dealing with the absurdity of university policy (Grove 2019; Bhardwa 2018). However, our enquiry aims to understand how academics deal and continue to live with policy despite its absurdity. The existing literature suggests that individuals who have learned to live with the absurdity of policy do so by rationally resisting it, as proposed by Camus' third choice. We instead examine Kierkegaard's (1986) second choice – a leap of faith – as a nuanced perspective on how policy actors respond to policy absurdity through resistance. In this study, we use Kierkegaard's concepts of faith and hope as an analytical tool to understand how these concepts enable an individual to overcome doubt and transform an absurd situation to achieve good. By adopting a Kierkegaardian perspective, we can explore a new approach for addressing the absurdity of policy. By allowing themselves to

act in accordance with their convictions, our emphasis on faith and hope offers a novel perspective on how policy actors resist implementing absurd policy.

This study aims to contribute to empirical research on institutional policy-making in higher education worldwide. It provides a new Kierkegaardian framework for understanding the relationship between university management and policy as an infinitely regressive self-fulfilling structure, where absurd policy is, in reality, absurd management. The study reveals that those who enact policy deal with its absurdity by viewing it as a faith-based structure, which enables them to transform their absurd policy experiences to produce something good. Our study findings indicate that similar circumstances are encountered globally, as demonstrated in studies conducted in the United Kingdom (Maton 2005; Evans et al. 2019), Ireland (Skerritt et al. 2021), Israel (Sapir 2021) and Europe (Jayadeva, Brooks, and Lažetić 2021; Stavrou 2016; Raaper 2017; Peruzzo 2020).

We begin by describing the institutional policy context and how the policy-practice divide manifests in terms of dissonance and cognitive dissonance. We found that policy enactors prefer policy-practice harmony over division, but they can only live with policy in a managerialised university if policy and practice are inherently dissonant. Next, we establish the theoretical framework for our Kierkegaard lens. Then, according to our study's methodology, we present our findings regarding how policy appears to those who enact it, as well as how they relate to and behave in its presence. Finally, our discussion synthesises our findings to reveal the nature of the relationship between policy and university management, as well as how those who enact policy deal with its absurdity.

For the purposes of our study, 'implementation' refers to when what is prescribed in policy is either actually carried out or planned to be so, whereas 'enactment' refers to what was really done in light of what was prescribed (Ball, Maguire, and Braun 2012; Snyder, Bolin, and Zumwalt 1992).

Institutional policy context

Institutional policy (hereafter 'policy') refers to policies that are established internally by universities. Meta policies (also known as policy frameworks or 'policies on policy') provide for the development, implementation and review of policy (Freeman 2015, 2018; Carlson and Freeman 2019; Devlin and O'shea 2011; Clark, Griffin, and Martin 2012; Rainford 2021; Freeman 2012, 2014c). These meta policies are mandated by the Australian higher education regulator (Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency 2021) and define the institutional policy instruments, their classification and application, specify approval authorities, and establish the 'cycle for policy development and review' (Freeman, Hatwell, and Jensen 2013, 9).

The policy-practice divide

The policy-practice divide refers to the multifaceted and political nature of policymaking. Many scholars have written about this divide, aiming to identify and address the issues that arise from it (Harvey and Kosman 2014; Freeman 2014b, 2014a; Taylor 1997; Trowler 2002b; McCaffery 2018; McNay 2005; Becher and Trowler 2001; Morley 2010; Skerritt et al. 2021; Baak et al. 2021; Singh, Heimans, and Glasswell 2014).

In higher education, the policy-practice divide is typically characterized by the exclusion of academic staff from the policy-making process (Sabri 2010) as well as their resistance to policy (Jayadeva, Brooks, and Lažetić 2021; Raaper 2016; Becher and Trowler 2001; Petersen 2009). However, we argue that this characterization oversimplifies the relationship between policy and policy actors by suggesting that academics have a moral obligation and ‘ought’ to implement policy, and that any resistance is inherently wrong.

We challenge this characterisation of the policy-practice divide and emphasise the need for a more nuanced understanding of policy implementation and resistance in higher education. We propose that there may be instances in which policy actors view their resistance as a legitimate expression of their values.

