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# Time and its role in understanding programme directors and their professional learning in higher education: a practice architectures perspective

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**ABSTRACT**

Time has been acknowledged as a key factor in academic work and as a part of workplace learning, yet there is little empirical research that explores the multiple dimensions of time that shape learning at and for work, particularly for academics. This paper presents empirical evidence of the multi-faceted nature of time in the work of programme directors in universities where time is foregrounded as a critical yet often overlooked part of working and learning. Framed by a practice orientation, in particular the theory of practice architectures, this paper draws on evidence from an interview-based study that investigated the work and learning of programme directors in an Australian university to explore the various dimensions of time and their impact on work and learning. The findings not only highlight the importance of considering time as part of the practice architectures at a site but also emphasise the practical implications of this for how we can better support programme directors in terms of their professional learning.

## Introduction

Programme directors exist in most higher education settings and occupy a complex and diverse role that requires a high degree of autonomy, yet is also under-valued and seldom well supported (Aitken and O'Carroll 2020). Programme directors are known by a number of titles including course coordinator (Martinez *et al.* 2022, Williams *et al.* 2022), course leader (Van Veggel and Howlett 2018), programme coordinator (Ladyshewsky and Flavell 2012, Ingle *et al.* 2020), programme leader (Cahill *et al.* 2015, Lawrence *et al.* 2022) or programme director (Milburn 2010, Massie 2018, Wiener and Peterson 2019, Aitken and O'Carroll 2020, Rinfret *et al.* 2023). In this paper, we use the title *programme director*, as one of the more commonly used titles, to describe the participants in our study.

The programme director is a critical yet underappreciated role within universities, acting as a conduit between the institution and the student experience (Massie 2018). Academics in the role of programme director are generally responsible for a whole programme of study with varying responsibilities, generally including staffing, pastoral care of students, administration relating to the programme of study for which they are responsible and resolving student and teaching issues. Programme directors 'provide a unique and influential academic leadership role; one that has a significant impact on the quality of student learning and programme innovation' (Milburn 2010, p. 87).

Significantly, programme directors generally lack positional authority and are reliant on their ability to influence to fulfil their role (Milburn 2010). Further, university policies and guidelines tend to 'overlook important aspects of [programme director's] work ... which affect the quality of provision' (Mitchell 2015, p. 713). To date, there has been a paucity of research into programme directors as well as a lack of recognition of the importance of the role in contemporary universities (Milburn 2010), although this literature is growing (see Lawrence *et al.* 2022). Importantly for the contribution of the paper, there is little research exploring professional learning for programme directors and even less considering how time impacts programme directors' work and learning practices.

An area of broad agreement in the literature is that, despite an increasing interest in academic leadership within higher education (Ladyshewsky and Flavell 2012), there is little in the way of professional learning for programme directors (Massie 2018, Ingle *et al.* 2020). To date, support for programme directors has tended to take the form of leadership development programmes (Delaney *et al.* 2020, Lawrence *et al.* 2022) and has tended to be relatively structured in nature. While it has been well established in workplace learning that people learn primarily through participation in work (Eraut 2011), there has been less emphasis on how programme directors learn through participation in their role. Work exploring academics enacting work-integrated learning in their teaching found that, although learning was generally understood as occurring through professional development, professional learning, and everyday learning (Webster-Wright 2009), the focus of learning was primarily on learning through everyday work (Price and Lizier 2024).

In this paper, we explore time as a key factor in understanding the role of the programme director in contemporary contexts of higher education and how we might consider time in relation to how we understand work and learning for programme directors. To frame this discussion, we use the theory of practice architectures (hereafter TPA) (Kemmis *et al.* 2014) as a way in which to consider time as more than merely a resource, but as a part of the broader webs of practices present at the site. We report on a study that investigated the role of programme directors in an Australian university using the TPA to investigate the ways in which time influences the practices of being a programme director. This work contributes to our understanding of the strategically and practically important, yet often little understood, role of programme directors in higher education and offers insights into how we can better support learning for those in such roles. The next section briefly outlines our theoretical approach before moving on to a discussion of the literature regarding time and academic work.

