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# The Evolving Role of Internal Organization Development Offices in Higher Education

## Perspectives from Australia and the United States

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By Ralph A. Gigliotti  
and Andy Wear

### Abstract

Internal organization development offices, scholars, and practitioners have an important role to play in helping organizations and their leaders navigate the ambiguity, complexity, and disruption posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and in helping them repair, recover, and reinvent for a post-pandemic future. Given the wide range of contemporary challenges and the need for leaders at levels of higher education to engage directly with these challenges, internal organization development offices will need to straddle both operational and humanistic imperatives. This article provides an overview of two internal organization development offices—one in Australia and one in the United States—and how these offices have evolved to best meet the short-term and long-term needs of university colleagues.

**Keywords:** organization development; leadership; higher education; COVID-19; leadership development

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Internal organization development offices, scholars, and practitioners have an important role to play in helping organizations and their leaders in navigating the ambiguity, complexity, and disruption posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and in helping them repair, recover, and reinvent for a post-pandemic future. Within higher education, specifically, many of the trends that were well underway prior to the pandemic, including the integration of technology into the design and delivery of course instruction into the college and university workplace along with increased emphasis on leadership development across all levels of higher education, have accelerated due to the global public health crisis. We now bear witness to a sector in deep transition, resulting in many existential questions regarding the desired scope and central purpose of our institutions, the

fundamentals of pedagogy in a fully online environment, the perils and promise of a remote workplace, and the role of higher education institutions in preparing students for an uncertain future. These questions have significant implications for the work of faculty, staff, and university administrators across the higher education landscape and the spirit through which these individuals approach their work. Given the wide range of contemporary challenges and the need for leaders at levels of higher education to engage directly with these challenges, as highlighted in this article, internal organization development offices will very likely need to straddle both operational *and* humanistic functions to support institutions and colleagues in addressing both short-term and long-term needs.

Despite the different national responses to the global pandemic in

Australia and the United States, the impacts of the crisis raise important questions and considerations regarding the shifting expectations and responsibilities of leaders in higher education. In order to appropriately situate this article, we begin with a brief overview of each country's unique contexts, focusing specifically on the primary missions of our respective institutions, the scope of internal organization development operations, and the ways in which our offices have evolved to best meet the needs of university colleagues. In response to the widespread disruption and unrest across the higher educa-

tion landscape, the dual operational and humanistic imperatives of internal organization development offices become more pronounced, particularly as colleges and universities provide tools, strategies, techniques, and resources for navigating this unsettled period, in addition to supporting others as they make sense of this period of intense turbulence.

communication around COVID-19 has been relatively effective and well-supported by the public, if evaluating the response using metrics such as public opinion measures and media commentary. Much has been made of the Australian tradition of compliance with authority and the rule of law, often presented as at-odds with the constitutionally enshrined rights and freedoms that are dominant within the U.S. narrative. Although such generalizations may not always be accurate, in reflecting on the dual national responses to the global pandemic, these assumptions do seem justified.

**Australia's higher education sector (under the legislative and jurisdictional purview of the federal government) often finds itself in the political crosshairs. While home to one of the nation's most lucrative exports (after iron ore and coal, international education was Australia's third largest source of export revenue), Australia's universities find themselves in an unenviable situation. With a projected revenue loss of \$12–18 billion between 2020 and 2024, Australian universities now face a period of bleak transformation ...**

#### **RMIT University and the Australian Backdrop**

Despite this depiction of positive leadership and compliant followers, however, Australia's higher education sector (under the legislative and jurisdictional purview of the federal government) often finds itself in the political crosshairs. While home to one of the nation's most lucrative exports (after iron ore and coal, international education was Australia's third largest source of export revenue), Australia's universities find themselves in an unenviable situation. With a projected revenue loss of \$12–18 billion between 2020 and 2024, Australian universities now face a period of bleak transformation (Marshman & Larkins, 2020). The federal government's unwillingness to support or subsidise universities (as distinct from the bail-outs provided for other, more politically-friendly industries) remains disappointing, if not unexpected, as the long and antagonistic relationship between conservative politics and academia persists. To add to this pain, the federal government's employment subsidy

scheme (JobKeeper) excluded higher education sector employees, with an immediate impact on the estimated 94,500 casual employees (Harris, Smithers & Spina, 2020). Finally, in a nod to the 'culture wars' trope, the federal government went on to propose amendments to the higher education fee structure, reducing student fees "for courses in areas the government identifies as potentially job-rich and increasing them for the humanities and certain other courses" (Grattan, 2020, para. 7). Some universities are better placed than others to weather these multiple assaults. One comprehensive study identified RMIT University as one of 7 (out of 41) Australian universities "most at risk of having their international student revenue losses exceed available cash and investment reserve" (Marshman and Larkins, 2020, p. 12). In this climate, one can only hope that RMIT's long history and foundational character will prevail. Whatever the future holds, the role of the organization development office will be an important dimension to its success.

