



The Hidden Work of Giving: Academic Intermediaries Role in Rural, Regional, and Remote Teacher Professional Experience Placements

Sarah James

Queensland University of Technology

s35.james@qut.edu.a

Anna Hogan

Queensland University of Technology

ar.hogan@qut.edu.au

Catherine Thiele

University of Sunshine Coast

cthiele@usc.edu.au

Abstract

Philanthropic initiatives designed to support preservice teachers' rural, regional, and remote placement experiences aim to ensure equitable educational opportunities for these school communities by attracting early career teachers and addressing critical teacher shortages. These initiatives provide valuable funding and placement opportunities for preservice teachers, but they also create significant work for academic and professional staff at universities that are tasked with facilitating philanthropic relationships for rural, regional, and remote placements. This paper critically examines how professional experience academics navigate the demands of rural, regional, and remote-focused philanthropic initiatives. Drawing on Berlant's concept of cruel optimism, we explore how the promise of social good becomes entangled with institutional precarity and unsustainable workloads. We argue that in the absence of institutional support and workload recognition, philanthropic initiatives are at risk of being unsustainable.

Keywords: *Philanthropy, professional experience, academic intermediary, cruel optimism, rural regional remote*

Introduction

Philanthropy has gained prominence in higher education institutions, operating as a strategic mechanism aligned with the broader marketisation trends of neoliberal education reforms (Parker et al, 2023). Such neoliberal reforms have transformed initial teacher education to reflect entrepreneurial approaches and market driven logics, for example, initial teacher education providers are now judged by student satisfaction scores, graduate employability, performance standards, and standardised curricula (Aydarova, 2022; Skourdoumbis & Rowe, 2025). Framed as a means to enhance higher education institutions' innovation and competitiveness, philanthropic partnerships deliver tangible benefits such as widened student participation, improved graduate employability, and enhanced ties with industry (Parker et al, 2023). Roberts et al. (2021, p.8), argue that philanthropy is "*critical in addressing issues long overlooked by systems focused on metro-normative understandings of education*" and plays a significant agenda-setting role by creating sustainable opportunities which benefit preservice teachers while addressing community needs. From this perspective, philanthropy is positioned as a key factor in shaping educational outcomes, particularly when it supports professional experience placements in rural,

regional, and remote schools and contributes to addressing persistent issues of teacher retention and workforce stability.

While the value of philanthropy in expanding educational opportunities is well established in the literature (Kurz & Parreira do Amaral, 2023; Reckhow & Snyder, 2014; Saltman, 2010), less attention has been paid to how philanthropic partnerships are formed, negotiated and sustained within higher education institutions. Emerging research has observed that philanthropic partnerships introduce complex demands on academics tasked with managing donor relationships (Czerniewicz & Cronin, 2023). These demands often translate into extensive administrative work to align higher education institution programs with donor expectations, creating a risk that academic agendas are distorted by donor priorities which privilege short term projects over longer term goals and systemic reform. Conceptually, Seddon and Billett's (2004, p. 10) notion of "*social partnership*" is useful in understanding this tension. While collaborations between public, business and civil society actors are framed as "*mutually beneficial, innovative relationships that address common societal aims*", they caution that resulting philanthropic funding frequently fails to cover the infrastructure costs required to sustain such partnerships. Thus, Seddon and Billett highlight how the promise of collaboration can mask significant resource gaps and hidden burdens for institutions. Such complexities underscore the need for higher education institutions to critically assess philanthropic partnerships to ensure they support, rather than hamper, academic integrity and institutional independence. Our paper contributes to this emerging research by offering new insights into the lived experiences of academics working at the intersection of philanthropy and initial teacher education.

Academics who manage philanthropic partnerships perform complex labour that cuts across multiple domains including, navigating university systems, supporting students and schools, overseeing placement logistics, and stewarding donor relationships (Coll & Eames, 2000). They are often described as "*boundary spanners*" (Aldrich & Herker, 1977, p.220), mediating between institutional and external domains by filtering information, translating expectations and facilitating collaboration. Their work also resembles "*boundary crossing*", which involves not only mediating but actively moving between and bridging different social or professional spheres (Kilpatrick et al., 2002, p.xi). This crossing entails a deeper entanglement. Rather than simply translating across domains, these academics inhabit multiple worlds, simultaneously carrying the burdens of each. Despite its value, this boundary work remains largely invisible within higher education institutional workload models and is often unrecognised in performance metrics (Frølund & Ziethen, 2016). Drawing on Berlant's (2011) concept of cruel optimism, we argue that while philanthropic partnerships promise access, opportunity, and social good, they also entangle boundary spanners and crossers in contradictory pressures, ethical tensions and material strains that undermine the conditions of their work.

To develop this argument, the paper proceeds in four parts to address the question: How do initial teacher education academics work in the space between the philanthropist or funders and beneficiaries. First, we discuss how philanthropy has become a viable financial mechanism for expanding access to regional, rural and remote professional placements within initial teacher education programs. Second, we expand on our conceptual framing of Berlant's (2011) cruel optimism alongside Frølund and Ziethen's (2016) idea of the academic intermediary to explore the philanthropic work being undertaken in initial teacher education. Third, we examine the intermediary role of professional experience academics and explore how their responsibilities with philanthropic initiatives intersect with broader issues of workload and recognition. Finally, we turn again to Berlant's conceptualisation of cruel optimism as a critical lens for understanding the contradictions and complexities of academic work within philanthropic partnerships.

Philanthropy in Initial Teacher Education

Successive government reports in Australia have emphasised the need to equip preservice teachers with the skills and cultural awareness necessary to thrive in unique and often underserved settings, particularly in regional, rural and remote communities (Halsey, 2018; Scott, 2023). While most government schools in Australia exist outside metropolitan cities (e.g., 63% in Queensland) (Queensland Government, 2023), most initial teacher education programs reinforce metro-centric norms. Roberts et al. (2021) argue that this reflects a lack of “rurality” (p. 106) at the policy level, which is particularly absent in the Australian Professional Standards for Teachers that are used to inform and accredit initial teacher education programs. However, amid escalating teacher shortages, which are particularly acute in regional, rural and remote areas, there has been a renewed policy focus on improving initial teacher education pathways to prepare and support teachers to work in these communities. The Australian Government recently noted “the need for funding models to support rural and regional placements, due to prohibitive accommodation and travel costs” (Scott, 2023, p. 65).

