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Capacity building in early childhood education research in a regional Australian university

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Special Issue: Theorising Research Capacity Building

ABSTRACT: This article presents a case study of successful research capacity building in the field of early childhood education in a non-research intensive, regional Australian university. In a context characterised by substantial political, economic and structural constraints, it illustrates a creative, strategic, and to some extent, transgressive approach to research capacity building inspired, in part, by concepts proffered by social theorist Gilles Deleuze.

Key words: research capacity building, early childhood education, political economy, Deleuze

Introduction

This article is prompted by Butler's (2004, p. 17) question of "What makes for a liveable world"?; in this instance, the world of academia with its intensifying culture of performativity arising from escalating politico-economic demands for knowledge (research) production (Peters & Besley, 2006). The article presents a critical, reflexive case study of research capacity building in the field of early childhood education in a non-research intensive university in regional Australia, contextualised within the global and national political economy of knowledge production. My aim is to contribute to the literature about educational research capacity building by describing and theorising practices in the local case study site that have been successful, strategic and, in reflecting a commitment to 'reflexive activism' (Pollard, 2006), to some extent transgressive. Like Rees, Baron, Boyask, and Taylor (2007) and Leitch (2009), I contend that research capacity building entails more than the development of specific methodological knowledge and skills. It also encompasses learning to read political and policy domains and imperatives; identifying how power operates within them and thus how they might be shaped; and developing strategies for transcending politico-economic constraints. In contemporary contexts, cultivating the capacity to transcend such

constraints imaginatively and ethically, I believe, is central to creating a liveable academic world.

The article proceeds in three distinct moves. It begins by introducing the notion of political economy as it relates to research production internationally, and educational research capacity building in Australia. Next, the case study is presented with particular reference to five undertakings by the early childhood education research group. The third and final section considers the contributions of the case study. In calling for a widening of theoretical lenses for conceptualising research capacity building, it draws in a preliminary and exploratory way on concepts from Deleuze to elucidate some of the affective, relational and ethical aspects of successful research capacity building within the case study site.

The Political Economy of Research Production

The term ‘political economy’ recognises that the production and distribution of wealth is inherently connected with the operation of power (Holden, 2005). In the political economy of knowledge production, research is a high status commodity with potential to generate considerable wealth and competitive advantage (Ozga & Lingard, 2007). Not surprisingly, therefore, its production, dissemination and utilisation have become increasingly subject to close government scrutiny and regulation (Blackmore & Wright, 2006; Ozga, 2008). Framed in discourses of auditability, accountability, performance management, efficient use of resources and productivity gains, this scrutiny and regulation has led to the international proliferation of formal mechanisms purporting to assess research quality (Coryn, 2008).

Research assessment mechanisms: Effects and consequences

These mechanisms have become a key part of the ‘global architecture’ of the political economy of knowledge production (Jones, 2007) and their impact - globally, nationally and locally - has been the focus of substantial analysis and critique (Lingard, 2008). Because they drive research capacity-building endeavours in many countries, including Australia (Blackmore & Wright, 2006), it is pertinent to briefly reiterate their impact here. My intent in doing so is threefold: to illustrate an aspect of the political economy of knowledge production (specifically with respect to research); to set the context for the local case study; and following Butler (2004), to invite reflection about what makes for a ‘liveable’ academic life.

Many analyses of research assessment mechanisms have focused on their far-reaching, often negative, consequences. Although these consequences vary according to context, they invariably have implications for academic lives and career trajectories, and hence implications for research capacity building. In the UK, for example, concentration of research funding into only the very highest performing universities as a result of the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) has magnified divides between research intensive and non-research intensive education departments, the working conditions of academics in those departments, and the research and career advancement opportunities open to them (Holligan, Wilson, & Humes, 2010; Munn, 2008). Within highly rated departments, differentiation between research active academics and those primarily concerned with teacher education has led in some cases to the latter being regarded as “second-class academic citizens” (Munn, 2008, p. 421). Hence, as Middleton (2009) notes, the RAE has had profound implications for “structural relations” (Bernstein, 2000, p. xxiv) between individuals and between groups.

