Restructures, redundancies and workforce downsizing

Implications for Australian higher education sector post COVID-19

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This paper reports on research conducted with staff employed in the Australian higher education sector during the COVID-19 pandemic. The sector has been significantly impacted, particularly those institutions heavily reliant on revenue from international student enrolments. Universities moved swiftly to introduce cost-savings measures such as, deferring capital works spending and reducing non-salary expenditure, scaling back casual and fixed term staff and cuts to executive staff salaries, followed by rounds of redundancies, early retirement offers and termination of staff, often framed as organisational restructuring. However, financial data for the 2021-22 period indicate that some institutions have actioned disproportionate staff cuts related to net income, often badging this downsizing as organisational restructure. This information is discussed in terms of the potential implications for the higher education sector in planning for, and meeting workforce needs, as it seeks to regenerate a sustainable business model post-pandemic.

Keywords: COVID-19, higher education workforce, restructure, job loss, workforce planning, succession planning.

Background and introduction

The impact of COVID-19 saw Australian higher education institutions losing $1.8 billion in 2020 (Kelly, 2022) with the pipeline effect of lost international student enrolments over the three years of an undergraduate degree indicates a continued drop in international student fees across 2022-23. In the COVID-19 context, universities moved swiftly to introduce cost-savings measures such as, deferring capital works spending and reducing non-salary expenditure, scaling back casual and fixed term staff and cuts to executive staff salaries. This has been followed by rounds of redundancies, early retirement offers and termination of staff, often framed as organisational restructuring. This paper reports on recent research conducted with staff employed in the Australian higher education sector during the COVID-19 pandemic.

A cross-institutional survey (n = 113) and individual interviews (n = 14) conducted in 2021-22, generated qualitative and quantitative data that reflect the impacts these sudden workforce changes have had on individual careers. Now financial information for the 2021-22 period is available, findings indicate that some institutions have actioned staff cuts disproportionate to net income, often badging this downsizing as organisational restructure. The overall estimate of lost jobs in the higher education sector over 2020-2021 is variable, with the Australia Institute reporting 20 per cent (Kelly, 2022) and Larkins (2022) 8 per cent, with both authors acknowledging the difficulty of accurate reporting given methodological challenges including how casual staff are reported and data lags (Norton, 2022). Regardless of the exact count of jobs lost, findings from this research reflect a workforce that is deeply divided in terms of perceptions about: the fairness of employment decisions; the quality and integrity of university leadership and decision-making through the pandemic; the capacity for the sector to recover; and, long term career opportunities in the sector. This data is discussed in terms of the potential implications for the higher education sector in planning for, and meeting, workforce needs as it seeks to regenerate a sustainable business model post-pandemic.

Universities have been operating in complicated and shifting contexts for several decades responding to globalisation, technological innovation, marketisation and massification of higher education (Doidge & Doyle, 2020; Fitzgerald, White, & Gunter, 2012). These influences have profoundly re-shaped academic work and disrupted traditional career pathways (Macfarlane, 2016) with casual staff constituting 31 per cent of the Australian academic workforce pre-COVID-19 (Baré, Beard, & Tjia, 2021) and only one in three employees at Australian public universities holding secure, ongoing jobs (Kniest, 2021a, 2021b). Accompanying the transition of Australian universities from a government funded, public service industry to a competitive, market-driven model of higher education has seen significant growth in the non-university provider sector with 141 Australian institutions currently operating (TEQSA, 2021). However, this market-driven business model has succeeded largely on the international student enrolment dollar that is no longer dependable income for the sector as a consequence of COVID-19. The pandemic has therefore exacerbated 'uncertainty, risk and change,' (TEQSA, 2021, p. 11) for the Australian higher education sector.