Such issues were addressed in the *Independent Review into Regional, Rural and Remote Education* (2018) conducted by John Halsey. While this review highlighted that preservice teachers undertaking placements in regional, rural and remote locations face “issues and costs their counterparts in urban areas do not have to worry about” (p. 7), Halsey also promoted regional, rural and remote placements as an effective way to attract teachers to these regions. As a means of addressing cost barriers, the *National Teacher Workforce Action Plan* (Australian Government: Department of Education, 2022) proposed providing financial support for preservice teachers undertaking regional, rural and remote placements, including a \$2,000 ‘top-up’ for those travelling to remote areas. In Queensland, the context of this research, there are similar grants, including ‘Beyond the Range’, which provides up to \$5,000 for eligible placement-related expenses (Queensland Government: Teach Queensland, 2024). More recently, the Federal Government introduced the ‘Commonwealth Prac Payment’ (known in Queensland as the Teach Queensland Prac Payment Grant) aimed to assist students (including preservice teachers) to manage the costs associated with undertaking a mandatory placement (Queensland Government: Teach Queensland, 2024).

These governmental initiatives and grants frame the challenge of regional, rural and remote professional placements as being predominately an economic issue that can be addressed through financial incentives. However, as Lampert et al. (2021) caution, these grants stem from various pools of government funding and are not consistently available year-on-year. Indeed, while Halsey’s (2018) review recommended increased government responsibility for funding regional, rural and remote initiatives, he also highlighted the “very helpful” (Halsey 2018, p.65) role that philanthropy could play in addressing funding gaps:

Because of the more targeted and flexible nature of the philanthropic \$, a key role of philanthropy may be to shine a light on the nuanced challenges and approaches required for RRR [regional, rural and remote education] and to either support the case for government funding to be directed where it may be lacking, or to support RRR educators and communities to innovate and develop approaches relevant to their context, which can be adopted by others where appropriate. (Halsey 2018, p.65)

This dual emphasis, on government and philanthropy, reflects a broader shift in education policy towards network governance (Ball & Junemann, 2012). Here private actors are increasingly incentivised to supplement or co-deliver public responsibilities (Reckhow, 2013).

Research has explored philanthropy in public schooling education, suggesting that it varies widely in its forms and effects (Hogan & Thompson, 2023; Hogan & Williamson, 2023; Rowe et al., 2024). Typically, philanthropy is referred to in three common ways: corporate philanthropy,

strategic philanthropy and venture philanthropy. Corporate philanthropy is often driven by corporate social responsibility. Here, businesses might contribute to education programs for corporate branding, visibility, or alignment with future workforce development, particularly in rural economies tied to agriculture or mining. For example, the BHP Foundation has a Regional Education and Skills Program to provide financial support to eligible students in regional, rural and remote areas to pursue higher education (see Mayes, 2019). This type of giving is often motivated by a desire to ‘give back’ to the local community that supports, in this case, BHP mining operations. Strategic philanthropy, on the other hand, is often framed around measurable return on investment, where philanthropic organisations fund initiatives not only to ‘do good’, but to produce demonstrable outcomes aligned with policy goals. As Reckhow (2013) argues, these types of investments allow philanthropists to build credibility and legitimacy to work closely with governments and education systems. For example, the Vincent Fairfax Family Foundation partners with Australian Schools Plus to deliver the Fair Education program, which targets schools in disadvantaged communities, many in regional, rural and remote areas. This program provides funding and coaching to build school leadership capacity and parent engagement, aligning with broader government policy goals around school improvement and equity (see Hogan et al., 2023).

Venture philanthropy, in further contrast, is seen to influence the policy agenda itself. Here market-based solutions are promoted to drive system-level reform. Reckhow and Snyder (2014) call these philanthropists ‘jurisdictional challengers’: private sector organisations which compete with or provide alternatives to traditional public sector institutions. They highlight how philanthropists in the U.S. context invest heavily in Teach for America. Rowe (2024) similarly argues that Teach for Australia operates within the same venture philanthropy framework, emphasising outcomes and systemic change. For example, in the regional, rural and remote context, Teach for Australia recruits high-achieving graduates to teach in disadvantaged schools as part of a broader strategy to address educational inequality through talent-based interventions. These placements are not just framed as filling teacher shortages, but as levers for systems improvement, aligning with venture philanthropy’s logic of measurable impact and return on social investment. Backed by a combination of philanthropic funding and government support, Teach for Australia’s presence in regional, rural and remote schools illustrates how non-state actors can reshape the teacher workforce pipeline, reconfigure professional preparation, and influence public discourse about what constitutes quality teaching. Such interventions or ‘social partnerships’ can simultaneously support immediate needs while reinforcing reform agendas that are often centred on individual excellence and market-responsive solutions.

Regardless of type, much of the existing research on philanthropy can be separated into two dominant strands: one that focuses on the actions and influence of philanthropists and the other that examines the effects of philanthropic programs and interventions on their intended beneficiaries, typically schools, teachers, or students. The former often interrogates the policy agendas, governance strategies, and discursive power of philanthropic actors (see also Olmedo, 2018; Lubienski, 2020; Rowe, 2024), while the latter tends to assess the impact or efficacy of specific programs, grants, partnerships (e.g., Teach for Australia placements and attrition from the profession) or philanthropic funding in disadvantaged schools (Rowe & Di Gregorio, 2024). What is often missing from these accounts is an examination of the space in between, that is, how philanthropy is negotiated at the level of everyday policy work. This analytical gap is even more critical when we consider how Halsey’s (2018) recommendation has been operationalised by initial teacher education programs, not as a broad lever for systemic reform, but as a practical solution to support individual institutional responses to professional regional, rural and remote placements. Indeed, both higher education institutions involved in this research had developed philanthropically supported programs, scholarships and bursaries to facilitate preservice teacher placements in regional, rural and remote communities. We were not concerned with the motivations of the philanthropists involved or the experiences of the student beneficiaries.