When established in 1887, RMIT was a 'Working Men's College,' however, it allowed enrollments for both men and women the following year, offering courses in technical, business, and arts disciplines. As the institution grew, it transitioned in name, from Melbourne Technical College to Royal Melbourne Technical College, before settling on the name Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT) in 1960. The institution's history in delivering vocational education remains strong—not only in name but in its ongoing vocational education offerings. Since achieving university status in 1992, RMIT University's student numbers have grown to 91,111 (2019) and staff totaling 5,546 (2018), making it one of Australia's largest universities.

In March 2020, the Organisational Development team at RMIT University joined millions of Australians in leaving their physical office building to work from home as part of the early response to the first wave of the COVID-19 outbreak. The response from the Organisational Development office focused, with some immediacy, on providing targeted academic leadership

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support, contextualised by the COVID-19 response. Research undertaken (by co-author Andy Wear) into crisis leadership in higher education led to the work of fellow co-author, Ralph Gigliotti, with correspondence ensuing. Beyond discussions of the crisis leadership literature and implications for leadership practice in higher education, ongoing discussions centred on respective professional and socio-political environments, observing key similarities among the contextual differences. Certainly, the bipartisanship and inter-jurisdictional consultation observable in Australia stood in stark opposition to the political dynamic at play in the United States.

### **Rutgers University and the United States Backdrop**

Several pundits and scholars have noted, and as acknowledged in the introduction of this essay, the pandemic accelerated trends that were well underway prior to the global health crisis. The United States was dealing with a crisis of declining trust in national leadership before COVID-19. According to Gallup, trust in the government to handle problems reached historic lows in late January 2020, with 35 percent of Americans reportedly having “a great deal” or “a fair amount” of trust and confidence in the U.S. government’s ability to deal with domestic issues, down from 45% four months prior (Brenan, 2019). This decline in confidence was noted among both Democrats and Republicans. At the same time, higher education institutions in the United States also faced a number of major challenges prior to the global pandemic, including competing perceptions of value and worth, criticisms regarding access and accountability, decreases in state and federal funding for higher education (Pew, 2019), and in some regions of the country, declining enrollments due to falling birthrates and demographic shifts (Barshay, 2018).

Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, is the nation’s eighth oldest institution of higher learning. As one of only nine colonial colleges established before the American Revolution, Rutgers has a centuries-old tradition of rising to the challenges

of each new generation (Rutgers University, 2021). With a projected deficit of nearly \$180 million due to the pandemic, including lost revenues and increased costs, budgetary challenges remain at top of mind for many across the institution. With a total undergraduate and graduate student enrollment exceeding 70,000 and under the leadership of a new president as of July 1, 2020, the institution must both navigate the immediate challenges imposed by the pandemic, all the while pursuing the following strategic imperatives: the relentless pursuit of academic excellence, the need to develop strategic institutional clarity, and the achievement of a beloved community.

Reporting to the Senior Vice President for University Strategy and in collaboration with the Executive Vice President for Academic Affairs, the Rutgers Center for Organizational Leadership is an academic leadership and organizational development resource for Rutgers University and the higher education community. The Center provides a portfolio of programs, consultation services, and research initiatives for current and aspiring leaders seeking to develop and enhance their leadership, communication, and organizational competencies. As a hub for academic leadership development, consultation, and research, our signature offerings aim to improve individual and collective leadership capacity, support university strategy initiatives, and cultivate a culture of leadership development across the institution. In response to the pandemic, the Center continued to provide support, guidance, and consultation to individual leaders and units from across the institution, including a virtual adaptation of our leadership education and organizational development portfolio. The Center also engaged in numerous facilitations across Rutgers with units seeking to recalibrate their programs and services in pursuit of modified strategic priorities. Finally, throughout this crisis, the Center has been actively engaged in supporting leaders across higher education through publications, webinars, and podcasts with national and international outlets (Gigliotti, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c; Ruben, 2020a, 2020b). Similar to the noted pivot at RMIT University, Rutgers faculty and staff were

forced to adapt quickly to a fully virtual teaching and work environment. The challenges facing colleagues across the institution reinforced dual areas of focus for the Center—supporting both the operational needs of units and their leaders in change management, priority setting, and organizational assessment, for instance, in addition to supporting the humanistic needs of colleagues through many one-on-one coaching and consultation conversations. As detailed in the next section, crises such as the global pandemic demand both approaches to organization development.

