Departures and redeployments during COVID-19: University staff narratives

A. Ian Glendon

The COVID-19 pandemic, the Australian government's response, and longer-term influences within Australia's higher education sector, provided the background and rationale for this study in an Australian public university. From a context of how Antipodean University (AU) dealt with the revenue crisis, this paper describes how a sample of staff were affected through job loss or redeployment. It describes reported experiences of 77 AU staff, who either departed AU or who transferred to other jobs within AU, and who provided narratives describing their leaving/redeployment experiences. Respondents had been academic and professional staff, and most of those leaving did so in December 2020. An inductive reflexive thematic analysis of online survey responses revealed six themes: Relevant features of the external environment, AU's organisational culture and values, Parties involved with respondents' leaving experience, Leaving/redeployment processes encountered, Respondent's personal agency, and Past/present condition in/directly attributed to changed employment status, with 25 subthemes.

Keywords

Departing experiences; downsizing; personal agency; redundancy; reflexive thematic analysis

Background and introduction

In 2020 a three-pronged 'perfect storm' severely affected Australian university staff's lives and livelihoods. The short-term component was the COVID-19 pandemic, from which the most critical financial impact on universities was losing their revenue stream from international students due to national border closures, so that would-be students stayed away. The medium-term aspect was a federal government with an unsympathetic record – even hostility – to the public higher education sector (Megalogenis, 2021; Richards, 2021). One immediate impact of this political component was that, unlike most of the Australian industry and commerce private sector – including four private universities – public higher education institutions were excluded from the federal government's discretionary emergency JobKeeper payments, made early in the COVID-19 pandemic, which enabled employers to retain essential workers.

The longer-term feature was a higher education sector that over decades had increasingly adopted corporate-style management practices to the extent that universities were seen as becoming 'top-heavy' with managers and associated staff (Richards, 2021). This managerial group was strongly focused on meeting and exceeding key performance indicators, including being benchmarked against metrics, particularly publications, citations, grants, and student fee income, as well as with university and subject international rankings. While all Australian universities were affected by these issues to some extent, different strategies were adopted. Antipodean University's ***Sustainability Pathway*** – hereafter ***SP*** – identified ~80 academic and ~200 professional positions as 'surplus'.

Study objectives were to: (1) 'give voice' to AU staff who either left AU employment, or who were redeployed in the 18 months to 30 June 2021; (2) provide feedback to AU management on these staff's reported experiences.

Methodology

AU's Vice-Chancellor (VC) provided permission to facilitate this project. Ethics approval was granted. Contact details were available for AU staff departing or redeployed/reassigned 1 January 2020 to 30 June 2021.

I developed a brief online survey to collect basic information, excluding personal data (e.g., age, departmental affiliation). Survey invitations were distributed 10-13 August 2021. While email addresses were available for all redeployed/reassigned staff, departed staff email addresses were incomplete. The survey was closed on 30 September 2021 – approximately two weeks after the last response had been received. Responses were anonymous and privacy requirements were adhered to. Staff departing AU for all reasons during the 18-month period were included in the survey.

The open-ended survey question invited contributions thus: ***Please write a narrative in your own words describing your redeployment or departure experience. Your personal free-form format narrative should be devoid of any identifying features. It can be as long (or as short) as you wish. It should not include any personal demographic information. References to relevant***

others or organisational elements should be framed generically (e.g., 'my head of school/department', 'my group'). Your narrative might refer to your feelings then and now, and sources of helpful advice, but there are no specific guidelines as to what you might include. You might find it convenient to draft your narrative in a Word document first, and then copy and paste it to the question field once you are happy with the content.

Quantitative analysis

To enable a more discriminatory categorisation than an academic/general classification, the survey provided the pre-coded categories in Table 1, which shows staff category distributions prior to respondents' departure/redeployment.

Table 1: Respondents' reported prior staff category and level

Staff category/level	N	%
Academic: Level A (1) B (9) C (5) D (2) E (14) Other (3) Not given (3)	37	34.6
Professional: HEW4 (2) HEW5 (5) HEW6 (6) HEW7 (10) HEW8 (7) HEW9 (4) HEW10 (1) Other (2) Not given (3)	40	38.5
Research: Principal Research Fellow (2) Research Fellow (2) Other (3) Not given (2)	9	9.6
Managerial: HEW7 (1) HEW9 (2) Contract (2) Other (1)	6	5.8
Administrative: HEW3 (2) HEW4 (3) HEW5 (3)	8	7.7
Technical: HEW6 (1) HEW8 (1) Not given (1)	3	2.9
Staff category not given	1	1.0
Total	**104**	

Of eight departure reasons, four were AU-initiated schemes – voluntary redundancy (VR), voluntary early retirement (VER), deed of release (DoR), and compulsory redundancy. Four were designated as other reasons – fixed-term appointment ended, job elsewhere, retired, and 'other reason'. Leaving cases were re-coded to represent these two categories. Table 2 shows respondents' reported manner of leaving AU, or whether they were redeployed/reassigned.

Table 2: Respondents' reported manner of leaving AU, or redeployed/reassigned

Reason reported	N	%
Redeployed/reassigned	5	4.8
Retired not via VER	6	5.8
Retired via VER	21	20.2
Departed via VR	4	3.8
Departed via DoR	6	5.8
Departed because position deemed 'surplus' (i.e., made redundant)	15	14.4
Departed because fixed term appointment ended	17	16.3
Departed for job elsewhere	22	21.2
Departed for some other reason (e.g., domestic, health)	8	7.7
Total	**104**	**100**

VR voluntary redundancy VER voluntary early retirement DoR deed of release

Table 3 cross-tabulates staff category by type of reason for leaving for 98 departing respondents who provided this information.

Table 3: Cross-tabulation of staff category by type of reason for leaving (N=98)

Staff category*	'Other' No.	'AU-initiated' No.	Total
Academic	14	23	37
Professional	23	14	37
Research	7	0	7
Managerial	2	4	6
Administrative	5	3	8
Technical	1	2	3

* One respondent did not nominate their staff category

Qualitative analysis

To the question inviting respondents to describe their leaving/redeployment experience, 77 responded. There was no preponderance for any category of respondents to respond – or not to respond – to this question.

Qualitative analysis drew on Braun and Clarke (2022), whose detailed description of reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) best represents the approach taken in analysing the open-ended responses. Rationale for using RTA included: (1) a clear aim, which would be met by an inductive semantic approach, (2) to facilitate a structured analysis from a large amount of free-form data, and (3) like a grounded approach, the potential for theory development might be realised post-analysis. Data analysis was approached inductively and semantically, within an experiential and relativist framework. For an example of inductive approaches in organisational research, see Spector et al. (2014).

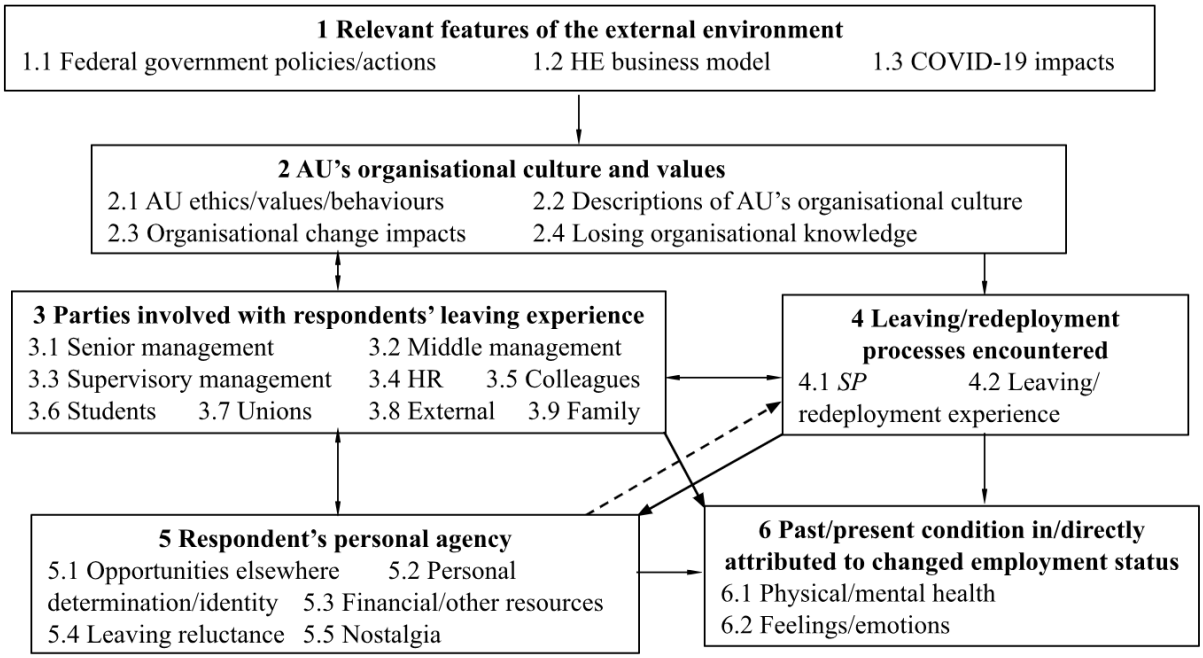
The narrative data coding process was undertaken in exploratory fashion to develop a superordinate thematic narrative. Research questions focused on: (1) understanding respondents' recent departing/redeployment experiences, (2) learning something about how respondents made sense of what had happened to them during their leaving/redeployment experiences, (3) identifying respondents' perspectives and reflections on what had happened to them, (4) discovering how respondents and others reportedly behaved during this process, and (5) broader factors (e.g., socio-political processes) that could have influenced respondents' experiences.

This section describes analysis and interpretation of the 77 narratives (aggregate >23,000 words). When analysing qualitative data, the researcher is likely to employ a bottom-up grounded approach – in this case following a moderated inductive process. I felt privileged to be provided with details of respondents' unique leaving and redeployment experiences. Allocating material to themes and subthemes, while far from arbitrary, has associated ambiguities. For example, there is inevitable overlap between extracted material distributed between thematic categories. This reflects 'messy' realities of organisational life, particularly at a time of rapid change.

Themes should be clearly demarcated and built around a strong core ***central organising concept*** comprising: 'The (sometimes implicit) idea that unifies meaning in a theme; the concept or idea that all the analytic observations that constitute a theme relate to' (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 284). In this case, the core concept was respondents' personal agency, which became Theme 5 in the analysis. While each theme should portray an independent element, all are part of the story 'told' by the data. Central to the initial operational analytical stages, RTA components – codes and themes, should be driven by the research question/s.

As the researcher is an active agent in knowledge production, Braun and Clarke (2022) recommended using first-person active voice when describing the analytic process. They argued for an approximately 50/50 balance between analytic narrative and data excerpts. Data require interpreting by the researcher to provide sense-making and to develop a thematic structure. Braun and Clarke advised a maximum three thematic levels – overarching themes, themes, and subthemes. An overarching theme represents a higher-level thematic construct – departure/redeployment experience in the current project. A thematic associations map introduces the thematic analysis section. Narrative verbatim excerpts are followed by parenthesised respondent number and their reported reason for departing AU or being redeployed.

Figure 1: Thematic associations map



AU=Antipodean University; HE=higher education; HR=Human Resources; ***SP=Sustainability Pathway***

Thematic analysis

Thematic analysis of narratives identified six themes encompassing 25 subthemes. Themes were: (1) Relevant features of the external environment, (2) AU's organisational culture and values, (3) Parties involved with respondents' leaving experience, (4) Leaving/redeployment processes encountered, (5) Respondent's personal agency, and (6) Past/present condition in/directly attributed to changed employment status. Figure 1 presents the six themes with their associations, represented by arrows. Text below describes the themes and subthemes, with illustrative excerpts. Theme numbers reflect logical sequence, not relative importance.