## Theory of practice architectures

According to the Theory of Practice Architectures (TPA), social practices are constituted of sayings, doings and relatings that hang together in pursuit of a project, or objective, of a practice and are shaped by site-specific arrangements (Kemmis 2022). The term *sayings* encompasses the discourse and terminology utilised within a practice. *Doings* denotes the collective and individual actions undertaken by practitioners, while *relatings* refers to the connections established between individuals and objects during practice implementation (Mahon *et al.* 2016).

Practices are enabled and constrained by practice arrangements that determine the scope of possible practices (Kemmis 2022). Specifically, *cultural-discursive arrangements* prefigure the sayings and potential discourses within a practice. *Material-economic arrangements* prefigure the physical conditions, including resources, thereby shaping the doings of practices. *Social-political arrangements* prefigure the relationships between people and things within practices (Kemmis *et al.* 2014; Mahon *et al.* 2017). There exists a reciprocal relationship between practices and arrangements, with each continuously influencing and reshaping the other as practices are enacted. This dynamic interaction forms the *practice architectures* characteristic of a particular site (Kemmis 2022).

## Time and academic work

Time has been acknowledged as a key factor in academic work (Ylijoki and Mäntylä 2003, Zukas and Malcolm 2017), where it is generally conceptualised in terms of time as a resource. Research exploring time and academic work tends to be underpinned by assumptions of increasing managerialism in universities, cultures of audit and measurement and the increasing speed of university life (for example, Ylijoki 2013, Smith 2015, Vostal 2015).

In their work exploring the work of academics in Finland, Ylijoki and Mäntylä (2003) identified four 'time perspectives' through which we can better understand how academics experience their work: scheduled time, timeless time, contracted time, and personal time. Scheduled time refers to 'externally imposed and controlled timetables' (p. 60) and includes things such as project deadlines, meetings, and teaching timetables. Ylijoki and Mäntylä (2003) identify scheduled time as the most common time perspective that drives much of how academics experience their roles. Much academic work occurs within a scheduled time, with a lot of work time not spent on academic work at all but rather 'it is constituted by the "work about the work", be this answering emails, filling in module forms, recruiting students or pacifying colleagues' (Zukas and Malcolm 2017, p. 520). In contrast, Ylijoki and Mäntylä's concept of timeless time exists outside of external demands and instead 'refers to internally motivated use of time in which clock time loses its significance' (p. 62). Timeless time is often compressed to accommodate scheduled time and is the space within which academics most often complete their research. In contrast to scheduled and timeless time, contracted time refers to something more amorphous and uncertain. Contracted time is 'a sense of time as something that is terminating combined with an uncertainty about the future' (p. 65). Given the well-acknowledged precarity in much of academic work, contracted time can refer to the duration left on a contract or concerns about where the next grant or contract will come from. Unlike scheduled and timeless time, contracted time cannot be managed or even planned for. It is a sense of time passing and uncertainty about the future. Personal time speaks to discourses around work–life balance and is where academics 'reflect on their lives as a whole and the role of work in them' (p. 67). Like contracted time, personal time is difficult to define and reflects a sense of time passing and how one might pass their time. In the case of personal time, the questions asked by academics are more existential – how should I use my life? How do I balance work and family commitments?

Although the work of Ylijoki and Mäntylä (2003) does not use a practice approach, it nevertheless highlights two main aspects of time that are often discussed in the practice literature. The first of these is objective time, where time is viewed as a succession of events along a linear timeline that can be measured and 'managed' The second way that time has been considered in practice approaches is as the past, present, and future of human experience, or human time. Heidegger (1962), for example, posited that time is characterised by the dimensionality of the past, present, and future of human activity.

