Looking into the "Dark Mirror": Autoethnographic Reflections on the Impact of COVID-19 and Change Fatigue on the Wellbeing of Enabling Practitioners

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic brought global disruptions to the way universities operate. Online learning abruptly took priority, as the physical campuses in Australian universities became deserted. Staff had to instantly adapt to major changes in work practices, whilst continuing to support students' engagement and maintain quality teaching and learning. This article discusses how change fatigue during the pandemic impacted the wellbeing of staff working in the enabling education sector. As staff and student wellbeing is interdependent, gaining a better understanding of the influences on staff wellbeing in the post-pandemic era is worth exploring in the context of discussions around student wellbeing and success. Autoethnographical reflections of eight practitioners at six Australian universities working in teaching, leadership and professional practice in enabling education, were thematically analysed. Emergent data reveals the superordinate theme of change fatigue and sub-themes of time, online fatigue, and emotional labour. This article highlights the impact of workload intensification and change fatigue in educators. Our findings demonstrated that practitioners prioritise their workload and students, to the detriment of their own wellbeing. These findings hold relevance for institutions as they look to address student wellbeing and success, and highlights the value of embedding cultures of care and compassion across all levels of the university.

Keywords: Change fatigue; online learning; online teaching; wellbeing; enabling education.

Introduction

In March 2020, the World Health Organisation (WHO) declared a worldwide pandemic known as COVID-19. To reduce the spread of infection, isolation requirements were enforced in Australia, resulting in a massive cultural shift to working, teaching and learning predominantly online from home. Higher education was sent into a tailspin, as educators, learning designers and professional staff adapted learning materials and spaces, whilst simultaneously supporting student wellbeing and transitioning into an often unfamiliar, online learning environment. For many academics and university staff, these adjustments compounded existing pressures within the modern neoliberal university and commonly resulted in heightened forms of change fatigue. Hence, higher education employees were overexposed to further changes in work environments already "overwhelmed by change" (Halupa & Bolliger, 2020, p. 18) and "neoliberal fatigue" (Lavee & Strier, 2018, p. 504).

Central to higher education's corporatisation and neoliberalisation, is the Australian government's agenda for widening participation (Bradley et al., 2008; Hodges et al., 2013), enacted by enabling practitioners who are supporting non-traditional students to access higher education (Baker et al., 2021). These pre-tertiary or pathway students are notably underrepresented groups who have experienced educational disruption or disadvantage (Crawford & Johns, 2018; Hopkins, 2021). Many are from low socio-economic backgrounds, are first-in-family, have had substantial gaps in learning, or encountered mental or physical challenges within education systems (Baker et al., 2021). Literature suggests that these students commence tertiary study with diverse needs and challenges that require additional pastoral, mental health and academic support (Olds et al., 2020; Crawford & Johns, 2018; Hopkins, 2021; Jones et al., 2016). The work of program delivery to enable these students to gain university entry typically entails philosophies of care, social justice and student flourishing (Jones et al., 2020), including in digital learning environments (Hopkins, 2021). Enabling education practitioners focus on supporting this diverse cohort to achieve their educational goals, however, this often comes at a personal cost to these educators, such as overloaded workloads and burnout (Crawford et al., 2018).

This article discusses how change fatigue during the pandemic period (and beyond) impacts the wellbeing of these "underrepresented and unacknowledged" staff (Bennett et al., 2016, p. 217; See also Eloff et al., 2021; Macqueen et al., 2022) working with vulnerable students in the enabling education field. This article draws on reflections of eight practitioners at six Australian higher education institutions working in teaching, leadership and professional practice within the field of enabling education. The researchers can be considered "insiders" to the community they are researching as all are Australian enabling practitioners (Coghlan & Brydon-Miller, 2014). The term "practitioners" has been used throughout this article as it is inclusive of academic and professional staff. The researchers' positionalities frame the rationale for this project. All are women and members of the mental health special interest group (SIG) for the National Enabling Educators Association of Australia (NAEEA). The SIG's previous research has explored the impact of the high needs of enabling cohorts on educator burnout in non-COVID-19 times (Crawford et al., 2016; Crawford et al., 2018; Olds et al., 2023). This research is an extension of this project, shifting its lens to the COVID-19 pandemic. We posed the research question: *how did supporting non-traditional students in their transition to online learning and university during a global pandemic, impact the wellbeing of practitioners and students*? The aim was to collate the lived experience of those working in a high-needs space in an extremely challenging socio-cultural moment and highlight who carries the weight of supporting enabling student wellbeing in the neoliberal institution.