Theme 1: Relevant features of the external environment

Subtheme 1.1: Federal government policies and actions

The most poignant response under this heading was from a respondent who explained in detail how they discovered that their Australian Research Council (ARC) Discovery Grant had been one of eleven sector-wide that had been vetoed by then Education Minister (Hon Simon Birmingham, who declined to endorse 11 ARC approved grants), which had critically impacted this respondent's cv (Koziol, 2018). While AU had provided support for the project, this respondent maintained that not receiving the ARC grant very probably adversely affected a subsequent grant application that they had submitted.

All comments under this heading were critical of the federal government's actions and role in the pandemic, and more generally. One stated:

> ***I do not blame [AU] for this, more the complete lack of support from the federal government which forced all institutions to consider terrible measures*** (R28 VER)

Another wrote:

> ***The federal government's wilful disinterest in the health of a tertiary education system that used to be one of its key sources of export income... We are living through a time of epochal change*** (R111 VER)

Subtheme 1.2: Higher education business model

All comments under this subtheme were critical of the Australian higher education business model. Two illustrative extracts were:

> ***The main reason I decided to leave [AU] in 2021 was due to the instability and uncertainty of the International Education sector in Australia. The department that I worked for at [AU] is directly impacted by the loss of international students*** (R79 Job elsewhere)

> ***Today's analysis by the Australia Institute of the number of jobs lost and the disproportionately gendered nature of those that have left the system is shocking*** (R111 VER)

One lengthy contribution summarised the following nine ways in which Australia's higher education system was failing: (1) financially-driven teaching philosophy with 'less popular' subjects dropped, (2) over-large classes, (3) staff workload manipulation, (4) restrictive laboratory teaching experience for recent PhDs, (5) eroded technical and professional staff support, (6) federal government short-term research agendas, (7) arbitrary and unreasonable publication expectations, (8) 'rules' not applying to research intensive staff, (9) inadequate central infrastructure support for research and teaching.

Subtheme 1.3: COVID-19 impacts

Respondent comments characterising this subtheme laid the blame for their situation, at least partially, on the COVID-19 pandemic. A miscellany of leaving reasons characterised respondents' contributions. Illustrative comments were:

> ***I would have continued...in the university if it was not for the pro-retirement arguments...triggered by COVID*** (R25 VR)

> ***COVID-19 severely impacted the work environment at [AU], and it became impossible to continue working in the environment*** (R106 Other reason)

> ***COVID affected us badly...we were scared at work*** (R63 VR)

> ***I was victim of a blanket decision to not increase senior staff remuneration in 2020 in deference to the COVID situation*** (R5 Job elsewhere)

COVID unsettled and disrupted everything I thought I knew and had taken for granted at [AU] and in a very short period (R37 DoR)

I have a sense of loss of what a traumatic couple of years all or most Australian universities have collectively been through during and as a result of the pandemic (R111 VER)

This brief extract constituted this respondent's entire narrative!

My 12-month fixed term contract was terminated due to the COVID-19 pandemic in May 2020 (R54 'Surplus')

Distribution of Theme 1 (Relevant features of the external environment) subthemes among respondent groups

All three subthemes were most heavily endorsed by respondents departing through VER, perhaps indicating that this subsample had the broadest perspective on events leading to their departure.

Theme 2: AU's organisational culture and values

The effect of an organisation's culture, its ethics and underlying values, and the way it treats its employees and other stakeholders have been extensively documented in academic and popular publications, making it unsurprising that this theme was identified. This longer-term feature has developed across higher education in several countries. Organisational culture and values are likely to be particularly salient during rapid organisational change, as behaviours that are represented by these values are liable to be thrown into sharp relief, which occurred during the period investigated.

Subtheme 2.1: AU ethics, values, and behaviours

Comments representing this subtheme were either positively, neutrally, or negatively oriented.

2.1.1: Positive

Some comments expressed favourable views of the way in which AU had addressed local pandemic effects. An illustrative quote was:

I believe that [AU] could not have handled things any more professionally and compassionately, particularly when it came to making the hard calls in relation to people's livelihoods (R102 VER)

2.1.2: Neutral

Other comments were matter-of-fact statements about the 2020-2021 situation. One was:

My departure from [AU] was the result of a University-wide restructure and cost-cutting investigation (R107 'Surplus')

2.1.3: Negative

In this subtheme orientation, negative commentary was expressed by respondents on numerous aspects of AU's functioning. While the focus was on an 18-month period, many comments were historically related, a clear implication being that the pandemic had simply brought these features to the fore. For example, one respondent noted that it was only 'Indians' who had faced job loss, while all 'Chiefs' positions remained intact. This might reflect a higher organisational value being placed upon senior managers, while lower-ranked employees were regarded as expendable. Inter alia, respondents' comments related to:

- Gradual separation of AU from its values and purpose.
- Increasing and stultifying managerialism.
- Work reduced to numbers, dollars, and league tables.
- Non-egalitarian decision making.
- Lack of support and recognition for intellectual and creative disciplines.
- Poor treatment of staff and students.
- Conflict between levels within AU.
- Lack of communication.
- Poor career prospects.
- Perceived discrimination due to recently becoming a mother.
- Being deceived.
- Nepotism.

Other negative comments are represented by these excerpts:

I would have chosen to stay at [AU], or perhaps work at a reduced capacity, if there [was] some regard for my capabilities as an individual. It became very clear that it had nothing to do with us as staff members; it was all about fulfilling a university plan or ideal structure (R92 Job elsewhere)

Aside from the lack of engagement of the divisional head, I resent not being given the same input opportunity as my equals in the organisation. When the head of division raised questions about how the process had rolled out without his consultation, he was instantly dismissed (R5 Job elsewhere)

Subtheme 2.2: Cultural descriptions

A frequently used variable in organisational research, 'culture' was mentioned by some respondents to describe their experience of AU, in all instances negatively.

2.2.1: Extent of toxicity/authoritarianism

A few respondents explicitly described AU's culture as 'toxic' or authoritarian, in at least one case identifying perpetrators of such a culture. Illustrative quotes were:

[AU] was quite possibly the most toxic workplace I have ever encountered (R40 Job elsewhere)

Under the current Vice Chancellor and chief operation officer a toxic culture exists that prefers new non-experienced non-university staff (R100 Contract ended)

2.2.2: Degree of trust

Other respondents referred to a lack of trust within AU. Again, there were hints that these comments referred to a longer-term problem that was exacerbated by COVID-19 precipitated events. Roffee and Kimberley (2022) noted that COVID-19 had intensified existing challenging conditions for higher education. Illustrative quotes were:

I found myself having little trust in management, particularly when conversations around restructure, reviews and organisational change came about (R60 Job elsewhere)

The level of trust and respect at [AU] is pitiful (R40 Job elsewhere)

Subtheme 2.3: Change impacts

Another heavily researched organisational area is change and its effects on organisational members. While many staff could have remained relatively unaffected by changes that affected AU in 2020 and 2021, and some might even have benefitted from the changes (e.g., leaving with a payment then taking a position elsewhere), for some respondents neither of these outcomes was likely. Thus, some respondents were particularly prone to have had negative experiences during the 18-month period. It was also likely that at least some of those whose lives had been particularly strongly impacted by their departure experience would use the free-form question option to express some of their anger and displeasure. Respondents' comments reflected that their experiences in the period represented the extreme end of a continuum that had been in progress for some considerable time. These excerpts support these premises:

Work conditions at the university had declined monotonically during my time there (R9 VER)

I was also very concerned about the changes that were occurring in my group at least. The very things that I had valued about [AU] – the collegiality, the academic freedom, the respect seemed were being abandoned at a rapid rate – and so I was glad to go (R97 VER)

My departure experience was strongly linked to the rapid changes occurring within [AU] and the wider university sector brought on by the COVID crisis and the response of [AU]. In no time at all, it seemed, many of the operational decisions which were routine at an academic element level (i.e., school/department/centre) were centralised along

with academic teaching programs, budgets, and approvals for almost everything including courses to be delivered and by whom (R37 DoR)

There are many other elements to this story, from the university continuing to increase the numbers of students accepted into the undergraduate courses, without increasing faculty or sessional staff or rooms or equipment, to the choice not to appoint professional staff permanently, rather in acting positions on six-month contracts, that all compound one another to create a workplace that is not beneficial to growth or creativity, two elements crucial to a healthy university (R109 Other reason)

Subtheme 2.4: Losing organisational knowledge

While this variable features in the organisational behaviour literature, it is far less studied than those variables represented by the other subthemes within AU's culture and values theme. This was clearly an issue for respondents whose comments were redolent of regret that the university would be the poorer for the loss of staff, who collectively represented a substantial loss of organisational knowledge acquired over a considerable period. Total years of AU employment by the 94 respondents who departed the organisation and who provided this information was 1077. Assuming that this subsample was representative of all AU departures during the target period in terms of employment years, grossing up this figure based on the ~15 per cent response rate from those leaving AU during the target period gives a total estimated 'experience years' lost to AU during the 18 months to end June 2021 of: 1077×100/15=7180 years! This figure excludes years of AU employment of 309 staff listed as departing for whom no valid email was available and who were therefore not included in the survey. This represents a considerable loss of organisational knowledge within a brief period. Illustrative quotes were:

[I] am incensed that the university was forced to make appalling decisions that have led to the loss of unfathomable amounts of knowledge and experience (R28 VER)

The loss of knowledge within the school is tragic...I find it somewhat disheartening, perhaps ironic, that at least one person who accepted VER from another university was brought in to fill a gap left by 'cuts' at [AU] (R101 VER)

I expect that the research and teaching quality will suffer over the next few years because of the loss of people like me and those who retired who were the knowledge keepers (R65 Job elsewhere)

It is disappointing to see the way in which the accumulated knowledge and experience of former staff is discarded. I/We are 'dead to them' despite the platitudes (R97 VER)

Distribution of Theme 2 (AU's organisational culture and values) subthemes among respondent groups

Associations between different respondent groups' reported reason for leaving and the distribution of comments coded under this (and other) subthemes did not present a simple response pattern. Key features were:

- The 59 coded Theme 2 comments were distributed across all nine respondent groups.
- Respondents leaving for jobs elsewhere made the most Theme 2 comments (19).
- Respondents leaving for jobs elsewhere were most likely to report both positive and negative comments.
- Respondents representing four leaving groups made comments referring to a 'toxic culture' – those leaving via a DoR and ending a fixed-term contract were most likely to endorse this subtheme.
- Respondents leaving for jobs elsewhere were most likely to make comments referring to a low-trust culture.
- Reference to change impacts were most likely to be found among comments made by VER departers.
- VER respondents and those who left for jobs elsewhere were most likely to refer to losing organisational knowledge.

Theme 3: Parties involved with respondents' leaving experience

Theme 3 had the largest number of comments assigned to it, and – along with the personal agency theme – the most words describing respondents' experiences. This indicated a high level of importance attributed to other parties in respondents' leaving/redeployment experiences. Some comments coded as elements of this theme linked with aspects of other themes, for example including reference to behaviours attributed to various management levels.

In our working lives, we are obliged to engage in relationships with multiple parties. In the case of parties representing aspects of our employing organisation, these may take various forms, and be of varying intensity and valence (from very positive to very negative). The topic of workplace relations has exercised the minds and endeavours of many organisational behaviour researchers. Apart from respondents themselves, nine parties were identified from narratives supplied. They are addressed as subthemes below.

