




# Doing leadership differently as resistance: Care-fully reworking Aotearoa New Zealand's research system

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## Abstract

The 'research system' in Aotearoa New Zealand is rife with obstacles for entry and retention of diversity. The research system's complexity and longevity gives the impression of stability and fixity, but we argue it is characterised by a lack of imagination around leadership that generates change. In this article, we examine the embodied experiences of research leadership, as encountered by participants at Aotearoa New Zealand's universities and a nationally funded Centre of Research Excellence. It is within such institutions and organisations, built on colonial and patriarchal values, that experiences of marginalisation, oppression and harassment have been documented. We destabilise the apparently static nature of this 'research system monolith' by taking up MacLeavy, Fannin and Larner's (2021) provocation of a feminist approach to boldly do leadership differently. Drawing from interviews with researchers, we argue that resistance to, and reworking of, the research system can be found in feminist modes of practice: in the everyday, mundane practices of care-full research leadership that do leadership differently.

## KEYWORDS

ethics of care, feminist future, leadership, research system, resistance, reworking

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

[R]esistance, resilience and reworking are three simultaneous and different ways of thinking about the new political spaces and subjectivities that contemporary feminist

scholarship is excavating.

(MacLeavy et al., 2021, p. 1573)

The 'research system'<sup>1</sup> in Aotearoa New Zealand—with its unavoidable connections to the global circulation of ideas, people, innovation and economies—is

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rife with obstacles and barriers to entry, retention and advancement of diversity, broadly construed. Imported colonial, patriarchal ideals, values and metrics of research, science and innovation have been central in validating and buttressing New Zealand's economy (Cupples & Grosfoguel, 2018). The close ties between national economic interests, the mandate for research and development and the creation of research institutions to support this have meant that instrumentalism and positivism have framed the approach of our research organisations that make up the 'research system'. Materially, this dominantly narrated research system invests time, effort and money into research programmes that centralise these approaches, and metricise success through grants won, papers published, H-indices, patents and exports (Mountz et al., 2015). The brand of research leadership that has thrived and been perpetuated in these environments has valued authoritative control, a narrow focus on performance metrics, hierarchies, superiority and ungenerous interrelationships in teams (Welde et al., 2019). This type of direction has generated, and to some extent, *valued* experiences of marginalisation, oppression and harassment in hypercompetitive, exclusive and elitist research climates.

In this article, we destabilise the apparent static nature of this 'research system monolith' by taking up MacLeavy et al.'s (2021) provocation to explore new political spaces in feminist approaches to doing differently through leadership, and doing leadership differently. Blackmore (2023, p. 1) argues that leadership 'as a concept and discourse is under-represented in higher education, over-researched in management literature, misused in policy and often abused in practice'. As a core value in this article, the authors wish to problematise the notion of leadership as it has been conceived in the narrow and performative parameters of the neoliberal university in the past three decades. We acknowledge the focus on 'leadership' as an attribute in academia within this neoliberal milieu. In this context, we endeavour to forensically examine 'leadership', so as to challenge the rigidity and conceptually constrained meanings attached to it. Coupled with literature on 'doing diversely' and care ethics, we examine the embodiment of the research system through the experiences of participants who occupy positions at both a nationally funded Centre of Research Excellence and at Aotearoa New Zealand universities, and who recognise a different form of research leadership. In doing so, the paper speaks to a growing literature that considers the meanings of leadership to be less 'top down' and more about creating space to

consider the horizontal, collaborative, multidirectional and multiconceptual notions of leadership that empower and enliven rather than constrain academic relationships. We provoke that resistance to, and reworking of, the research system is hidden in feminist modes of leadership practice: in the everyday mundane practices of care-full research leadership, in myriad ways.

## 2 | NEOLIBERAL RESEARCH, SCIENCE AND INNOVATION: NON-DIVERSE PEOPLE, KNOWLEDGE SYSTEMS AND MEASURES OF 'EXCELLENCE' AND WHAT THEY MEAN FOR LEADERSHIP

Contemporary global north research systems, through the history of their conceptualisation, institutionalisation and imperatives for progress, are predominantly underpinned by neoliberal ideologies. These methods of management are observable in coalitions of universities like the Group of Eight in Australia, the Russell Group in the UK and Ivy League universities in the United States, which are often used as examples to university institutions elsewhere given their position in international rankings of prestige: 'indicators that measure their academic research performance and their global and regional reputations' (U.S. News, 2022). Despite their geographical specificities (in local culture, environment, national priorities), generalisable features of these systems are that they typically rely upon and generate individualism and competition, centred around the productive, performing academic subject (Wright, 2017). Morrissey (2013) argues that, in the context of increasing institutional uncertainty and competition, the desire to 'optimise productivity in an increasingly competitive neoliberal economy' (p. 799) has resulted in the heightened use of key performance indicators and a culture of performance management. There is an emphasis on developing intra- and inter-institutional competition which 'divide[s] rather than unite[s]' (Puāwai Collective, 2019, p. 33).