An autoethnographical approach and thematic analysis were chosen for this exploration, as both methodologies qualitatively capture the nuanced narratives of individual's work/life circumstance during the pandemic. This project is a way to, as Miller suggests, position enabling practitioners' lived experience within a framework "more capacious than their own" (1995, p. 23). The tethering of diverse autobiographies within an autoethnography is a reflexive exercise to articulate the importance of individual and shared stories. Sharing and weaving the particularities of teaching and learning challenges faced by varied enabling practitioners during this global crisis, creates a rich experiential tapestry of challenges to wellbeing. Emergent data revealed the superordinate theme of change fatigue and subthemes of time, online technology, and emotional labour, highlighted by the impact of workload intensification and change fatigue in educators. This data offers insights to the higher education and enabling sectors on the impacts of rapid technological change on university staff and students. Moreover, during this changing space of pandemic pressures meets digitisation and neoliberalisation, our findings demonstrate that practitioners typically put their enabling education workload and the wellbeing of their students first, to the detriment of their own wellbeing, risking burnout experiences of exhaustion, anxiety, shame and guilt.

Literature Review

"Neoliberal Fatigue": The Psychic Landscape

Since the 1980s, higher education's neoliberalist discourse continues to impact university structures internationally. Australian academics find themselves "stretched globally and domestically, stuck between tensions of neoliberalism, bureaucracy, widening participation, technological determinism, and a user pays system" (Olds, et al., 2020, p. 27). This lean towards neoliberalism has commodified learning within universities (Kenny & Fluck, 2017). Budget cutbacks and economic viability pressures have resulted in student ratios increasing, reductions in tenured academic staff, increases in a casualised workforce and a focus on workload models leading to workload intensification. These changes have impacted not only the practitioner, but also, the student experience (Larsen & James, 2022). Lavee and Strier (2018) have previously identified "neoliberal fatigue" amongst workers in caring professions, such as social work, teaching and nursing (p. 504). This fatigue is due to increasing workplace demands, including emotional demands from clients, and exacerbated by shrinking funding, time, material and emotional resources (Lavee & Strier, 2018).

Those in caring professions are subjected daily to a range of intensive emotions (their clients' as well as their own). A helpful framework for understanding the meanings of work-related emotions, such as anxiety, frustration and fatigue, within a social and political context, is provided in the work of Hochschild (1983). This investigation demonstrated how organisations require individuals, women in particular, to present and manage their emotions in accordance with the demands of gendered workplace roles and power hierarchies. Such gendered expectations persist in the field of enabling education programs, where successful student completion, retention and transition increasingly rely on the paid (and unpaid) emotional labour of mostly female, early career, or casual teaching practitioners (see Crawford & Johns, 2018; Motta & Bennett, 2018). Enabling practitioners must cope alone with the "emotional flooding" of their professional practice, often devoid of effective workplace supports, resources, tools or training (Lavee & Strier, 2018, p. 507). Yet, a feminist rethinking of the "cultural politics of emotion" demands breaking the silence on the real costs of this performativity of care in the contemporary neoliberal, digital university (Ahmed, 2015, p.1). It is also necessary to disrupt the disparity between men and women's performance of pastoral care and the difficulty of maintaining wellbeing or healthy work-life balance in the gendered neoliberal academy (Gill & Donaghue, 2016). These neoliberal harms have been exacerbated during and post pandemic times.

Workload Intensification, Technostress and Change Fatigue

The shift to "cheaper" online learning and use of educational technologies is another outcome of the neoliberal agenda (Lambrinidis, 2014). Educational technology has historically been labelled as "a site of struggle inside the university" (Hall, 2013, p. 52). Such sentiments often stem from fears of technological determinism assuming pedagogy and best practice teaching and learning (Jones & Bennett, 2017). It may be a misnomer that online learning is cheaper, as creating engaging and supportive online environments takes time. Jones and Olds (2020) suggest that additional scaffolds and supplementary resources are required by online students to reduce feelings of isolation, build connection and create community. Workload intensification for academic staff has become a contentious issue in the context of the pandemic. Workload models are often criticised for being unrealistic and unable to fully capture all daily tasks that university teaching staff undertake. Kenny and Fluck (2019) surveyed 662 Australian practitioners regarding workload, finding that there is "an underestimation of the work they were required to undertake" (Kenny & Fluck, 2019, p. 27). Larsen and James (2022) also note the link between increasing student-to-lecturer ratios, workloads, stress and wellbeing. Additionally, Gregory and Lodge (2015) highlight the fact that technology-enhanced learning is adding further stress to teaching staff workloads, as it requires different pedagogical approaches and training which is not adequately accounted for in workload calculations. This was highlighted during the pandemic, with the time pressures or workload intensity, and stress caused by the rapid move to videoconferencing.