Subtheme 3.1: Senior management

It was clear which level of management was being referred to in respondents' narratives. Top, senior, or executive management refers to the VC, deputy vice-chancellors, or the senior executive group. Comments under this heading divided into those respectively expressing positive, mixed, and negative perspectives.

3.1.1: Positive

Whether within a national or provincial government, a company, or – as in this case – a university, organisational members' confidence in their senior management is likely to be important to how effectively an organisation functions. Senior management must typically work hard to earn the respect and trust of those they manage. These contributions typified respondents' positive comments about AU senior management:

I have great confidence in the Executive Group and in [VC's] leadership (R5 Job elsewhere)

We were led from the front by our VC on this score, my strong view at the time and still, was that we (the Uni) were fortunate to have [this VC] at the helm as the whole shemozzle unfolded during the year (R102 VER)

I appreciated the regular VC updates throughout the uncertain times in 2020 (R79 Job elsewhere)

3.1.2: Mixed

This aligned with a more subtle, qualified, and ambiguous expression of support for senior management, as represented by this sole extract:

It was a difficult time for management...they had a lot of responsibility which I acknowledged, but at the same time there was a crisis in leadership in the organisation (R4 Contract ended)

3.1.3: Negative

Respondent narratives under this heading included claims of bullying, in one case by a very senior manager. Two respondents identified senior managers who they claimed had acted against them unfairly. Some respondents expressed bitter feelings about their alleged experiences. Criticisms of senior management included:

- Failing to involve people to ensure a functioning university.
- Exercising power over trivial matters.
- Operating in perpetual crisis mode.
- Waste of time attending VC's 'town halls', which did not address important issues or answer key questions.
- Lack of assistance for some employees.
- Inaction over critical matters.

In analysing the supposed economic merit of the university's downsizing policy, this extract provided details that queried the wisdom of the strategy adopted:

The information given by very senior management last year now seems to be grossly incorrect, to the point you wonder if any of it was necessary at all. [AU's] net operating result for 2020 was [-$Xm], after paying

[$Ym] in redundancies, VERs and associated consultants. So, if they'd done nothing, they would have made a [$Zm] profit. For 2021 they are currently forecasting a profit of [$Wm]. Also confusing is the number of staff actually made redundant. Management said it [was] less than [xx] staff, but by the number of people I know who were affected and the work areas still in chaos, it seems so much more than that (R110 Redeployed)

Subtheme 3.2: Middle management

Middle management refers to group (faculty) level management, including pro-vice chancellors (PVCs), deans, and equivalent level managers. The organisational literature has revealed that historically 'middle management' have been squeezed – from above, and potentially from below, sometimes giving them an invidious hierarchical position between parties on both sides. All responses under this subtheme were critical of middle management. Comments referred, inter alia, to:

- Operating in a highly authoritarian manner.
- Feeling of being treated unjustly.
- Lack of consultation over actions.
- 'Politicking'.
- Dismantling innovative elements of a world-renowned educational program.

Illustrative extracts:

Feelings were only reinforced by how detached and stagnant management were. They identified the 'difficulties of the COVID-19 situation' and frequently commended staff and regurgitated the importance of well-being, while simultaneously loading staff up on unconscionable workloads with the threat of redundancies over people's heads. It was inhumane (R4 Contract ended)

Deans and others in more senior [roles] across [AU] took the crisis situation as a cue to operate in a highly authoritarian manner and continued in this mode over an extended period of time (R37 DoR)

I witness[ed] really poor leadership at PVC level in my faculty (R35 Job elsewhere)

Subtheme 3.3: Supervisory management

This level of management refers to a respondent's immediate superior, typically a head or deputy head of school/department/organisational unit or someone at deputy/director level.

3.3.1: Positive

The most positive comment made under this heading was:

My assistant director was very understanding regarding my decision to leave to commence a job with more security than [AU] could offer at the time (R68 Job elsewhere)

Other respondents who were generally positive about the role played by their immediate superior made comments that were typically ambiguous in describing this role, as illustrated by these two excerpts:

My supervisor and Head of School...were quite supportive of my continuing with my career – knowing that I had played a key role in the School leadership a few years earlier, but they did not make much attempt to dissuade me [from leaving] (R24 VER)

The executive at the School...have done their best to support staff, but, understandably, they have had to look out for themselves as positions and courses were lost (R101 VER)

3.3.2: Negative

Concerning accounts under this subtheme included bullying, and misinformation instances. Other negative comments referred to:

- Focus on administrative issues.
- Lack of support for academic staff.
- Lack of communication.
- No acknowledgement of an individual's hard work and efforts over an extended period.
- Hiding information about known organisational changes.
- Hostility, verbal abuse, denial, deceit, and lying.
- Targeting and forcing out staff.
- Telling staff members unpleasant details about other staff.
- Isolating staff members.

These extracts reflect negative reported experiences:

One bad manager is all it takes to ruin a great working relationship. Poison spreads rapidly in close knit areas. We went from a team to Everyman for themselves (R63 VR)

I don't understand the cruelty of the situation. I had no support from my line manager. In fact, he never even acknowledged the situation with me. From his obvious lack of empathy, I can only assume that he was instrumental in my demise (R72 'Surplus')

Subtheme 3.4: Human Resources (HR)

Although HR played a major role in managing AU staff redeployments and departures, this category received few comments.

3.4.1: Positive

Describing information and support provided by HR to be very helpful one respondent's positive comment was:

I found the support of those [AU] staff involved in the VER process exemplary. Information was accurate, easily accessible and advice and guidance professionally provided – without pressure (R102 VER)

3.4.2: Negative

Comments under this heading were typically very tersely worded, with HR being variously described as useless, unsupportive, and unhelpful. Other examples were:

The way...HR...communicated through the process was perfunctory and curt (R9 VER)

Tactics used by HR could only be described as despicable and totally non-professional (R61 'Surplus')

Subtheme 3.5: Colleagues

Respondents frequently mentioned colleagues, including the role/s that they played in respondents' experiences, as well as their feelings and attitudes towards colleagues. Social identity theory provides an explanatory framework for why social support from those in the same situation is so important for personal resilience, particularly in adversity – e.g., traumatic events, which may serve to 'define' a group within a structured social context rather than as stigmatised individuals (Muldoon et al., 2021).

3.5.1: Positive/sympathetic

Notwithstanding their current situation, some respondents expressed considerable support and concern for (ex-)colleagues, as these extracts illustrate:

I have heard anecdotal stories of key staff choosing to leave, and those who left without choice that make me sad (R60 Job elsewhere)

My colleagues were treated as casualties through this process...people who had invested their lives in working at [AU] were not given the same return investment by the University to get through the crisis (R78 Contract ended)

Some respondents reported that they maintained contact with ex-colleagues, typically expressing concern for the increased workloads that ex-colleagues faced due to reduced staffing, usually without any reduction in teaching, as illustrated by these excerpts:

> ***I feel genuine concern for my colleagues still at university and a small sense of guilt about having left them having to cover my load*** (R17 VER)

> ***Office staff...who have continued working during this period have become exhausted with doing the same amount of work with less than half the staff...I wonder when those left will feel considerable burnout*** (R44 Contract ended)

Some respondents commented about support received from colleagues, which these extracts illustrate:

> ***Close colleagues were so extremely kind and generous with their words of appreciation and good wishes for the future*** (R56 VER)

> ***My colleagues providing nothing but positive feedback about my work*** (R103 Contract ended)

3.5.2: Negative

The sole negative comment about colleagues concerned a respondent's reporting being bullied, ostracised, and digitally stalked by colleagues over a two-year period, which this respondent attributed to themselves incurring detrimental health issues, which links with Theme 6.

Subtheme 3.6: Students

Adverse impacts reportedly facing students resulting from staff losses included being left without supervision, disrupted learning, lack of continuity, and feeling abandoned by the University. Some respondents made more generalised comments about the impact on students' experiences, of which these were illustrative:

> ***I despair at what the experience will be like for current undergraduates*** (R28 VER)

> ***No consideration was given to the question 'what number of students is sustainable'*** (R12 Other reason)

Subtheme 3.7: Unions

Notwithstanding expectations that campus trade unions might have played an important role in the crisis, that this party received very few mentions indicated the reality was that unions played a comparatively small role in the unfolding crisis (extant legislation precluded unions from taking industrial action in defence of members' interests). From the few comments made on this topic, it seemed that there was a difference between the role played by the union representing academic and many professional staff – the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) and the (Together) union representing other staff.

3.7.1: Positive

One respondent commented positively on the help that they had been given by the NTEU in successfully negotiating a higher payout. Another commented that:

> ***The NTEU did a tremendous job in advocating for staff*** (R101 VER)

3.7.2: Negative

All negative comments made by respondents about a trade union did not specify the relevant union, nor whether they themselves were union members. Relatively low union membership density among AU staff might indicate that at least some who made these comments were not union members. Anecdotally, in at least one university, non-members complained that the union would not help them. It would be unreasonable for non-members to expect help from a union, which would constitute a form of 'freeloading'. As these comments were all made by professional staff it was unclear which union they referred to. One respondent drew attention to the potential conflict of interest when an employee's manager was in the same union:

> ***...leaving staff unprotected and vulnerable...the union wouldn't assist us because of the manager's position held in the union*** (R62 Other reason)

While another claimed that:

> ***The union was incredibly useless and unsupportive*** (R18 Other reason)

Subtheme 3.8: External parties

Three external parties identified by respondents were all consultants made available or brought in by AU: (1) a management/organisational consultant team that was supposed to assist with transitioning to a new structure; (2) an employment coach made available to assist the respondent with finding new employment; (3) a consultant intended to help with improving a respondent's resumé. While in the latter two cases the assistance was appreciated, none of these external parties rendered unequivocal assistance. In the case of the management consultant, the respondent's reported experience was extremely negative, as illustrated by this narrative excerpt:

> ***Their involvement seemed unorganised, without clear goals, and the consultants operated without oversight. One particular business consultant engaged in bullying behaviour including racist and homophobic or gendered/sexual comments towards staff, belittling remarks, group shaming, threats to end contracts and insidious gaslighting. This individual implied that this was part of approved method of restructuring management and supported by the head of department and implied that they could behave with impunity... Staff were asked to spend copious amounts of time preparing project documents that were never used afterwards, not useful, and not a part of any paid work or billed to any paid project. These were supposedly a part of 'business development' pursuits but no paid projects ever resulted from months of this work*** (R67 Contract ended)

Hiring external consultants has become common practice among large organisations. The decision whether to do so make it incumbent on managers to:

- Determine needs and objectives.
- Establish whether relevant expertise (e.g., for transitioning during change), may be available in-house – a 'make or buy' decision.
- Assess whether hiring consultants represents good value for money.

A further, potentially problematic, issue is the extent to which an organisation's responsibility is transferred to external parties that may not share the host organisation's values or culture, and the potential impact of such transference upon staff who are most affected.

Subtheme 3.9: Family

When people leave an organisation, family members are very likely to be impacted. Issues raised by respondents included the impact on a departing staff member's financial situation, decisions about family size, and an individual's responsibility in caring for a sick partner. More generally, one respondent wrote:

> ***All employers should be mindful that at any given time, any of us can have a lot of stuff going on in the rest of our lives in addition to work*** (R110 Redeployed)

Distribution of Theme 3 (Parties involved with respondents' leaving experience) subthemes among respondent groups

Predominant features were:

- All positive comments about senior (executive) management were made by respondents leaving either by VER or from those securing jobs elsewhere.
- Negative comments about senior management were split between six respondent groups – those leaving either because their contract ended, or because their position was deemed 'surplus' or for some other reason shared the greatest proportions.
- Comments on middle management were split between five respondent groups – heaviest weightings were from respondents whose contract ended, and from those who left for jobs elsewhere.
- Positive comments about supervisory management were primarily made by those leaving through VER.
- Negative comments about supervisory management were split between six respondent groups – those reporting leaving for 'other reason' were proportionately greatest.