Blue (2019) notes that time is 'central to practice-theoretical accounts of the social' (p. 923) in part because of studies that trace the development of practices over time and because 'practices are repeated in sequences and combinations that exhibit various forms of temporal connection' (p. 923). A practice is defined by its temporality as a ' . . . temporally unfolding and spatially dispersed nexus of doings and sayings . . .' (Schatzki 1996, p. 89). Likewise, Hopwood (2014) considers time as a central feature of practice, including it as one of the four essential dimensions of workplace learning along with bodies, spaces, and things. Although time, bodies, spaces and things are considered essential to workplace learning, they are often 'invisible in dominant accounts of work and learning' (Hopwood, 2014, p. 349).

Recent work considers time in the context of professional learning through the lens of the theory of practice architectures (TPA) (Salo *et al.* 2024). This account builds on the two main conceptualisations of time within practice approaches – objective time and human time. The first account posited by Salo et al. is 'time as a resource' (p. 9) or, in TPA terms, time as a material-economic arrangement. The second account of time proposed by the authors is 'time as an open-ended

dimension of practices' (p. 9), where time is part of the flow of actions through past, present, and future as an inseparable part of practices, as Schatzki, Hopwood and others describe. Of these two accounts, Salo *et al.* (2024) note that most discussions of professional learning tend to consider time as a resource, in TPA parlance a material-economic arrangement, where it can be measured and 'managed'. The authors instead adopt the conceptualisation of time as 'a temporal aspect of practice' (p. 10).

In considering both time as a resource and time as a part of practices, the TPA may offer a way to unify the two constructs. In TPA, practices are composed of sayings, doings, and relatings that 'hang together' in pursuit of a project (Kemmis *et al.* 2014). As a practice-based approach, one might argue that time is an intrinsic part of practice where practices unfold in space and time, happening through time but also constructing time (time as part of practice). Time can also be thought of as part of the arrangements at a site that enable and constrain practice (time as a resource). The TPA then offers a way in which to consider time from both the resource and practice perspective in considering time as being instead more broadly conceptualised as part of the *practice architectures* present at a site. In this conceptualisation, time is an intrinsic part of practices, but how time happens within practices is prefigured, but not predetermined, through the arrangements brought to or found at the site.

## The study

### Study design

This paper draws on interviews undertaken with eight programme directors from an Australian university as part of a broader project examining middle leading in higher education (Lizier 2024) and examines the following research questions:

- How does time appear in the practices of programme directors?
- How do arrangements prefigure time in the practices of programme directors?

The overall aim of this paper is to consider the implications of time, and the arrangements that enable and constrain it, for the professional learning of programme directors.

The participants were drawn from four faculties across an Australian university, volunteering in response to an email that went out to their faculty email lists for academic staff. Informed consent was obtained from participants in line with the ethics approval for the study, and all participants were provided with a Participant Information Sheet in advance of the interview and given the opportunity to ask questions before agreeing to be involved in the study. Participants were all experienced academics in continuing roles with between 2 and 20 years' experience as an academic. Some participants had previously worked in industry, while others had always worked in higher education. Participants were mainly programme directors of post-graduate programmes with a few also coordinating undergraduate programmes across on-campus and online-only delivery. Further identifying characteristics of the participants are not included to maintain their anonymity.

Participants undertook interviews of around 1 hour in duration via the Zoom videoconferencing platform. The interviews explored the practices of middle leading using an adapted form of the Interview to the Double approach (Gherardi 1995, Nicolini 2009) to explore the lived experiences of being a programme director. The Interview to the Double (ITTD) method aims to articulate and represent practice by asking participants to describe how a day in their job unfolds in such a way as to instruct the interviewer on how to pass as their 'double'. Participants then provide a highly descriptive and detailed account of their day/week that provides rich insights into their day-to-day practices. Traditionally, participants in an ITTD

are asked to describe their next workday; however, in this study, programme directors were asked to describe how the interviewer would replace them over the coming week as a single day did not provide sufficient depth of description to gain insights into the full range of practices.