"Zoom Fatigue" (also known videoconferencing fatigue) is a new term emerging from the pandemic, describing the mental exhaustion or burnout arising from repetitively attending videoconferences (Bennett et al., 2021; Ngien & Hogan, 2022; Riedl, 2022). Ngien and Hogan (2022) describe videoconferencing software such as 'Zoom' as having "unrivalled domination" (p. 2) and note a growing global reliance on it. Riedl (2022) defines Zoom Fatigue as "somatic and cognitive exhaustion that is caused by the intensive and/or inappropriate use of videoconferencing tools, frequently accompanied by related symptoms such as tiredness, worry, anxiety, burnout, discomfort, and stress, as well as other bodily symptoms such as headaches" (p. 157). Ngien and Hogan argue that Zoom fatigue is also related to viewing ourselves on the screen for extended periods of time. Fatigue is associated with a range of mental health issues such as depression, anxiety and sleep disorders (Williamson et al., 2005), "irritability, stress, forgetfulness and nervousness" (Rump & Brandt 2020, p. 3), and blurred vision, headache or poor motor skills (Johnson & Mabry, 2022). For example, a recent study on nursing students found that 67% of students using Zoom in their learning experienced high levels of Zoom fatigue (Oducado et al., 2021). Zoom fatigue is an emerging health concern with potentially dire impacts on wellbeing (Ngien & Hogan, 2022).

During the pandemic, working from home using videoconferencing and other communications technology became the norm (Bennett et al., 2021; Dool & Alam, 2022; Riedl, 2022). Change fatigue is defined as "the state when excessive change has led workers to feel exhausted and unable to further adapt" (Cox et al., 2022, p.718). Increasing changes and complexity in work roles, competitiveness, insufficient training and resources, an increasingly nomadic workforce and the "always on" perception of expectations are factors associated with increased levels of stress and layers of fatigue (Dool & Alam, 2022; Halupa & Bolliger, 2020). There is evidence that change fatigue affects people in multiple professions. In higher education during, and in the pandemic aftermath, were in constant states of change, as practitioners adapted to learning technologies, but remained in a state of flux, moving curriculum on and offline. While a significant part of this change fatigue was the rapid shift to videoconferencing and online learning, the diverse and challenging needs of enabling cohorts make it unsurprising that practitioners experienced change fatigue in technological and emotionally augmented pandemic times.

Wellbeing and the Student-Practitioner Relationship

Wellbeing is a complex and multi-dimensional construct that generally encompasses positive mental health, quality of life, job satisfaction, happiness, contentment, thriving, positive relationships (Eloff et al., 2021) and the "capacity to manage emotional, social, academic and occupational challenges occurring within supportive environments" (Cross & Falconer, 2021, p. 5). In recent years, student mental health and wellbeing has become a priority concern for universities, due to significantly higher rates of mental illness and psychological distress amongst university students than the wider community (Larcombe et al., 2016; Nieuwoudt, 2023; Stallman, 2010). Mental health and wellbeing influences student outcomes including attrition, retention and academic performance (Hodges et al., 2013; Nieuwoudt, 2023; Orygen, 2017). Belonging to a marginalised group and/or transitioning to university are additional risk factors that contribute to poor mental health and associated outcomes (Orygen, 2017). Students enrolled in enabling education may experience compounded risk factors for poor mental health, and significant concerns for the mental health and wellbeing of these cohorts across Australia have been acknowledged for a number of years (Crawford et al., 2016; Lisciandro, et al., 2016). In one recent study, 95% of enabling students were experiencing above normal levels of psychological distress even before the COVID-19 pandemic (Nieuwoudt, 2021).