Rather, we were interested in how initial teacher education academics worked the space in between the philanthropist or funders and the beneficiaries.

To understand how philanthropy is facilitated within higher education institutions, we turn our attention to the everyday work of initial teacher education academics responsible for leading professional placements. From working alongside these people, we know they are responsible for developing and sustaining philanthropic partnerships and transforming funding into programmatic action. Yet, much of the literature to date focuses on procurement: the broader, institutional work of higher education institutions and their embedded engagement/advancement offices in securing private-sector funds. For instance, Tompkins-Stange (2016) highlights how grantee organisations, including universities, strategically frame their work to align with donor priorities, not necessarily by altering their core missions, but by adapting the language, focus, and presentation of their initiatives to resonate with philanthropic agendas. Perkmann et al. (2013) observe that university engagement offices have become central to translating donor agendas into institutional initiatives, acting as crucial intermediaries between external funders and internal higher education institutions programs. They argue that these offices help align philanthropic interests with institutional priorities by identifying funding opportunities, shaping project proposals, and framing institutional activities in ways that appeal to donor expectations. In doing so, they perform a form of ‘organisational translation’, reconciling the language of impact, innovation, and accountability demanded by funders with the academic values and operational constraints of universities. While some research has investigated the significant role of academic deans in cultivating donor relationships and aligning philanthropic interests with institutional strategy (Conley & Shaker, 2021; Shaker & Nelson, 2022), far less attention has been paid to the downstream role of ‘regular’ faculty members.

Conceptual Framework: Cruel Optimism and Academic Intermediaries

This paper brings Berlant’s (2011) concept of cruel optimism into dialogue with the academic intermediary to discuss the complex and often precarious role academics play in facilitating philanthropic initiatives within initial teacher education, particularly in the context of professional experience placements. Rather than adopting Berlant’s conceptual framework in its entirety, we focus on a key dimension of the work, specifically individuals’ affective attachments to compromised—but desired— futures (see Duschinsky et al., 2019; Duschinsky, 2020). We examine how academics become attached to aspirations, such as equity-driven philanthropic funding for regional, rural and remote placements, even as the pursuit of these aspirations intensifies labour.

Berlant (2011) describes cruel optimism as the condition in which “*something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing*” (p. 1). We explore how academics develop attachments to the potential of philanthropic funding as a means of securing socially just educational outcomes. This attachment is not simply ideological but operationalised through a range of affective and material practices that include handling donor relationships, planning and rationalising evidence-based initiatives, and ensuring their ethical and culturally appropriate implementation. In striving toward this imagined ‘better future’ academics assume intermediary roles that are multifaceted, complex, and deeply embedded in institutional and external expectations.

The intermediary role is characterised by Frølund and Ziethen (2016) as a form of knowledge brokerage, where academics must respond flexibly to “*changing situations, roles, functions, and ways-of-being*” (p. 3). In the context of our research, this labour includes stewarding partnerships through regular communication with donors, attending meetings, aligning institutional values with philanthropic visions, and producing compelling evidence of impact. These responsibilities, while crucial to the success of philanthropic initiatives, are often layered on top of already substantial teaching, research, and service obligations. Boundary-spanning or crossing work is especially visible in the domain of professional experience, where academic staff are already

responsible for student placements, managing relationships with schools, supporting placement tutors, and navigating diverse and somewhat complex professional domains, and the regulatory and accountability demands of teacher education (Bennett et al., 2017). This labour is akin to Frølund and Ziethen's (2016, p. 19) reference to stewardship, in which they note, is often invisible and undervalued, despite its crucial role in translating individual-level advocacy into institutional-level action. As Aldrich and Herker (1977) observe, such work positions academics as 'boundary spanners' or 'boundary crossers' (Kilpatrick et al., 2002): individuals who operate at the interface of institutional structures and external actors, filtering donor interests while also facilitating institutional action in the quest for the 'greater good' of betterment of student experiences.

The academic intermediary embodies Berlant's (2011, p. 2) insight that optimism can become cruel when "*the object that draws you in actively impedes the aim that brought you to it*". The promise of philanthropic funding for regional, rural and remote placements, a goal framed around equity and opportunity, can paradoxically exacerbate workload intensification, generate institutional friction, and place staff in precarious positions of responsibility without clear recognition or support. The desire to achieve long-term structural change is thus entangled with short-term pressures and institutional contradictions, producing a "*sense of desire*" (Berlant, 2011, p. 13) that is both motivating and costly. Berlant refers to this cost as *impassé* noting, the *impassé* becomes not just personal experience but a collective condition, requiring forms of improvisation and adjustment in the meantime (Berlant, 2011, p.4). By framing academic intermediaries within the concept of cruel optimism, we offer a nuanced account of the emotional, political, and institutional tensions that shape their work.

Methods

Data presented in this paper are drawn from a broader qualitative case study investigating the role of philanthropy in initial teacher education programs across two Queensland universities. The wider study included interviews with academic executive leaders, academic leaders in professional experience, and professional staff involved in developing and managing philanthropic partnerships. For this paper, we focus specifically on the academic leaders in professional experience, Ash, Charlie, and Rory, each with 3–5 years of experience in this position. The voices of the professional staff Quinn and Tatum are also included to offer unique perspectives on supporting the work of intermediaries and philanthropic partnerships. Pseudonyms have been used throughout to protect the identities of participants and ensure confidentiality. Semi-structured interviews lasting approximately 60 minutes were conducted with each participant. These interviews focused on their experiences coordinating philanthropic funding initiatives for professional experience placements in regional, rural and remote school communities. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, with transcripts verified by participants to ensure accuracy.

An inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to explore the data, allowing for the emergence of patterns and meanings grounded in participants' accounts. However, the analysis was informed by the concept of cruel optimism (Berlant, 2011) and the construct of the academic intermediary (Frølund & Ziethen, 2016). This dual framework enabled us to interrogate how participants navigated the aspirational promise of philanthropy, such as increased funding and improved placement opportunities for students, against the systemic constraints and emotional demands that accompanied this work. The findings are organised around key themes that we developed including: 1) hopeful attachments to philanthropy; 2) the invisible labour of intermediation; 3) fractured institutional responsibility; and 4) workload intensification and emotional cost.

Findings

Hopeful Attachments to Philanthropy

Allocating philanthropic funding to support students' regional, rural and remote placements emerged as a powerful emotional investment among participants. Philanthropy was viewed as a way to create possibilities that would not otherwise exist in the current structures of initial teacher education, particularly when providing meaningful professional experience placements in regional, rural and remote locations. The participants' responses reveal there were hopeful attachments to what philanthropy could enable for students and regional, rural and remote communities more broadly. They raise issues such as, greater student access, deeper community engagement, and a more socially just distribution of educational opportunity. Rory articulated this when she observed, *"without that money, the [regional, rural and remote] trips wouldn't be happening. We'd have a whole lot of students who wouldn't experience [the] country"*. Similar comments were made by Quinn:

We're getting students out as far as we can, out into the middle of nowhere, to have an experience ... a lot of them get stuck into the community and they love it... they can have a look around, [and if] they have a good experience, they'll probably go back [to teach].

These two academics, Rory and Quinn, had formed an attachment to the promise of philanthropic funding or as Berlant (2011, p. 46) proposes, a sense of the *"possibilities"* that funding may offer students. They saw philanthropic funding not only as a resource but as an invitation or an opportunity for students to witness what teaching in regional communities could look like. They observed that this type of 'lived experience' was important in shaping future career choices to teach in regional, rural and remote communities.

Similarly, Charlie's investment in philanthropy was driven by a belief that initial teacher education can play a role in better supporting regional, rural and remote communities: *"We're trying to connect them [the student] with the community"*. It could be argued that the use of 'connect' suggests an aspirational vision of initial teacher education that is place-based, relational, and human-centred. This attachment reflected a broader belief in the purpose of higher education, beyond credentialing, but as a way to facilitate a 'better' future for regional, rural and remote communities. In fact, Ash made this point more explicitly by stating;

It benefits the students, but it also benefits those [regional, rural and remote] communities out there and getting the students—the beginning teachers— out there... It gives them that foot in the door. It benefits the profession, I suppose. It's the bigger picture. It's not just about the university, the kudos to the university, [it's] that we're providing these opportunities for students to go out. I think it's a lot bigger.

Here, Ash positioned philanthropic initiatives as a catalyst for system-wide benefit, including helping students enter the profession, enriching regional, rural and remote communities, and advancing the education sector's collective responsibility to equity. Her framing connects to what Berlant (2011, p.1) refers to as the promise of *"an improved way of being"*, a future shaped not by institutional inertia, but by proactive, ethically motivated interventions.

Ethical judgment was also inferred by the professional staff, Quinn noted: *"Knowing that they've actually got some money, and they're not going to be dirt poor when they get home... [is] nice"*. The attachment to philanthropic financial support noted by Quinn's comments blurred the institutional boundaries of her typical work activities with care and obligation. Here her work spanned boundaries, from the main 'operational' role of placing students in schools for professional experience to an altruistic mindset that reflected the wellbeing of students. Goodrich et al. (2020, p.6) posit, *"boundary spanners may be asked to play a number of roles, some of which may fall outside their area of expertise"*. Tatum referenced similar thoughts related to

financial stressors: “No one can afford to go and do a five-week placement and not have money to pay their rent”. Tatum’s comment suggested an attachment that is carried emotionally and professionally to facilitate philanthropic initiatives that support students.

Collectively, the participants’ comments suggested that philanthropic funding offers opportunities which create a bridge between ideals and actions. Their attachments to the funding were aspirational, grounded in a desire to ‘make things better’ in a system where conventional funding mechanisms were falling short. Yet, as the following themes will show, these attachments were not without cost. The optimism that drove participants’ efforts also made visible the tensions and contradictions of operating as academic intermediaries in a complex and under-resourced higher education institutional landscape.

The Invisible Labour of Intermediation

While participants expressed deep hope in the possibilities philanthropy could offer for regional, rural and remote professional experiences, their statements also revealed the substantial, often invisible labour required to realise these ambitions. As academic intermediaries, they were responsible for brokering relationships, translating philanthropic visions into practical initiatives, and managing the expectations of multiple stakeholders, all while navigating their ‘other’ work. These forms of intermediation were affective, relational and administrative, yet often unrecognised in formal workload models and/or performance metrics. Charlie’s experience exemplified this dynamic and clearly reinforced the boundary spanning and crossing work undertaken. Having facilitated key relationships with philanthropic partners, including the development of a funding proposal that aligned with donor values and institutional requirements, she found herself pushed to the periphery:

I did all the legwork and the hard yards, and then all of a sudden, I've got nothing to do with it anymore. Like, it goes to the [Advancement / Engagement] team, and they liaise with [philanthropist], they liaise with the students, they get the shortlist. Then all of a sudden, I get an email saying, can you come to the interviews and interview [the students]? It's like, I missed the whole thing—I'm left out of that whole process in the middle... It would have been nice to be cc'd in or have some understanding of what happened.

Charlie continued,

we set up a meeting... we went to [philanthropist organisation] in the city. We thrashed out some ideas. Initially, they had the idea of us doing it one way, the way they thought would work. But we talked them into changing their approach.

Charlie’s comments reflected there is a disconnect between the labour required to build philanthropic momentum and the institutional structures that govern its formal progression. While Charlie was an integral part of the initial development of the partnership, called on for her expertise in regional, rural and remote professional experience, and while she was closest to the work, her reflections indicate she was neither kept in the loop nor given ownership of the outcomes. Her role was essential but rendered invisible once ideas and approaches were agreed upon, a dynamic that echoes what Frølund and Ziethen (2016) describe as the knowledge broker, caught between multiple institutional layers, managing expectations without recognition or authority.