## Analysis

Interviews were transcribed, and participants were given the opportunity to review their transcripts and make changes for accuracy and clarity before the transcripts were analysed using an iterative thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2021) utilising NVIVO software. Desktop research was also conducted to explore the policies and frameworks relating to programme directors at the university. The analysis looked to establish key themes related to the research questions through iterative cross-referencing of data, analysis, and research literature. Of the themes that were evident in the interview transcripts, time emerged as a key one, with all interview participants noting various aspects of time and the role it played in their work and learning how to do their job. After the initial thematic analysis, the theme of time was explored in greater detail, again using a thematic analysis approach in conjunction with the TPA using the Table of Invention (Kemmis *et al.* 2014), to delve deeper into the concepts of time, work, and learning. All the names used in the following discussion of the findings are pseudonyms, and none of the specific faculties or programmes for the participants have been identified to preserve participant anonymity.

## Time and arrangements prefiguring programme director practices

The analysis from the interviews with programme directors showed how time is a multi-faceted concept in terms of the role of the programme director. Time was critical to understanding the role having been mentioned or indirectly referred to by the eight interviewees 53 times. The following discussion of the findings applies the TPA (Kemmis *et al.* 2014) as a theoretical lens to consider how arrangements enable and constrain the practices of programme directors at the site, focusing on time. For the purposes of explanation, the sections below discuss time and the role of the programme director using the constructs of cultural-discursive, social-political, and material-economic arrangements. However, it is important to note that such arrangements do not exist as discrete categories and that practices and arrangements are enmeshed within the practice architectures at the site.

### Time and cultural-discursive arrangements

A key feature in mentions of time among the programme directors were 'workload allocations'. Within each faculty at the university, agreements were made annually according to a faculty policy as to how one's time should be apportioned across the year. In an academic role with no additional leading or service responsibilities, a 'balanced academic', this calculation was generally 40% of time allocated to teaching, 40% to research and 20% to service and other work. In contrast, an academic in a programme director role might have a time allocation of 40% programme director, 40% research, 10% teaching and 10% service. This approach was very much grounded in a 'time as resource' perspective where an academic's time could be divided into percentages devoted to different aspects of their role.

Faculty policies around workload allocation formed a crucial part of the cultural-discursive arrangements at the site. Such policies set expectations as to the amount of work required of programme directors and in terms of how people talked and thought about the role of programme director. For example, several programme directors interviewed talked about their workload allocation, often lamenting that it was inadequate or that it failed to capture the complexity of the role. Indeed, the cultural-discursive arrangements in this case often acted to constrain the practices of programme directors as workload and related policies served to highlight the

disconnection between what the policies said in terms of workload allocation and how the programme directors experienced the role day-to-day. As Paul noted in relation to discussing workload allocations,

> I don't know what world management people above are living on because you're going to burn people out.

Most of the programme directors (all but one) noted that the true time they spent on programme director work regularly outweighed the time officially allocated through the workload process. This had a significant impact not only on how they completed work tasks for the role of programme director but also in terms of their role as an academic overall as well as their personal life.

As Ylijoki and Mäntylä ([2003](#)) found, academics often struggle to balance the high time demands of their role in terms of 'scheduled time' with their 'personal time' and need for 'timeless time' to maintain their research within higher education employment structures that tend to favour precarious work (contracted time). This also became an issue for the programme directors interviewed for this study as they consistently noted that the programme director role inhibited their ability to conduct research, which was detrimental to their careers longer term . There is overlap here with university promotions policies and processes as well the social-political arrangements at the site that emphasised research and research outputs as central to recognition as an academic and to one's chances of promotion. As Cathy noted,

> I'm really trying to build my calendar to be 80% research at the moment and flick that switch across because it's been about 2% for two years. [while I was programme director]