As alluded to above, one such divisive technique in the research system relates to metricisation. Internationally, research metrics have informed a range of national research evaluation exercises, including the Research Excellence Framework (UK), Excellence in Research for Australia and the Research Support Fund in Canada (Cupples & Grosfoguel, 2018). A formalisation of research metricisation also occurred in Aotearoa New Zealand in 2002 with the introduction of a Performance Based Research Fund (PBRF). Viewing the PBRF critically, we

see Aotearoa New Zealand universities become funded according to six-yearly assessments of the productivity of individual staff within tertiary education organisations, alongside a reliance on volume of Equivalent Full-Time Students (EFTS) (Roper, 2018). For the most part, this metric-based system reinforces key features of research 'excellence'. It is argued to select for (and further optimise) the optimally performing 'academic subject' (Grant, 2019), effectively picking winners (Harre et al., 2017). What is clear is that metrics that privilege traditional, output-focused measures of research success perpetuate existing inequities (Cupples & Pawson, 2012; Walker et al., 2020); contribute to a hypercompetitive, individualised and arguably uncaring research environment; and that dominantly equate research leadership and research impact with measurable outputs (Locke & Bensky, 2022).

Like other research metrics elsewhere, the PBRF framework has also shown some promising, and surprising, flickers of resistance. The scheme collects data that, when looked for, demonstrates that minority groups in the research sector are performing well in research, but are simultaneously being discriminated against in relation to promotion, leadership roles and everyday environments (Brower & James, 2020). This finding not only further legitimises a call for qualitative studies on the lived experience of the research system, but also illustrates the value of responsible use of data for the people it is surveying. Further, in 2022, the Tertiary Education Commission proposed revisions to definitions of 'research' within the PBRF framework to conceptualise it in a more 'capacious' fashion (Tertiary Education Commission, 2022). This means that research and impact can be interpreted differently for many different groups, offering alternative pathways to the hard science metrics logic.

The prioritisation of academic subjectivities towards measurable performance indicators orients people in particular ways (Ahmed, 2006; Rowlands & Wright, 2021); it orients research leaders away from emotional, embodied, social and relational practices that have no clear measured/measurable value (see Ball, 2012; Blackmore, 2020; Martin et al., 2015; Waller & Wrenn, 2021). As Blackmore (2020, p. 24) outlines 'while the leader is treated as gender neutral, leadership is still invested in the gendered attributes of the individual who then "manages" followers'. Emerging from Western Enlightenment tradition, the 'highly individualistic conception of autonomy starkly devalues both dependencies and attachments along with the vulnerabilities that accompany them' (Jones, 2014, p. 195). Colleagues are positioned in competitive opposition, driving the experience of less genuine collegiality in research spaces (Harland et al., 2010;

Peake & Mullings, 2016), and contributing to oppression, exclusion and homogeneity in the workforce. Given prevailing inequities and injustices within the research system (see Locke & Bensky, 2022; Locke & McChesney, 2023; McAllister et al., 2020; McAllister et al., 2022; Naepi et al., 2020), there is a need to reconsider the role of research leadership and reimagine the ethical coordinates of research system actors.

## 2.1 | Equity, diversity and inclusion in research systems

The global research system is an assemblage—of infrastructures, ideas and economies, inextricably connecting and networking localised research production internationally—that, in its conception and practice, is elitist (Cupples & Grosfoguel, 2018). It privileges the moneyed, the socially connected and the white through (but not limited to) its process of university admissions that feed the research industry and through the knowledge frameworks it markets (see Cupples & Grosfoguel, 2018). Such an approach is not just historical: just this year a number of US university diversity, equity and inclusion programmes have come under deliberate threat (e.g., Gamboa, 2023; Wong, 2023) where they are not economically viable and, worse, diversity of contribution to the research system is not valued. While there are geographical specificities to such foreclosures, and while we do not wish to conflate a US example with others, we assert that these kinds of politics *are* experienced in negative ways, and that overseas experiences can have significant influence on places further afield by the nature of ubiquitous connectivity today.