Universities have bolstered centrally located counselling services and implemented wellbeing initiatives, however, the role of the student-practitioner relationship is generally less recognised by institutions as an influencing factor in student wellbeing and persistence at university (Crawford & Johns, 2018). Yet, university students report that their wellbeing is mainly influenced by what the practitioner does – the support they provide, and the practitioner's benevolence, competence, availability, attitude and interaction with students (Eloff et al., 2021; Seary & Willans, 2020). Care, kindness and compassion displayed by university staff in student interactions aids student wellbeing (Riva et al., 2020). When on-campus students were forced to adapt to online learning during the pandemic, they reported that enablers of their success were "empathetic and understanding staff; clear directions: and engaging, interactive delivery of the online learning" whilst barriers included "loss of support networks" (Attree, 2021, p. 106; see also Joubert et al., 2023). Larsen and James (2022) highlight that the student-practitioner relationship supports students' sense of belonging, self-efficacy and ultimately their success. Therefore, the practitioners' actions, communication and presence played a substantive role in supporting wellbeing and connecting students in the online learning, pandemic world (Joubert et al., 2023).

This article extends the research around neoliberal, technostress and change fatigue within higher education to specifically focus on enabling practitioners, many of whom carry additional pastoral care responsibilities (Seary & Willans, 2020) and supporting students from equity groups that require additional time and emotional energy at a personal cost: "emotionally, professionally and in workload" (Macqueen et al., 2022, p. 7). Recognising increasing evidence of the "interdependency between staff and student wellbeing" (Riva et al., 2020, p. 103) described as a "student/staff wellbeing loop" (p.108), staff wellbeing and precarious welfare states must be carefully examined in conversations about student wellbeing and success.

The practitioner reflections in this article are the other side of the same coin of student wellbeing in the age of digital, on-demand, learning and teaching. As we shall see, these stories also peel back the institutional wellbeing rhetoric and raise difficult questions including, who is really caring for the carers? There is a practical as well as moral-political imperative to include practitioner wellbeing in discussions of student wellbeing, particularly when discussing enabling education programs which support vulnerable students into undergraduate study. This article makes the case that student wellbeing and practitioner wellbeing are inextricably intertwined, and both must be understood against the wider social, economic and political context of an increasingly dehumanising, extractive academic capitalism. Hence, this article uses the popular cultural metaphor of the "dark mirror" to highlight the hidden dark side of new communication technologies to process large numbers of diverse students at faster rates. The overreliance on technology in teaching and learning contexts, while fast and convenient, can also feel alienating, invasive and overwhelming especially when teachers are pressured to constantly win the approval of those

above them and below them in workplace hierarchies. Such pressures were particularly acute during COVID-19 and remain worthy of close and critical analysis in any holistic discussion of wellbeing in higher education.

Methodology

Autoethnography encourages participants to reflect on an "individual or set of experiences" (Lipton, 2020, p. 47) which is then analysed and understood in a broader cultural or community context (Ellis, 2004). As a cross-institutional project, a collaborative autoethnography was considered an effective method (Arnold & Norton, 2020). The exploration of practitioner autobiographies within a collaborative autoethnography is a purposeful project to recognise the importance of individual experiences of teaching a high-needs cohort during a pandemic, and the limitations of institutional supports in the sector. This is aligned with Lipton (2020) who suggests that autoethnography allows for greater representation of voice and motivates "qualitative researchers to find more transparent, reflexive, and creative ways to do and share their research" (p. 47). Collaborative autoethnography offered an authentic method to tether these diverse voices and experiences of practitioners and professionals working in enabling education and address the question: *How did supporting non-traditional students in their transition to online learning and university during a global pandemic, impact the wellbeing of practitioners and students?*

The data for this study was collected by eight of the nine researchers in the dual role of participant and researcher. The ninth researcher was not included as a participant, their role was to ensure rigor in the thematic analysis's coding process (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To address the overarching research question, each participant wrote a guided reflection of approximately 1000 words, in response to a set of questions designed around the Boud et al. (2005) reflective framework: Describe, Evaluate, Interpret and Plan. The questions were:

1. *What are the perceived challenges, costs and benefits for practitioners in enabling education during the COVID-19 pandemic?*
2. *What personal impacts are experienced by staff in this context?*
3. *How do you manage the impacts of COVID-19 to maintain; a sense of wellbeing, create healthy work-life boundaries and maintain high standard, quality teaching and support to students?*

Reflections were de-identified and collated into a "story pot" (Bennett et al., 2016), where a systematic data analysis was undertaken using Braun and Clarke's thematic approach (2006). Reicher and Taylor (2005) advise "rigour lies in devising a systematic method whose assumptions are congruent with the way one conceptualizes the subject matter" (p. 549). Conceptualising the story pot involved reading each reflection to familiarise ourselves with the data, searching for reoccurring words, phrases and topics. Next, "initial codes "were generated, the story pot was then re-read and colour coded (p. 87). Codes were collated into loose themes, that were reviewed by the ninth researcher and checked against the coded extracts , narrowing and defining the final sub-themes of time, online fatigue (workload plus surveillance), and emotional labour within a superordinate theme of change fatigue. The findings and discussion will elaborate the relationship between these sub-themes, and how the triple threat of time, increased technological workload, and emotional labour leads to change fatigue and injury to wellbeing when practitioners, prioritise the educational experience and wellbeing of students before their own.