Dissonance and cognitive dissonance in higher education

Dissonance

The Oxford English Dictionary (n.d.) defines dissonance as an ‘inharmonious or harsh sound or combination of sounds’ or discord – a ‘Want of concord or harmony (between things); disagreement, incongruity.’ This discord is experienced in emotional, social, political, ideological, epistemological, cognitive and/or philosophical forms (Fisher-Ari, Kavanagh, and Martin 2017). But how cognitive dissonance is resolved is of interest to this study, and it is one of the most enduring theories in the history of social psychology (Cooper 2019; Gawronski 2012).

Cognitive dissonance

According to cognitive dissonance theory, people adjust their belief systems to align their behaviours such that they reduce dissonance; people have an aversion for dissonance and a desire for harmony. If an individual is placed in a situation that conflicts with their personal values they will engage one or all of the following cognitive dissonance reduction techniques: (1) change a dissonance-creating cognition; (2) add cognitions that are consistent with the behaviour; or (3) trivialise or reduce the importance of a belief (Festinger 1957). Any or all these techniques adjust an individual’s attitude towards the dissonance. In doing so they take a leap towards harmony to reduce their psychological discomfort.

Cognitive dissonance in higher education

The everydayness of higher education is fraught with cognitive dissonance generated by the corporatization agenda, regardless of geographic location. There are many examples of this. For instance, the top five universities in North America and the United Kingdom showcase their academic stars, who are largely white men, while also pledging their dedication to policies of equity and inclusion (Stack 2020). In a broader sense, populism and unrealistic goals are frequently found in university prospectus and slogans, which confuses prospective students (Saukh and Chumak 2018). Due to the ambiguity of the professorial chair role, academics are reluctant to take it on and feel torn about their managerial and academic responsibilities (Freeman, Karkouti, and Ward 2020). Some academics inflate grades to increase student retention and save their programs, which leaves them with feelings of guilt (Hassan, Mohamed, and Nelson 2020). While

universities promote online proctoring technologies (timed assessments) as neutral and convenient, academics are aware that these tools support punishment-based pedagogies, (Logan 2021). Academics likewise struggle with the conflict between their positive self-perception as enthusiastic scholars and the unfavourable stereotypes about them that institutions do nothing to change (Sommerfeldt and Kent 2020).

To continue the list of cognitive dissonance-inducing conditions: academics who study sustainability are pressured to travel by plane in an effort to improve research outcomes (Schrems and Upham 2020; Bjorkdahl and Duharte 2022); academics who implement decolonization policies in African universities are compelled, against their humanitarian values, to internationalise their programs for commercial gain (Bamberger et al. 2019); academics must work with policy that prioritises grades while they value learning (Alghazo and Pilotti 2021); and while policy mandates the use of textbooks, the academics believe textbooks are unnecessary (Zaidi 2020). It appears that dealing with cognitive dissonance is the lived experience of policy actors, from diverse areas, and throughout many nations.

Cognitive dissonance in Australian higher education

Organizational change is a significant trigger for dissonance in the Australian higher education sector. Despite a university's high external rankings, academic staff react negatively to mandated behavioural changes (Lewis 1994). And when expected managerial behaviours clash with an individual's ideals, dissonance increases, particularly for leaders with a relational leadership style (Patton 2021). Due to the influence of corporate managerial practises and neoliberal ideology, some Australian university deans and school heads experience daily emotional contradictions between their beliefs and role expectations (Bosetti and Heffernan 2021).

Policy – as a dissonance-creating construct

It is not that policy is *described* as dissonant when its language lacks agreement with practice, it is that policy *is* a dissonance creating construct (Imbeau 2009). For those who enact policy, policy feels unresolvable and therefore absurd, which creates a cognitive dissonance that is subsequently somehow resolved (Campbell 2011) or even left unresolved (Davies 2000), effectively leading to acts of resistance (de Gooyert et al. 2016). Survival within a managerialized university is, in other words, a political act of resistance on the part of academics; our study reveals the nature and manner of this resistance.

The degree of dissonance that remains in the system is determined by how individual academics and the academy as a whole respond to the dissonance emanating from the corporatization of universities and their deviation from their original intention to serve the public good. How this dissonance manifests and how it affects individuals within the academy is the subject of our research question: *If policy is absurd (creates a policy-practice divide) what is the nature of the relationship between policy and university management, and how do those who enact policy deal with this absurdity?*