- Those reporting leaving for 'other reason' made the greatest proportion of negative comments (>70 per cent) about HR.
- Positive comments about (ex-)colleagues were made by all respondent groups apart from those constituting the small retirement subsample – largest proportionate numbers were made by those leaving through VER and those whose contracts ended.
- Respondents leaving through VER made the greatest proportionate number of comments about students.
- Positive comments about the NTEU were split equally between VER and 'surplus' leavers. In some instances, the union referred to was indeterminate.
- All negative comments about unions were made by those leaving for 'other reason'.
- The small number of comments about external parties and family were each split equally between three groups.

Theme 4: Leaving/redeployment processes encountered

Subtheme 4.1: Top-down

The AU document ***Sustainability Pathway (SP)*** provided the official policy framework for staff departures and redeployments. Reference to SP and the processes it described were divided into positive and negative comments.

4.1.1: Positive

The sole positive comment was:

> ***The SP initiative was handled very professionally and communicated well*** (R79 Job elsewhere)

4.1.2: Negative

With SP being pivotal in the university's downsizing operation it is unsurprising that its implementation had significant impacts on some respondents, eight of whose narratives referred to SP. From their experiences of its effects, respondents' descriptions of the SP process included that it was: 'non-person centric', 'devious', 'polarising', 'evil', and 'frightening'. An illustrative excerpt was:

> ***How dare the university use sustainability as a euphemism for disrespectfully non-renewing many fixed term contracts and casual staff*** (R78 Contract ended)

Subtheme 4.2: Leaving experience

Reflecting the survey invitation, a substantial proportion of respondents' aggregate narrative material was coded under this heading. Comments coded here described respondents' leaving experiences more generally.

4.2.1: Positive

Respondents who reported positive leaving experiences – for example, events organised for them, demonstrate links with personal agency (Theme 5), illustrating how a staff member's leaving experience is likely to be critical to their sense of agency. One wrote:

> ***This 'period of grace' was vital to my sense of leaving employment in the way that I wanted, with a sense of agency*** (R111 VER)

More generically another wrote:

> ***My departure experience with [AU], was well informed, structured, and detailed. I was able to action all check-list requirements, prior to my departure date*** (R76 Job elsewhere)

4.2.2: Mixed

Leaving an organisation may have both positive and negative features. One respondent described their mixed leaving experience thus:

> ***I did not have a particularly good or bad experience...the administrative process associated with the VER was not problematic...I did wish that the scheme could be more flexible in terms of timing*** (R24 VER)

4.2.3: Negative

Respondents' descriptions of their negative leaving experiences – both in terms of number of accounts and aggregate words – considerably outnumbered positive and mixed leaving experiences. Some respondents referred to the absence of a traditional leaving function, including an AU policy restricting catering budgets for these events. Others rued the apparent lack of regard for their achievements and years of loyal AU service. Mention was made of pressure on respondents to make a quick decision on their departure terms, or not even being told that their employment was about to be terminated. Some claimed that they had been misinformed or misled about whether they would retain their job. The absence of an exit interview, even when requested by at least one respondent, was cited as a lost opportunity for AU to glean feedback about respondents' experiences. Respondents typically referred to the impersonal and formulaic nature of how they were told that their services were no longer required. One respondent maintained that their leaving experience included a breach of their privacy. Respondents' generic descriptions of their leaving experiences, and how these were handled included: 'appalling', 'cold', 'cruel', 'devoid of emotion', 'disappointing', 'frustrating', 'heartless', 'lacking empathy', 'let down', 'sad', 'shocking', 'stressful', 'unpleasant', and 'upsetting'.

Some illustrative extracts are below. The first of these was the shortest narrative received.

> ***Was shown the door after being forbidden to seek outside funding*** (R39 Contract ended)
>
> ***That's it. Just gone. No goodbye or anything*** (R43 'Surplus')
>
> ***My experience has permanently tarnished my views of [AU]*** (R18 Other reason)
>
> ***My last day...felt very much a formality with zero humanity attached to it*** (R49 VR)
>
> ***I honestly felt that no-one particularly cared that I was leaving*** (R65 Job elsewhere)
>
> ***My departure experience was extremely negative*** (R67 Contract ended)
>
> ***There are no words to describe what losing my job has meant to me*** (R72 'Surplus')
>
> ***The University had very poor systems for winding up employment arrangements*** (R78 Contract ended)
>
> ***I was no longer treated as an employee whose wellbeing mattered. I was a cost to the business that needed to be cut*** (R107 'Surplus')
>
> ***The way the whole process was handled was extremely poor and did not take into account staff financial needs or emotions*** (R82 'Surplus')
>
> ***There was no personal sentiment at all in the interaction. To say this felt like a 'kick in the guts' is an understatement...my termination was business-like at best. A standard (HR) spiel was read to me*** (R103 Contract ended)
>
> ***The process was handled in a negative way, placing so much emphasis on loss of jobs as opposed to working through innovations and development for the future*** (R92 Job elsewhere)
>
> ***I truly hope that University management and HR learn from this research and embed some of the recommendations into practice. There is much room for improvement judging by my departure experience!*** (R81 'Surplus')

4.2.4: Redeployment

Redeployment enables retention of employees who might otherwise be made redundant. It also avoids recruitment and selection expenses – which can be considerable in advertising, staff time, and relocation costs. Nevertheless, redeploying staff needs to be addressed in a way that makes sense for the individuals involved and the organisation. That AU redeployments enacted during this period might not have been as well thought out as they could have been, was illustrated by the single respondent who in describing their redeployment experience, reported several problematic features:

> ***I was then placed in a fixed term, backfill contract for ten months. It was obvious from the start the area didn't want me. I wasn't given any training, was given excessive pressure about things I couldn't reasonably know, wasn't included in group emails or social events, wasn't given the computer equipment I needed to do the job and was pressured if I had***

to take any leave. After one month I was told I wasn't suitable for their area and should look elsewhere...Even though I really wanted to stay at [AU], I had become resigned to the fact there was just no place for me anymore. I applied for one last job, mainly hoping to have at least one positive experience before I left. Fortunately, I received good feedback and ultimately was given the job. However, this is also a fixed-term contract, so I will have to go through this all again in a few months. The 11 months since being made redundant have been incredibly difficult for me (R110 Redeployed)

Distribution of Theme 4 (Leaving/redeployment processes encountered) subthemes among respondent groups

The small number of positive comments about ***SP*** were all made by respondents who left for jobs elsewhere, who also made the greatest proportion of negative comments about the SP process. This respondent group also reported the greatest proportion of comments about having a positive leaving experience. Negative leaving experiences were reported by all eight leaving groups (i.e., only those who were redeployed reported no such experience), with the largest proportions being reported by those whose position was deemed 'surplus' and those whose contract ended.

Theme 5: Personal agency

Personal agency refers to the degree of control expressed or implied in respondents' narratives. An initial reading of respondents' narratives clearly indicated that this was a critical aspect of their leaving or redeployment experience. Along with Theme 4, this theme was a prime component of the central arc defining the overall narrative. Some responses under this theme addressed the issue of what factors provide or attenuate personal agency when an organisation undergoes rapid and somewhat unpredictable change.

Subtheme 5.1: Opportunities elsewhere

Respondents described various alternative employment opportunities based on transferrable or additional skills, knowledge, or interests. A key feature of these narrative components was respondents taking an initiative to be proactive in seeking alternative employment, including three who reported obtaining employment at other universities. An impression of relief and renewed job satisfaction was evident in most comments here. Illustrative excerpts were:

I decided to find work in an industry that is not adversely affected by COVID-19 restrictions/limitations (R79 Job elsewhere)

I made the decision to leave [AU] to open my own tech start company (R92 Job elsewhere)

I feel valued. I feel needed. I have learnt that there is life beyond [AU] and in so many ways it is better (R107 'Surplus')

Subtheme 5.2: Personal determination/identity

This subtheme reflected respondents' determination to follow a path that was independent of what AU might otherwise have offered them. An emerging concept in the 1980s (McAdams, 2018), narrative identity comprises an internal evolving story that integrates a person's reconstructed past and imagined future to provide unity and purpose to their life. Those who construct life stories featuring themes of personal agency and exploration, were found to enjoy better mental health and wellbeing (McAdams & McLean, 2013).

Some respondents expressed appreciation for opportunities that AU had afforded them, and in some cases continued to do so, for example in emeritus/emerita or adjunct positions. A few respondents described a process that involved them seeking meaning in what had happened to them. It appeared that they had entered a category of employees who extract long-term benefit from what might have been an initial negative experience. Some refer to this ability as 'resilience'. Whether this is an individual trait, or a feature that is contingent on circumstances is moot. The third excerpt below indicates how this subtheme links with Theme 6. Illustrative extracts were:

I was in the fortunate position of leaving [AU] pretty much under my own steam (R102 VER)

I retained my office and laboratory space...I continue to enjoy my role as an academic in the school (R25 VR)

I have not for one moment regretted my decision to leave [AU]. My physical and mental health has improved significantly, and I have 'space' to think about my future (R101 VER)

Subtheme 5.3: Financial/other resources

5.3.1: Positive

Comments from these respondents indicated that financial comfort was a motivator in their decision making. One wrote:

The financial benefit of the VER conditions and the decision to leave was, ultimately, pretty much a 'no-brainer' (R102 VER)

5.3.2: Negative

Post-employment financial security was not guaranteed for all leavers, as this extract illustrates:

My financial situation is dire and am relying on minimal Centrelink payments which don't cover anywhere the needs of my mortgage and other bills and expenses (R58 'Surplus')

Subtheme 5.4: Reluctant leavers

Some respondents expressed conflicted feelings about leaving AU. Some narratives included short histories of respondents' achievements and disappointments during their years at AU, which was nevertheless perceived to be somewhere they felt comfortable and wished to remain attached to. A sense that respondents felt committed to their academic or other professional role was tinged with sadness at the way that it had ended. This subtheme reflects the importance of professional identity to many respondents' notion of self. For post-COVID-19 impacts on research, see Downham Moore (2022). A sense of grief or loss permeated some of these accounts. These excerpts illustrate some of these features:

When I was offered a package to 'retire' I was significantly conflicted... there are many things that I am no longer allowed to do (R25 VR)

I have absolutely no regrets but a lot of sadness about what has been lost at a university I used to love (R35 Job elsewhere)

It was with mixed feelings that I accepted a voluntary early retirement at the time. I wasn't really ready for retirement. However, I am so glad that I accepted the offer and [no] longer trying to manage the impossible! (R56 VER)

I felt sad at leaving [AU]...the University had obviously been a big part of my life and I had been very committed to my students and my colleagues and found research stimulating and enjoyable...I was looking forward to the year ahead which promised...exciting challenges but those quickly melted away with the onset of the pandemic...I was left to my own devices. The rhetoric of management care and concern rarely matched with my lived reality, and it was probably the most miserable period of my entire [AU] career (R97 VER)

Subtheme 5.5: Nostalgia

Some respondents' comments under this heading were interpreted as signifying that they sought some continuing association with AU. For others, expressed feelings of regret permeated some of their comments, particularly how AU had changed for the worse in their view. Some respondents expressed satisfaction and contentment about the time that they had spent at AU and what they had achieved there. These extracts illustrate this subtheme:

In many ways working at [AU] was the highlight of my career (R12 Other reason)

I have enduring happy memories of my time there and the real reason I left is because I could tell that it might not last (R27 VER)

I had a long and successful career alongside many great colleagues, and I did not want my career to be defined by its final year (R37 DoR)

I typically feel happy to be there but satisfied too not to any longer be an employee (R111 VER)

I am grateful for the opportunities that [AU] provided me with. I couldn't have wished for a better working life, but I am glad that I am not part of the institution it is becoming (R97 VER)

Distribution of Theme 5 (Personal agency) subthemes among respondent groups

Unsurprisingly, respondents who reported leaving for jobs elsewhere expressed the highest proportionate number of comments referring to opportunities elsewhere, while those leaving through VER made the greatest proportion of comments about personal determination and having adequate financial resources. VER departers also made the greatest proportion of comments suggesting a degree of reluctance in their departures and expressing some nostalgia about leaving.