Findings and Discussion: What Creates Change Fatigue?

The findings and discussion highlight that it is time *plus* technology *plus* supporting the wellbeing of enabling students (emotional labour) that has led to change fatigue and symptoms of burnout in enabling practitioner in pandemic times. Discussion of these interconnected themes demonstrate how each of these pressures contribute individually and collectively to change fatigue and ultimately practitioner wellbeing outcomes.

Time Pressures on Teachers and Their Emotional Exhaustion

Time was the most frequently used word across the reflections, predominantly appearing in association with the topics of work-life balance and technology (over)use. This is perhaps no surprise, given the neoliberalist landscape of commodified time, economic rationalism, and overreliance on technology, compounding the collective trauma experience of COVID-19 and its expressed effect of change on the relational aspects of the participants' lives. Pragmatically, the negative impacts of the time taken to adapt pedagogy to online modes and support student wellbeing through the interface of technology, while also being "seen" by management surveillance as sufficiently productive, were evident throughout participant reflections. There was a resounding demoralisation experienced by time poor, fatigued enabling education practitioners concerned that they could not provide the necessary level of support and quality education for their non-traditional students. A deprioritising of practitioner needs and wellbeing occurred as personal time was consumed with "adapting my usual classroom activities to

the online environment" (Participant 8) as "the needs and the expectations of non-traditional enabling education students continues to grow every year, they need a lot of support" (Participant 1).

In the participant reflections, time pressures and associated workload intensification emerge from the conceptual realm to take on lived daily realities of emotional exhaustion and other negative impacts on teacher wellbeing. Described in various ways, time emerges in the reflections as a burden to bear: "COVID has doubled time's weight. With life online and universities in crisis, response times narrow, availability expands, expectations grow" (Participant 5). Time, in the reflections, morphs into a commodity that can be given and taken, provoking anxiety associated with the perception of (lack of) quality:

> My academic workshops were moved to online delivery and I was given very little time to update the Moodle shell. I was not happy with the quality I was able to deliver as the workshops had not been designed for online students. (Participant 6)

While the student may be told to "take her time" to complete assessment tasks, taking into account a challenging technological and socio-cultural environment university-based teachers in the neoliberal academy rarely enjoy the same degree of flexibility and empathy around their workplace deadlines (Attree, 2021, p. 109).

Time is associated with the affectual nature of our humanness in our relationships with self and others as "there is plenty of guilt around (lack of) time for family*"* (Participant 8). In the reflections, one participant who had returned from maternity leave to reduced hours, noted that due to the pressure of time and budget, "[I am] now doing my normal (previously full-time) job in part-time hours, (and) I was given extra work that we would have usually assigned to a casual tutor" (Participant 3). Time pressures lead to feelings of powerlessness, as the balance of power sits in the hands of university management (Berg & Seeber, 2017). One participant reflected on the pressure to conform to neoliberal expectations, "… when in times of economic stress and increased competition only my manager's opinion will count in the end" (Participant 1). Participant 7 lamented on the dehumanisation of this work environment: "there was time where I felt I was like a robot, a machine, accomplishing transactional tasks at work but not achieving much at a professional and personal level.*"* The perceived decay of time increases uniformity and supports the neo-liberal agenda, by removing the authentic existence of the individual (Hans, 2017). Such sentiment of malaise and ineffectiveness are commonly symptoms of burnout. Through this moulding of self to meet neoliberal adaptations of time and workload, wellbeing and relationships suffer:

> there were times where I felt I had little choice but to prioritise work over family and self-care to meet unrealistic deadlines, rather than risk being seen as incompetent or unreliable as a woman and a mother in the workplace. (Participant 3)

This change in constructions of time and workplace, created a fatigue in practitioners as they synchronously tried to protect students' mental health and wellbeing. Ironically, the more committed we are to our occupation, the more likely we are to experience time-stress (Berg & Seeber, 2017).