Theoretical framework

We propose that to address this research question and to reveal new insights, a Kierkegaardian lens offers a unique perspective. This lens employs the concepts of

faith, the leap of faith, hope, doubt, and the absurd. Faith is seen as an individualistic choice, a decision made by the will, and experienced in the context of the absurd and doubt. The 'leap of faith' is the choice made to believe over one's doubts, a means of overcoming doubt and transforming the absurd into the non-absurd. Hope is a personal and subjective aspiration that is centred on the *possibility* of 'the good,' which represents the significant values that motivate people to strive for a fulfilling and meaningful life. Doubt is an inherent aspect of faith and not separate from it, a sensation that arises from a sense of incomplete or inadequate comprehension of the object of one's faith. And the absurd is what an individual cannot rationally justify or explain, but it is through faith that one can transform the absurd into the non-absurd. In short, faith is the act of accepting something *as-if* it is true in the face of absurdity, and it enables one to overcome doubt and hold onto the hope of the good.

On faith

The faith which we aim to observe is not merely the reliance that one places upon God, as Aquinas (1950) has written. Although the method may be similar, it is rather an act of choice, a decision made by an individual. Saint Augustine (Swindal n.d.) conceives faith as 'an act of the intellect determined not by the reason, but by the will'. Aquinas (1950: II – II. q.1. art.4) characterizes faith as 'the intellect assents to something [gives permission for something to be so], not through being sufficiently moved to this assent by its proper object, but through an act of choice'. He states that 'faith requires that what is to be believed be proposed to the believer' by themselves or others. From an epistemological perspective then, any truth claims about policy, in terms of what policy does or what it is for, requires the individual or others to say or infer what policy is, and for the individual to *choose* to place their trust in that.

Kierkegaard's (1986) reinforces the concept of faith as an individualistic choice. He refers to the decision to believe over one's doubts as a 'leap of faith'. He argues that faith can only be experienced in the context of the absurd and doubt. For him the absurd is different to that of Camus, such that the absurd is that which the individual cannot rationally justify. The absurd is the impossible made possible, akin to winning the lottery without the purchase of a ticket. It is through the means, power, or possibilities brought about by the absurd that one arrives at, or takes the leap of faith. Therefore, without the existence of the absurd, faith cannot be actualised or experienced as a means of overcoming doubt.

In order to explain the individualism inherent in the leap of faith, Kierkegaard's (1986) considers the biblical narrative where God directs Abraham to sacrifice his beloved son Isaac. This directive causes great fear in Abraham, as it contradicts his deep love and devotion for Isaac; nevertheless, after much contemplation, Abraham overcomes his doubts and chooses to obey, only to be stayed by an angel. Kierkegaard's (1986) argues that Abraham could only choose to perform this unfathomable and incommunicable action because he took a leap of faith, which for him meant setting aside his doubts and ethical reasoning in favour of a higher telos. Faith is therefore situational (motivated by the absurd), subjective, and aligned with an individual's beliefs and values. Through taking a leap of faith, one can overcome doubt and transform the absurd into the non-

absurd. Faith is the capacity to comprehend, for oneself, what others cannot rationally explain, nor can one rationally explain it to others.

Ontologically and epistemologically speaking, faith is *the act of accepting* something *as-if* it is true (Beyleveld and Ziche 2015). This acceptance is subjective and directed towards objects or entities in the present moment. Faith is therefore a product of our construction, influenced by our own authority and the testimony of others, be it a prophet or the nostalgic longing for education as a public good. In short, we assert our faith by taking a leap of faith to overcome doubt in the face of the absurd. More poetically, we weave our faith from the fabric of our hope.

On hope

‘To relate oneself expectantly to the possibility of the good is to hope’ (Kierkegaard 1998, 249). True hope is not the same as optimism; instead, it must be attained by going through despair, facing hardship and adversity (Kierkegaard 1998). Since we cannot specifically name the object of hope, we can only say that it exists outside of time and is focused on the possibility of ‘the good’, which for Kierkegaard is not a predetermined or objective ideal, but rather a personal and subjective aspiration that people must work towards to live what they perceive to be a fulfilling and meaningful life. Hope then, is a form of belief that *this* (situation) too will eventually come to pass – whatever *this* situation is (Wood 2012) – and then the good can be realised. Nietzsche provides another way to grasp hope, characterising it as ‘the rainbow over the cascading stream of life’ (Bidmon 2016, 188). By ‘rainbow’, he suggests something elusive, a brief apparition of an otherness; ‘a good’ that keeps withdrawing itself from our grasp. Therefore, hope is the ultimate prospective emotion, focused on imagining a situation beyond its current conditions (Scioli 2020).