Aotearoa New Zealand has a unique research system geography and history, grounded in a settler colonial context. The Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment (2023) highlight that:

Equity, diversity and inclusion are important to create and sustain a fit-for-purpose research system. We need a system which has no barriers to entry, retention or advancement for women, Māori, Pacific Peoples and other under-represented communities.

In Aotearoa New Zealand, the Crown, a key research system policy maker and funder, has obligations of equal partnership with Māori under Te Tiriti o Waitangi. Despite these expectations and impassioned commitments from government and research organisations towards 'diversity, equity and inclusion', inequities around participation remain rife within the research

sector (Soar et al., 2021), where there are proportionally many fewer non-white, non-middle class and non-men employed, or in training. Despite policies such as the 2005 Vision Mātauranga statement or MBIE's 2008 Diversity in Science Statement highlighting a 'focus and ambition for diversity in science' (McAllister & Riva, 2022, p. 1), equity, diversity and inclusion for many marginalised groups in the research sector are not seen to be improving, or at best are only improving incrementally.

Pressure for reform by communities of researchers as seen in consultation processes has culminated most recently in MBIE releasing the Te Ara Paerangi Future Pathways White Paper (Ministry of Business Innovation and Employment, 2022), and this proposes a research system in which diversity and inclusion are core principles. Critically however, it fails to recognise the role of the research system in both generating and reinforcing multiple forms of inequity, with the same logics, metrics and approaches being used to count, capture and value diversity (e.g., 'Māori academics are often used to tick boxes on proposals' (Naepi et al., 2020, p. 149), 'equitable' hiring policies without noting the actually existing data on staff retention, or the valuing of diversity for economic prosperity over anything else). Te Ara Paerangi envisions the future of Aotearoa New Zealand's Research, Science and Innovation system as supporting and promoting the well-being of all people. What seems to be missing are the everyday 'actually existing' practices that actively seek to promote the well-being and care of all people.

Ahmed's (2012) work helps us to understand that, without specific and direct mechanisms, institutional 'commitments' to diversity, equity and inclusivity become non-performative. Non-performative diversity, equity and inclusion policies, statements and commitments enable institutions to appear as being committed to diversity and inclusion without having to carry out any actual change; 'as if a statement in and of itself can speak diversity into being' (McAllister & Riva, 2022, p. 2). Similarly, where inclusion refers to the 'integration of formerly excluded and disadvantaged groups and individuals into the patterns of achievement and success that, in the past, have typically been accessible to only the privileged' (Hoskins & Jones, 2022, p. 4), the mere presence of Indigenous, women and other marginalised or under-represented academics 'serves to reinforce the academy's branding of itself as inclusive, tolerant and open' (Kidman, 2020, p. 250).

### 3 | FEMINIST FRAMINGS FOR RESEARCH LEADERSHIP

In the context of neoliberal acts of exclusion and marginalisation, feminist literature and feminist modes of

practice offer counter-practice that might point us to different modes of 'doing'. Feminist movements within the research system emphasise emotional, embodied, social and relational practices that have been largely excluded from the research system's value of 'success'. And what this counter-practice requires is a range of novel approaches, as performed by a diversity of people. As a 'situated practice of being, doing, saying and relating' (Blackmore, 2023, p. 1), leadership in the research system, in its formal and informal modes, provides opportunities for resistance and counter-practice. Below we discuss MacLeavy et al.'s (2021) conceptions of resistance, resilience and reworking, the theory and practice of 'ethics of care', and the recognition and support for wellness, embodiment and relationality (Adams-Hutcheson & Johnston, 2019).

#### 3.1 | Resistance, resilience and reworking

In envisioning feminist futures, MacLeavy et al. (2021) discuss resistance and reworking as emergent practice, whereby 'feminist activism takes place in interstitial spaces, where particular actions or actors are entangled with (as opposed to external to) the forces of power that shape the way in which lives are lived and work is conducted' (p. 1567). These might be the spaces of every day, mundane care-full practices of resistance, examples of which are documented abundantly in feminist ethnography and auto-ethnography (e.g., Caretta & Faria, 2020; Puāwai Collective, 2019). Gibson-Graham (1996, 2006) highlight diversity in economic practices, where 'economy' is typically and predominantly understood as capitalist activity. Their work celebrates the multiple different offerings of practices like in-kind labour, volunteer work and unpaid care-work that are argued to amass to more than the capitalist economy put together. This different way of framing and knowing a monolithic imagining (in their case, the economy) is powerful for re-imagining and reworking a future system (in our case, the research system).