Recruitment of programme directors was another temporal aspect of the role. The cultural-discursive arrangements around recruitment to the role of programme director prefigured how time was talked about and shaped the practices of being a programme director. Programme directors came to their roles through a variety of pathways that included being appointed, selected through a competitive process and, in one case, 'volun-told' that they were the only one available to do the role and that it was 'their turn'. Generally, those in programme director roles were there for a fixed term of around two years, after which there appeared to be a general expectation that the programme directors would return to their balanced academic roles and someone new would take over. This approach was reinforced by faculty policies and the inclusion of the programme director role as part of the service component of the workload allocation. Further, a service approach to programme directorship created a revolving door of programme directors in some areas, leading one interviewee to comment that 'I don't own this role' (Paul) in the context of only being in the role for a fixed period before having to hand it over to the next incumbent.

The cultural-discursive arrangements around the policies, processes, and the language used to discuss programme directorship had implications for workplace and professional learning in the role as programme directors had little time to come to grips with the requirements of the role and needed to 'hit the ground running' while also being keenly aware that they were only there for a relatively short time. Desktop research indicated that professional development and professional learning provided to programme directors by the university took the form of SharePoint sites containing reference materials, MS Teams sites for communications between programme directors in different faculties, and policies and procedures relating to the role. In reality, most participants talked about how they had learned about the role from their predecessor. In the absence of someone to perform a 'hand over', there was little documented about the role itself specific to each course and faculty.

Programme directors not only had a short time in which to learn how to go on in the role, but once they reached a place where they felt competent and comfortable in the role there was only perhaps 12–18 months left before needing to hand over to someone else. The limited time that programme directors spent in their role is also a part of the broader arrangements across academia that note the increasing speed of academic work (Ylijoki [2013](#), Vostal [2015](#)). As participant James noted, there is a 'velocity' to the role. Due to the

demands of the role, and time taken away from the 'real' work of being an academic, there were few who had continued past the fixed term originally agreed to and there was a sense of serving ones' time in the role. This was, in part, also a function of the social-political arrangements at the site, which significantly influenced the experiences of the programme directors.

### *Time and social-political arrangements*

The programme directors interviewed noted that, while they could enjoy aspects of the role of programme director, they often felt that they needed to get back to their 'real work', most notably research to progress their career. This touches on what Ylijoki and Mäntylä (2003) referred to as 'timeless time', time that can be used as one wishes and directed according to internal motivation. Timeless time is where academics can undertake their research work with time to read, write, and reflect away from the demands of their 'scheduled time'. The programme directors interviewed in this study noted repeatedly that there was little time for such 'timeless time' for their research. As Amy noted,

> Then we have Friday which I try to keep for research and catching up on the rest and there are weeks where I really don't have time for the research because as I say by the time I do all what I have to do that's the weekend.

Having no time during the working week for research work then acted to drive research work into 'personal time' (Ylijoki and Mäntylä 2003), generally on the weekends, as Amy noted above. The pressure within higher education for continued research outputs saw the programme directors reluctantly move their research work into their personal time which had implications for their wellbeing as well as their relationships outside of work. As Amy noted above, she tried to keep Fridays clear for research and to 'catch up' on the week, however this was a rare occurrence and her research work therefore bled into her personal time on weekends.,

Having little or no time for research was extremely problematic, given the cultural-discursive and social-political arrangements at the site. Cultural-discursive arrangements such as performance benchmarks and the workload allocation guidelines outlined the research output expectations for academics at different hierarchical levels (Lecturer, Senior Lecturer, Associate Professor, Professor), with the requirement to produce recognised research outputs increasing for each level. Such policies also influenced social-political arrangements at the site, with those in more senior positions needing to produce more research outputs and so making roles such as programme director far less attractive, leaving the roles to more junior colleagues. This intersects with how academics believe that they are recognised and promoted within the university with the cultural-discursive and social-political arrangements perceived as generally emphasising research over teaching and service aspects of academic roles when awarding promotions. This led one participant to note that taking on the programme director role was the 'death knell for promotion' (James). Given that the roles were generally only offered for a two-year period, there was little incentive for someone to stay within the role longer term unless they felt that they had no choice. Lucia noted that a report had been produced in her faculty that looked at research and publications. Within this report, the impact of the programme director role was evident, and she reported that the faculty had then made some changes in response to this,

> In their report . . . it was evident when you saw the publication table where all the other [department] staff had like 1,000 publications and I had three so they were like it's evident that this is constraining and limiting [Leticia's] capacity to focus also on research, so they recommended to separate the course [program] directorship for one person to do on-campus and another person do the online.