While Charlie’s remarks reflected a disconnect, Ash described this dynamic as the university’s over-reliance on goodwill: “All this stuff [we do] is not recognised... It takes so much time, and it’s difficult to even quantify... It’s a bottomless bucket of engagement that’s overflowing”. Her metaphor here suggested there is a level of emotional exhaustion in intermediary work; a never-ending stream of demands that are rarely supported by the institutional scaffolding they require. As Ash further highlighted, philanthropic work is never “straightforward... it’s never a matter of this is the project, and this is your money... there’s constant hurdles to jump over”. Rory, too,

observed the mismatch between the ethical importance of the work and the lack of structural support for it: *“I’m passionate about this happening, but passion doesn’t get me 30 grand out of nowhere”*. Despite their efforts, which were essential to the delivery of key programs, these boundary spanners or crossers remained hidden in plain sight, quiet choreographers of care, negotiation and endurance who held the system together even as it slowly wore them down.

Participants also described fluctuations in their role. Tatum noted from a professional staff point of view, her work often extended beyond the standard logistical coordination of placing students. Tatum reflected on the additional workload associated with *“offering opportunities”*, she noted organisation in terms of *“accommodation”* and *“funding”* for students as additional logistic complexities that fell well outside her ‘typical’ role and responsibilities. She continued: *“it is not easy to place a student”* and *“we place them in [regional, rural and remote] schools where we know they will get a bursary”*. Indeed, the reliance on schools and teachers to host preservice teachers often hinges on goodwill, the unspoken expectation that educators will take on additional responsibilities. In this case, Tatum was involved in relational brokerage as she translated expectations and facilitated relationships for sustaining placements in particular ‘known’ schools (which are recipients of philanthropic funding). These responsibilities far exceeded the standard tasks detailed for her job. The role also required her to discern the realistic capacity of supervising teachers. Tatum acknowledged that *“teachers are burnt out”*, implying that placement of students without overservicing particular schools weighs on her mind as she commented, *“don’t cut off your nose to spite teacher education your face”*, inferring that overservicing schools acts against the best interests of all stakeholders.

Collectively, participants identified the ways in which their academic or professional identity was stretched beyond their ‘normal’ boundary of work and reshaped by this labour. They were required to shift between roles of educator, relationship manager or broker, travel agent, fundraiser, and administrator, duties that typically sat outside their job description. Such unseen work is redolent of a neoliberal approach to education which depends on unpaid labour (Potvin & Dority, 2022). Indeed, here, workload inequalities (and related rhetoric) coalesce with real systemic conditions. These conditions may include government funding withdrawal from public services like education, market driven logic that includes running education systems like a business, and emotional and relational labour that sees women placed at the core.

This scramble, constant improvisation, or spanning across somewhat unfamiliar boundaries, is what makes the labour of intermediation particularly invisible. It does not fit easily within the linear models of academic productivity or institutional planning. It happens between meetings and emails and in between teaching and research, performed only because someone must keep the work moving. These insights expose a structural tension; while philanthropic partnerships are increasingly promoted as essential to university strategy and public good initiatives, the academic labour that makes them possible remains under-acknowledged. As Ash observed, *“we do it for goodwill”*. That goodwill, while powerful, is neither infinite teacher education nor free. It carries emotional weight, professional risk, and time costs that are frequently absorbed by already stretched academic and professional staff. According to Berlant (2011) good will would be viewed as an affective attachment, that is, the idea that if we work harder and show we care, we can make broken systems like education work better.

Fractured Institutional Responsibility

Participants’ experiences of managing philanthropic partnerships were consistently shaped by a lack of clarity over who was responsible for what. While philanthropic funding was positioned institutionally as a strategic good, the actual work of delivering on aspirations was scattered across different teams. For academic intermediaries like Charlie, Ash, and Rory, this created ongoing uncertainty and disorientation, leaving them to ‘fill the gaps’ between institutional aspirations and operationalisation of the initiative.

Charlie's reflections made this fragmentation visible. Despite her initiative in cultivating partnerships and building philanthropic proposals, she frequently found herself working in a relational and informational vacuum: "You're scrambling to try and get things underway and trying to get money or tied up with different teams trying to solve the same problem. No one's talking to each other". She described being delegated responsibility without clear guidance or structural support: "It's like, off you go, Charlie... but I don't know what I'm supposed to do here. The things that I've tried to do aren't really gaining traction". This sense of being both accountable and unsupported typifies the "porous zone" Berlant (2011, p. 53) describes: an affectively and administratively incoherent space that absorbs labour and ambiguity. Charlie's experience underscores how universities increasingly rely on individuals to navigate institutional silos (Roper, 2021), pushing the burden of coordination, troubleshooting, and emotional labour onto those least empowered to systematise the work.

Though Charlie's assertions revealed a sense of fragmentation, Ash also pointed to the lack of institutional coherence, describing meetings that led nowhere: "I had a meeting with so and so, but what's the outcome? What's the action? I'm not getting that. I'm really disjointed with what's going on". Her frustration pointed to a structural gap between strategy and implementation. While central units like Advancement or Engagement may oversee donor relationships at a high level, the practical, ground-level work, including the design of placement models, supporting students, and ensuring alignment with donor goals, is often left to academic staff who were disconnected from formal decision-making structures. This disconnect was further exacerbated by overlapping responsibilities and an overreliance on interpersonal relationships. As Charlie noted: "There's so many people involved, so many middle people... Lots of different people have their fingers in the pie, which is great. But there's no coordinated action around it". As Charlie further highlighted, this sometimes meant working alongside people who had limited knowledge of initial teacher education and the complexities of regional, rural and remote spaces,

I'm finding that— initially, I was getting this man who I'd never worked with before, trying to organise me into how to engage with the [philanthropist] around [regional, rural and remote spaces], and he had no idea about [regional, rural and remote] teaching whatsoever.