### **Operational and Humanistic Approaches to Organization Development**

Few events position leadership more sharply in the crosshairs of public opinion than do crises, and no crisis in living memory has presented such glaringly disparate interpretations of leadership as has the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the consistency of challenges facing institutions of higher education, such as the lack of formal training and development of academic leaders and the ongoing scrutiny of higher education and its leaders as lacking in agility (Ruben, De Lisi, & Gigliotti, 2017), great pride can be taken in the immediate higher education response to the pandemic. Colleges and universities are regularly criticized for being slow-moving operations, and agility may at times seem countercultural and perhaps even threatening to the core values of the academy (Utz, 2020). However, colleges and universities across the globe engaged in colossal and commendable efforts to adjust quickly to fully online learning and work environments, and some institutions of higher education were among the first organizations of any kind to close physical operations and embrace social distancing in the early days of the pandemic (Baker, Hartocollis, & Weise, 2020). The events of recent months posed large-scale and complex challenges, and many of the traditional values of the academic enterprise have proven useful in helping leaders and institutions in responding to the ambiguous and interconnected challenges posed by the pandemic, including critical and creative thinking,

sophisticated approaches to research and inquiry, and a growing emphasis on interdisciplinary and inter-sector collaboration and consultation.

In what appears now as strategic prescience, RMIT prioritized developing excellence in academic leadership as a “2020 Area of Delivery” in the *Ready for Life and Work* strategy (RMIT University, 2019). As appendices to the internal Organisational Development office, the area of delivery teams had refined structures and distinct deliverables. For example, the team dedicated to overseeing the academic leadership stream was small; a manager, a communications business partner, and a hybrid academic-professional role (Senior

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Lecturer, Learning and Development) whose role was partly designed to bridge the operational and cultural divide between the university’s academic and professional portfolios—expectations and responsibilities that looked quite different in 2019. This focus on enhanced academic leadership development mirrored a similar emphasis at Rutgers University, with the units at both institutions required to shift immediately in response to the pandemic. Importantly, this shift demanded a recalibration of the ways in which our organization development teams work, the core programs and services they provide, and the ability of the respective teams to engage in responding strategically to the operational and humanistic needs of colleagues across the institutions.

### **New Organization Development Programs, Initiatives, and Roles**

In responding to immediate institutional needs, both internal organization development offices at RMIT and Rutgers

reconsidered core programs and initiatives and pursued new directions to best meet the moment. Below is a brief summary of these new offerings—each of which addresses the immediate operational needs of the institution and its leaders, along with the humanistic needs of colleagues in navigating a period of widespread personal and professional disruption.

#### ***RMIT Leadership Series***

The impact on resources meant a swift broadening of the team’s scope. While academic leadership remained its substantive focus, there was a focus on developing broader leadership development initiatives. In normal circumstances, organi-

zation development teams might defer to tried-and-true approaches, but with an increasing awareness of the phenomena of ‘information fatigue’ and ‘cognitive overload’ (Lee, Son, & Kim, 2016; Bolisani, Scarso & Padova, 2018) affecting RMIT employees, a change in strategy was required.

One of the earliest initiatives was the weekly Leadership Series, delivered to all RMIT University leaders, covering themes and topics (with supporting resources and information) specific to leading in a time of crisis. At the time of writing, the series consists of over 20 editions, covering a range of topics, including leading through disruption, self-care for leaders, situational adaptability, distributed leadership, and being resilient. Accountable for the academic integrity of the series, co-author Andy Wear worked to ensure each topic was researched as exhaustively as possible, albeit bound by significant time constraints. As topics were determined by the changing landscape of COVID-19, the team operated on a one-week turnaround of content—an exercise

in academic vigour (if not adequate rigor) and adaptability writ large. Rather than mandating participation in a program, individual time constraints, coupled with emotional and cognitive exhaustion, led to the formulation of a series that was both accessible and digestible for those with an interest in these topics. In presenting a more readable, conversational style, it was hoped that time-poor leaders would be more likely engaged. Relatively low-production video interviews with RMIT leaders accompanied each topic, projecting a relatable and authentic presence while simultaneously flagging leadership ‘champions.’ While the imposed technological and physical limitations determined this method, it was not entirely unintentional. The low-production aesthetic of laptop recordings and the delivery of remarks by leaders from their homes, captured the ‘zeitgeist,’ projecting familiarity and a sense of solidarity that transcended title or position. In keeping with a commitment to evidence-based, critical practice, a range of relevant resources for those leaders who had the time, inclination, or need to go deeper was made available. Although videos and podcasts were prioritised over the more conventional text-based resources for their ‘portability,’ a list of seminal and current critical texts and articles accompanied each week’s edition.