Technological Fatigue: Digitisation, Dark Mirrors and Surveillance

Adapting to online learning and use of online technology for tasks that were normally executed face-to-face prior to the pandemic, and the impact on wellbeing, was another major theme highlighted in the reflections. While important work has been done identifying the "online fatigue" experienced by undergraduate students during COVID-19 shutdowns (Attree, 2021) it is equally important to consider the online fatigue experienced by practitioners in enabling programs (p. 106). Their work was equivalent to four to six hours a day teaching online, engaging fatigued students and supporting the transition of non-traditional students new to online learning; and renegotiating teaching activities as espoused by Participant 8: "A quick classroom activity can become complicated and time consuming online, groups cannot be managed simultaneously; spontaneity, connection and discussion are truncated and staccato(ed)." Additionally, Participant 1 commented on the fatigue that teaching through Zoom brought:

> Too much teaching through zoom for hours at a time is like looking into the void that looks back into you, staring at the dark mirror, wondering what is really going on behind the black squares of "participants" who choose to stay silent and just lurk.

Reflecting on the negative or dark aspects of digital technology, this participant seems to be making cultural reference to the colloquial term *black mirror*, which refers to the unlit computer screens the; "symbols of our technological society" that "once deactivated, become a black surface reflecting our figure (or rather our shadow)" (Affatigato, 2019). The reference also recalls Brooker's (2011) dystopian Netflix television series of the same name, which dramatises the alienating and invasive aspects of modern communication technologies. This black mirror world wherein participants are constantly on camera, recorded, watched and measured according to how popular and productive they are, is not only the dark material of science fiction fantasy, but increasingly the lived reality of low status or precarious workers in the digital economy.

It seems while teachers are required, in the digital university, to be ever more engaging, entertaining, innovative and attentive, in order to attract and retain non-traditional students, the student-clients may still turn cameras and microphones off, leaving the practitioner with a blank screen or perhaps a sense of shame and guilt for not holding her paying audience. Viewing our reflections from the black mirror void can, it seems, also lead to a negative self-image and increased self-awareness (Ngien & Hogan, 2022; Riedl, 2022). In turn, this self-awareness uncomfortably prompts practitioners to realise that they are actors with an obligation to please their audience. Naturally, this increases pressure to perform that, in turn, increases social interaction anxiety and a constant need to maintain performance levels (Ngien & Hogan, 2022). Social interaction anxiety "plays a key role in increasing fatigue", as those affected, focus excessively on avoiding behaviours that elicit disapproval, increasing their cognitive load (i.e., mental burden), triggering fatigue" (Farmer & Kashdan, 2015, as cited in Ngien & Hogan, 2022, p. 5). Associated with Zoom fatigue is technostress (or technology overload): stress and fatigue caused by overexposure to new forms of technology and continual demands to update technological skills.

Replacement of face-to-face meetings with videoconferences during the pandemic created a form of neoliberal asymmetrical surveillance akin to Foucault's (1977) writings on the Panopticon. Supervisors held power as the watchers. Staff felt the expectation to be "seen":

> In lockdowns Zoom also provided the digital tools for a new more intimate level of surveillance of teachers by their managers. I was shocked and fearful when a more senior program coordinator commented to me that she could 'watch,' all the teachers through the zoom recordings, in a tone that suggested to me a kind of indirect threat and also an expression of the lack of trust in experienced teachers which is becoming more common in enabling education. (Participant 1)

The need to be "on" in case someone was watching and questioning their work ethic was expressed by Participant 8; "The worst impact is the lack of trust that is communicated by upper management, doubt about academics working to full capacity at home, and surveillance of our foot traffic on campus." This fed feelings of fear of surveillance and a suspicion of being watched, while also attempting to deliver positive student experiences in a climate of perpetual change and cutbacks. Consequently, the pandemic, workload, and the digital panopticon delivered *"uncertainty and demand and failure to meet all the changing boundaries and expectations that others set for us"* (Participant 1), undermining academic identity and injuring the wellbeing of practitioners. These feelings of lack of accomplishment and agency are also symptoms of burnout. In this emotional climate, previously collaborative environments and sociable workplace activities may be overridden by the competitive and individualistic "emergency as rule" (Thrift 2000, cited in Gill & Donahue, 2016, p. 91) modus operandi of the digital, neoliberal university. Participant 4 aptly summarises:

> I got Zoom/Teams fatigue with everyone else's need to feel connected. I was quite happy beavering away by myself and just getting things done…The rants through the screen by others probably were the biggest impact on my wellbeing. As an enabling educator I think I am used to putting student's wellbeing and the wellbeing of my staff before my own. So I was quite exhausted by that...I don't think I managed it at all to maintain a sense of wellbeing...except maybe turn their sound off from time to time.