The social-political arrangements at the site then privileged research as the most desirable and well-rewarded way to spend one's time.

## Time and material-economic arrangements

Time as part of the material-economic arrangements perhaps best reflects the idea of time as a resource. The day-to-day practices around being a programme director and an academic more generally were 'constituted every day in digital technologies' (Zukas and Malcolm 2017, p. 516), with email and online meetings the main way in which they related. The email and other technology systems are part of both social-political and material-economic arrangements that enable and constrain the practices of being a programme director. As Billy noted,

> . . . you're going to spend the three to four hours [a day] in just really replying to emails both from students as well as from staff members.

The need to 'keep on top of email' was mentioned by many of the programme directors, and checking emails was often the opening comment when describing an average day.

The high administrative burden and the need to be present on email, and in meetings, was in opposition to the idealised workload allocations that formed part of the cultural-discursive arrangements, particularly taking time away from that most valued activity, research. As Cathy noted,

> I think the other challenge is that continuity of time because you can't just do research in half a day or two hours a week or three hours a week, you need blocks of time and repetitive things without other things sneaking in and I think one of the biggest challenges is managing that cycle when you have almost an uncontrollable workload and this curved workload comes through [for the programme director role].

While email may seem like a trivial work tool found in many professional contexts, it has been recognised as a 'core academic practice' where it becomes '"work about the work" both in and outside of work time' (Zukas and Malcolm 2017, p. 512). When programme directors were asked to respond to the Interview to the Double premise of describing their time in detail, all participants began with some variant of checking email to see what the priorities were for that day and if there were any emergencies to deal with first thing in the week. In many ways, the contents of emails directed programme director activities and were also a key conduit between the programme director and students and between the programme director and teaching teams, as well as other stakeholders. As Zukas and Malcolm (2017) have noted in their work researching academics, email 'is a means to an institutional end, but managed by individuals in their own time, generating an overwhelming sense of responsibility' (p. 517).

University processes and resources (or a lack thereof) enable and constrain time within practices. Most programme directors referred to a lack of resources constraining their ability to practice. Paul noted that,

> We are being asked to do more with less and your processes are making our jobs difficult and contribute to the amount of time.

In contrast, some programme directors commented that they had negotiated access to increased resources to lighten the burden. Billy noted that they had been able to negotiate assistance from a part-time learning designer to help the teaching team with curriculum work that they might otherwise not have had sufficient time for.

> So, we engaged someone who works with us on a 0.2 basis as a learning designer in our school who created templates for the different aspects on how teaching works so people can integrate that but who also does other things and activities. . .- so it's cheaper for us as a school but it is also at the same time so much more efficient and also saves time for the academics involved in the teaching. [Billy]

Timetabling was also an area that could constrain the practices of programme directors. A new way of teaching through six short, online teaching sessions per year had replaced the traditional bi-semester structure of in-person learning for some programmes. This meant that, for some of the programme directors interviewed, changes to the timetable's structure and the delivery method had a significant impact on how they enacted their role. Billy summarised it as,

> I think the other challenge versus standard academic work is we do it six times a year so we're onboarding and offboarding or whatever the word is at the end of the sessions six times a year. So, what every other course [programme] director is doing twice a year we're doing six times a year, processing applications, special consideration, all those systematic things. The timescale and the volume are significant and there's a workload to doing that and facilitating it. [Billy]

As discussed earlier as part of the cultural-discursive arrangements, very few resources were provided that were specific to the site of practice. Most were centrally developed by the university rather than the faculties and involved mainly SharePoint sites containing policies, procedures, and checklists. Professional development opportunities were also offered, however, only taken up by a small number of programme directors. These included seminars on key topics or new initiatives across the university as well as a centrally organised network of programme directors from across the university, again, not reliably attended by most programme directors. These material-economic arrangements designed to support professional development, while specific to the university, were not sufficiently specific to the faculty or course and so were considered supplementary to the everyday learning of programme directors.