The impact of COVID-19 on the higher education sector has been dramatic, involving decreased revenue, numerous lockdowns, the switch to fully online digital learning for all students in the sector, working from home for staff and a lack of government financial support. Initial strategies of deferring major capital works, executive staff salary cuts, redundancies, early retirements and the delay of scheduled staff salary increases may not have been sufficient to combat the predicted financial shortfall by institutions. Some universities, such as, the Universities of Sydney, Newcastle and Adelaide reported better than expected 2020 revenues and Monash University, for example, recording 'an operating surplus for 2020 of $259 million, which was $29 million more than the $230 million operating surplus reported in 2019' (Kniest, 2021a, p. 23). Indeed, in 2021, several universities returned substantial net operating profits reflecting flaws in the financial projection data (Larkins, 2022; Matchett, 2022) used to justify significant workforce reductions, recently described as knee-jerk responses that will have a long-term impact on the quality of teaching, research and student support (Roffee & Kimberley, 2022).

With staff salaries consuming approximately 57 per cent of a higher education institution expenditure, reducing staff costs was an obvious cost-cutting strategy (Marshman & Larkins, 2020). Throughout 2020, voluntary redundancies, early retirement schemes, natural attrition and terminations resulted in 17300 lost jobs across universities (Universities Australia, 2021) almost equivalent to the predicted 17500 job losses modelled by Tjia, Marshman, Beard & Baré (2020) who also estimated a 25 per cent reduction in casual staff. It is now emerging in 2022 financial data for universities, that in many cases these staffing cuts were not strongly justified.

It appears that some universities have used the uncertain and unpredictable environment created by the pandemic as an opportunity to undertake academic and administrative structural reforms. These reforms were not directly driven by financial stresses induced by 2019-2021 changes in student fees income and investment returns. Faculties and departments have been restructured, subject offerings reduced, and other curriculum reforms implemented, leading to very significant staff reductions in some universities. Many universities are expected to report a strong financial recovery in 2022 (Larkins, 2022, p. 1).

Sadly and significantly, those who have lost their jobs risk not only loss of income but loss of career (Barnes, 2021, p. 2). This COVID-19 inspired shedding of staff has created even greater instability for the higher education staff holding already insecure roles on casual and fixed term contracts (Doidge & Doyle, 2020). In this research project we were interested to investigate the implications for the sector in terms of attracting and retaining quality staff post-pandemic.

Further to this, as the university sector faces a rapidly aging workforce whose numerous older members were preparing for retirement prior to the COVID-19 pandemic (Loomes, 2014; Loomes, Owens, & McCarthy, 2019), the strategic importance of developing and retaining a younger, talented and dedicated academic workforce is imperative. If early career academics, (the future of the university workforce) who, pre-pandemic, successfully attained teaching and research positions, or post-doctoral research positions, 'were often on contracts, and daunted by future work prospects' (Bosanquet, Mantai, & Fredericks, 2020, p. 747), how much more daunting will a career in academia appear to them in a market of lay-offs and redundancies? Perhaps the bigger question from the perspective of the higher education sector is, where does this position universities hoping to recover their full business model post-pandemic? Where will universities find staff to provide a quality learning and teaching experience for international and domestic students?

This research reports on a broad-scope, cross institutional survey of Australian higher education employees to obtain qualitative and quantitative data to determine the common experiences and potential impacts that these sudden workforce changes have had on individuals' careers and career planning. This research seeks to better understand how staff feel their university managed the rapid downsizing, how they were personally impacted and what they believe will be the implications for the higher education sector going forward. This data is discussed in terms of the potential long-term implications for the university sector in meeting future workforce needs. This research addressed a gap in the knowledge around the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on universities, as other research studies have focused on the financial impact, the disruption to learning and teaching, and the organisation of work and university structures (Baré *et al.*, 2021; Baré, Beard, & Tjia, 2020; Croucher & Locke, 2020; Davies, 2020; Doidge & Doyle, 2020; Marshman & Larkins, 2020; Parker, 2020; Ross, 2020; Thatcher *et al.*, 2020). No studies have yet explored the impact on career experiences, career planning and aspirations for higher education workers in Australia and the implications for the university workforce.

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Methodology

Research question

How have the sudden workforce changes resulting from COVID-19 impacted the careers of staff working in the higher education sector and what are the long-term implications for universities in terms of meeting future workforce needs post-COVID?