Many authors have elaborated on the effects of the RAE and equivalent mechanisms. Middleton (2009, p. 194), for example, describes how research assessment mechanisms divert and channel academics’ “intellectual attention and political engagement, influencing what they study, how they do it, and how they report and write”. In New Zealand, the focus on the performance of individual academics as the unit of assessment in Performance Based Research Funding has been criticised for encouraging strategic, ‘short-termism’ in publication practices (Ashcroft & Smith, 2008). Similarly, in Australia, the use of contentious journal rankings developed for the first Excellence for Research in Australia (ERA) assessment for purposes far beyond their original intent exerted considerable pressure on academics to distort their decisions about publication outlets (The Australian, 2010; Yates, 2010). Because of “clear and consistent evidence that the rankings were being deployed inappropriately ... in ways that could produce harmful outcomes”, they were abandoned following the first ERA assessment (Carr, 2011, no page). Hong Kong’s RAE has highlighted the asymmetries between large academic markets such as the USA and the UK and smaller markets such as Hong Kong, especially in terms of what is considered particular and local, and what is perceived to be of international relevance and therefore of higher status. Consequently, research contextually relevant to Hong Kong has been devalued (Evers & Katyal, 2008). Increasing managerialism on academics’ workloads and often deleterious impact on sense of intellectual autonomy and self worth further exacerbate these

transnational, endemic and counterproductive effects (Evers & Katyal, 2008; Holligan et al., 2010; Middleton, 2008; Sikes, 2006).

Nonetheless, research assessment mechanisms have had some positive effects (Findsen, 2008; Lingard, 2008). Most notably, in the UK, the perceived shortcomings of educational research and relatively poor performances of educational researchers in the 2001 RAE, followed by a demographic review of social science research (Economic and Social Research Council, 2006), has led to a range of systemic research capacity building initiatives (Holligan et al., 2010; Munn, 2008). These include the establishment of the exceptionally well resourced and decade-long [1999-2009, in its generic form] Teaching and Learning Research Programme (Pollard, 2010), along with the Teacher Education Research Network in England, the Applied Educational Research Scheme in Scotland, the Welsh Educational Research Network (Christie & Menter, 2009; Munn, 2008; Murray, Jones, McNamara, & Stanley, 2009), and the Strategic Forum for Research in Education (Leitch, 2009). Although the focus of these schemes varies, all aim, at least in part, to drive improvements in the quality of educational research through research capacity building networks designed to enhance individual, institutional, and inter-institutional capacity.

Educational research capacity building in Australia

In contrast to the UK, Australia has seen virtually no large scale targeted government investment in educational research. The Australian Research Council (ARC), unlike its counterparts in several countries, does not have a designated funding stream or review panel for educational research (Yates, 2010)¹. To date, bids for prestigious programmatic funding for educational research through ARC funded Centres of Excellence and Collaborative Research Centres have been unsuccessful (Cumming, 2010). The consistently low success rate across all disciplines for highly competitive ARC project funding and the paucity of other sources of external funding for educational research, with the exception of contract research primarily for government with its inherent limitations, severely limit scope to undertake funded educational research and exacerbates competition between institutions to secure funding (Cumming, 2010; Yates, 2010).

Despite Australian Government rhetoric about the importance of both education and research in the knowledge economy and concern about the performance of the discipline of education in the first ERA, there has been little response to ongoing lobbying from the peak educational

research organisation, the Australian Association for Research in Education (AARE), for the establishment of a targeted educational research funding scheme. An Australian Council of Deans of Education report (Cumming, 2010) highlighting the urgent need to renew the education academic workforce and build its research capacity appears likely to meet with a similar lack of government response. Although AARE has introduced well-received initiatives for developing research capacity targeted at doctoral candidates and early career researchers, these are small scale and conducted with minimal funding. Hence, educational research capacity building in Australia continues to be almost entirely dependent upon the resources that individual universities choose, and are able to, commit to this endeavour.

All 38 Australian universities are technically comprehensive research and teaching institutions but their profiles, status, and resources for research capacity building vary widely. The research-intensive 'Group of Eight' universities, Australia's nearest equivalent to the UK's elite Russell Group Universities, have substantial endowments and have long received the vast majority of government research funding. At the other end of the spectrum are the regional universities, most of which were established around 1990, at the time of the amalgamation of Australia's previously binary higher education system. Generally, regional universities have found it difficult to move beyond their modest beginnings in terms of overall research performance indicators, despite some notable internal concentrations of research strengths (Williams, 2010).

With the implementation of the ERA and increasing attention to global university rankings, the Group of Eight universities have intensified their arguments for increasingly concentrated research funding, citing the need to improve the efficiency of the university sector overall and their institutional standing in international rankings (Lingard, 2008). The Australian Government has reiterated its intent to distribute funding on the basis of performance on second and subsequent assessment rounds of ERA, and to support highly rated emerging and established research concentrations, regardless of their location. Nevertheless, 'position taking' by the influential Group of Eight (Blackmore, 2008, p. 98, invoking Bourdieu, 1993), accentuates the precarious position of non-research intensive institutions as they seek to build sufficient research capacity to ensure their continued eligibility for government research funding. Like any mechanism designed to differentiate and rank for funding and reputational purposes (Blackmore, 2008), the ERA prompts questions about the strategic options open to the least powerful universities as they invest

their limited resources in research capacity building (Blackmore & Wright, 2006) – and the effects of taking up these options.