In keeping with the dismissal of hegemonic thinking, rather than viewing activism referenced above as a 'static or singular project' with a fixed end and output which might attract 'pessimistic and dismissive prognoses of feminism', (MacLeavy et al., 2021, p. 1559) we might consider mundane acts as a process of always being *in becoming*, moving towards a different future of the university, and in understanding and celebrating feminist explorations of resistance and reworking as 'immanent to everyday relationships' (MacLeavy et al., 2021, p. 1566). This 'reframing of resistance as emergence' in feminist geography rebuts the concept of resistance as dualistic, or

‘a force opposing a monolithic structure’. Rather, the facade of the ‘monolith’ is recognised for its many, different ‘actually existing’ practices.

While movements exist to resist the research system and its institutions by attempting to topple them (see de Oliveira Andreotti et al., 2015), feminist modes of action work to destabilise and resist the system/institution *from the inside out*. For example, using the musical form of the fugue to think through the multi-layered and textured academic lives of their participants, Locke et al. (2021) discuss how their participants, women academics, ‘created a successful intersection between the ways they reshaped their discipline, used mobility to good effect, thought through their gendered relations and identities, and found moments of opportunity in university policies and structures. In some instances, they reproduced existing structures and inequalities in the university. This echoed the dominant finding in the research literature that women in leadership are complicit in reinforcing neoliberal inequalities’ (p. 1093). It is this work from the inside out working to ‘destabilise forces and temporalities’ (MacLeavy et al., 2021, p. 1567) that we pay attention to in this article, and which we imagine have been at the core of these systems since the time of their foundation.

### 3.2 | Ethics of care

Ethics of care can be positioned in opposition to the individualised and hypercompetitive nature of the optimally (performing) academic subject. Lawson (2007) discusses that ‘Care ethics focuses our attention on the social and how it is constructed through unequal power relationships, but it also moves us beyond critique and toward the construction of new forms of relationships, institutions, and action that enhance mutuality and well-being’ (Lawson, 2007, p. 1). As a moral theory, ethics of care emphasises the importance of relationships and interdependence in ethical decision-making (Tronto, 2013), including prioritising the needs, emotions and experiences of those involved in a particular situation (Held, 2006). This approach has important implications for various areas of inquiry, including education, and social policy, where ethics of care can help practitioners to prioritise the needs and values of recipients of care, particularly those who are vulnerable or marginalised (Tronto, 2013), such as the emotional and social development of students alongside their academic achievement (Noddings, 2013). In social policy, ethics of care can inform the development of programmes and policies that prioritise the well-being and flourishing of individuals and communities (Held, 2006). Overall, ethics of care provides a framework for understanding and responding to the complexities of

human relationships and can contribute to a more compassionate and just society.

Critiques of the hegemonic university as ‘un-caring’ have pushed some academics to ‘practice care as a form of resistance to the status quo of the university’ (Bartos, 2021, p. 2). It has become clear that, ‘we urgently need ways of thinking—and educating—that cease to devalue the dependencies, attachments and vulnerabilities that are not just unavoidable, but a generative and constitutive part of what Griffiths elsewhere calls the “web of identity”’ (Jones, 2014, p. 195). Tronto’s (1998) understanding of care as both a practical and political project positions care as a counter-practice within the neoliberal university context. Feminist modes of practice can therefore work to resist and rework the conditions of research systems, while also providing spaces to enable resilience to hold out for a better future (Humble et al., 2006; MacLeavy et al., 2021). Through care in the research system, we ‘envision opportunities for inventing alternative knowledges, ontologies, and pathways towards an undetermined future’ (MacLeavy et al., 2021, p. 1564).

## 4 | METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

To explore understandings of generative leadership in Aotearoa New Zealand’s research system, we use findings from a reflexive thematic analysis of 11 semi-structured Zoom interviews conducted between December 2022 and February 2023. Interviews were approximately 1 h in length. Participants were invited from one Centre of Research Excellence (CoRE), typically working in interdisciplinary teams, and all also engaged in research at a university in Aotearoa. Participants were at a range of career stages, from PhD student to (full) Professor. Participants also came from a range of disciplinary backgrounds (including, but not limited to, sciences, social sciences and humanities). Seven participants identified as women and four participants identified as men. Participants identified across five different ethnicities, with one participant identifying as Māori and six identifying as Pākehā and NZ/European.