Participant 4 exhibits poor wellbeing with symptoms of fatigue and burnout, citing vicarious exhaustion from listening to other's exhaustion, and lack of agency. Combined with the neoliberal academy's move to technologically driven teaching and pedagogies for an already challenging cohort of students, the added pressures of workload, surveillance and competition lead to overwhelming change fatigue in enabling practitioners.

Teacher empathy and emotional labour was an important enabler in student success during the COVID-19 university closures (Attree, 2021), however it is important to recognise that emotional labour comes at a cost to teachers who may be simultaneously struggling with their own experiences of anxiety and stress around technology. Participant 1 found that "the biggest challenge in my workplace was the move to teach everyone and everything via zoom." Practitioners were additionally faced with the constant need to "adapt" and "pivot" as they were "inundated by designing and redesigning course activities" (Participant 8). The technostress felt by having to be both academic and IT specialist added to change fatigue felt by practitioners, who were simultaneously navigating their personal home stresses, as "They juggled learning how to teach remotely (and work the technology) and supervise their own school children at home, it was all so very physically and emotionally taxing" (Participant 7). For the participants in this project these constant technological changes and challenges, combined with a desire to minimise the impact on student wellbeing, led to the exhaustion expressed by Participants 3; "I felt endlessly tired, anxious and panicked over the work that never stopped mounting."

Care or Burnout? Staff and Student Wellbeing

In the reflections under analysis there was a consistent emphasis on the emotional labour required for teaching and supporting non-traditional students while also struggling to keep up with technological changes and the accelerated pace or intensity of university workloads (see also Crawford et al. 2018; Motta & Bennett, 2018). The diverse nature of enabling student cohorts in terms of both background and academic skills requires a particular level of emotional labour unlikely to be experienced by other undergraduate academics (Crawford et al., 2018); and heightened by the move to online teaching and communication during the pandemic. Emotional labour is "a state that exists when there is a discrepancy between emotional demeanour that an individual displays and the genuinely felt emotions that would be inappropriate to display" (Berry & Cassidy, 2013, p. 22). High levels of emotional labour over extended periods, along with stressors such as intensified workloads, diversified modes of delivery and an absence of agency (Crawford et al., 2018), can potentially damage staff wellbeing and lead to teacher burnout, exhaustion, fatigue, low motivation and health issues (Berry & Cassidy, 2013; Cross & Falconer, 2021). Symptoms of burnout also include detachment, cynicism, feelings of a lack of accomplishment, or ineffectiveness (Maslach et al., 2001).

Not only does emotional labour and burnout pose personal costs for staff and a commercial risk for universities, but it also poses a risk for student wellbeing and success. Student and staff wellbeing are fundamentally interrelated (Abery & Gunson, 2016; Riva et al., 2020). Staff wellbeing and job performance impacts on student satisfaction, performance and retention, which in turn, influences university performance and international rankings. When job specific demands and practitioner accountability rapidly increase, whilst job security is simultaneously eroded, further harm is created within this cycle (Berry & Cassidy, 2013; Cross & Falconer, 2021). To effectively address student wellbeing and success, institutions must also pay close attention to staff wellbeing, particularly during periods of change, uncertainty and adversity.

Participant 1 articulates the hidden injuries of expending emotional labour in a climate of funding cutbacks, time pressures and increasingly online learning:

> There is, I know, I see, I feel, inadequate support for the teachers who support the students. University counselling services are no remedy for or protection from fatigue or exhaustion, even if you did trust them with your real feelings and personal true stories.