The institutional assumption that philanthropic work can 'slot into' existing systems overlooks the complexity of managing donor relationships, designing ethically sound placement structures, and coordinating across systemic boundaries. In many ways, the academic intermediary emerges as someone who smooths over gaps, manages relationships informally, and ensures progress continues despite systemic breakdowns. Yet this workaround is unsustainable. As Charlie put it: "There's no rule book or playbook... I'm left out of that whole process in the middle". This point goes beyond a lack of communication, suggesting there were deeper structural requirements needed to ensure universities can meet strategic aims. The university promises impact through philanthropy, yet fails to support those tasked with delivering on that promise. The point reflects Berlant's (2011) notion related to "transgressing the accustomed order of things" (p. 78) where the failure to accommodate or work outside of systemic processes contributes to stress.

Workload Intensification and Emotional Cost

Alongside their strong ethical commitments to equity and regional, rural and remote school communities, participants described the emotional toll of philanthropic intermediation. The labour required to sustain partnerships, respond to evolving institutional expectations, and deliver meaningful placement outcomes often extended well beyond formal role descriptions. Two of the academics spoke candidly about workload and emotional costs. Rory discussed the weight of this work. Despite years of investment in enabling rural placements through philanthropy, she found herself constantly advocating for its importance in the absence of broader institutional ownership: "Sometimes I think I'm waving the flag, saying, come on, this is

something that's important". This flag-waving metaphor evokes a sense of standing alone, publicly defending the value of work that others may not fully understand or prioritise. Rory's persistence reflected the emotional labour often required to facilitate philanthropic initiatives.

Rory also noted the cumulative strain of sustaining these efforts over time, particularly considering funding precarity and the repetitive nature of grant-seeking: *"The issue really, is sustainability. It's having to go through the process of applying and spending the time that it takes, and the knockbacks"*. Her emphasis on time, the time to apply, the time to justify, the time to manage knockbacks, underscores how philanthropic intermediation extended beyond a discrete task into an ongoing condition of labour. This work was rarely formalised, yet it must be maintained consistently if students are to access funding and partnerships are to persist. Charlie's experience similarly highlighted how philanthropic coordination demands ongoing, responsive, and time-intensive labour: *"It is this ongoing work that takes time. We're problem solving as we go"*. This comment spoke to the open-ended, adaptive nature of the role. Philanthropic implementation was not experienced as a linear or predictable process but rather as a continuous stream of issues to resolve, where each new challenge layered onto existing responsibilities. Here, workload intensification was not merely about doing more, it was about managing the emotional and operational complexity of work that seeped into boundaries undefined in traditional workloads.

Turning to both professional staff voices, Quinn noted that the main scholarship on offer is one that *"everyone just applies for... so I process the rural and remote [philanthropist funding application] ... I place them, and then I... send it off"*. The workload accompanying the additional tasks Quinn undertook related to philanthropy appeared to require additional resource allocation as she noted: *"it'd be great to have some more funding for another person in my office"* and *"the workload now... I try my best"*. Tatum expressed similar thoughts around workload: *"it happens to us often—they [colleagues/academics] go to a networking meeting and then the next day we're flooded with emails saying [x] want to form a partnership"*. She continued: *"I think a lot less people are interested in taking on that extra stuff even if it's a \$10,000 scholarship... they just see it as more work"*. The convergence of workload intensification and the related philanthropic processes mentioned by Quinn underscored how for example, applying for a scholarship is not a simple solution, rather it creates additional administrative burdens and requires institutional oversight to manage effectively.

This theme highlighted the paradox of academic and professional staff intermediation: the very individuals most invested in ensuring equitable, high-quality regional, rural and remote placements are also vulnerable to burnout. Their optimism about what philanthropy could achieve is, as Berlant (2011) describes, 'cruel' in the sense that the labour of sustaining it slowly erodes the conditions for their own professional wellbeing. As Charlie commented, *"who benefits from all this? Well, definitely not me"*.

The Cruel Optimism of Academic Intermediation

The responses of Rory, Charlie, Ash, Quinn, and Tatum reveal philanthropic partnerships with universities as hopeful opportunities to pursue an imagined better future for beneficiaries, particularly university students and regional, rural and remote school communities. However, these hopeful attachments to philanthropic funding are not without consequence. The very systems that promise benefits for the broader social good, simultaneously can burden those who work hardest to enact philanthropic initiatives. As Berlant (2011) suggests, optimism becomes cruel when individuals remain attached to a desired future that structurally obstructs their own flourishing. In this context, the hope placed in philanthropy becomes a double bind: it motivates sustained labour and moral investment, while offering little recognition in return. This reframing invites a more critical understanding of university and philanthropic partnerships, not simply in terms of funding, 'gifts', doing good, or opportunity (McGoey, 2012), but as a system of

obligation that reshapes academic identities and expectations.

In this paper we have highlighted the intermediary role as one that exists to fill institutional gaps and misalignments. Each of our participants was required to act across professional boundaries, mediate and engage in social partnerships across professional spheres, manage relationships with donors, coordinate internal teams, and align programs with philanthropic missions, often without formal authority, training, or time allocation. The academic intermediary became a boundary spanner or crosser, analogous to a compensatory figure, absorbing institutional incoherence and translating aspiration into action. As others have argued (Shore & Wright, 2015; Frølund & Ziethen, 2016), this form of boundary and social partnership work is increasingly central in academic life yet remains under-acknowledged in university policy or workload models.

Hochschild (2012, p. 8) mentions *“emotional labour... and its unpaid form”*, that is *“in the absence of unquestioned external guidelines, the single function of emotion becomes more important, and the commercial distortion of the managed heart becomes... a human cost”* (p. 29). Our *“culture invites women, more than men, to focus on feelings rather than action”* (Hochschild, 2012, p. 51). Hochschild (2012) notes, women are schooled in emotional management and are typically caregivers who disproportionately carry emotional labour outside of the home. Berlant's (2011) work, attends to the embodied and affective cost of sustaining optimism under structurally unsupportive conditions. Her notion of the ‘impassé’ speaks directly to the way feminised labour is stretched across roles that are both professionally necessary and structurally unprotected. Our findings suggest there is a slow creep of responsibilities and improvisations related to new or novel duties that are gradually absorbed by academics and professional staff and that accumulate without relief or structural change.