The impetus for this study originates in broader research that examined the politics of the concept of *Kindness in Science* (see Kindness in Science, 2023; Rayne et al., 2023). For the purposes of this article, the participant responses are engaged with from the angle of their everyday experiences working in collaborative research settings. Specifically, the participants were asked to examine their ideas about what they thought leadership looked like in academic settings. Interviews lasted for roughly 1 hour, and the interview data were analysed

inductively and deductively using a thematic analysis methodology and method (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Participants were asked about their views on leadership, but what was actually articulated in their responses was how leadership played out in the everyday mundaneness of academic work. They highlighted potentially 'mundane' practices of resistance and reworking, through doing the research process differently, and using positions of leadership to positively change the research environment rather than just focusing on the institutionalised measures of success.

## 5 | GENERATIVE RESEARCH SYSTEM LEADERSHIP: KEY THEMES

### 5.1 | Discomfort and uncertainty are a sign of humanness and good leadership

A significant theme that was developed from the participants is at first reading counterintuitive and articulates the importance of leadership as embracing discomfort and uncertainty. This is not only an epistemological positioning in relation to exploratory scholarship, but also in relation to pragmatic research approaches that benefitted the research team. One early career researcher participant demonstrated this point by discussing a good research leader as, 'in my particular example, someone that is able to demonstrate sitting with uncertainty and uncomfortableness, but still make decisions and helps others to feel comfortable sitting with that'. The participant described the way good leadership seemed to involve a necessary element of being open to the research process where the 'destination' of the project (where it would lead) was not yet known. Indeed, good leadership in this context was articulated by the participant as an openness to the open-endedness of exploratory and collaborative research, even when that particular research team/initiative had very real expectations and funding pressures reliant on there being a destination and 'output'. This participant described their relief that the project lead in this case was able to 'be uncertain' and provide strategies to enable the participant to still fulfil their research obligations, while also being able to offer meaningful opportunities to 'learn along the way'.

The participant further shared their experience of applying for ethics approval as an example of leadership that sits with uncertainty and discomfort. Because of the exploratory nature of the research and the way their project was challenging the dominant norms of the research process because of this open-endedness, the ethics committee process was anticipated to be more challenging

than usual. This was a source of great anxiety for the participant, who was taking a lead role in writing up the application. They continue: 'I've got this anticipatory feeling of future hoops that I'm going to have to jump through all the time. I was doing an ethics application and we didn't fit into the boxes for that process'. The participant spoke about the project lead taking an active role in helping the team navigate the uncertainty and anxiety by working collaboratively with the team and the participant in a way that was assured but not overbearing or dictatorial. When the application came back for revisions from the ethics committee, the team worked together to respond to the questions and critique. The participant expressed feelings of gratitude and relief that they had not been left to feel responsible for any perceived 'failings' in the application writing. What is so powerful about how this participant articulates leadership is the way the project lead was able to rework and, at times, resist the research system through their seemingly mundane everyday practice of sitting with uncertainty both within the open-endedness of the project, and when working through the constraints of the research institution (i.e., during the ethics process).

This participant provides a good point of entry to consider leadership qualities in the context of the wider institutional setting of the university and the necessity of relational research practices. Research leadership is conventionally institutionally rewarded for its public and discipline authority (reassertion of hierarchy in knowledge making), its publications, patents, grants, contracts, industry collaborations and media capture outputs (e.g., Welde et al., 2019). Multiple participants, however, spoke of research leadership as requiring elements of care and affect. Participants emphasised the significance of relationships as a key aspect of leadership, where relationship-based leadership requires the reciprocal dimension of relationality. Participants described leadership as not just merely a position of authority, but as an act of modelling particular behaviours, values and relationships. They highlighted the need for leaders to be personable, approachable and committed, and to lead in a generous and collaborative way.