The Case Study

This article begins to grapple with such questions at a micro- rather than at a system-level through a critical, reflexive case study of research capacity building in the field of early childhood education in a non-research intensive, regional Australian university. The case study is critical, both because of “its strategic importance in relation to the general problem” (Flyvberg, 2001, p. 78) and its consideration of the political and ideological context in which it is situated (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000). More simply, it documents considerable success in research capacity building, despite the cumulative impact of substantial structural impediments that impose multiple layers of disadvantage. The case study is reflexive in its attention to how the participants are positioned and position themselves within this political and ideological context, and their consequent aspirations, actions and construction of their academic identities (May & Perry, 2011; Middleton, 2009).

Impediments and opportunities

The case study site is located in a regional, multi-campus university ranked in the lowest quintile of Australian universities on many research performance indicators, including the first iteration of the ERA conducted in 2010. Since its establishment in 1990, the University has received only a small stream of government funding for research related purposes under the previous performance-based funding formula (the ‘Research Quantum’), calculated on research income, research student completions and refereed publications (Blackmore & Wright, 2006). Hence, it has relatively little research infrastructure; nor does it have a strong research culture.

Like many Australian universities of its kind, the University has a large Faculty of Education (the Faculty) that offers a wide range of teacher education programs. Almost all of the approximately 80 education academics employed on a full time, continuing (tenured) basis are involved in teacher education; around 60 percent have a doctoral qualification; and around 20 percent (16 academics) identify early childhood education as their teaching specialisation. Primarily because of the achievements and productivity of its professoriate, the Faculty achieved an overall ERA rating of ‘3’ (‘world class’) on a five point scale, putting it into the second quintile in the discipline of education within Australia in the first ERA

assessment. Despite this creditable rating, however, the well documented, endemic challenges to building research capacity in teacher education internationally (Knowles, Cole, & Sumsion, 2000; Murray & Maguire, 2007; Murray et al., 2008) remain pronounced within the Faculty. Amongst other challenges, they include a very high proportion of staff entering academia as a second career, often without a doctorate; heavy teaching loads; the difficulties of combining doctoral study with full time employment; and a tendency to prioritise the immediate demands of teaching over research.

The regional, multi-campus nature of the University presents additional challenges to building research capacity. Its early childhood education academics are spread across three campuses, hundreds of kilometres apart. Geographical dispersion, cost of travel between campuses, and consequently rare opportunities for face to face meetings and heavy reliance on electronic and video communication technology create additional complexities for research capacity building. Moreover, each campus is located several hours by road / rail from the nearest capital city. Given Australia's highly urbanised population and relatively underdeveloped technological infrastructure in many regional areas, the University's location constrains opportunities for participation in policy briefings and inter-institutional and cross sectoral meetings and events.

Gender constitutes a further layer of structural disadvantage. In Australia, caring responsibilities continue to have a significant (Diezmann & Grieshaber, 2009) and disproportionate impact on many academic women's lives and careers compared to those of their male colleagues (Probert, 2005). In the case study site, for example, many early childhood education academics, almost all of whom are female, have significant family responsibilities that often preclude them from participating in research capacity building events if travel is required.

Yet another layer of structural disadvantage stems from the 'newness' and relatively low visibility of early childhood education research as a scholarly field in Australia (Dockett & Sumsion, 2004). Amongst the many consequences are the generally small enrolments of full time early childhood education doctoral candidates across Australia, particularly in the case study site, in part because of the university's relatively limited capacity to fund doctoral scholarships. As doctoral candidates are major generators of educational research in Australia (Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs, 2000), small cohorts of early

childhood education doctoral students further constrain growth in research output and visibility. Moreover, of the relatively small pool of doctoral-qualified graduates in early childhood education, experience indicates that few are able and willing to take up an academic position in a regional university.

Despite the compounding and constraining effects of each of these layers, the case study site has some distinguishing features conducive to building capacity research in early childhood education. In market discourses, these features constitute strategic capital with potential to be leveraged to competitive advantage in a research field generally considered low status by more research intensive universities and therefore not a priority for their research investment. In a competitive market, targeting early childhood education research afforded the regional University a potential research niche that fitted comfortably with its focus on preparation for the professions, social justice, engagement with local communities and regional sustainability, and complemented its large early childhood teacher education programs. The strategic appeal of this research niche has been enhanced by growing government investment in early childhood in recent years.