Finally, this paper contributes to academic labour scholarship by foregrounding the emotional cost of engagement with philanthropy under neoliberal logics. Participants described feeling stretched, disoriented, and emotionally overdrawn, not simply from the volume of tasks, but from the disjuncture between their commitments and their capacity to hold those commitments meaningfully. The cost here is not only time, but relational and professional coherence. For academics to remain hopeful, innovative, and resilient, the systems in which they work need to ensure they offer procedural clarity or relational continuity. Crucially, the labour associated with philanthropic intermediation, including relationship building, coordination and strategic negotiation, is rarely recognised in day-to-day activities, instead privilege is typically given to quantifiable outputs such as publications and grant income (or at least, successful, high-value philanthropic partnerships). As a result, academics undertake this invisible work that is emotionally consuming, reinforcing a misalignment between what university's claim to value and reward.. The emotional exhaustion described in this study echoes existing critiques of neoliberal higher education reform which highlight the increased managerial control and performance metrics that have led to work intensification among academics (Dafermos, 2023).

The rise of the intermediary is not incidental, it is a predictable outcome of neoliberal higher education reforms that have withdrawn public funding (Connell, 2013), valorise external partnerships (Ball, 2012), and expect individuals to creatively manage systemic underinvestment (Connell, 2013). Cruel optimism gives us language for the attachment to roles that are both valued and undermined. It describes the attachments to aspirations that promise improvement or flourishing, yet, sustain the very conditions that prevent such progress. Attachments that drive academics to ‘wave the flag’ for change, even when it comes at personal cost, with no formal recognition and often underpinned by emotional and relational labour.

Ethics

This research has ethics approval through QUT's University Human Research Ethics Committee, Approval Number 4015.

References

- Aldrich, H., & Herker, D. (1977). Boundary spanning roles and organization structure. *The Academy of Management Review*, 2(2), 217–230. <https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.1977.4409044>
- Australian Government: Department of Education. (2022). *National teacher workforce action plan*. Retrieves September 1 2025 from <https://www.education.gov.au/national-teacher-workforce-action-plan#:~:text=On%2015%20December%202022%2C%20Education,will%20be%20published%20throughout%202024.>
- Aydarova, E. (2022). Shadow elite of teacher education reforms: Intermediary organizations' construction of accountability regimes. *Educational Policy*, 36(5), 1188–1221. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0895904820951121>
- Ball, S. J. (2012). *Global education inc: New policy networks and the neo-liberal imaginary* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203803301>
- Ball, S. J., Junemann, C. (2012). *Networks, new governance and education*. Policy Press.
- Bennett, D., Roberts, L., & Ananthram, S. (2017). Teaching-only roles could mark the end of your academic career. Retrieved April 17 2025 from <https://theconversation.com/teaching-only-roles-could-mark-the-end-of-your-academic-career-74826#:~:text=This%20includes%20teaching%2C%20marking%2C%20supervision,and%2020%25%20service%20and%20leadership>
- Berlant, L. (2011). *Cruel optimism*. Duke University Press.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp0630a>
- Coll, R. K., & Eames, C. (2000). The role of the placement coordinator: An alternative model. *International Journal of Work-Integrated Learning*, 1(1), 9.
- Conley, A., & Shaker, G. G. (2021). *Fundraising principles for faculty and academic leaders* (1st ed. 2021.). Springer International Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-66429-9>
- Connell, R. (2013). The neoliberal cascade and education: An essay on the market agenda and its consequences. *Critical Studies in Education*, 54(2), 99–112. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17508487.2013.776990>
- Czerniewicz, L., & Cronin, C. (2023). *Higher education for good: Teaching and learning futures*. Open Book Publishers.
- Dafermos, M. (2023). The neoliberal transformation of university and restructuring of academic labour. *Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies*, 21(1), 1-37. <http://www.jceps.com/archives/14767>
- Duschinsky, R. (2020) *Cornerstones of attachment research*. Oxford University Press.
- Duschinsky, R., Reisz, S., & Messina, S. (2019). 'Pulling the world in and pushing it away': Participating bodies and the concept of coping. *Medical Humanities*, 45(2), 124–130. <https://doi.org/10.1136/medhum-2018-011581>

- Frølund, L., & Ziethen, M. (2016). The wisdom of the intermediary: The role, function, and ways-of-being of the intermediary in a strategic program for university-industry relations. *Triple Helix (Heidelberg)*, 3(1), 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40604-016-0039-4>
- Goodrich, K, Sjostrom, K., Vaughan, C., Nichols, L., Bednarek, A., Lemos, M. (2020). Who are boundary spanners and how can we support them in making knowledge more actionable in sustainability fields? *Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability*, 42, 45-51, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cosust.2020.01.001>
- Halsey, J. (2018). Independent review into regional, rural, and remote education. *Department of Education, Skills and Employment, Australian Government*. Retrieved April 28 2025 from <https://www.dese.gov.au/quality-schools-package/independent-review-regional-rural-and-remote-education>
- Hochschild, A. R. (2012). *The managed heart: Commercialization of human feeling* (3rd ed.). University Of California Press.
- Hogan, A., & Thompson, G. (2023). Running the canteen for profit: funding, parents and philanthropy in Queensland state schools. *Critical Studies in Education*, 64(5), 464–478. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17508487.2023.2180531>
- Hogan, A., & Williamson, A. (2023). Mapping categories of philanthropy in Australian public schooling. *Discourse (Abingdon, England)*, 44(5), 651–666. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01596306.2022.2071841>
- Hogan, A., Gerrard, J., & Di Gregorio, E. (2023). Philanthropy, marketing disadvantage and the enterprising public school. *The Australian Educational Researcher*, 50(3), 763-780. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-022-00524-5>
- Kilpatrick, S., Johns, S., Mulford, B., Falk, I. and Prescott, L. (2002) More than an Education: Leadership of School-Community Partnerships. Report on Project UT-31A, Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation, Canberra. Available <https://www.agrifutures.com.au/wp-content/uploads/publications/02-055.pdf>
- Kurz, B., & Parreira do Amaral, M. (2023). Philanthropising teacher education? The emerging activities of corporate philanthropy in teacher development. *Revista Española de Educación Comparada*, 42, 109–132. <https://doi.org/10.5944/reec.42.2023.34241>
- Lampert, J., Mcpherson, A., Burnett, B., Armour, D., Broen, S., & Tomkins, S. (2021). *Research into initiatives to prepare and supply a workforce for hard-to-staff schools*. Final report. https://opal.latrobe.edu.au/articles/report/Research_into_initiatives_to_prepare_and_supply_a_workforce_for_hard-to-staff_schools/16418766?file=30422619
- Lubienski, C. (2020). What ‘good’ is schooling?: The new edu-philanthropies and education reform. In A. Hogan & G. Thompson (Eds.), *Privatisation and commercialisation in public education* (pp. 21–35). Routledge.
- Mayes, R. (2019). Corporate funding and local community development: A case from the mining industry in Australia. In N McCrea & Finnegan (Eds.) *Funding, power and community development* (pp. 85-100). Policy Press. <https://doi.org/10.51952/9781447336167.ch006>
- McGoey, L. (2012). Philanthrocapitalism and its critics. *Poetics (Amsterdam)*, 40(2), 185–199. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2012.02.006>