On doubt

When the believer has faith, the absurd is not the absurd — faith transforms it, but in every weak moment it is again more or less absurd to him. The passion of faith is the only thing which masters the absurd — if not, then faith is not faith in the strictest sense, but a kind of knowledge (Kierkegaard 1967, 7). Doubt or moments of weakness are inherent aspects of faith and not separate from it. Faith is blind and not true if it does not hold on to doubt while simultaneously overcoming it. Doubt is not equivalent to disbelief or mistrust of one’s faith, but rather it is a sensation that arises from a sense of incomplete or inadequate comprehension of the object of one’s faith (Wood 2012).

Methodology

We chose a qualitative case study approach as this is useful in exploring complex phenomenon (Creswell 2007; Yin 2003). The case study is also frequently used to enhance understanding of the policy-making process in the public sector (Molloy 2010), and is applied in higher education research projects (Bennett and Lumb 2019; Cai 2018; Josephine and Nyland 2018; Yumusak et al. 2015) and studies on discourse in

Table 1. Interview questions.

Question
From your perspective, what is the ultimate goal of having this policy?
Do you and people in your role agree with this goal? Why/why not?
How did you come to hear about the policy? What was your initial response? Why?
How do you feel your peers in a similar role to yours feel about the policy? Why do you think they feel this?
Have you had the opportunity to influence the development and implementation of the policy? If so, how?
Do you consider the implementation of the policy has been a success? Why/why not? What is the evidence for this?
Were there challenges in developing/implementing/using this policy? If so, what were they?
Have you found yourself either actively wanting to support or resist the policy? If so, please describe and explain why and how you supported/resisted.
Are there ways you see the policy being actively supported or resisted? If so, please describe, and explain why you think this is the case.
Who has supported or resisted the policy? What is the evidence of this? Why do you think this is the case?
Does this policy help you in your job/role/situation? Why/why not?

the higher education context (Bowen 1992; Peacock 2013; Ramsay et al. 1998; Sellar et al. 2010).

Due to the depth of enquiry afforded by semi-structured interview (Huff 2008; Shepherd 2015; Leavy 2017), 17 interviews were undertaken with policy actors, ranging from the chair of a key governance group to various deanery roles, staff from a learning and teaching support unit, and professional staff involved in implementation of policy. Studies in higher education and policy frequently use semi-structured interviews (Gale 2003; Rytberg and Geschwind 2017; Stelitano 2018). Informed written consent was obtained from all participants prior to commencement of the study. Each participated in a recorded interview guided by the analytic stages of discourse (Alldred and Burman 2005; Peacock 2014; Sharp and Richardson 2001).

The first set of questions gathered data about role title, role fit within the broader organisational structure and involvement in the selected policy development and implementation. Following that were a series of semi-structured questions that are summarised in Table 1, and the interview closed with an open question that prompted participants to reflect upon the interview and share anything else they considered pertinent to the research.

Interviews were transcribed and, consistent with human ethics approval, participant data was anonymized; it is confirmed that these alterations have not distorted the scholarly meaning. Inductive thematic analysis of the transcripts allowed for the complex and nuanced nature of policy and the policy-making process (Braun and Clarke 2006). The qualitative tool Nvivo allowed for detailed analysis of interview data. The generated

Table 2. Policy actor coding.

Policy Actor Code	Title	Descriptor	Examples
SLn	Senior Leader	Direct positional influence on development, review and implementation of policy	Chair of governing body, head of school, faculty manager, pro vice-chancellor
MMn	Middle Manager	Indirect influence on development, review and implementation of policy	Associate dean, associate director
FLn	Frontline staff	Minimal influence on policy development, and review and are either directly or indirectly involved in implementing policy	Coordinators, analysts

nodes were grouped into six themes, which appear in the findings, and this informed a deductive analysis of participant data. The participants ('policy actors') do most of the speaking from this point on, and coding provided and described in Table 2 is used to signify their voice.

Most of the time we have paraphrased policy actor comments, but sometimes we quote them directly in '...' quotation marks to express their exact position on the matter.

The six themes constitute the actors' accounts of their experiences of policy in terms of how policy *appears* to them. Each theme includes how they experience policy and how they subsequently comport themselves in the presence of policy. Where possible we place these accounts in dialogue with existing policy perspectives.