## Discussion

Time limited appointments to the job of programme director, lack of time for structured professional development, an expectation to learn quickly and 'just in time' and limited time to learn a new job were all important factors in learning at and for work for programme directors and shaped their approaches to how they approached the practices of programme director. The findings from our study of programme directors in the Australian context have surfaced the critical importance of considering time to paint a fuller picture of the role of programme director in higher education. More than just a measure, the evidence from interviews with programme directors provides an account of how time was a key part of practices for programme directors, prefigured by the arrangements present at the site. A common position when thinking about time for academics and other professionals has been to consider time as a resource. Such an approach positions time as an individual issue and something that academics have the responsibility to manage for their own benefit and that of their organisation.

Using a TPA approach has broadened our appreciation of time and its impact on the practices of programme directors as a crucial part of the practice architectures present at a site. This argument follows that presented by Salo *et al.* (2024), who argued that 'theorising about learning in and for professional practice requires recognising and building on two complementary aspects of time: time as a resource (an identifiable and observable material-economic arrangement) and time as an open-ended dimension of practices (a flow of actions, including past, present and future).' (p. 9). In this paper, we have argued that, to unify these approaches, time is perhaps best thought of as a part of the practice architectures at a site where time is both an intrinsic part of the practices themselves as well as prefigured by the arrangements.

The work of Price and Lizier (2024) is useful here. In their recent work exploring the professional learning of academics enacting work integrated learning into their teaching, Price and Lizier used the analogy of the ocean as a device to describe agency and its role in practices. This analogy is also a useful way in which to think about time. Time, and how it is talked about and experienced by programme directors, is enabled and constrained by the same arrangements that prefigure practices (Kemmis 2022). Time, then, may be said to form a part of the conditions of possibility for academics in programme director roles (Price and Lizier 2024). In extending Price and Lizier's analogy of the ocean to include time, we can think of time as being like the waves on the ocean coming in to shore. If a surfer is surfing a wave they are 'spending' time surfing but also responding to the conditions at that site that will influence how that time is experienced in practices. There are elements present in the ocean, such as the tides, currents, wind, wildlife, rocks, and other people, that will enable and constrain the surfer's progress to shore and either provide the conditions for a clear run or require

them to take a different path to avoid obstructions. Time is part of the energy that moves around and through the practices of being an academic who is also a programme director, enabling and constraining practices.

The programme directors interviewed for this study were practicing in pursuit of the project of being both an academic and a programme director where certain arrangements relating to time – how it was described, measured, and used – enabled and constrained their enactment of those practices. As the programme directors practiced, they came to understand the practices of being a programme director and of balancing these with the competing practices of being a 'balanced' academic where research outputs were privileged. However, the arrangements found at the site, while enabling some aspects of academic practices and programme director practices, also worked in many cases to constrain both. This has significant implications for how we think about professional learning for academics in programme director roles.

## Implications for professional learning

Including time as an important part of understanding the role of programme directors brings an additional dimension and complexity to both the study of work and learning and the practical support provided to programme directors in their role.

Recent work from Kemmis (2021), taking a TPA approach, has proposed that 'learning is a process of coming to practice differently' (Kemmis 2021, p. 10). Learning is not a practice but is instead an outcome of participating in practices that change and re-form over time. As Kemmis (2021) notes, 'learning happens in practices, and learning shapes and reshapes practices' (p. 7). This approach positions learning as transformation, not only for individuals but also for the practices themselves and the sites in which those practices 'happen' (Kemmis 2021, p. 12). Taking the approach that programme directors learn through coming to practice differently, it is therefore important to acknowledge and to consider time when looking at workplace and professional learning for programme directors.