Finally, this work was evaluated using site data, analytics, and a survey—the latter generating almost universally positive feedback from anonymous readers/leaders. Access and readership data indicated a very satisfactory and stable interest in the series, although interpreting these data in the midst of an extended crisis must come with some qualification.

#### ***RMIT Crisis Leadership Modules***

The team’s secondary response to leadership support and development was more conventional, even if the content was not. Adaptability was continuously tested as the team responded to varied demands from academic colleges and professional portfolios. As long as RMIT continues to manage its response to the pandemic, the team will continue to develop these bespoke, formal training modules; however, at the time

of writing, the following have been made available or are soon to be delivered:

1. Wellbeing
2. Leading and supporting your people through change
3. The process of change
4. Conversations about change
5. Conversations about decisions
6. Team dynamics
7. Leadership & culture: resetting for 2021

Notable in this selection is an emphasis on change and people (or culture), building on the aforementioned observations concerning an increased focus on operational and humanistic aspects of our response. Issues of change, culture, and team dynamics demand a sophisticated operational response *and* humanistic response—both of which call for a more strategic, people-centered, and systems-oriented view, which is articulated throughout the modules.

#### ***Transforming the ‘Pracademic’ Position***

While neither project nor initiative, the transformation of co-author Andy Wear’s role during the pandemic is notable; if only for the possibilities these ‘pracademic’ roles open in future thinking and organization design. Established prior to the pandemic, the position of Senior Lecturer, Learning & Development (the first and only academic position within RMIT’s Organisational Development office) transformed from its somewhat amorphous description to one defined by, and attuned to, the particular demands of the situation. Unlike ‘traditional’ academic roles that are largely defined by an allocation of teaching and/or research responsibilities, this position was established as substantively project-focused, with reduced research allocation and no teaching requirements. As the response to the pandemic overwhelmed many, the role’s particular hybridity of academic and (alternative and/or non-university) professional experience ensured both areas of the university’s operation were confident that its respective language, culture, and perspective were understood. Of course, any such role is at risk of being ‘neither fish nor fowl’ and failing to adequately meet the expectations of *either* area—a risk mitigated by either a (rare)

combination of experience or (the more attainable) clear articulation and acceptance of the role’s limitations. The role has additional value in its service as both conduit to inter-operational communication and pre-emptor of potential tension or conflict. Indeed, some have described the role almost wholly in these terms, as someone “. . . frequently called upon to help resolve particular disputes and help identify sources of problems among the many layers of organization found in an academic setting” (Volpe & Chandler, 2001, p. 245).

**The leadership traits, behaviours, and characteristics that have proven impactful during this period of crisis will likely remain at the forefront of leadership development programs for some time, including the need for authenticity, honesty, and an ethic of care. As such, internal organization development and leadership development offices will remain central to supporting their leaders in navigating this altered terrain.**

Many central, operational portfolios have developed roles such as this that inhabit a ‘third-space’ (Whitchurch, 2008), and increasingly referred to by the portmanteau, ‘pracademic’ (Volpe & Chandler, 2001). The diversity of experience exhibited by the practitioner-academic can inform the variable nature of these roles. Andy’s experience of working for most of the past decade in this space has been largely positive, with a particular hybridisation of academic (Continental Philosophy) and practitioner (Digital Pedagogy and Learning Design) experience serving to bridge some distance of the operational/academic divide, with clear articulation and acceptance of the role’s limitations serving to make up the difference.