Sub questions:

1. Have the sudden workforce changes resulting from COVID-19 affected the career pathways of workers in the higher education sector?
2. How have the sudden workforce changes resulting from COVID-19 impacted staff who are still working in the higher education sector?
3. How well have universities managed their workforce throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and how are staff feeling in relation to working in the higher education sector long-term?
4. How will the impacts of COVID-19 influence long-term operations of Australian universities and private providers?

This research project involved the distribution of an anonymous, cross-sectional online survey offering 18 questions implemented via Qualtrics in 2021-22. The survey was comprised of predominantly closed questions seeking quantitative data reflecting: the employment status of respondents pre- and post-pandemic, relevant demographic information, current employment and employment planning for a possible future career in higher education. In addition to the closed question responses, this survey offered questions inviting written comments to facilitate exploration of individual experiences of the pandemic in relation to employment, planning and expectations around a long-term career in higher education.

The survey was distributed from October 2021 to March 2022, seeking feedback from all categories of employees working in higher education institutions when the COVID-19 pandemic was first reported to the World Health Organisation on 31 December 2019. Survey distribution occurred through a combination of purposive and snowball sampling methods using: a) researcher networks (e.g. Linked

In/Outlook/Social media), b) advertising the survey link through professional associations media/memberships (e.g. Higher Education Private Provider – QUALITY Network (HEPPP-QN), NTEU Sentry, Advance Higher Education). A total of 113 responses were received before the survey was closed in March 2022. The representativeness of this data is limited as it was not possible for the researchers to either randomly or comprehensively sample the entire Australian higher education workforce (currently estimated at 183,830, (Larkins, 2022). However, it is possible through statistical analysis to consider how demographically (un-) representative the data is by comparison with the annual Australian Higher Education Workforce reporting for 2021. For example, approximately 20 per cent of our surveyed respondents lost their jobs over 2019-2021, whereas Larkins (2022) calculated that approximately 8 per cent of the higher education workforce lost jobs over this period with over 65 per cent of these jobs lost to casual staff. Our survey respondents were therefore disproportionately affected by lost work compared with the overall statistics for the sector. However, Larkins (2022) also reports that the percent range of total jobs lost per institution is highly variable, ranging from 11 to 20 per cent.

To supplement these data with experience-based individual accounts of COVID impact on careers and on the sector, we invited survey respondents to volunteer for online (Zoom or Teams) individual interviews (approximately 30 minutes) and completed 14 interviews with staff working in the sector as COVID hit. Twelve interview questions sought to explore in more depth the changes in the sector and the impact of these changes on individuals. In analysing and reporting this data, the researchers hoped to generate a more nuanced narrative of the higher education workers' individual experiences of the pandemic in terms of their employment and their planned career trajectories. Qualitative data generated from surveys and interviews was independently analysed by each of the four authors who then reconvened to discuss and reach agreement on key themes and representative quotes for reporting. From these data, the researchers sought to identify the challenges that are likely to confront the university workforce and the higher education sector more broadly. This may inform university planning for post-COVID operations with particular relevance to workforce planning, including succession planning to develop a more sustainable higher education industry.

Discussion of Results

Survey

Of the 113 respondents, almost 75 per cent were aged over 40 years with 73 per cent of this over 40 cohort aged over 50 years. Sixty-one per cent of respondents were female. Responses were collected from all states and territories except Tasmania and the Northern Territory with the majority (68 per cent) from NSW. To contextualise this, NSW represents 40 per cent of the higher education industry (TEQSA, 2021) and women were recently estimated to make up 58 per cent of the workforce (Australian Government Department of Education Skills and Employment (DESE), 2019).

Table 1: Employment profile

Employer	
University	86.2%
Private Provider	7.3%
Both University & Private Provider	6.4%
Still Working for a University or Private Provider	
Full-time	64.0%
Part-time	16.2%
Neither	19.8%

Most recent work roles for respondents included a broad range of positions including ongoing and sessional academic staff (levels A-E), administrative staff, learning support staff (e.g., laboratory facilitators, academic advisors), research fellows, professional staff, technical staff and senior executives. Thirty per cent of participants were professional staff with the remainder being academic staff.