The Vice Chancellor and previous and current Deans of the Faculty of Education were quick to recognise, act on, and support this strategic potential. Their plan was to capitalise on the considerable expertise and external standing of three of the Faculty's academics – then all senior lecturers, with respective disciplinary backgrounds in developmental psychology, social policy, and speech pathology – to create a small research nucleus in early childhood education. In late 2005, in a symbolic and strategic act financed through accumulated reserves, they appointed a foundation professor of early childhood education (the author) to develop research capacity – at the time, only five other Australian universities had made such an appointment. In early 2007, the regional University made a further strong public statement about its intent to establish a substantial research profile in early childhood education by appointing, to a different campus from the foundation professor, a second full professor and an associate professor with an early childhood specialisation amongst their broader research interests.

In 2010, the University made early childhood education the focus of its bid for the one and only round of Collaborative Research Network funding. The aim of this 'one-off' scheme was to support research capacity building partnerships between, non-research intensive

regional universities and research intensive metropolitan universities. Given its traditional emphasis on water management, agricultural sciences and agriculture, the Vice Chancellor's decision to nominate early childhood education research as the focus of the proposed network to be led by the regional University, was an unprecedented step for the University. The degree of institutional commitment to early childhood research capacity building was also unprecedented nationally.

Case study 'boundaries'

The case study covers the period from September 2006, when the foundation professor took up her appointment, to May 2011 with the announcement that the regional University was successful in its bid for Collaborative Research Network funding. The announcement followed four years of tireless effort by the Dean of the Faculty to secure substantial external funding to build research capacity in early childhood education. The case study focuses on five undertakings during this period that were particularly significant for the group's trajectory and exemplify its organic yet strategic approaches to capacity building. The account that follows is inevitably partial. It refers only to selected initiatives of the foundation professor and various combinations of the three then senior lecturers, and focuses only on group activities and achievements, not those of individuals. Although informed by ongoing conversations with colleagues and doctoral students, it represents the perspective of the foundation professor who, by definition, occupies a privileged position in the university hierarchy and broader academic community.

The establishment of the early childhood research group

In 2006-07, the University committed to a double layered strategy for research development: targeted investment in its 'high performing' researchers who were affiliated with its flagship research centres; and, under their leadership and primarily at the Faculty level, increasing the proportion of academics who were 'research active' through the formation of research groups to drive capacity building. As members of the Research Institute for Professional Practice, Learning and Education, the foundation professor and three original senior lecturers had access to research fellowships that typically allowed them to devote at least twelve months in every three and a half year period entirely to research.

Within the Faculty of Education, the focus was on the development of an inclusive and productive research culture through building a 'critical mass' of research active academics in

five research groups. Its emphasis on support for the collective rather than the individual had a distinctly communitarian flavour. While designed to maximise returns on investment of scarce resources, it nonetheless suited the markedly collegial Faculty culture, especially amongst the early childhood academics whose professional backgrounds were steeped in a strong tradition of collaboration. Like other Faculty groups, the early childhood research group under the leadership of the foundation professor provided a mechanism for skill development and mentoring; a scaffolded pathway to eventual research centre affiliation for early and mid career researchers; and a basis from which to build a coherent, externally funded research program.

Consistent with other Faculty groups, the early childhood research group had a modest, discretionary annual budget³. The budget was symbolically and strategically significant. It signalled University and Faculty commitment to early childhood research, and confidence in the group's capacity to determine a viable and appropriate developmental pathway. It also fostered a distinctive blend of innovatory, at times audacious, entrepreneurship and creative marshalling of resources to enhance the group's capacities, visibility and positioning in the early childhood research 'marketplace'; a strong ethic of care to early and mid career researchers; and a commitment to directing research energies for the public good.

The group's overarching programmatic research focus was on the quality of early childhood education and care. This focus served several purposes. The elasticity of the notion of quality accommodated an array of interests, thus helping to safeguard against feelings of exclusion that research capacity building initiatives can generate (Leitch, 2009). As a highly contentious notion, it opened up space for diverse methodological and theoretical approaches and robust debates conducive to fostering an intellectually vibrant, but inclusive culture. Moreover, its policy saliency signalled engagement with government agendas and offered possibilities for building and strengthening relationships with policy makers.

The group's commitment to bringing diverse theoretical perspectives and methodological expertise into productive dialogue led to notable early successes. Within a period of 18 months from early 2007, for example, various combinations of the senior researchers (the foundation professor and the three then senior lecturers) secured three Australian Research Council grants. The first ARC funding obtained by the senior lecturers, this tangible success in a highly competitive funding arena reinforced that, harnessed wisely, the group's diversity

was a valuable asset that could be leveraged for research capacity building. This potential was exemplified in the ARC funded project, *Infants' Lives in Childcare* (Sumsion, et al., 2008-2011).