Findings

This study identified six main themes regarding policy: 1) policy is regarded as valuable for its *potential* to align values, articulate expectations, set standards, ensuring safety, and bringing about positive change; 2) influence on policy is role dependent, with senior leaders having more influence than middle and frontline actors; 3) policy implementation is considered the responsibility of senior leaders and middle management; 4) policy development and management roles are inextricably linked; 5) policy dissonance prompts introspection and value alignment among policy actors; and 6) policy actors resist due to learned ignorance and conflicting values.

Theme 1: policy has value

Our policy actors agree that policy could align values or provide a 'reference point' for value articulation (SL1). It can be an 'expression of aspiration', an articulation of 'expectations and standards', endeavours 'to keep everyone safe' (MM6) and 'supports good practice' (FL3). Policy is a 'construct ... open to interpretation and different uses' (FL3) and its review processes can be used to 'hopefully change practice and people and culture and ways of doing things' (SL1), implying that policy has the potential (hope) to bring about beneficial change for some good.

Theme 2: policy influence is role dependent

Our policy actors revealed that their influence on policy was role dependent – either their formal role or role in the committee approval process. One middle manager expressly observed that their capacity to influence policy had reduced since ceasing to serve on a key governance group. Others confirmed they were able to participate in policy-making processes by virtue of their role, describing their role as one of 'liaison' or 'wheeling and dealing' (MM3) or 'negotiation' and 'influencing' (MM4), while MM9 described it as 'navigation and negotiation'. Reflecting on their capacity to influence the process, middle managers stated:

... just reflecting on my own experience, [moving up the management levels], the higher you sort of go up that ladder, the more strategic your view becomes (MM1).

... there probably does need to be a bit more work around that implementation space. And I guess this is where [the MM role] and that middle layer ... is where their power lies and where

their ability lies. You know, we can make this useful. We can be the people that drive. . . . this is what it means, and this is how we can use it . . . as that tool for good, I guess. And I don't feel like we're there with it. So maybe – maybe – that's a missed opportunity (MM9).

I think by definition, in the [MM] role and any leadership role, you're an advocate or a champion for the policy procedure (MM4).

Senior leaders, however, appear to have a disproportionate influence in setting the scope of policy and influencing policy outcomes. As observed by one middle manager 'some stakeholders' views carry more weight' and their influence is ' . . . not always in a good way' (MM8). While ' . . . sometimes it feels like it's at the whim of an individual's perspective' (MM8).

Staff who do not hold positions in the committee structure or who are at school level notice their limited ability to influence policy. And frontline actors are particularly reliant on senior leaders to serve as their guide on policy.

I probably have no clue unless it was something that was communicated via . . . the [redacted] . . . and even if there are processes where there's a framework . . . I'm not necessarily going to engage with something I have to look up, so it's good that a communicate is sent out (FL2).

Theme 3: policy implementation is the role of senior leaders and middle management

Academic staff at school level also believe that it is the function and role of senior leaders to channel policy to those responsible for implementing it.

So, when something's new, when there's a new policy – particularly – I think it's critical that that work [senior leaders interpreting policy] happens with the people on the ground who are really primarily responsible for seeing the outworking of it (MM7).

Some senior leaders and middle managers agree that it is they who have a responsibility to implement policy.

It's in discourse. The [redaction] committee, which I chair, which is part of [redaction], that policy has been discussed. It's been talked about. The policy has been approved. It hasn't been forgotten . . . it's still very much in front of centre of people's mind[s] that we need to implement it (SL1).

Theme 4: policy development and management roles are inextricable

Several middle managers acknowledged that policy and their role in middle management/leadership are inextricable. Managers were seen as 'enactors of different policies' (MM9) and those who need 'to pay more attention to policy' – more than they did when working solely as an academic. 'So, because you do have to follow process in those roles to ensure that things happen as they should, it does bring a different focus to the way you engage in a university' (MM9). Reinforcing policy is a way a manager can demonstrate their loyalty and engagement with the leadership, and middle managers also displayed informal power in the policy-making process. They were able to 'filter' or interpret

information to determine ‘what things are helpful back at the school level’ because ‘sometimes in schools things happen and you don’t really understand why it’s happened’ (MM9). Furthermore, middle managers played a role in ‘helping to bridge that gap’ to ‘have impact on the work and life of an academic ... and what that means for their courses and for programs and for quality ...’ (MM9).