Almost 20 per cent of survey respondents were no longer working for a university or private provider either in a full-time or part-time capacity in 2021 and indicated that they ceased this employment in 2020 or 2021. Seven of these staff had not found other employment while others had found varied employment in other sectors. Forty-five per cent of the staff who had lost higher education employment had experienced either voluntary or involuntary redundancy.

Over 60 per cent of 113 respondents had been employed in higher education for over ten years with almost 28 per cent having completed more than 20 years of service. Almost 19 per cent of respondents could be categorised as early career staff with 1-5 years of experience. Only 22 per cent of total survey respondents indicated they held tenured or ongoing positions when COVID-19 impacted the sector, with 45 per cent of respondents indicating they were employed fulltime reflecting very heavy reliance on fixed term and short term or sessional contracting in the sector.

Over one quarter of respondents who were no longer employed in higher education indicated they had no desire to return to the sector. Fifty per cent said they would return and 23 per cent were unsure if they would return to working in the sector.

Thirty-six per cent of respondents indicated that their institution's strategy in responding to the pandemic was to implement workforce restructure with the remainder indicating pay cuts (for executive staff (18 per cent), all staff (7

per cent) or pay freezes for all staff (9 per cent) or 'other' (16 per cent)). It is evident in financial data for the period 2020-2021, that while widespread workforce restructures delivered job losses estimated at 8 per cent across the university sector, the sector experienced a net financial loss of only 4.5 per cent (Larkins, 2022). Almost one-third of survey respondents were 'unsure' if their institution's strategies were fair with the remainder of responses evenly split between 'fair' and 'unfair'. Fifty-five per cent felt they were adequately supported by their institution and 45 per cent did not feel adequately supported. In answering the question if they thought that their employment situation might have been improved by a government support intervention for the sector, the responses were also almost evenly split between yes and no. These dramatically polarised opinions about fairness of strategies and adequacy of support provided by institutions or government reflect the uncertainty that characterises the current mood of the academic workforce reflected in other studies (Creely *et al.*, 2021) and identifies overall ambiguity regarding leadership strategies to address the pandemic.

In answering qualitative questions in the survey, respondents who were still employed in higher education indicated the main impact of COVID-19 on their work was in terms of increased workload (often related to decreased staffing) but mostly related to the task of pivoting teaching, learning and assessment to online delivery. There was also extensive commentary about the pressures working from home introduced in terms of loss of social contact, managing family obligations and being more 'available' to students who needed more support in the context of the pandemic. The negative impact of working from home on the wellbeing of teaching staff has been noted and described in terms of 'confinement and repetition' with staff feeling 'unsettled, distracted, overwhelmed and lacking focus,' and 'being conflicted between various roles' (Creely *et al.*, 2021, p. 19). Such negative impacts were observed in 34 comments from our survey results most frequently described as 'isolation' and 'disconnection'. While a significant proportion of staff indicated that they were pleased to be able to work from home as this made work more convenient, they also noted that this convenience was qualified by the greater volume of work associated with converting teaching materials and assessment to online formats, developing knowledge and skills to enable this very quickly, as well as increased administrative work generated by online arrangements.

Finally, respondents identified the following potential challenges for higher education providers beyond COVID-19: achieving a workable blend of online and face to face models; achieving adequate numbers of international students to sustain the sector; achieving adequate funding to sustain the sector; re-contracting and retaining staff; rebuilding the academic workforce; and maintaining flexible working arrangements.

Interviews

Interviews were conducted with 14 volunteers from the higher education workforce who had also completed the survey and indicated an interest in providing more qualitative accounts of their experience during COVID. Staff were drawn from academic as well as professional staff positions and were predominantly at executive or professorial level of appointment as well as three early career teaching or laboratory staff. Two respondents were from non-university providers with the remainder from the university sector.