The Infants' Lives in Childcare project

The genesis of the project was the need for the newly established team of senior researchers, with their respective backgrounds in early childhood teacher education, developmental psychology, speech pathology and policy studies, to find ways of negotiating their diverse research traditions and epistemologies and to capitalise on their collective theoretical resources and methodologies – including quantitative skills, a scarce and valuable commodity in the Australian early childhood research economy. Their immediate challenge was to find ways of working that would neither “deny differences in perspectives nor indeed to seek consensus between them”, while mobilising “individual research passions into a collective desire” (Jones, MacRae, Grieshaber & Sumsion, 2010, p. 1). More prosaically, the imperative was to identify points of intersections in their diverse research backgrounds and interests that would open up possibilities for joint projects.

These multiple demands, along with two team members' established research interest in infancy, led to the development of a proposal to investigate the experiences of infants in childcare, as far as possible, from the perspectives of the infants themselves. The inherent challenges of this undertaking (for infants are unable to verbally convey their experiences to others) reinforced the need to draw on the team's collective and complementary theoretical and methodological resources, skills and insights. The intrigue of these challenges and the enticement of working across theoretical terrains immediately attracted two additional chief investigators: a highly regarded Professor of Psychology from a different Faculty and a prominent, retired early childhood academic.

Strategically, the funding proposal was framed around discourses of investment and human capital development that resonated with government funding priorities. As foreshadowed in the following excerpt, however, it also opened up generative spaces for cultivating the group's collective research imagination:

The use of multiple interpretative frames from diverse knowledge bases will ensure analytic richness and depth; avoid the limitations of reliance on any one source of knowledge or expertise; and dislodge researchers and participants from the

‘certainties’ of their habitual reference points. Drawing on a range of specialist expertise, while simultaneously shaking free of its constraints, will create new spaces for ‘listening’ to infants’ ‘voices’ ... (Author et al., 2008-2011, p. 69).

Indeed, the project has epitomised vigorous intellectual enquiry, with resources drawn from sources as diverse as attachment and narrative theory, Habermas, Deleuze and Merleau Ponty, amongst others, to interpret a rich data set generated through field notes, video, ‘baby cam’, photography, time use diaries, standardised parent and carer questionnaires, and parent and carer interpretations of video data.

Three PhD students have joined the project. All are undertaking a ‘thesis by publication’, adding to the considerable corpus of writing emanating from the project. Two have aspirations to become early childhood academics within the Faculty upon completion of their doctorates, hopefully signalling an easing of difficulties of recruiting doctoral-qualified staff. In light of the considerable interest the project has attracted, the team will host an international research symposium to mark the end of the formal funding period. In short, the project has amply fulfilled the demands of research performance mechanisms without being subsumed by them. It has also illustrated the potential of adopting a ‘science-oriented’ model (a large team of researchers, with several PhD students attached to the project) to build research capacity in early childhood education.

The development and trial of the Australian Early Years Learning Framework

In 2008, inspired by the *Infants’ Lives in Childcare* project and the benefits of collaboration grounded in a deliberate seeking of diversity, the foundation professor and one of the original senior lecturers (by then an associate professor) formed a national, cross sectoral consortium to submit a bid to the Australian Government to develop and trial Australia’s first national early childhood curriculum framework. The 30-member consortium included academics from seven universities (and colleagues from each campus of the regional University), practitioners, employers, representatives of peak organisations, and early childhood consultants. The consortium’s bid was successful, in part, it appeared, because it constituted a national web of expertise, locally- and state / territory-specific insights, extensive networks, and diverse cultural, practice-based and theoretical perspectives.

Developing and trialling the early childhood curriculum, Australia’s first national curriculum for any educational sector, was a high stakes, complex undertaking. It involved working

closely with the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) – comprising representatives of all relevant departments of all state/territory governments as well as the federal government – in a national context of traditionally ambivalent and often hostile state / territory-federal relations (Moon & Sharman, 2003). For reasons of political expediency³, the COAG timeline for the completion of the project was extremely tight, thus exacerbating the already considerable pressures on the consortium.

Not surprisingly, the project provided invaluable insights into the inherently political nature of curriculum, the power of the media, the constraints facing governments, and the cultural traditions of bureaucracies and their strategies for managing political risks. The political complexities and sensitivities required constant negotiation, translation and compromise and provided intensive skills development in working effectively with government (Sumsion et al., 2009; Millei & Sumsion, 2011). The methodological and logistical challenges of trialling the framework in 28 sites across Australia were relatively easily addressed, and provided the necessary experience and a successful template from which the early childhood research group could design and undertake future national studies.