Sitting with discomfort and uncertainty in this light can be seen as an indispensable dimension of sustaining relationships and relationality in leadership. While again this may sound counterintuitive, uncertainty and discomfort have been identified by feminist philosophers as part of an array of characteristics that encompass notions of difference. Using the context of the feminist classroom, bell hooks emphasises sitting with discomfort, and that 'difference' is a key site of learning, noting that confronting 'one another across differences means that we must change ideas about how we learn; rather than fearing

conflict we have to find ways to use it as a catalyst for new thinking, for growth' (hooks, 1994, p. 113). For example, in the context of classrooms, '[bell] hooks' approach points to the dependency of teachers on their students as much as the reverse. This dependency impinges on the affective life of the teacher as well as their sense of identity' (Jones, 2014, p. 197). As hooks entreats, 'I'm not trying to say we're all equal here. I'm trying to say that we are all equal here to the extent that we are equally committed to creating a learning context' (hooks, 1994, p. 153). The participant in focus in this section articulates a form of leadership that is demonstrating the pedagogical qualities of an openness to discomfort and uncertainty, and the relational dynamic that highlights the 'humanness' and even fallibility of leadership in such a setting.

## 5.2 | Expansive and multiple forms of leadership

Following MacLeavy et al.'s (2021) argument for 'embracing the multiplicity and simultaneity of contemporary feminisms' (p. 1558), the second significant theme developed from the interviews highlights multiplicity and more expansive forms of leadership, as we describe below. While the research system has typically valued leadership based upon authoritative control, narrow performance metrics, hierarchies and superiority (e.g., Welde et al., 2019) participants articulated 'leadership' as encompassing all dimensions of academic life. Likewise, scholarship on leadership in academia has often focused on leadership within managerial structures (Acker & Wagner, 2019); however, during our interviews, participants positioned leadership as more than simply performative. One participant articulated leadership as: 'I feel like with leadership, most people think about it as the person at the front, but actually I think leadership permeates all layers of teams and all layers of research'. This participant metaphorically described their research environment as a lava lamp—where team members, collaborators, participants and so on are all key in the process, and always connected and dynamic. Within this, this participant discussed:

I don't consider myself a leader specifically... I'm definitely not one of those, generally speaking, names at the top of the paper. But I do hope that I model leadership in the way I conduct myself... Leadership is kind of a funny one, because I mash it up in my mind with all the other good things about being a good participant in a team, a good team player; anytime you're doing the good stuff

that can be perceived as leadership, rather than it just being about the person leading the charge.

Significantly, this participant points to ethics of care within leadership that emphasises the importance of relationality and interdependence within the team (e.g., see Tronto, 2013). Likewise, this participant acknowledges the impact of the ways in which we conduct ourselves, particularly in relation to leadership, where 'best practice [can] also be human enough to be approachable and not being austere and superior'. This highlights an ethic of care which includes concern over the experiences, needs and emotions of those in the team (e.g., see Held, 2006). This participant, however, also mentioned 'but then again, I do appreciate people who do the leading from the front in a really generous and collaborative way... being personable and approachable but clearly demonstrating a commitment', pointing to a multiplicity of care-full research leadership in both formal and informal leadership contexts (see Blackmore, 2023).

Framing care-full practices of leadership as resistance in the neoliberal research system as 'counter-conduct' (Foucault, 2009) or counter-practice, shifts 'attention to the everyday practices through which the subject resists power configurations at the micro-level' (Odysseos, 2016 cited in Zembylas, 2021, p. 214). This kind of leadership as resistance in the research system could reveal practices and experiences that 'escape normalised practices of conduct' (Foucault, 2009 cited in Zembylas, 2021, p. 214). Indeed, the participant in this section is implicitly aspiring to a form of leadership that is expansive and generous, but also multiple and committed. Furthermore, this participant brings in the affective dimension to leadership, in that actions, behaviours and values permeate the research 'climate' and directly impact those involved. As Zembylas (2021) points out, 'to create renewed affective relations as counter-conduct in ... universities, then, would essentially mean to invent new affective practices that instigate empowerment and resistance against the various manifestations of neoliberal education' (p. 221). Ultimately, leadership in this section is framed as resistance to dominant modes of research leadership that offer different ways of inhabiting the university landscape. He continues:

As Odysseos (2016) observes, counter-conducts do not always take the form of rejection or refusal of conduct, but rather they are manifested 'as a questioning, reworking and elaboration of pastoral power', while at other times, they may reinforce, redirect or improve the mechanism of conducting power (pp. 183–84).

(Zembylas, 2021, p. 214)

Not only does this reworking resist, but it ‘invites us to focus on new terrains of feminist politics, which are neither wholly inside nor wholly outside these structures’ (MacLeavy et al., 2021, p. 1570) be they the university/academia/research.