Theme 6: Condition in/directly attributed to changed employment status

Comments coded under this theme were among the most difficult and challenging for me to read. I found some accounts disturbing.

Subtheme 6.1: Physical/mental health

Some respondents provided lengthy accounts of their physical/mental health condition that they either wholly or partly attributed to their leaving experience. Absence of personal data meant that it was not possible to test the finding by McLean et al. (2020) that individual differences in thematic and structural aspects of narratives predicted psychological wellbeing. Of three narrative factors, motivational and affective themes was most strongly associated with wellbeing. A few respondents with serious health conditions reported receiving no support from AU. While for some respondents the organisational changes allegedly either created or exacerbated mental and physical health issues, dealing with health impacts was outsourced. Staff who felt that their mental health was of concern were referred to an external counselling service, which was criticised as not being evaluated for its use or effectiveness.

Descriptions of how respondents portrayed their mental health status included: 'anxiety', and 'uncertainty'. Physical impacts included 'not sleeping'. Reported impacts on respondents' work included being: 'apathetic', 'disillusioned', 'stressful', 'struggling to stay motivated', 'unfulfilled', and 'very frustrated'. Illustrative extracts were:

> ***Executives...outlining how people were 'surplus to requirements'... was dehumanising, offensive, and rude to the physical and emotional labour that went into providing the services for the organisation that brought in the income*** (R4 Contract ended)
>
> ***My psychological state of mind is a complete mess and would probably provide enough material for a complete study outside the scope of this survey*** (R58 'Surplus')
>
> ***My depression comes in bouts and I try to work thru them. But I am no longer able to work now because I can't handle the stress of working with people like that*** (R62 Other reason)
>
> ***This experience with [AU] has left me void of all confidence and positive self-esteem. I still wake up in the middle of the night trying to piece the whole thing together. The trauma is real and constant*** (R72 'Surplus')
>
> ***I have PTSD as a result of my experience...and cannot visit an [AU] campus without feeling physically sick*** (R100 Contract ended)

Subtheme 6.2: Feelings/emotions

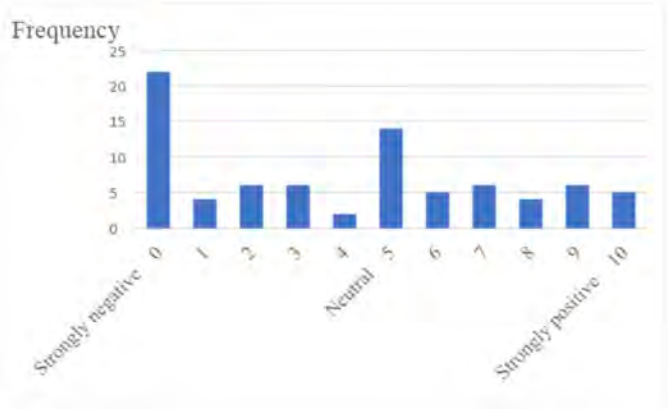
Feelings or emotions expressed in respondent accounts included: 'abandonment', 'anger', 'being undervalued', 'bitterness', 'demotivation', 'disappointment', 'disempowerment', 'embarrassment', 'frustration', 'heartbreak', 'hopelessness', 'rejection', and 'sadness'. Illustrative excerpts were:

> ***I was collateral damage from the situation the University found itself in*** (R5 Job elsewhere)
>
> ***As I write this, the tears are flowing again*** (R72 'Surplus')

Distribution of Theme 6 (Condition in/directly attributed to changed employment status) subthemes among respondent groups

Comments about their mental or physical health were made by members of all groups apart from those leaving through VR, with those reporting leaving for 'other reason' showing the largest share proportionately – probably because for at least some in those group, poor health had been a prime reason for leaving. Some feelings or emotions were reported by members of six of the nine leaving groups, with the greatest proportionate number reported by those whose contract ended, followed by those whose position was deemed 'surplus'. Glendon (2024) provides an extended analysis of this theme.

Figure 2: Overall rating of personal leaving/ redeployment experience



Further quantitative analyses

Respondents' narratives ranged between 11 and 2697 words (mean >300). The 77 narratives generated 298 thematically coded extracts (mean per respondent=3.87). The highest mean number (5.14) of excerpts was for the seven respondents who reported leaving for a reason not otherwise listed (health and domestic circumstances were provided examples). The second highest (5.00) was from VER leavers (n=14), while the lowest (2.40) was for the five respondents who retired, but not through VER, followed by those whose position was deemed 'surplus' (2.75, n=12). Differences between respondents' numbers cited here and those in Table 2 are because not all respondents provided narratives. The three highest aggregate sub-thematic extracts were for: Negative AU ethics/values/behaviours (n=22), Positive references to colleagues (n=21), and Negative leaving experience (n=20).

The final question invited respondents to rate their leaving/redeployment experience on an 11-point scale labelled at one end with '10 Strongly positive' and at the other with '0 Strongly negative'. The scale mid-point was labelled '5 Neutral' with intervening points labelled numerically. More than a quarter of respondents rated their experience as 'strongly negative'; just over six percent rated their leaving experience as 'strongly positive'. Mean rating was 4 (5 corresponded to a 'neutral' response). The most positive mean rating was from those retiring 'naturally' – i.e., not through VER. The most negative was from respondents whose position had been made redundant. Figure 2 shows the response distribution.

A strong theme permeated many respondent narratives, which was identified in the qualitative analysis as Theme 5. This theme was captured in the notion of agency – the extent to which respondents described having control over the events that occurred in respect of their departure/ redeployment. To test the validity of this theme, I separated the narratives from other survey responses and rated them for degree of personal agency on an 11-point scale (matching the survey scale inviting respondents to rate their overall leaving/ redeployment experience). The 11-point scale was anchored by '0 No agency', through '5 Medium agency – or cannot say', to '10 Very high agency', with intermediate points represented numerically. To test this concept more rigorously, two highly experienced psychologists, neither of whom was in the respondent sample, independently rated the 77 narratives without sight of other survey responses. There were strong associations between the three independent ratings, and with respondents' ratings of their personal leaving/redeployment experience.

This suggests that the extent to which respondents' narratives implied that they felt in control of their departure/redeployment experience was the main predictor of their degree of reported positivity/negativity with this experience. No straightforward association existed between leaving experience reported by respondents and their departure method. Of the 20 respondents who made comments representing a negative departure experience, five (of 12) had positions that were declared 'surplus' and five (of 12) reported that their contract had ended. Three (of 16) reported leaving

for a job elsewhere. At least one respondent from all leaving groups reported a negative leaving experience. Of the four respondents whose narrative included a positive leaving experience, three left for a job elsewhere; the other was a VER departure.

The complete 77 narratives were downloaded into NVivo (v20.5.1) under the nine departure/redeployment categories. Six themes were derived from a word-based sample, three of which closely matched those identified from the text-based analysis. One theme with no counterpart in the prior analysis included time-based words. This novel finding from the word-based thematic analysis, suggested the importance of time features – from days to years – in respondents' narratives that was not revealed from the text-based analysis.

Research implications

Data and analyses

This research is novel in that, to my knowledge, no study collecting and analysing narratives from employees leaving an organisation in large numbers within a short timeframe as an indirect result of a pandemic has hitherto been undertaken in a higher education context. An evident feature from very early in the analytic process was the key role that personal agency played in respondents' narratives, which was the core theme (Theme 5) of the analysis. An individual's control of their immediate environment features in many organisational theories. Derived from personal narratives, this outcome reinforces the salience of the personal agency construct, in this case during rapid organisational change. Implications include the importance of giving voice to individuals whose employment termination is imminent, particularly if they have not been involved in the process. It also speaks to areas of HR practice within an organisation – not just within the specialist HR function. The quantitative–qualitative survey allowed for both types of data analyses.

Relating to existing scholarship and research

As any study is unique within its data gathering and socio-political context, it is difficult to identify studies with which it can be directly compared. While informed commentary and personal experiences from academics about their circumstances are available (e.g., Hil, 2012), empirical studies are less common. Studies (e.g., Glendon, 1992) have revealed the problematic nature of 'voluntariness' when applied to 'voluntary redundancy'. Current study findings were consistent with those of Andrew (2020), who interviewed mid-career academics who had taken 'voluntary' redundancy from Australian and New Zealand universities. Andrew's respondents' narratives expressed ambiguity and severe misgivings about the 'voluntariness' of their decisions to the extent that they did not in reality perceive that they had the choices suggested in the 'voluntariness' label ascribed to their organisational departures.

Describing 'voluntariness' as a 'slippery concept' (p. 16), Andrew's analysis proceeded within a critical constructivist qualitative interpretive framework to create a metanarrative. His analysis presented six representative narratives as evidence for the problematic nature of his respondents' departure experiences within a 'voluntary redundancy' context. Adopting a deductive (theoretical ***a priori***) approach, Andrew (2020, p. 23) developed a latent thematic structure from the narratives, crystallising four dominant themes: 'sense of injustice', 'perceived fraudulent/deceitful behaviour', 'bullying/scapegoating', and 'loss of value/identity', with commodification of higher education as an overarching theme. Many features of Andrew's respondents' narratives resonated with those from the current study.

Method/methodology

The richness of data in most narratives, as well as total wordcount identified this as a successful data-gathering methodology, and one that future researchers seeking similar data might consider adopting. Data gathering occurred within a year of most respondents' leaving experience, thereby offering an opportunity for them to reflect on what had happened to them and to interpret their departure from a wider context within a relatively short timeframe. That the study was rapidly approved through managerial tiers was welcome, albeit unusual. Ethics approval was expeditiously granted without any required protocol amendments. Other researchers might not encounter such fortune in implementing comparable research methodology.

The topic was also clearly appropriate to this methodology, which did not seek demographic data beyond respondents' years of AU employment, prior employment, and present status. Respondents had the option of not supplying even this limited amount of personal information, although that nearly all did so, indicated that they did not feel threatened either by the survey nor by the person conducting it. No information was available about those who did not complete/return the survey.

Theory

While an inductive semantic approach is not designed to generate theory from data analyses, the thematic map developed from the analytic process led to a generic model of personal agency during organisational change (available on request). The personal agency model could be used either to: (1) retrospectively re-analyse previous research studies involving individuals embroiled in organisational change; (2) as a framework for prospective deductively oriented qualitative research on individuals experiencing organisational change, particularly substantial downsizing. The current study augments the substantial literature on the role of personal control (analogous with agency in this study) in organisational change, which is based substantively on quantitative (e.g., survey) data.