The formation of a national early childhood research network

A direct and unexpected outcome of the consortium’s work in developing the curriculum framework was the subsequent establishment of a national early childhood research network. Supported initially through a modest, seed grant from the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth⁴ secured by the early childhood professor and associate professor, the intent was to continue and extend the cross sectoral collaboration that had been such an integral part of the development of the curriculum framework. The network was launched at the regional University, with a two-day, residential inaugural symposium with participants from all Australian states and territories, many of whom travelled vast distances to attend. Holding the event in a relatively small regional town symbolised the distinctive identity and ‘place’ of the regional University’s early childhood research group. If place is seen as constituted from “multiple, intersecting social, political and economic relations” (Hubbard, Kitchen and Valentine, 2004, p. 6), an integral aspect of the group’s identity was its continual challenging of widely held perceptions in Australia of peripheral regionality. In positioning itself as a national leader of a collaborative early childhood research network, the group offered an alternative to models of metropolitan-based research leadership that derived authority, in part, from institutional prestige.

Symposium participants included members of the curriculum consortium; bureaucrats with whom the consortium had worked particularly closely in the development of the framework; practitioners from early childhood services that had trialled the framework; and key organisations, including unions, with a strong interest in the implementation, use and impact of the framework. Their first task as a network was to draw on their collective cross-sectoral knowledge to identify specific research priorities and “formulate effective demands for further research” (Schuller, 2007, p. 3, quoted by Leitch, 2009, p.357). Small, cross-sectoral working groups were established to take leadership of an identified research priority, including seeking funding support. Some groups have proven more active than others. An early outcome was a special issue of a scholarly journal⁵, focussing on the curriculum framework and notably including articles by practitioners as well as academics. One of the most valuable outcomes of the network, however, has been the continuation of the cross sectoral conversations that characterised and infused the development of the curriculum framework and the consequent strengthening of cross sectoral alliances. Hence, in many respects, the network embodied an important step towards developing what Leitch (2009, p. 357) refers to as “intelligent research communities that strengthen policy-oriented research capacity and lead to more robust evidence bases for educational decision-making and action”.

Commitment from the funding body for ongoing support was subsequently secured by the foundation professor and associate professor. The broadening of the network’s remit to include a focus on all aspects of the Australian Government’s early childhood education and care reform agenda saw an immediate tripling of its membership. The network’s model of distributive leadership provides many opportunities for mentoring early and mid career early childhood academics, including those from the regional University, and capacity building in cross sectoral research is now an explicit and prominent aim.

The development of an intergenerational model for undertaking commissioned research

The emphasis on external research income in Australia’s ERA and the low success rate of ARC funding schemes generates considerable pressure to secure commissioned research contracts. Partly in response to this imperative, the early childhood research group has developed a successful ‘intergenerational’ model for undertaking commissioned research and concurrently building research capacity. Drawing on long standing professional connections of the senior researchers, the model centres on bringing together from across several

Australian states, a number of highly respected, policy-astute, and skilled early childhood ‘elders’, mostly former / retired academics with a long history of high profile contributions to early childhood education and vast accumulated reserves of policy and practice wisdom. They welcome opportunities to support the early childhood research group and to work as a team for relatively short, pre-defined periods on commissioned research projects, as research group adjuncts under the leadership of one or more senior researchers

The model has had a dramatic and cumulative effect in enhancing the capacity of the early childhood group in several broad ways. First, the wealth of expertise and standing of each project team assembled is clearly attractive to funding bodies. Moreover, the adjuncts’ dispersed geographical locations and extensive networks have facilitated relationship-building with policy makers in several Australian states and territories. The group’s high success rate in winning tender bids and its increasingly substantial track record in commissioned research presumably add to its competitive advantage. Second, the intergenerational composition of the project teams generates valuable opportunities for enhancing contextual, historical and policy understandings and thus generates richer insights than would be possible otherwise, while the deliberate and systematic inclusion in each team of at least one early or mid career academic with little or no prior experience of externally funded research provides multiple opportunities for situated learning. In turn, increasing the number of early and mid career academics with scaffolded experience in commissioned research has increased the group’s capacity to take on additional projects. Third, the distribution of responsibilities within the project teams (with the adjuncts undertaking most of the field work and the academics undertaking most of the writing, following intensive two day, whole-of-team meetings to jointly analyse data,) is time effective. Further, and seemingly unusually for commissioned research in Australia, the model also enables the academic members of the team time to engage deeply with the relevant literature, undertake scholarly writing from the project and identify directions for the development of subsequent ARC funding proposals.