### 5.3 | Challenging the ‘ideal’

Prominent in interviews was the notion of perceived academic ‘ideal’ that was unattainable, but simultaneously a celebration of a specifically feminist form of leadership that was authentically collaborative and participatory. Participants discussed how this leadership of difference ensured junior colleagues were appropriately supported and encouraged but not measured against narrow, and conventional benchmarks of ‘excellence’. This form of feminist leadership challenged and reworked notions of the ‘ideal’ academic to be both more expansive and less individualistic. Rather than measuring success in solely measurable outputs, leadership in this context offered a high trust model of collaborative engagement where any perceived ‘mistakes’ were turned into learning moments that benefited everyone. This kind of leadership was identified by participants as potentially extending to wider conceptions of scholarly life, where relational practices and collaborative and supportive behaviours could be seen as tangible and aspirational role modelling for junior researchers. The very powerful dimension of this theme was the sense of authenticity this style of leadership gave to organisational aspirations and goals to be more inclusive. These points are illustrated in the excerpt from an early career researcher who spoke of the formal leadership team in their Centre of Research Excellence in the following way:

I’ve never felt it was preachy or rammed down my throat, or I’ve never felt judged for not quite hitting the ideal mark. So, I think that’s something that [the leadership team of the CoRE] does really, really well, is encourage people to be better. They don’t make them feel like they’re being bashed on if they aren’t hitting the, you know, ‘the ideal’. ... And talking about leadership, that’s come at all levels—[the leadership team of the CoRE] permeate it through the whole organisation, and actually having things really clear values-wise around the statements [they have] for events and for diversity and equity and inclusion and engagement is just really helpful for a researcher to work those things

into their practice, rather than feeling like it’s a tick box exercise.

This excerpt provides an interesting window to explore what is meant by ‘hitting the ideal’ in academia, wherein the idea of what is ‘ideal’ is framed in the context of publications and the wider plethora of ‘outputs’ that a neoliberalised research system valorises. An important dimension to the above quote is the way that leadership in this setting was different from conventional approaches to research leadership. Furthermore, the participant points out the way this kind of leadership brought their colleagues with them as they collectively navigated the contours of their project and their research lives. This approach echoes Tronto’s (2013) requirement for relationships and interdependent decision-making that speaks to ethics of care. The vision that ‘everyone’ can be involved speaks to the inclusivity that policy-makers appear to be striving for, but is not yet routinely rewarded in practice.

MacLeavy et al. (2021) discuss resistance and reworking as emergent practice, whereby ‘feminist activism takes place in interstitial spaces, where particular actions or actors are entangled with (as opposed to external to) the forces of power that shape the way in which lives are lived and work is conducted’ (p. 1567). Likewise, rather than viewing the output or outcome of such activism as a ‘static or singular project’ often tied to ‘pessimistic and dismissive prognoses of feminism’ (MacLeavy et al., 2021), the result is recognised as being always *in becoming*, moving towards a different future of the university, and in understanding and celebrating feminist explorations of resistance and reworking as ‘immanent to everyday relationships’. Jones (2014) highlights the ways in which ‘inequalities can be productive differences that hold open the space for generative encounters, while dependencies can be embodied in relations that not only enable flourishing, but that can also become the site of an embodied ethical education in how to relate to otherness and difference’ (Jones, 2014, p. 196). This last point nicely encapsulates the experience of this early career researcher who acknowledges the necessary element of dependence and hierarchy between themselves and their more senior colleagues, but is nonetheless encouraged and supported to participate as a researcher with as much potential to positively contribute as senior colleagues.

While the discussion of generative leadership in this section has focused on participants’ attention to mentoring and support of colleagues, it is worth also reflecting how these relationships can also be characterised by exploitation. While not specifically mentioned by participants here, there is abundant literature that points to examples—particularly in science, technology, engineering and

mathematics (STEM) subjects— of manipulation regarding, for example, article authorship (Ni et al., 2021) and project team inclusion (Naepi et al., 2020). Further, while there is evidence that women mentees may find their support needs better met by women mentors (Ragins & Scandura, 1997), what is also documented is cases of mentors taking credit for mentorship only to fulfil promotion criteria in otherwise toxic relations with mentees (Marino, 2021).