Generalisability

Braun and Clarke (2022) distinguished two types of generalisability:

1. Idiographic, analytical, and vertical: '...conceptual or theoretical... generates a new concept or theory that has relevance for subsequent research' (p. 144). A generic model of personal agency (not shown) was developed from this study's thematic mapping.
2. Naturalistic or representational: 'When the research resonates with the reader's experiences' (p. 144). Feedback on report drafts included some from study respondents, who elected to declare their identity to me, and who indicated that the report resonated with their leaving experiences, thereby providing some evidence that this type of generalisability had been met.

A related concept is ***transferability***: 'The notion that a qualitative data analysis potentially has relevance beyond the contexts and settings of a particular study and can be 'transferred' to other settings and contexts' (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 297). This may be revealed through referencing by researchers investigating downsizing and other organisational changes.

Study strengths and limitations

For a qualitative study, 77 responses with an aggregate of over 23,000 words represents a robust data set. Because each respondent crafted their own narrative no transcription was required, as 100 per cent fidelity for all narratives was ensured. Most themes were replicated, either in whole or in part, in a context independent word-based software analysis. The qualitative methodology was thereby demonstrated to be a successful means of data gathering. For qualitative research, response rates are generally immaterial as 'representativeness' does not align with this term's use in quantitative research. The nature of the survey, which was distributed almost simultaneously to all potential respondents, meant that more traditional ways of determining 'stop rules' for sampling (e.g., theoretical saturation) was unavailable.

While the qualitative component represented the key focus of the study, the survey method provided an opportunity to collect basic quantitative data. Response rates (40 per cent for redeployed respondents ~15 per cent+ for departed respondents) was typical of online survey returns. However, survey reach was limited by no contact details being available for many potential respondents and an unknown number of invitations being sent to staff who departed before the target period. While it might have been interesting to have obtained data on respondents' organisational location, for example to determine whether respondents from different departments/groups reported variability in treatment, respondent anonymity was deemed to be more important. The survey was designed to collect university-wide data. Anonymity of survey returns and excision of contact details soon after the surveys had been distributed meant that no reminders were possible. However, it is unlikely that reminders would have done little more than marginally boost the response rate.

The 11-point scale demonstrated that a wide range of responses to

respondents' lived experiences could be obtained. The parallel scale for rating degree of personal agency represented in respondents' narratives revealed the utility of this instrument as a way of comparing survey responses with independently sourced data. Either or both scales could be used in future research as a way of measuring experiences and facilitating comparisons.

Resource constraints precluded further methodological or data triangulation, for example a comparable survey of staff who retained employment, interviews with managers involved in the downsizing process, content analysis of relevant university documents. Important questions not addressed included: 1) long-term job loss consequences – for example, professional identity, potential long-term unemployment, and feelings/attitudes about subsequent employment, 2) distributed effects, particularly on respondents' close family members and social networks, 3) effective and ineffective coping strategies, and 4) effects on organisational 'survivors' and on the organisation's resultant culture.

Implications for practice

To provide a generic context for the study, it is widely acknowledged that managers tend to find that dealing with organisational downsizing is among their most extreme challenges.

Managerial behaviours

Although implications from study findings relate particularly to higher education management, they could apply to a broad spectrum of managerial practices in any organisation, as well as to media agencies when presenting organisational downsizing accounts, professional practice (e.g., trade unions, accreditation bodies), and counselling/therapy – specifically for those involved in assisting employees faced with actual or potential job loss. For managers in any organisation making downsizing decisions, fairness and democratic principles require identifying ways of including employees in decisions that affect their futures. Consultation should be genuinely participatory and democratic.

Line managers may have a prerogative in managing employee departures within their domain. There may be a fine line between such prerogative and bullying. One of Andrew's (2020, p. 19) respondents reported that he had been: 'Sent as a manager to training on bullying policy…I was taught how far you can push people before it's considered bullying…I had been effectively taught how to bully'. Consistency between principles espoused by senior management (e.g., 'bullying is totally unacceptable and will not be tolerated under any circumstances in this organisation'), may be so diluted by the time they reach the point of inflexion between first line management and employees or contractors, that they become a travesty of good intentions. Current study narratives indicated that bullying – at as least as perceived by some respondents – occurred despite senior management's, and the university's formally documented policy.

Critical issues for senior management to consider when addressing continuing degradation of staff's personal agency relate to structural features binding all operational levels within prescriptive policies and schedules. These include ***inter alia*** key performance indicators imposed on all levels of management, annual performance/development review processes, and teaching performance ratings – imposed on increasing staff workloads and performance expectations. Other important variables include organisational culture issues relating to staff morale, perceived fairness of treatment, and trust of management, policy, and process. A highly competitive environment for resources and an uncertain political climate, ensure that these issues are difficult to address. Regardless of context, management has choices, which have consequences not just for those who depart, but also for remaining 'change survivors'. In future years staff remaining might interpret management actions in ways that reflect how downsizing issues were addressed. In the longer-term, organisations that can enhance employee agency through mitigating the most harmful effects of structurally imposed barriers could reap benefits within their socio-economic environment.

One draft report reviewer made this observation: ***One also wonders at times whether middle management have the requisite people/leadership/business/organisational skills beyond their discipline skills? Of course, some similar comments can be made at the next level down (e.g., head of department).*** Given the importance of managerial skills within any organisation, and the undoubted impact that management behaviours had upon at least some respondents, it would be highly desirable for the organisation to review managerial appointments, as well as preparation and continuing training arrangements for all managers.

In terms of external assistance for staff exiting the organisation, it is crucial that a suitable process is established from the outset so that it does not become unduly 'transactional'. A key feature of this process as it was delivered in this case was to transfer responsibility for coping with organisational change to individuals most affected by it, rather than making it part of management's responsibility to address as a component of staff's leaving or redeployment experience. This links with the desirability of providing adequate managerial training to assist positively with employees' leaving/redeployments encounters.

Large organisations, including universities, have risk management functions. Business risks take several forms, which might include undue reliance on a small number of revenue sources. Many Australian universities place heavy reliance on an income stream of revealed fragility – in the current case as international student fees from a small number of countries. Universities might usefully review, at least annually, the wisdom and desirability of such weighted income. Risk management decision making aids include highly functional artificial intelligence systems, which might have been deployed to help address decisions made prior to, and during the COVID-19 pandemic, both for AU and within higher education. Undue reliance on international students might have been flagged some years prior. Longer-term optimal strategies, for example, retaining intellectual capital within the sector, could have been emphasised given the direct and non-direct importance of the university sector as a component of various socially important indicators – for example, feeder rates required to sustain various professions, and critical research required for national security and defence initiatives.

Systemic context

Given aggregate job losses from Australian higher education in 2020 and 2021 (Littleton & Stanford, 2021), proportions of staff departing other Australian universities during this period were comparable with those leaving AU (Larkins, 2022, nd). While policy and practice differences existed between Australian universities during this period, it is likely that leaving experiences across the sector were broadly comparable with those of AU respondents. Thus, study findings imply a wider societal narrative with at least these features:

(1) Lack of respect, understanding, and perceived long-term value for the university sector by the then coalition Australian federal government. This disregard, which was evident for many years prior to the COVID-19 events (e.g., Megalogenis, 2021), was manifested most evidently in 2020 by the deliberate exclusion of public sector university staff from the federal government's JobKeeper scheme, which saved many businesses from bankruptcy, while permitting retention of many billions (estimates range to AUD$20bn) by organisations that did not meet the clearly established criteria for revenue reduction, but were not required to return 'overpaid' amounts. Whatever they imparted by their verbalised statements, government actions indicated that federal coalition ministers and party members clearly held the Australian university sector in low regard, and their staff as expendable.

(2) Loss of a vast amount of valuable knowledge, experience, and skills – collectively from the most highly educated sector of the Australian economy.

(3) Bias against exploratory research in favour of a policy of seeking to 'pick winners' in a misguided effort to portray commercialisation as a more worthwhile goal than scientific discovery as a basis for building a strong society and a robust economy. For its income level, Australia is relatively lowly ranked for its degree of economic complexity – in 2021 93rd out of 130 global economies. This is primarily due to its heavy reliance on exports of iron ores/concentrates, coal, petroleum, gold, and tourism – all of which are highly vulnerable to projected downturns due to climate change impacts in coming decades. As the Visual Capitalist (2023) report on economic complexity noted: 'Australia's largest exports are in low complexity categories, such as minerals and agriculture. To compound matters, the country's economy is heavily linked to China's'. While commercialisation of research – as in traditional R&D – is important, predicting which exploratory research will bring future economic benefits is highly problematic. Ratios of up to $5

return for each $1 invested in basic university research have been identified.

The thematic associations map revealed that federal government actions impact higher education structure enhancing effects of organisational culture and how individuals within the system perform their roles, to health and career outcomes for individual staff. After nearly ten years in opposition, the massive combination of challenges the newly elected (May 2022) Labor federal government inherited included international threats to national security from geopolitical tensions and deficient defence capability, along with substantial environmental degradation accelerated by global climate change. Urgent domestic issues included expanding socio-economic inequalities, plus accelerating crises in health and education, exacerbated by a trillion-dollar budget deficit. The higher education sector can play a constructive role in addressing these threats. However, making positive contributions may require significant pivoting away from the current business model to a more systems-oriented stance, which considers higher education to be an investment for future national benefits.

The three-year federal electoral cycle is not conducive to addressing these long-term issues within the necessary timeframe, requiring bold decision making and forward planning. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed existing gaps in primary healthcare including rapidly developing employment shortfalls in general practice, nursing, aged care, mental healthcare provision, and childcare – exacerbated by ambiguities between federal and state funding models. School teachers leaving the profession and a depleted higher education sector add to the challenges. A revamp is required, based on a future investment model designed to meet projected national employment needs in areas exposed as weaknesses, and reduced reliance on overseas student fee income. A tentative start was made by the government's statement (July 2022) that it will review ministerial veto power for ARC-approved grants. Even if this veto power is removed, the low percentage of successful grants means that the review process is already highly wasteful of expert person hours.

As at organisational level, a risk management approach is required at federal level to ensure that higher education policy and practice is designed and adequately resourced to meet projected needs. An implication from current study findings is the importance of treating higher education as a precious resource and for governments to support it financially with genuine commitment, and distinct from petty politicking. While the higher education sector is highly competitive, a superordinate approach, for example based upon a systems methodology, might generate useful insights regarding fruitful links between universities and other societal system components beyond commercialisation. Systems methodology, which can take various forms, typically involves a system boundary, inter-related internal elements, and multiple external links.

Implications for individuals

Given the relatively short period over which impacts occurred in this case study, it was unsurprising that respondents provided few insights in respect of how they coped as individuals with changes that they encountered. Narratives were mainly passive to the extent that they reflected things that respondents reported were done to them and that were often perceived to be beyond their personal control. Notable exceptions were the 43 comments coded under three Theme 5 Personal agency subthemes (Opportunities elsewhere, Personal determination, Positive resources). Each person's unique situation makes it hard to generalise from these accounts, although respondents from all nine groups made at least one comment that was coded under one of these subthemes (in the case of respondents whose jobs were declared 'surplus' it was a single comment).