In summary, through the undertakings and strategies outlined in this descriptive case study, the early childhood research group has developed a particular and arguably distinctive ethos of research capacity building: inclusive, collaborative, entrepreneurial, strategic and committed to deep intellectual engagement while producing work of immediate policy

relevance. This ethos and accruing success have generated an almost visceral momentum: the group is attracting an increasing number of doctoral students; their projects contribute to the overarching research program; and the appointment of a second postdoctoral fellow appears imminent. That momentum is likely to escalate markedly with the injection of substantial funding from the Collaborative Research Network scheme to support research capacity building.

Despite these successes, research capacity building in the case study site has required constant grappling with tensions and dilemmas – for as Murray et al. (2009, p. 394) note, it is an inevitably complex and multi-layered endeavour that requires juggling often competing “individual, collective, institutional and national” interests. Tensions and dilemmas in the case study site have included finding ways to build closer relationships with policy makers while preserving academic traditions of informed critique and opportunities for policy activism; and engaging in policy relevant research without becoming “locked into national policy constructions and their ideological narratives” (Leitch, 2009, p. 364). Leitch (2009, p. 357) also warns against “tying research capacity building too neatly into some form of instrumental accountability”. Heeding her warning in the face of the “harsh realities of a competitive market” (Leitch, 2009, p. 358) presents further challenges. For example, how to manage tensions between inclusivity and high quality research; between synergies that arise from a critical mass and intellectual independence; between collaboration with other groups and structural incentives that foster competition; and between forging coherent programs of research and recognising and valuing serendipitous diversions? These concerns continue to consume much attention.

Reflections on the Case Study

Indeed, research capacity building in the case study site remains a work in progress. The soon-to-be-established Collaborative Research Network will signify a new phase in the evolution of the early childhood research group. It is timely to reflect, therefore, on what might be learnt from the case study and approaches to capacity building undertaken to date.

Contributions

Perhaps the most immediate contribution of the case study is that the early childhood research group’s increasing visibility and its growing success as measured by research assessment criteria illustrates that, despite substantial structural constraints, in the Australian context in a

non-research intensive university, it remains possible to build educational research capacity from a low base to the level of national prominence. In Flyvbjerg's (2001) terms, therefore, the case study has potential strategic importance for policy arguments in favour of supporting emerging sites of research strength regardless of their location, and for disrupting the logic of arguments calling for the intensification of research funding concentration in Australia's 'Group of Eight' universities.

The case study has illuminated influences contributing to the regional University becoming a "rich pocket... of research activity" in early childhood education (Leitch, 2009, p. 368): strategic leadership and commitment at multiple levels within the university, seed funding, engagement with government policy priorities, collegiality, collaboration, networks, methodological expertise, enculturation and situated learning. Their marked similarity to key influences cited in the accounts of systems level capacity building in the UK and Ireland referred to previously in this article suggests that aspects and variations of the approach to capacity building in the case study site might be potentially relevant to other contexts. The Collaborative Research Network will see the early childhood research group at the regional University partnering with equivalent groups at two interstate research intensive metropolitan universities. The Network's focus on inter-institutional research capacity building may provide insights into the potential of the approaches used by the regional University to 'be scaled up' to a systems and / or national level.

Importantly, the case study has also highlighted that it is possible to collectively construct a 'liveable [academic] world' (Butler, 2004) by strategically meeting the demands of the political economy of research production without being subsumed by them. Constructing a liveable world in the case study site required attending to the affective, relational and ethical dimensions of research capacity building. Accounts of educational research capacity building in the UK and Ireland are usefully informed by an array of theoretical perspectives, including social capital theory and social contracts (Leitch, 2009); social practice, including communities of practice (Rees et al., 2007) and communities of enquiry (Christie & Menter, 2009); and network theories of various kinds (Ozga, 2007). How readily some of these perspectives lend themselves to teasing out affective, relational and ethical dimensions, however, remains unclear. Likewise, critiques of the deleterious effects of research assessment mechanisms informed, for example, by Bernstein (Middleton, 2008) and Foucault (Holligan, 2010) attend to the implications for identity work but do not account for the

palpable sense of agency, energy and passion characterising the early childhood research group at the regional University. The importance, and mix, of affective, relational, ethical and strategic considerations warrants further attention and calls for a broadening of theoretical lenses through which to conceptualise research capacity building. For precisely these reasons, and inspired their emphasis on the political, the productive, the creative and the ethical, I have found it helpful to turn to the theorising of Gilles Deleuze and collaborators.