Despite this display of power, policy actors in middle management roles agreed they did not hold formal power. Their ‘power’ and ‘abilities’ lay in their mandate to implement policy (MM9). For middle managers without formal power, they interpret policy as a ‘quality lens’, and perceived it as a tool for providing ‘oversight’ ‘to facilitate and navigate’ internal processes (MM9). This participant saw their role as ‘facing up’ and ‘facing down’, while balancing the ‘push and pull’ to ‘work with that rather than stressing anybody out or being resistant to change as well’ (MM9).

So, you’re kind of looking up to whole university policies and procedures and change and direction and then you’re helping to kind of apply that or help people understand this is what’s being looked at at senior leadership levels and this is how we have to then consider things as we’re going through, in my case, [redacted] processes with people. So, it’s kind of a conduit role, I guess as well. And you’re there to represent the faculty and also, I guess, support the work of the [role redacted] of that faculty (MM9).

Following policy ‘to the letter of the law’ without considering ‘nuances’ may also create issues such as ‘an inequity for students’ (MM4). Undivided reliance on policy is also seen as taking ‘the easy way’ or shows ‘an insecurity with people’s knowledge bases’ as

... sometimes it’s not there, and you have to be able to act appropriately, of course, and sometimes you don’t have a policy that’s telling you step by step what to do. You’re interpreting that policy within your delegation (SL5).

Simply put, many of our interviewed policy actors would not have their positions and privileges in the university setting were it not for the texts and discourse of policy, both of which are somewhat divorced from practice.

Theme 5: policy dissonance prompts introspection and value alignment

While policies can cause dissonance, according to one middle manager, they can also serve as a catalyst for reflection on personal values and an examination of how well they mesh with role responsibilities.

When referring to the policy under investigation they acknowledged that it

... creates less dissonance for me in my role. But I think it’s important to understand that we’re often ... required to support things where there might be a bit of minor dissonance where ... if it was left up to us, we probably wouldn’t want to support it (MM6).

Similar to this middle manager, policy actors may engage in an introspective process to examine their values and beliefs and determine whether they are consistent with the policies that their role requires them to support. Therefore, by responding to the introspection – prompted by policy dissonance – policy actors can act in ways that are consistent with their own values and advance what, in their perspective, is a ‘good’ outcome.

Theme 6: policy actors resist due to learned ignorance and conflicting values

For our policy actors, resistance to policy was due to two main reasons: learned ignorance of policy (FL2) and experiencing policy as absurd (SL6). At the school level policy is only referenced when necessary or when there is an issue to resolve. 'It's kind of like a backup thing that if we get in trouble' (MM7). As Ball (2015a) puts it, resistance in the form of refusal might be *deliberate*, and as such policy can be resisted 'up to a reasonable level in the university' (SL6), and by employing it deliberately out of context to oppose change or to support a specific position, as in a political sense. Policy can thus be deliberately 'put through a particular filter' and academic staff will interpret their practice through that filter 'because they are defending the way they do things' (F1). Staff can 'bypass and mutiny against policy' (SL6) and 'go rogue and do whatever they like' (MM2), especially if policy is 'creating difficulty' (MM4) and not aligned with their notion of the good; staff may feel 'managed by policy or constrained by policy' and 'resist policy in terms of its intent' or 'twist it around to their own means' (MM4).

Discussion

We believe our findings help answer our question: *If policy is absurd what is the nature of the relationship between policy and university management, and how do those who enact policy deal with this absurdity?*

The relationship between policy and management

Together, themes 2, 3, and 4 (policy influence is role dependent, policy implementation is the role of senior leaders and middle management, and policy development and management roles are inextricable) speak to the relationship between policy and university management, which put bluntly is:

Policy is absurd; ergo, university management is absurd

This highlights one of the required conditions for academics to survive at a managerialised university and is an extension of our opening statement. Our policy actors, many of whom are university managers, acknowledge that senior leadership and middle management, as well as other friendly staff they utilise to promote their efforts, have a disproportionate influence on policy-making. Furthermore, management believes it is their responsibility to function as policy translators and interpreters, implying that policy is created for them. As a result, university management is placed in a chicken-and-egg relationship with university policy, in which there is an infinitely regressive self-fulfilling relationship between what appears to be two separate objects/entities (university management and policy), when in fact these are two parts of the same thing. Butler (1878) reframed this type of relationship as, perhaps 'a hen is only an egg's way of making another egg'. By extension then, we can say that both the following statements are true: policy is only university management's way of making more university management; and university management is only policy's way of making more policy. But as we argue later, this is a necessary condition for universities, and academics, to survive neoliberalism.