She makes the important point that communications technology can, ironically, undermine the caring teacher's attempts to emotionally connect with, and support students. From these reflections the added burden of emotional labour is being disproportionately borne by already overloaded staff, mainly women, often casual with insecure tenure; this is the "dark side" of the enabling sector's much vaunted pedagogies of care, underpinning well-intended widening participation and "student-first" change agendas. Non-traditional students need increased support for their wellbeing especially in the pandemic age, yet this emotional labour is being expended by staff who do not always have adequate training, resources and "resilience" to adapt to it under increasing time pressures. Moreover, these participant insights demonstrate a certain suspicion about the increasingly ubiquitous institutional staff "counselling" as an individualistic, even victim-blaming response to larger, systemic problems. Indeed, when WHO (2019) defined "burnout" as an occupational phenomenon or "chronic workplace stress that has not been successfully managed" it provided a timely reminder that burnout is not something that can be solved by counselling alone but demands a collective and whole of sector response to the voices and perspectives of practitioners on the ground (para. 4).

Our participants in this study also reveal their own (perhaps misguided) sense of shame in not being sufficiently supportive of vulnerable "others" when feeling overwhelmed by constant change. Indeed, these are practitioner pressures and emotions that are rarely acknowledged or discussed in enabling education research; a kind of open secret amongst those who do the most online teaching. In her feminist reflections on secrecy in the academy, Gill (2010) has rightly called for a breaking of the silence around the many psychosocial "hidden injuries" of the "toxic" (Gill & Donaghue, 2016, p. 92) neoliberal university. The reflections from practitioners in this study not only contribute to this exposing and rethinking of the "cultural politics of emotion" (Ahmed, 2015, p. 1) at work in the neoliberal university but highlight the particular hidden burdens and injuries experienced by enabling practitioners, predominantly female, who deliver pedagogies of care to ensure successful transitions of marginalised student groups as their daily practice. Participant 2 reflects:

> meanwhile while I carried the burden of these evolved, larger responsibilities of being a work from home mum, I also carried the guilt that I was meant to be helping my students learn to adjust to being new students in the tertiary world!

While universities enhanced their workplace wellbeing initiatives during the pandemic to support staff, access to these required staff to invest more of their own time and energy; resources that were already lacking and overstretched. Instead, respectful personal relationships, flexible work, trust, supportive management, and good communication were more likely to create a

health promoting working environment (Dickson-Swift et al., 2014). The reflections in this study point towards a possible lack of support from management staff and perspectives preoccupied with restructure, "innovation" and perpetual change at the expense of an already vulnerable workplace and emphasise instead that "change is exhausting, uncertainty is exhausting, and that this change and this uncertainty is not yet done" (Participant 2*)*.

Conclusion: Catching our Breath in the Post-COVID University

While this article provides an illustrative snapshot of staff wellbeing in crisis during the peak period of COVID-19 lockdowns, the issues it raises remain important and relevant to student success in the post-pandemic digital university. Additionally, this research contributes to the body of literature focussed on the under-studied field of enabling education. Furthermore, the inclusions of multiple higher education institutions in the project, increases the transferability of findings. The enabling practitioners reporting on their daily lived experiences here, are frontline practitioners and counsellors engaging with stressed or vulnerable students and absorbing the impact of this on their own wellbeing. While the term "burnout" has become ubiquitous in popular discourse in post-pandemic times, there is a dearth of research regarding how the mental health of enabling education practitioners is put at risk by university neoliberalisation, digitisation and our own culture of care in supporting vulnerable students. The reflections in this article highlight the real costs and negative impacts on enabling practitioners' wellbeing, when they prioritised the wellbeing of their students over and above their own health during the move to online learning during the pandemic (and beyond). If, in the "black mirror" society, switching off is a failing, then enabling practitioners are now under intense moral-political, as well as economic pressures, to keep expending emotional labour in the interests of widening participation for the 24/7 digital university. In order to create a sustainable sector for all staff, higher education will need to (re)value the narratives and lived experiences of those pathway practitioners closest to the most marginalised students and their experience, while recognising that student wellbeing and teacher wellbeing are also inextricably interconnected. As Riva (2020) writes:

> Student and staff wellbeing in teaching and learning settings are two sides of the same coin, needing the same "protection" and acknowledgement as priorities within Higher Education. In other words, supporting staff wellbeing is an essential action for adequately sustaining students' welfare. (p. 109)

To achieve this, we need to return to re-valuing universities as "caregiving organisations" (Kahn, 2005; cited in Riva et al., 2020, p. 110) that support the whole student, and contribute positively to local communities and society; not simply profit-driven businesses. This starts with embedding a culture of compassion at all levels, for both students and staff, through realistic workload models that allocate time for adaptation during times of change and for the ongoing important work of caring for students. By pulling these painful learnings out of the dark mirror we offer a way forward for improving both student and teacher wellbeing in the post-pandemic, digital university.

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