## 5.4 | Cultivating space

Participants spoke about how good research leadership begins with personal leadership, which constitutes knowing one's own personal values, and being faithful to these and as 'cultivating space to care for ourselves' (Mountz et al., 2015, p. 1239) as leaders. The importance of values was articulated in the interviews as the ability and capacity for academics to reflexively use their disciplinary expertise and knowledge to better the conditions of junior staff by ensuring they alter/transform barriers to participation. One participant shared her thoughts specifically about leadership:

I don't necessarily think it's about telling people how to do things. It's more around community building and facilitating and I think more and more as I get more senior in my role, I find my job is more about clearing the pathway for students in particular, but for more junior colleagues. And I think for me, I'm using the position that I'm in to try and change the system as much as I can. And so, to me, leadership is about how do we change what's not right.

Drawing on the work of Lorde (1988) and Ahmed (2014), Mountz et al. (2015) discuss that 'cultivating space to care for ourselves, our colleagues, and our students is, in fact, a political activity when we are situated in institutions that devalue and militate against such relations and practices' (p. 1239); as 'finding ways to exist in a world that is diminishing' (Ahmed, 2014). While participants highlighted practices that resist the norms of research leadership and attempt to rework the research system through their own positions of leadership (including the ways they work with colleagues and students), such practices simultaneously reinforce particular ideals of the research system. This includes neoliberal ideals surrounding individualism—reducing systemic, engrained issues to individual responsibility. However, what we have presented here is an array of examples of

how resistance to, and reworking of, the research system is—while hidden in feminist modes of practice: in the everyday, mundane practices of care-full research leadership—both certainly present and ubiquitous.

## 6 | CONCLUSION

There is a dominant narrative of 'leadership' in global north, neoliberalised research systems. This 'leadership' in Aotearoa New Zealand—with its unavoidable replications of others' models due to the global circulation of ideas, humans, innovation and economies—is rife with obstacles and barriers to participation and retention of diversity, broadly construed. Imported colonial and patriarchal ideals and metrics of science and research that have been inherent in validating and buttressing New Zealand's economy have meant that instrumental and positivist outputs and outcomes have made their way into leadership practices in contemporary research systems. This brand of leadership has valued authoritative approaches, with a narrow focus on performance metrics, hierarchies, superiority and ungenerous interrelationships in teams. This style of leadership prioritises investment of time, effort and money into research programmes that centralise these approaches and metricise success through narrowly defined parameters.

Simultaneously, but typically obscured, are the everyday mundane practices of care-full, relational and embodied research leadership. These mundane practices 'do' the research system differently and are narrated as acts of resistance to the hegemonic norms of the research system. Materially, these practices of resistance through 'leadership' have a focus on people and practice rather than process and product; relationships, humanness and fallibility; and leading with an ethic of care. While 'leadership' is a contested term and is often thought of in terms that play into dominant, often neoliberally inspired discourse and practice that promotes marginalisation and exclusivity, there are formal and informal modes of leadership beyond those that are rigidly defined in academia. Regardless of what word is used to describe the practice of leadership, recognising its vulnerability to co-option in any case, we maintain that it is how these politics of 'leadership' are performed that is of import. What we have narrated here instead is leadership with a small 'l', alongside those formal modes. We include everyday practices that can be subversive in ways that are hidden or at least only superficially visible. This is about leadership that is generative, inclusive and care-full; leadership of difference.

Change towards inclusivity in the Aotearoa New Zealand research system has been slow, giving an

impression of fixity and complexity that leaves little room for difference. In fact, as our participants demonstrate, the research system is dynamic, and beyond this, it is care-full, embodied, vulnerable and relational, as we have demonstrated through personal accounts of diverse actors who are ‘actually existing’ members of said system. The practices of leadership presented here ‘invite [s] us to focus on new terrains of feminist politics, which are neither wholly inside nor wholly outside these structures’ (MacLeavy et al., 2021, p. 1570). These mundane everyday practices of generative leadership perform difference, doing things differently to what is conventional. In this way, they enact a feminist politics of resistance to rework the research system.


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### ENDNOTE

<sup>1</sup> We define ‘research system’ in this article as all higher education and research institutions and organisations who engage in the creation, production and dissemination of knowledge. We recognise that there are geographical, institutional and disciplinary particularities, differentiations and contextual specificities that mean that speaking about a homogenous ‘research system’ can have limitations. Having said this, because ‘the research system’ is so slippery, nebulous and in constant churn, we ‘hold this term still’ for analytical purposes, in order to have this conversation, and raise the challenges associated with the conditions of knowledge production.

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