When taken together, themes 1, 5, and 6 (policy has value or the potential for delivering the good, absurd policy creates dissonance that prompts introspection, and those who must enact absurd policy resist it) illustrate, through the Kierkegaardian lens of faith, hope, and doubt, how policy actors reconcile themselves with the absurdity of policy. They hold a deep commitment to the university sector and generally support the decisions made by university management. These actors have a great reverence for policy, seeing it as a potential means of achieving good. Despite experiencing cognitive dissonance from implementing absurd policies, they maintain a faith in the potential of policy and hope that its promises will eventually come to fruition.

When confronted with the task of reconciling the absurd demands of policy with its pragmatic implementation, our policy actors demonstrate their conviction and actualise their faith by taking a ‘leap of faith’ in the hope of achieving some good from the situation. They take this leap of faith with the expectation that if the university’s policies were aligned with practice, then it would serve the public good. Through activating this potential for action, policy actors are capable of reconciling the divide between policy and practice, thus – in their eyes – transforming the absurd into the good.

To unpack the nature or form of resistance policy actors apply, we consider how Arendt (1998, 201) regards resistance as a ‘potentiality for action’, a power which even if it foregoes violence is almost stronger than the force it faces. Ironically resistance is often considered passive, yet resistance ‘is one of the most active and efficient ways of action ever devised, because it cannot be countered by fighting . . . only by mass slaughter in which even the victor is defeated’ (Arendt 1998, 200–201). Jefferson (1787) coined this a *held in reserve power of revolution*, ‘what country can preserve its liberties if their rulers are not warned from time to time that their people preserve the spirit of resistance’. Our policy actors are not being passive. They are taking resistive action by working around policy.

... when you get down to school level and discipline levels, things may not be enacted exactly the way they should be [in policy] because the policy and procedure don’t work (MM2).

... [staff] will try and negotiate or navigate their way around it [policy] in some form. They don’t necessarily fall foul of the policy . . . but they’ll try and avoid it in whatever way that they need to . . . just so that they don’t have to deal with it because they just don’t agree with it (MM4).

Consistent then with the markers of methods for reducing cognitive dissonance (Festinger 1957), an individual’s acts of resistance to absurd policy is always situational, subjective, and dependent on how these align with of influence ‘their beliefs and values’ (MM4). Consequently, we contend that those who resist absurd policy do so by acting on their convictions, meaning they take a leap of faith in themselves to endeavour to achieve some potential good from the absurd situation.

So, if somebody is a really strong student advocate and they feel in their heart of hearts that a student is being disadvantaged by something in policy, they’ll maybe try and do something a bit under the radar to help that student (MM4).

Policy awakens faith, hope, and doubt

On faith

The policy enactors experience a strong cognitive dissonance when contending with policy, which they attempt to reconcile or explain away, despite doubts stemming from challenges in policy development, implementation, enactment and review, and a divide between policy and practice that is often acknowledged. Nonetheless, they retain faith in policy's potential, believing that it could work if development and review processes were made more inclusive, as it has the capacity to provide a '... shared understanding, shared expectations, [and] a sense of shared purpose and direction of what we need to do' (SL1).

I think we believe [in policy]. I don't think we quite understand the positive benefits of good, forward thinking, innovative policy that is written for students, that is easily understood by students, which gives them the clarity of thought that articulates their obligations and our obligations. What that would do for us in our role and for students in their student journey I think can't be underestimated (SL6).

However, these aspirations for policy are founded on faith, as a promise with the *potential* to be fulfilled, rather than being actualized through experiences, which indicates an intriguing ontological and epistemological framework of policy and a particular way of perceiving faith. Policy, for those who enact it, is not merely a textual or discursive entity that shapes objects and subjects (Ball 2015a); rather, in its absurd state, it is a faith-based construct that stimulates people's faith, hope, and doubt.

Someone will come back to me and say, 'We have to say no, because this [policy] says this [something SL6 considers absurd].' And then [I] go back and say, 'Well, actually I'm going to say yes, and I'm going to take responsibility for that. Because as you can see, outside of that one phrase [in policy], the intent of this procedure is to achieve this [subjective ethical good]. And I'm going to take responsibility and make a decision, because my interpretation of that is this [a way of achieving the ethical good]' (SL6).