Academic professional learning has traditionally been confined to what Webster-Wright (2009) has referred to as professional development comprising formalised and structured 'learning opportunities' provided by the organisation (Herbert and Van Der Laan 2024). Within the university that was a part of this study, this was also the case, with desktop research showing that there were centrally planned learning activities for programme directors such as regular 'network' meetings where key information was presented as well as some ad hoc activities within faculties and schools. However, such approaches do not consider time as a critical part of either the practices of being a programme director nor the arrangements at the site. Adopting TPA helped to shift our understanding of work and learning away from activities premised on metaphors of acquisition and transfer (Hager and Hodkinson 2009) towards a view of work and learning as part of an enmeshed web of practice architectures found at or brought into a site where learning is coming into practice differently (Lizier *et al.* 2023). This provides a lens through which the practices of programme director are considered as site specific rather than focused on a view that the role of programme director is the same across faculties and different sites of practice. Programme directors, and those who support their learning, therefore need to take a more emergent view of the practices of programme director, and the arrangements that prefigure them, that are specific to the site of work rather than a focus solely on skills and procedures. This suggests taking a practice-informed approach to professional development where learning is acknowledged as taking place within practice: as coming to practice differently. Opportunities for learning through practice should be supported through encouraging programme directors to reflect on and share their experiences.

Other dimensions of time in practice, such as learning to manage and balance demands on one's time in a new role, learning the rhythms of a new role, and balancing the programme director role with an academic position, also played an important part in shaping experiences of working and learning for the programme directors interviewed for

our study. There were various drivers of time evident from the interviews, with time and its use being shaped or influenced by the individual programme director, the team within which the programme director worked, the faculty and institution, and the needs of students. Within contemporary contexts of new public management in higher education (Hood 1991) and the adoption of management approaches from the corporate sector (Birnbaum 2000), time was also influenced by arrangements around the business aspects of the role and rhythms of the higher education 'market' and the need to recruit and retain students. Programme directors were then coming to practice differently within these practice architectures and within their own sites of practice specific to their own disciplines and the programmes they were responsible for.

Standard, structured approaches to professional development, such as those described by the participants in this study, are therefore necessary but insufficient to support programme directors, a finding echoed by others (Salo *et al.* 2024). Such approaches are of limited utility to academics in programme director roles as they come to their practice differently as both academics and programme directors. The focus of formal professional development programmes does not consider the critical importance of time as part of the flow in and around practices and arrangements at the site, prefiguring and influencing all aspects of the practices of being both an academic and programme director. Moreover, the programme directors were appointed to their roles for a limited period, creating an 'end-date' at which the practices of being programme director must be handed over to someone else. The time constraint on how long an academic undertakes the role of programme director also has implications for motivation towards learning – why would programme directors undertake ongoing professional development for a temporary role where they are essentially 'serving time' until they can return to their 'real work' as balanced academics?

## Conclusion

This paper used the theory of practice architectures as a way in which to consider time as both part of practices but also a part of, and prefigured by, the arrangements found at or brought into a site for programme directors. Adopting the TPA has provided a way in which to think about time as more than merely a resource to be managed and deployed in pursuit of a goal by individual academics. In this paper, we have used empirical evidence from a study interviewing programme directors at an Australian university to explore time within higher education settings, highlighting how arrangements prefigure how time happens within practices, enabling and constraining practice at a site. There are significant implications for workplace and professional learning as the flow of time through and around practices prefigures not only the practices themselves but how programme directors come to their practice differently – learning through varying their practice over time. Professional learning for programme directors needs to shift from formal professional development programmes towards an approach that supports learning through practice.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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