#### ***Rutgers Academic Leadership Hub***

In response to the crisis, the team at the Rutgers Center for Organizational Leadership launched an Academic Leadership Hub on the Canvas learning management system for leadership development program alumni, along with others from across Rutgers with an interest in issues regarding academic leadership. In preparing the Hub, the team conducted a

survey of leadership program alumni to learn more about their primary challenges and areas in need of additional support. Based on this feedback, introductory modules were developed for the following topics of interest: crisis leadership considerations, organizational assessment and the resetting of priorities, leadership for high-performing virtual teams, and pursuing and encouraging wellness as an academic leader. Each module contains a brief overview of relevant content, several supplemental readings and resources,

and a discussion forum where participants can engage with others in the virtual community. The Center also hosted many virtual sessions throughout the fall semester on topics such as leading emotional intelligence, positive academic leadership, delivering conscious feedback, and academic leadership as facilitation, which were recorded and made available, along with supplemental resources, within the virtual Hub.

#### ***Crisis-Informed Consultations***

Recognizing the impact of the pandemic on organizational strategy and priority setting, the Rutgers Center for Organizational Leadership adapted the portfolio of consultation services provided by the Center to best align with the urgent needs of units and departments across Rutgers. Under the auspices of the Office of University Strategy, three services in particular were made available to academic and administrative units across the institution, all of which could be delivered virtually: crisis leadership consultations, strategic planning, and priority setting workshops, and organizational review and assessment programs.

Beginning first with crisis leadership consultations, the Rutgers Center for Organizational Leadership offers facilitated workshops for units on the preparation and development of crisis leadership competencies. This workshop provides participants with an opportunity to identify and analyze the types of crises that are most relevant to their unit/department and to self-assess the strengths and areas for improvement as it relates to the critical skills, values, and competencies associated with crisis leadership (Gigliotti, 2019). This program also provides individuals with an opportunity to reflect on the strengths and areas for improvement in addressing departmental and institutional crises.

Determining a path forward after a significant disruption and high uncertainty can be a daunting task. The Center offers a modular approach to strategic planning and project planning that allows units and departments to systematically clarify their mission, vision, and values, and establish measurable goals and action plans. This program can be customized to allow units, departments, or schools to collectively recalibrate efforts in the aftermath of a crisis.

Finally, the organizational assessment efforts engage faculty and staff in the evaluation of the work of their organization and in the identification of strengths and priorities for improvement using the Excellence in Higher Education framework (Ruben, 2016, 2020a)—a Baldrige-informed model for organizational excellence in an academic context. These sessions allow units, departments, or schools to collectively identify shared strengths and areas for improvement, and to explore needed changes that may have emerged from the coronavirus crisis.

## Conclusion

As the above sections illustrate, there was a need for the organization development offices at RMIT and Rutgers, like the institutions at large, to pivot immediately in response to the challenges presented by the pandemic. While there will certainly be a return to certain aspects of the past, the longer-term implications of this crisis will be profound. At an operational level,

the shift to remote work at scale seems not only achievable, but also beneficial for many faculty and staff. It is unlikely that the traditional, strictly office-based culture will return to many sectors, including higher education.

In the face of great human loss, there is a renewed emphasis on the role of universities as sites of belonging, inclusion, and community. In response to these demands, there is an emerging need for academic leadership that is collaborative, compassionate, and people-centered. The leadership traits, behaviours, and characteristics that have proven impactful during this period of crisis will likely remain at the forefront of leadership development programs for some time, including the need for authenticity, honesty, and an ethic of care. As such, internal organization development and leadership development offices will remain central to supporting their leaders in navigating this altered terrain.

The authors hope their shared experience proves useful in encouraging additional cross-cultural conversations. Despite differences in the national and institutional backdrop, it is insightful to note the shared commitment to leadership development, organizational capacity-building, and institutional strategy within both organization development offices. Furthermore, the capacity to adapt and develop new initiatives demonstrates the capabilities we aspire to develop in our leaders. How this experience is distilled and disseminated across institutions of higher education will be important future work. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, the projects and initiatives summarized in this article compel both authors to reconsider the dynamic between operational and humanistic approaches to organization development—approaches that will continue to be relevant for the post-pandemic university.

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Andy brings a diverse range of expertise to this position, having held both academic and professional roles in a number of Australian universities. His academic background and qualifications are in philosophy, with a particular interest in philosophical ethics and aesthetics, while his professional background is in learning design and digital pedagogies, with extensive experience working on large-scale digital transformation projects.

This diverse background has exposed Andy to the scale and complexity of universities as organizations, driving an approach informed by creative and critical thinking and the operational demands of large-scale transformation. This insight and experience has shaped his current perspective on organizational development as needing to be innovative and responsive to a rapidly-changing global landscape. E-mail address: [andy.wear2@rmit.edu.au](mailto:andy.wear2@rmit.edu.au).

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