The respondents had ten to 30 years of work experience in Australian higher education. When asked to describe changes to their work that had occurred since the start of 2020, every respondent mentioned increased workload in the context of a 'race to get online' and the pressure of 'always being available' or 'being on tap' due to the visibility of an online presence. Challenges for students and the staff who support them were not restricted to academic issues but also personal wellbeing issues, research logistics, practicums and so on. There was some recognition that flexibility to work from home and also greater innovation in online delivery of learning were positive outcomes from the pandemic, but these were mitigated by the pressures of increased workload.

When asked if they thought these changes were due to COVID-19, the responses were more diverse. Several respondents conceded that the race online was COVID-19 initiated but also suggested that some institutions opportunistically restructured to address pre-existing financial problems with consequent redundancies, retirements, non-renewed contracts and terminations that shortened careers for several senior staff interviewed and impacted career development for research-active academic staff.

Participant 4
I think many of these changes were made under the guise or excuse of COVID-19. The university was already in financial trouble.

Participant 7
COVID-19 and the savage restructure pushed me out.

Participant 9
COVID was a good reason to make radical changes some of which were definitely not required by the pandemic. Revenue wasn't too badly hit.

This aligns with a recent report into university finances that concluded that some COVID-19 related university administrative reforms have been more opportunistic than financially imperative (Larkins, 2022) and perhaps underscores the current enterprise bargaining claim by the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) to restrict the number of restructures a university may implement within the life of an industrial agreement (National Tertiary Education Union, 2022).

When respondents were asked to judge the impact of these changes on their work as either negative or positive, the majority indicated a negative impact with senior staff describing burnout, stress, loss of self-esteem and lost income dramatically impacting them as a result of redundancies that they were not ready for.

Participant 6
For me, my career has come to a halt or even an end because of COVID-19.

Participant 14
I had the rug pulled from under my feet. I was not ready to hang up my shingle.

For ongoing teaching staff, the impact was more nuanced:

Participant 1
I think a bit of both, it was such an intensely high workload for a period of dramatic change, that was negative. Positively, in that I engaged more broadly with people across the university as part of that whole program of digital uplift. We formed multi -skilled teams in training sessions, so I was working with technologists and designers on curriculum.

But for casual teaching staff, who bore over 60 per cent of the burden of lost employment over COVID-19 (Larkins, 2022), the impact was strongly negative:

Participant 5
Absolutely negatively... it has forced me to reconsider my academic career going forward because I've now seen the dark side of the university sector.

When asked about their future employment prospects in the higher education sector, negative views predominated among senior staff who had lost their positions due to their late career stage and concerns regarding recovering international student enrolments. Other respondents with tenure were more positive about career prospects and even predicted a surge in demand for staff in the sector as normal operations and the return of international students.

Participant 11
I think universities will be scraping the ground for staff by end of 2022 so my prospects will probably improve. It's already getting hard to recruit.

In contrast, the two respondents who were interviewed from non-university providers were distinctly positive about their own career prospects and the future of the higher education sector, generally.

Participant 2
We have achieved our five-year target in the last two pandemic years. We shall go beyond that next semester. I am very confident.

Participant 3
I think the higher education sector is on an upward trajectory of growth. I don't feel there is any impact. We are actually expanding; opening a campus in [other areas].

This positivity is supported by reports that private providers have been able to pivot more nimbly to changing sector conditions with more flexible staffing, new online delivery options, lower costs and a cheaper fee structure (TEQSA, 2021). Respondents from university settings were less optimistic about the future of the sector. A common theme was the need for a returned international student cohort but there was little confidence that international students would return in significant numbers from the university staff point of view. However, non-university provider respondents were optimistic, pointing out that they had held strong numbers over the pandemic as students moved from the expensive university sector to the more affordable private provider options.

The career prospects for early career academics were deemed particularly bleak by several respondents.

Participant 8
If you manage to keep your job, there are not as many options to move around. The prospect of promotion won't be around for a little while.

Participant 11
If I had to advise younger people, would they take my career path, I would caution them against it because it will only be the very cream of academic level applicants who get a tenured position in the future.

When asked about the prospects of their specific institution, responses were predominantly negative or, at best, uncertain:

Participant 3
There has been too much change without thinking through the widespread ramifications. The massive staff turnover has left the institution with very little corporate knowledge.