Petzer (2020) and Stevens (2022) noted that redundancies impact all employees, either as victims (leavers), survivors (position retainers), semi-survivors (redeployed), or redundancy envoys (senior managers, HR professionals). Stevens reported how the psychological contract is severely impacted when an employer removes employees' agency – threatening their psychological safety. Repairing the relationship may be extremely difficult. If employers treat redundancies mechanistically, emphasising targets over employees' wellbeing, dehumanising the process puts the latter's psychological safety at risk. Sources providing agenda features to 'humanise' redundancy processes include Cascio (1993), Clark (2020), Dobbins and Wilkinson (2020), Kets De Vries and Balazs (1997), Petzer (2020), and Wilkinson (2022).

Worthwhile studies would involve following up samples of staff leaving and those remaining after an elapsed period to identify the degree of success of various coping strategies. Impacts of university restructuring on downsizing 'survivors' are addressed by Owens et al. (2022). Personal 'survival' strategies might be implemented in real time or post hoc, for example to minimise cognitive dissonance. Surveying views and perceptions of those remaining within an organisation as a comparison sample, independently of staff engagement surveys, perhaps using a similar response format to that described here, could generate relevant case comparisons. For example, some staff remaining might report 'survivor guilt'; others might report regret at the absence of a VER/VR package option.

Concluding comments

Undertaking this project was challenging and rewarding. Support from colleagues was critical to its completion. More detailed information than can be provided in this article was extracted from the rich data. The comprehensive thematic analysis was broadly validated by a contextually independent word-based analysis using computerised qualitative data analysis software. Independent ratings of respondents' narratives provided some methodological triangulation. A key finding that respondents' reported degree of personal agency was the prime determinant of the extent and direction of their degree of reported positivity/negativity about their leaving experience has the potential to transmit a powerful message to managers addressing organisational downsizing.

The first study objective – giving voice to departing and redeployed AU staff – is met by the publication of this article and by Glendon (2024). The second objective – providing feedback to AU on these staff's reported experiences – was met by senior AU managers being invited to comment on early drafts of study findings, and by providing a copy of the report on which this paper is based to AU's VC.

While prior data patterns might have been predicted, for example degree of negativity expressed in respect of departure experience, being based upon reported departure reason, findings revealed nuanced and complex mixed experiences within and between leaving groups, as represented by the nine subsamples. These probably reflected diversity based on such unique individual circumstances as organisational role diversity, unit/departmental memberships, tenure, and academic/professional status. The most heavily weighted narrative subthemes, and respondent groups contributing to each were:

- Negative AU ethics/values/behaviours (29 per cent of narratives); eight of these 22 extracts were from respondents who left for a job elsewhere, four were from those whose position was declared 'surplus'; only the seven respondents who left either via VR or a DoR did not make comments coded under this subtheme.
- Positive comments about colleagues (27 per cent of narratives); the 21 extracts under this heading were proportionately greatest from those leaving via VER (n=5), respondents whose contract ended (n=5), and those who left for a job elsewhere (n=4); only those who retired 'naturally' did not make comments coded under this subtheme.
- Negative leaving experience (26 per cent of narratives); the 20 comments under this subtheme derived from all leaving groups, with those whose contract had ended (n=5), those whose position was declared 'surplus' (n=5), and those leaving for a job elsewhere (n=3) being most numerous.

Findings resonate with other studies of academic job losses. Threats may be particularly crucial for university staff's professional identity, (e.g., Andrew, 2020; Hall, 1968, 1971; Leckie & Rogers, 1995; Middlebook & Clarke, 1991; Norris, 2016), which is typically heavily invested in their work role. Adverse reported departure impacts were not confined to respondents whose jobs had been made compulsorily redundant, being expressed by respondents who left for most other reasons. As noted by Muldoon et al. (2021) while the powerful may remain ignorant of the effects of their behaviours, a social identity lens explains how the powerless are likely to remain cognisant of their traumatised status over an extended period. Support mechanisms were deemed problematic, with those encountered emphasising individuals' coping responsibility rather than corporate duty of care.

The important personal agency theme reflected degree of control expressed or implied in respondents' narratives over what happened to them during the target period. Independently assessed personal agency ratings were a strong predictor of respondents' direction and strength of valence – degree of positivity/negativity – in rating their leaving/redeployment experience.

Reflexive overview: Context, content, process

The four sections of this reflexive overview are: (1) ***Personal journeys*** – summarises three trajectories of respondents who provided leaving experiences narratives; (2) ***Potential actions for key stakeholders*** – reflects on relations with ten parties mentioned by respondents; (3) ***Process evaluation*** – reviews outcomes that were helpful and those that could have been improved; (4) ***Legacy*** – considers issues that might be addressed in future.

Draft report readers asked whether findings would generate recommendations, which are expected from consultancies (which this was not) and might arise from applied research (which this was). An important caveat is that findings relied almost exclusively on an online survey, augmented by AU documentation, independent raters' expertise, and my prior experience. One respondent who returned a survey with no narrative indicated that they considered that the terms under which they departed AU precluded them from completing an anonymous survey about their experiences, possibly signifying at least how some departures were handled. Others were much less recondite in describing their leaving experiences. We do not know about non-responders' experiences. From this evidence, topics outlined below might be issues for discussion/consideration.

Personal journeys

The qualitative analysis did not differentiate respondents' leaving categories beyond those pre-coded by the response format. Based on aggregate comments illustrating common exit experiences, a more global analysis identified three respondent clusters.

1. ***Contented.*** For these staff, leaving AU was timely and they could exercise agency, either because they were about to retire, or had imminent opportunities elsewhere, or were on the verge of departing for some other reason. They were typically financially secure, and some had achieved high career status within AU over an extended period. Their leaving experiences were mainly positive.
2. ***Ambivalent.*** These staff expressed some reluctance in departing AU, in some cases because they had wished to continue longer in employment or felt pressure to depart to allow colleagues facing less favourable circumstances to stay or were tired of the organisational context. Able to exercise limited agency, their leaving experiences were typically mixed.
3. ***Distressed.*** These staff experienced leaving AU as an unpleasant shock – for example, because their positions (and via professional identity by implication themselves) were declared 'surplus to requirements' (i.e., made redundant), or because a contract expected to be extended was terminated or because they were pressured to accept a 'voluntary' exit package. They could exercise very limited/no agency; some were financially insecure. Their leaving experiences were likely to be strongly negative.

Possible conversation topics: Is there an 'ideal' ratio between these three clusters: a) among leavers, and b) among remaining staff? If so, what is it? Can a university do anything to change this ratio? If so, should it do so?

Potential actions for key stakeholders

Universities forged their own paths in addressing the COVID-19 crisis. Peetz et al. (2022) described the extent to which some Australian universities consulted or negotiated with unions about job losses. Playing some role in their departure/redeployment experience, respondents' narratives spontaneously identified ten parties, considered below. In preparing these comments reference was made to thematic analysis of the full narrative transcripts.

1. ***Senior management.*** Driving the downsizing process, senior management had the greatest influence on how the university responded to the COVID-induced crisis. The process was deemed an opportunity to restructure and reduce staff numbers. Among Owens et al.'s (2022) reported Australian universities' reactions to COVID-19 was to use this as an opportunity to 'restructure' as a cover for downsizing and imposing redundancies. In terms of AU departures, the most predictable route was via the SP document, which detailed retained and redundant positions, providing financial and other justification for decisions. Its sanitised perspective legitimised decisions while its authors – apart from the VC – remained anonymous. Decision makers were effectively isolated from impacts of their decisions on individuals. Less predictable departure numbers resulted from designated schemes (VR/VER) as well as contract non-renewal and 'natural wastage'. While hindsight provides information that might not have been available during the initial decision-making phase, an unpredicted outcome of the departure process was that eventual departure numbers exceeded those initially deemed financially necessary. Reflections might include whether an alternative route to downsizing could have been selected, for example based on 'voluntary' departure schemes, and whether the crisis required action on the projected timescale.
2. ***Middle management.*** With all respondent comments about this management level (PVCs, deans, etc.) being negative perhaps being caught between the Scylla of senior management dictates and the Charybdis of witnessing impacts on people within their managerial domain (to be 'between Scylla and Charybdis' means to be caught 'between a rock and a hard place', or between two equally unappealing dangers or prospects), may have generated an inclination to operate in alignment with the former. Rationalisations might include that short-term pain for some staff might be mitigated by longer-term success of the university in terms of prestige for example. In the absence of further evidence these possibilities are speculative.
3. ***Supervisory management.*** While respondents provided a few positive comments about this management level (department head or equivalent), these were outweighed by experiences characterised by multiple negative comments. Being departmental head can be difficult. Lack of management training means that one may be unprepared for dealing with people whose immediate wellbeing or careers may pivot on your decisions. Optional 360-degree appraisals might be considered a cost-effective way to improve effectiveness in this role. Survey responses suggest that more thorough grounding in people management might be appropriate for staff at this management level.
4. ***Human Resources (HR).*** Although some positive comments were made about HR, these were outweighed by experiences reported as being negative. HR had to address fallout impacting individual staff from senior management decisions. The large number of people leaving within a much shorter timespan than typical would create a highly pressurised environment such that HR probably operated in 'crisis mode'. This might have precluded finding opportunities to learn more about departing staff's experiences during this period. A suggestion provided by a few respondents was that an exit interview – a long-established HR practice – could have helped to determine leavers' experiences of the departure process with a view to the university benefitting from such feedback perhaps to address wider issues within the university.
5. ***Colleagues.*** While the notion of collegiality within HE institutions might seem to be an anachronistic referral to past academic environments, the number and strength of positive respondents' comments about past and present colleagues were a bright note within otherwise gloomy narratives. It seems that despite decades of academic capitalism and HE institutions' prestige-seeking orientation (e.g., Slaughter & Leslie, 1997) responses indicated that collegiality is alive and particularly relevant during crises. This suggests that despite inevitable competition between individual staff, AU's collegiality could provide a robust route to organisational strength. Consideration could be given to how this feature could be fostered to create a strong and resilient university.
6. ***Students.*** Contemporary HE students are paying customers and perceive themselves as such. A challenge for universities is providing

a good education despite resource uncertainty. Face-to-face lectures are largely replaced by online delivery, while challenges to the student essay include software that can write essays instantly on demand. This may result in extinction of the traditional essay, which could be an opportunity for staff to exchange weary unfulfilling hours essay marking with more hands-on project-based learning – to enhanced satisfaction and learning of students and academics.

7. ***Unions.*** While the NTEU attempted to confront redundancies – for example seeking to recruit members and improve engagement through meetings and increased communication, it had to fight on many fronts across higher education. Three factors limiting union scope for effectively opposing redundancies were low staff membership and engagement, a legacy of anti-union legislation, and precarity of academic tenure. While AU followed required consultation protocols there was no detectable impact on staff departures. Default willingness of many staff to 'free ride' on colleagues' union contributions contrasted with the collegiality described in several narratives.
8. ***External.*** No positive comments were made about external parties. Consultants sell to higher education institutions, including one-on-one counselling and staff engagement surveys with fancy output. Consultants don't have a stake in the university except insofar as it may impact on their own business. External consultants were engaged for SP. When seeking information or feedback on important matters consideration might be given to greater accessing in-house expertise rather than relying so much on external consultants.
9. ***Family.*** An employee's redundancy is likely to greatly impact close family members, who may be subject to associated strain, psychological distress, and deteriorating mental health (Bubonya et al., 2017; Donovan et al., 1987; Marcus, 2013; Mendolia, 2014). They are typically the first support crew for those impacted by job loss (Ragland-Sullivan & Barglow, 1981). Effects on family members may persist after redundancy. Long-term effects on family members in this study are not known, but some might be extreme. At another university after accepting voluntary redundancy, one ex-colleague committed suicide. A staff member departing another university under similar circumstances reported suffering post-traumatic stress disorder for nearly two years.
10. ***Federal government.*** The above parties' contributions to COVID-induced crisis effects were overshadowed by the role of the then coalition federal government. The government engineered an unnecessary funding crisis in higher education, from which funds allocated elsewhere (~$20bn to 'undeserving' companies) could have been directed to preserving this component of Australia's precious intellectual capital. Australia requires strong intellectual foundations to compete effectively in a strife-ridden world in which among multiple issues, climate change must be urgently addressed. Squandering intellectual capital to satisfy a petulant animosity towards higher education is inexcusable (e.g., Moodie, 2020). An essential continuing task for the Australian higher education sector is to establish sound working relationships with federal governments to ensure that communication remains sufficiently robust that, both in normal operating mode, and when future crises arise, government response towards universities will be positive.