On hope

In the accounts of many policy actors, we observe the interplay between hope and faith. Despite acknowledging the imperfections in the policy development and review process, these actors remain devoted to policy, holding onto their faith that policy will eventually fulfill its intended purpose. The *if-then* (faith-hope) sentiment around policy is that, *if* a benchmarking process has taken place and the policy has been collaboratively developed, and there were no reasons provided why the proposed change would not work, *then* a policy can be potentially relied upon and is 'good' (MM2). More broadly, policy production processes (Gale 2003) are supported 'because they've been through a consultation process, they've been approved by the respective authorities' (FL2) and are 'there for valid reasons', so policy will *then* 'support innovation' (FL3).

Two middle managers affirmed their faith and hope in policy, acknowledging that the 'majority' of university staff 'at all levels' are 'intelligent' and 'passionate about their work', 'with strong views' (MM3). For these managers, policy creates a space that allows for collegial (Ball and Olmedo 2013) and 'constructive debate', and expresses a hope for a future where there is 'robust discussion around the value of what's going to be put in the

document to negate the risk of creating more problems than are solved' and to ensure students are not 'disadvantaged' (MM4).

On doubt

Several policy actors expressed doubt regarding the current role and function of policy as they reflected on these interview moments.

So perhaps it goes back to - are policies relevant, are they current and what's the purpose they are serving, and is that purpose being served by the function of a policy as opposed to it being something else?' (MM8).

As with Bacchi (2000) they believe policy is a tool for change, yet its current application was questioned.

[I think about change in organizations as being driven from policy] yet we continue to talk about problems for years on end, then - something's not happening correctly in terms of policy driving change (FL3).

Conclusion

In recent years, the policy-practice divide in higher education has been the subject of much debate and discussion. Many scholars have argued that this divide is a deliberate strategy of the neoliberal managerial class to impose market-driven values on academics and to exclude them from policymaking (Winter, Taylor, and Sarros 2000; Marginson and Considine 2000). However, our investigation reveals that this exclusionary manoeuvre harbours a fatal flaw, a hamartia of the managerialist strategy, because when faced with policy absurdity academics respond by drawing on their faith and hope for a future in which their university will serve the public good, despite doubting the efficacy of current policies.

Our study has shown that policy actors have found a way to transcend the absurdity and impracticality of the policy-practice divide by taking a leap of faith, a political act of resistance that enables them to exercise their values or sense of the common good. This type of resistance is related to how they use faith to overcome cognitive dissonance caused by policy that, in practice, makes no sense to them. Yes, policy is absurd, but this type of absurdity is more Kierkegaardian than Camusian. They resist policy by exercising their 'potential for action,' and as such they exercise some control in their daily practice by transforming the absurd into something that leads them to the good. As a result, these acts of faith-based resistance are expressions of their hope.

Our claim then is that the managerialization of higher education has led to a situation where institutional policy can only exist as a faith-based structure. However, policy absurdity paradoxically provides an opportunity for academics to act in accordance with their convictions and academic values, and to resist neoliberal exploitation of universities. By taking a dialectical leap of faith, policy actors can transcend the policy-practice divide to achieve some semblance of good. This form of resistance should be seen as a form of political action against the current state of affairs in Anglo universities. Speaking hopefully, from a realm where absurdity reigns, we find it heartening to know

that there are still those who fight for the values and principles that make higher education truly meaningful.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors

Fiona Margetts is a higher education policy and project management specialist. She is an Association for Tertiary Education Management Fellow and a Member of the Australian Institute of Project Management and International Centre for Complex Project Management and Graduate of the Australian Institute of Company Directors. Her research interests lie in the relationship between project management and the policy-practice divide experienced in higher education.

Stephen Jonathan Whitty is an Associate Professor of project management who is interested in determining ‘how we can best organise work so that those who perform it flourish’. He takes a strong stance against ‘off-the-shelf’ approaches to work management and calls into question the value of much of what we consider management, arguing that the majority of it is self-serving and a burden on the workforce. Jon is passionate about incorporating philosophy into the research and doctoral experience in order to understand and derive new insights for management practice, as well as to facilitate a transformational learning experience for students, much as philosophy has transformed his own learning.

Bronte van der Hoorn research focuses on the lived experience of project management. She is also interested in teaching and learning scholarship, particularly the experiences of post-graduate students. Her research is informed by Continental philosophical perspectives, particularly those of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, and frequently employs arts-based approaches. She is also enthusiastic about the use of visualisation in research and education.

ORCID

Fiona Margetts  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6258-6575>

Stephen Jonathan Whitty  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3969-4516>

Bronte van der Hoorn  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0929-8013>

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