Deleuzian perspectives

Deleuze and his collaborators explain that they use opportunities arising from necessities and problems that are not well understood to create concepts to assist in thinking differently about those necessities and problems (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994). They also aim to identify conditions “under which something new is produced” (Deleuze & Parnet, 2006, p. vi). With respect to research capacity building, Deleuzian concepts provide ways of thinking differently about the necessity of meeting the escalating demands for research production of the kind that rates highly in research assessment mechanisms, and the conditions under which a successful early childhood education research group might be created and sustained. More broadly, they invite us to think about new, imaginative and transgressive possibilities for living [academic] lives (May, 2005).

Deleuze focuses on processes of ‘becoming’ (other than what we are currently) through experimentation and ethical action “to bring into being that which does not yet exist” (Deleuze, 1994, p. 147; Semetsky, 2006). Becoming, he asserts, is propelled by passions and desire – creative and productive forces that enable us to occupy contexts differently how we occupied them previously (Deleuze, 1995). Becoming takes place through expanding connections, through experiential encounters with others, through critical reflexivity (Deleuze, 1995; Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). It is not a linear process marked by beginnings, progressions and ends, but rather about “modes of expansion, propagation, occupation, contagion, peopling” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 264) that open “doors and thresholds into new worlds” (Sotirin, 2005, p. 109).

From a Deleuzian perspective, therefore, becoming a successful early childhood research group is not primarily a matter of linear or logical planning, or about uni-directional movement from intent to achievement. Rather, it is a dynamic, organic and rhizomatic process of identifying possibilities, harnessing desires and energy, seizing opportunities and

making connections. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) note that in the natural world, rhizomes are forms (e.g., potatoes, couch grass, rabbit burrows) that extend themselves and proliferate through tuberous root systems or other, often subterranean structures. As the case study has highlighted, the regional University's geographically dispersed early childhood research group, with its multiplicity of interconnected understandings, resources, skills, capacities connections can also be considered rhizomatic. Rhizomes are pertinent to research capacity building purposes in that are constantly changing and proliferating through "variation, expansion, conquest, capture, offshoots" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 23); they have no fixed positioning, beginnings or endings, but multiple and shifting entry points.

Deleuzian-inspired approaches to research capacity building, therefore, attend to the rhizome's liminality: to parts that are expanding and those that are withering, to new entry points that are opening up and those that are closing down. In this sense, research capacity building in the case study site has entailed 'assemblage' or a "blending, collating, gathering and joining" (Phillips, 2006, p. 108) of people, opportunities, research and policy interests, theories, methodologies, sectors and desires, as variously exemplified in the *Infants' Lives in Childcare* project, the curriculum consortium and the early childhood research network. A Deleuzian consciousness involves constant alertness to the eruption of unanticipated 'lines of flight' (such as winning the tender to develop the national curriculum framework) that offer new possibilities, steep learning gradients (e.g., in the political complexities of curriculum development) and uncertain destinations (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987; Semetsky, 2011). At heart, a Deleuzian approach recognises the importance of "unfettering possibility to experiment with what a ... [research group] can do and where a ... [research group] might go" (Sotirin, 2005, p. 99) – within a commitment to ongoing, critically reflexive "ethical evaluations and re-valuations" of the effects of these experimentations (Semestky, 2010, p. 485).

Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) concepts of 'becoming' and 'rhizome' are two of their many concepts that have the scope and agility to "offer a variety of starting places" (May, 2005, p. 121) for thinking differently and imaginatively about research capacity building. What attracts me to Deleuze and has helped to sustain me through the exhilarating if exhausting four and a half years of the early childhood research group's history to date is not anticipation of specific guidance about explicit ways of addressing or circumventing the constraints deeply implicated in the political economy of knowledge production. Rather, for me, the

appeal of his writing lies in its refusal of contentions that such constraints present irreducible barriers to academic creativity and agency and its reminders that there are opportunities to subvert and transgress instrumentalist agendas and to construct liveable academic worlds.

Notes

¹ An exception is the funding stream, primarily for commissioned research, through the National Centre for Vocational Educational Research. In 1994, the *Innovative Links between Universities and Schools for Teacher Professional Development*, an action research based professional development program for teachers was established. While it operated successfully for several years, it was not a research capacity-building program per se.

² \$AUD 20K or approximately £13K, typically used for an annual residential writing retreat, one of the very few opportunities for all early childhood researchers to meet face-to-face each year; skills development; in situ mentoring at academic conferences through symposia presentations and shared group accommodation; inter-campus travel; hosting short visits by key international researchers; and travel by senior researchers to meet with policy makers and other potential funding bodies.

³ The Rudd Government was facing growing scepticism about its capacity to deliver its reform agenda.

⁴ A national non profit organisation that aims to contribute to the well being of children and youth by building collaborations with researchers, policy makers and practitioners from a broad range of disciplines.

⁵ *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 12 (1).

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