Process evaluation

What was helpful? Regular updates via 'town halls' were appreciated by some, and the 'softer' face of the university represented by the VC was considered a positive by some respondents. The VC accepted ultimate responsibility for the process and its outcomes. Some respondents reported that they had been treated well during their departure phase.

What could be improved? 'Hard' HR practice was represented by the mechanistic way in which SP was compiled, which lacked transparency. Many respondents felt that they had been treated with varying degrees of unfairness, duplicity, and inconsiderateness; some were extremely upset about their departure experiences. Some perceived that their selection for redundancy was discriminatory. Apart from benchmarking surveys, the extent to which university policies (e.g., on discrimination and bullying) are implemented merits close monitoring. More deliberate decision-making based on projected risk assessment might be more appropriate than moving early to 'crisis mode'. Consultation should be genuine.

Legacy

Memories about how they saw colleagues being treated and residual feelings about the process held by staff surviving organisational change, such as downsizing, may persist long after the change process has 'settled down'. Associated challenges might include:

1. ***Trust.*** To what extent was trust between management and staff eroded? What strategies might effectively recover and enhance trust?
2. ***Management tiers.*** While hierarchy is the typical organisational structure, to what extent does the university require exclusive top-down management? What impacts may be predicted from a large distance between decision makers and those affected by their decisions? What might, with benefit, be decentralised?
3. ***Recognition.*** Recognise the importance of work for the personal identity of academic and professional staff. Acknowledge the importance of personal agency – both for those remaining ('survivor syndrome' is a recognised feature of staff who remain after downsizing) and for those departing. What implications flow from such recognition?
4. ***Lack of agency.*** This can contribute to unhealthy stress, unmanageable workloads, and degraded mental health. This is not the sole preserve of the HR function but could be a priority for the whole university. How can staff agency be enhanced to benefit the university?
5. ***Duty of care.*** Many documents detail what employees can/can't do. How might codes of practice make managers' duty of care processes and practices more transparent?
6. ***Risk.*** From their internal and external environment, universities face speculative risks. While financial risk may be pre-eminent, others include labour market, reputation, and prestige. Are such risk management processes sufficiently robust and influential?
7. ***Maintain contact.*** For survey distribution, no email address was available for one-third of recently departed staff. What benefits might accrue if staff are provided with an opportunity to maintain contact with the university after leaving?
8. ***Consultation.*** What forums/mechanisms might be available for widespread staff consultation beyond traditional committees? How might staff be motivated to engage in such processes? How might consistent values and behaviours throughout the university be ensured?
9. ***Role of unions.*** How can the university engage more effectively with unions. For university staff Peetz et al. (2022) found that expected job loss stress was inversely associated with the extent of union involvement in decision making. What is the potential for expanding this channel for enhanced representation throughout the university?
10. ***Evidence of consistency.*** While (to my knowledge) those departing AU during 2020-2021 did not lodge claims or complaints against the University, a useful exercise would be to determine whether respondents' narratives comply with all aspects of official University documents.

The author is a retired academic who has been associated with several universities. Contact: aglen898@gmail.com

References

Andrew, M. (2020). Behind voluntary redundancy in universities: The stories behind the story. Australian Universities' Review, 62(2), 14–24. https://doi.org/10.3316/informit.398447476011801

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2022). *Thematic analysis: A practical guide.* Sage.

Bubonya, M., Cobb-Clark, D. A., & Wooden, M. (2017). Job loss and the mental health of spouses and adolescent children. *IZA Journal of Labor Economics,* 6(6), 1–27. https://doi.org/10.1186/s40172-017-0056-1

Cascio, W. F. (1993). Downsizing: What do we know? What have we learned? *Academy of Management Executive,* 7(1), 95–104. https://doi.org/10.5465/ame.1993.9409142062

Clark, T. R. (2020). *The 4 stages of psychological safety: Defining the path to inclusion and innovation.* Berrett-Koehler.

Dobbins, T., & Wilkinson, A. (2020). Downsizing. In A. Wilkinson, T. Dundon, & T. Redman (eds.), *Contemporary human resource management* (6th edn). Pearson.

Donovan, R., Jaffe, N., & Pirie, V. M. (1987). Unemployment among low-income women: An exploratory study. *Social Work,* 32(4), 301–305. https://doi.org/10.1093/sw/32.4.301

Downham Moore, A. M. (2022). COVID-19 disruption to research and research training in Australia: Gender and career-stage inequalities. *Australian Universities' Review,* 64(2), 15–26.

Glendon, A. I. (1992). Radical change within a British University. In D-M. Hosking & N. Anderson (Eds.), *Organisational change and innovation: Psychological perspectives and practices in Europe* (pp. 49–70). Routledge.

Glendon, A. I. (2024). Adverse health experiences narrated by university staff leaving during the COVID-19 pandemic. In M. S. Edwards, A. J. Martin, N. M. Ashkanasy, & L. E. Cox (Eds), *Handbook of academic mental health.* Edward Elgar.

Hall, D. T. (1968). Identity changes during an academic role transition. *School Review*, 76(4), 445–469. http://www.jstor.org/stable/1084456

Hall, D. T. (1971). A theoretical model of career subidentity development in organizational settings. *Organizational Behavior and Human Performance*, 6(1), 50–76. https://doi.org/10.1016/0030-5073(71)90005-5

Hil, R. (2012). *Whackademia: An insider's account of the troubled university.* Newsouth.

Kets De Vries, M. F. R, & Balazs, K. (1997). The downside of downsizing. *Human Relations*, 50(1), 11–50. https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1016901315958

Koziol, M. (2018). *Former education minister vetoed $4.2 million in recommended university research grants.* Sydney Morning Herald, October 26, 2018. Retrieved from https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/former-education-minister-vetoed-4-2-million-in-recommended-university-research-grants-20181026-p50c3a.html

Larkins, F. (2022). *Fifteen Australian universities exceed ten percent staff losses from 2019 to 2021*, Published 22 March 2022, The hardest COVID cuts to staff (campusmorningmail.com.au). Retrieved from https://franklarkins.files.wordpress.com/2022/02/cmm-23-stats-show-uni-job-losses-lower-than-reported.docx

Larkins, F. (n.d.). *Australian university staff job losses exceed pandemic financial outcomes.* University of Melbourne.

Leckie, G. J., & Rogers, B. (1995). Reactions of academic librarians to job loss through downsizing: An exploratory study. *College & Research Libraries News*, 56(2), 144–156. https://doi.org/10.5860/crl_56_02_144

Littleton, E., & Stanford, J. (2021). *An avoidable catastrophe: Pandemic job losses in higher education and their consequences*. The Australia Institute.

Marcus, J. (2013) The effect of unemployment on the mental health of spouses—Evidence from plant closures in Germany. *Journal of Health Economics*, 32(3), 546–558. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jhealeco.2013.02.004

McAdams, D. P. (2018). Narrative identity: What is it? What does it do? How do you measure it? *Imagination, Cognition and Personality*, 37(3), 359–372. https://doi.org/10.1177/0276236618756704

McAdams, D. P., & McLean, K. C. (2013). Narrative identity. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 22(3), 233–238. https://doi.org/10.1177/0963721413475622

McLean, K. C., Syed, M., Pasupathi, M., Adler, J. M., Dunlop, W. L., Drustrup, D., Fivush, R., Graci, M. E., Lilgendahl, J. P., Lodi-Smith, J., McAdams, D. P., & McCoy, T. P. (2020). The empirical structure of narrative identity: The initial Big Three. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 119(4), 920–944. https://doi.org/10.1037/pspp0000247

Megalogenis, G. (2021). *Exit strategy: Politics after the pandemic.* (Quarterly Essay 82). Morry Schwartz.

Mendolia, S. (2014). The impact of husband's job loss on partners' mental health. *Review of Economics of the Household,* 12, 277–294. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11150-012-9149-6

Middlebook, S., & Clarke, E. (1991). Emotional trauma of job loss: How to interact and cope with laid-off employees in distress. *Employee Assistance Quarterly,* 7(2), 63–65. https://doi.org/10.1300/J022v07n02_04

Moodie, G. (2020). Why is the Australian government letting universities suffer? *The Conversation* (May 19). (https://theconversation.com/why-is-the-australian-governmentletting-universities-suffer-138514)

Muldoon, O. T., Lowe, R. D., Jetten, J., Cruwys, T., & Haslam, S. A. (2021). Personal and political: Post-traumatic stress through the lens of social identity, power, and politics. *Political Psychology*, 42(3), 501–533. https://doi.org/10.1111/pops.12709

Norris, D. R. (2016). *Job loss, identity, and mental health.* Rutgers University Press.

Owens, A., Loomes, S., Kearns, M., & Mahoney, P. (2022). Restructures, redundancies, and workforce downsizing: Implications for Australian higher education sector post COVID-19. *Australian Universities' Review,* 64(2), 7–14.

Peetz, D., O'Brady, S., Weststar, J., Coles, A., Baird, M., Cooper, R., Charlesworth, S., Pyman, A., Ressia, S., Strachan, G., & Troup, C. (2022). Control and insecurity in Australian and Canadian universities during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Relations Industrielles / Industrial Relations,* 77(2). https://doi.org/10.7202/1091588ar

Petzer, M. (2020). *How to limit 'the sinking ship syndrome' during redundancies* (#cipdThoughtLab). Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development.

Ragland-Sullivan, E., & Barglow, P. (1981). Job loss: Psychological response of university faculty. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 52(1), 45–66. https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.1981.11780114

Richards, A. (2021). Renewable teaching and learning: Untangling the role of the Australian university. *Australian Universities' Review*, 63(2), 22–34. https://doi.org/10.3316/informit.082370698368820

Roffee, J., & Kimberley, N. (2022). Coronavirus and the crisis of higher education: Post-pandemic universities. *Australian Universities' Review*, 64(1), 3–5. https://doi.org/10.3316/informit.485793159080108

Slaughter, S., & Leslie, L. L. (1997). *Academic capitalism: Politics, policies, and the entrepreneurial university*. Johns Hopkins University Press.

Spector, P. E., Rogelberg, S. G., Ryan, A. M., Schmitt, N., & Zedeck, S. (2014). Moving the pendulum back to the middle: Reflections on and introduction to the inductive research. *Journal of Business and Psychology*, 29, 499–502. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10869-014-9372-7

Stevens, M. (2022). *Strategic redundancy implementation: Re-focus, re-organise and re-build.* Routledge.

Visual Capitalist. (2023). Countries ranked by their economic complexity. Retrieved from https://www.visualcapitalist.com/countries-ranked-by-their-economic-complexity/)

Wilkinson, A. (2022). Saying goodbye? Downsizing – are human resources assets or liabilities? In A. Wilkinson, *Human resource management: A very short introduction* (pp. 83–97). Oxford University Press.