Participant 7
We're building all these fabulous new buildings, there's just no one in them.

When asked if they intended to persist in the sector, senior staff mostly declined and less senior staff expressed concern over lack of job security.

Participant 5
Universities should take people off casual contracts and put them either on longer term three-year contracts or ongoing positions because that would add to security of employment for academics. That certainly has been one of the reasons why I'm considering

leaving. I have had 10 years of short term contracts and I'm a bit over it.

Senior staff pondered the sustainability of the sector given university leadership structures and the demands of academic work:

Participant 9
Even before COVID-19, Vice Chancellors focused on the length of their tenure, so five years. Not many are concerned about what happens in twenty years. Strategic Plans are five years, and some are for ten years. Nothing of a 20-year vision. Who is looking at longevity? They focus on deliverables within their tenure time.

Participant 1
Getting young people into work at universities will be a challenge. There is often a requirement to be a practitioner first, and then you need a doctorate, these people are 30 when they are entering the workforce at basic lecturer level! If you have been a classroom teacher for that eight years, you are already on that $120,000 salary.

Conclusion and Recommendations

In answering the research questions posed for this paper, it is evident the sudden disruptions of COVID-19 have affected the career paths of higher education staff, particularly in the university sector where large numbers of senior staff have lost employment due to redundancies and early retirement. Sessional staff have also lost employment and in many cases, commitment to the sector. Remaining staff have suffered from increased workload, work role complexity and negative impacts on their personal wellbeing. Job losses at the senior executive levels of the university workforce imply lost corporate knowledge and experience, while job losses at the junior level of the workforce (such as, sessional teaching staff) present barriers to rebuilding an adequate higher education workforce. In combination, this lost expertise and commitment presents a significant challenge to rebuilding a higher education workforce, not to mention the potential negative impact on the overall student experience, student retention and completion rates when unhappy staff front student cohorts.

There is deep division, uncertainty and a degree of cynicism among higher education workers as to how well their institutional leaders have navigated the pandemic. It is clear from university financial data for 2020 and 2021 (Larkins, 2022) that some universities have cut staff more aggressively than others and there are uneven financial impacts for individual institutions as a result. Further to this, there are potentially also uneven reputational implications for particular institutions. TEQSA has observed that "some institutions will navigate the changes induced through COVID-19 more effectively than others," (Wells Advisory, 2021, p. 11) and it will be interesting to learn whether all Australian universities are able to rebuild a sufficiently expert and committed workforce to sustain their former business models.

This research reflects significant anxiety in terms of how well the sector might recover from the dramatic drop in international students and address the associated doubts regarding career security and career progression in the Australian higher education workforce. As TEQSA has observed, 'higher education student pipelines are multi-year, and so with three years of impact (2020, 2021 and 2022 a certainty) so far, the pipeline will take an absolute minimum of the same number of years to re-build (2023, 2024 and 2025) (Wells Advisory, 2021, p. 5). With the growing number of leaner and more competitively priced non-university providers surviving COVID-19 in better shape than many university providers, the newly emerging post-COVID-19 higher education market could be permanently reshaped. Those universities willing to engage in long term workforce planning and succession planning may remain more resilient and sustainable in the increasingly disrupted and competitive higher education market.

While it is acknowledged that many institutions are implementing good practices, such as monitoring staff feedback, consulting broadly prior to implementing change plans and providing flexible working arrangements, the recommendations drawn from this research provide universities and non-university providers with further strategies to support a sustainable and committed workforce. These recommendations are relevant at the level of department as well as whole of institution:

1. Develop a sector-wide focus on long term strategic planning (beyond the typical five years) with a stronger focus on workforce and succession planning.
2. Implement improved staff recruitment and retention strategies.
3. Convert casual and contract positions to achieve greater tenure and job security.
4. Implement strategies to support and reward existing staff including, providing for career progression opportunities within the institution.
5. Support bottom-up as well as top-down strategies for social engagement to foster a sense of belonging for staff.

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