- Olmedo, A. (2018). Venture philanthropy and education policy-making. In K. J. Saltman & A.J. Means (Eds.) *The Wiley handbook of global education reform*. Wiley and Sons, Inc. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119082316.ch3>
- Parker, L., Martin-Sardesai, A., & Guthrie, J. (2023). The commercialized Australian public university: An accountingized transition. *Financial Accountability & Management*, 39(1), 125–150. <https://doi.org/10.1111/faam.12310>
- Perkmann, M., Tartari, V., McKelvey, M., Autio, E., Broström, A., D’Este, P., Fini, R., Geuna, A., Grimaldi, R., Hughes, A., Krabel, S., Kitson, M., Llerena, P., Lissoni, F., Salter, A., & Sobrero, M. (2013). Academic engagement and commercialisation: A review of the literature on university–industry relations. *Research Policy*, 42(2), 423–442. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.respol.2012.09.007>
- Potvin, J., & Dority, K. (2022). Feminist pedagogy in the neoliberal university: The limits of precarious labour. *Atlantis*, 43(1), 56–68. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1096957ar>
- Queensland Government. (2023). *National school resourcing board: Review of regional schooling resource standards (SRS) loadings*. https://www.education.gov.au/system/files/2023-12/consultation-17829/5_Qld_Department_of_Education.pdf
- Queensland Government: Teach Queensland. (2024). *Professional experience grants*. <https://teach.qld.gov.au/study-teaching/professional-experience-grants-and-resources/professional-experience-placements>
- Reckhow, S. (2013). *Follow the money: How foundation dollars change public school politics*. Oxford University Press.
- Reckhow, S., & Snyder, J. W. (2014). The expanding role of philanthropy in education politics. *Educational Researcher*, 43(4), 186–195. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X14536607>
- Roberts, P., Dean, J., Downes, N., & McPherson, A. (2021). *Education in rural and regional areas: A strategic review of potentials and possibilities for philanthropic engagement*. University of Canberra. https://researchsystem.canberra.edu.au/ws/portalfiles/portal/44888847/Education_in_Rural_and_Regional_Areas_A_Strategic_Review_for_philanthropic_engagement.pdf
- Roper, L. (2021). Encouraging interdisciplinary collaboration: A study of enablers and inhibitors across silos in higher education. *Interdisciplinary Journal of Partnership Studies*, 8(1), 6-. <https://doi.org/10.24926/ijps.v8i1.3687>
- Rowe, E. (2024). Policy networks and venture philanthropy: A network ethnography of ‘teach for Australia’. *Journal of Education Policy*, 39(1), 1-19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02680939.2022.2158373>
- Rowe, E., Di Gregorio, E. (2024). Grant chaser and revenue raiser: Public school principals and the limitations of philanthropic funding. *Australian Education Researcher*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-024-00750-z>
- Rowe, E., Langman, S., & Lubienski, C. (2024). Privatising public schools via product pipelines: Teach for Australia, policy networks and profit. *Journal of Education Policy*, 39(3), 384–409. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02680939.2023.2266431>

- Saltman, K. J. (2010). *The gift of education: Public education and venture philanthropy* (1st ed.). Palgrave Macmillan US. <https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230105768>
- Scott, M. [Expert Panel Chair] (2023). *Strong beginnings: Report of the teacher education expert panel*. Australian Government Department of Education, Skills and Employment. 2025 from <https://www.education.gov.au/quality-initial-teacher-education-review/resources/strong-beginnings-report-teacher-education-expert-panel>
- Seddon, T. & Billett, S. (2004) Social Partnerships in Vocational Education: Building Community Capacity. National Centre for Vocational Education Research https://www.ncver.edu.au/__data/assets/file/0014/5180/nr2002.pdf
- Shaker, G. G., & Nelson, D. (2022). A grounded theory study of major gift fundraising relationships in U.S. higher education. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 51(5), 1054–1073. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08997640211057437>
- Shore, C., & Wright, S. (2015). Audit culture revisited: Rankings, ratings, and the reassembling of society. *Current Anthropology*, 56(3), 421–444. <https://doi.org/10.1086/681534>
- Skourdoumbis, A., & Rowe, E. (2025). A critique of ‘Strong Beginnings’ initial teacher education reforms: mandating neuroscience as core curriculum within the ‘what works’ movement. *Australian Educational Researcher*, 52(1), 841–859. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-024-00743-y>
- Tompkins-Stange, M. E. (2016). *Policy patrons: Philanthropy, education reform, and the politics of influence*. Harvard Education Press.



Except where otherwise noted, content in this journal is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International Licence](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/). As an open access journal, articles are free to use with proper attribution. ISSN 1839-7387