Squeezing In: A Case Study of Australian Academic Workloads in the Discipline of English

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Australian academics are being squeezed from all sides, facing ever-intensifying bureaucratic expectations around research output, coupled with increased teaching commitments and mounting administrative duties. These demands are occurring in an environment where most academics are still employed under traditional arrangements whereby, notionally, 40 per cent of their workload is allocated to research, 40 per cent to teaching and the final 20 per cent to service or administration. Such figures are no longer – and perhaps never were – a realistic representation of average workloads. This paper discusses how Australian academics in the discipline of English have been working within and around the 40/40/20 model, as well as the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their workload. Discussion here is built on interviews with English academics, but the same concerns are applicable across the tertiary sector because employment conditions tend to be standardised at the institutional level rather than at a disciplinary level.

Background to Our Study

In 2021–22 the Australian University Heads of English (AUHE), a peak body for the discipline, commissioned a study about the use and impact of journal rankings. As part of this project, an online questionnaire was purposively distributed to English staff at all Australian universities, asking if respondents were familiar with journal rankings, if and how they had been impacted by those systems, what factor/s influenced their choice of journal when publishing articles, and any workplace changes they had experienced as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is important to note that these conversations occurred in the context of the 2020 Job-Ready Graduates package which saw huge increases in fees for Humanities subjects, as well as the ministerial vetoing of Humanities projects in the 2021 round of the Australian Research Council (ARC) grants. While the study did not explicitly address these issues, some respondents unsurprisingly touched on them. We received 68 responses to the questionnaire, across all teaching levels and institution types, then conducted follow-up interviews with 23 respondents to ask more specific questions about publication decisions and institutional policies around research outputs.

Table 1: Breakup of demographics of the questionnaire (n = 68) and interview (n = 23) participants.

	Questionnaire Respondents (%)	Interview Participants (%)
Institution Type		
Group of 8	44%	52%
Aust. Technology Network	6%	4%
Innovative Research Universities	10%	18%
New Generation	7%	0%
Other	32%	26%
Teaching Level		
Professor or A/Professor	34%	31%
Lecturer or Senior Lecturer	56%	56%
Other	10%	13%
Gender		
Female	60%	57%
Male	31%	43%
Other	1%	0%
Prefer Not to Say	7%	0%

The questionnaire and interview protocol were both designed to capture information about workloads in addition to standard demographic questions (gender, position, university type). This initial interest in workload was based on prior research and anecdotal evidence that demonstrates positions and research/teaching allocations influence the extent to which academics are impacted by publication pressures, including journal rankings. Our findings about journal rankings have been reported elsewhere (Nolan, Mrva-Montoya & Ward, 2023; Mrva-Montoya, Nolan & Ward, 2024). At the same time, another story clearly and strongly emerged from the responses: the problematic nature of academic workloads, especially in the context of changes occurring amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. Most of our respondents spoke about being employed under a 40/40/20 model, even though they pointed out that long-held norm was an inaccurate and even unrealistic representation. Many explained how they were working well beyond their contracted hours in a desperate effort to fulfil even a semblance of that expectation, with research being squeezed into their evenings and weekends. These comments and concerns reflect the state of affairs for Australian academics well beyond the discipline of English.

The "Golden Rule" of 40/40/20

The scope of academic work is generally ill-defined. In fact, as Julia Miller (2019) asserts, the definition of 'academic workload' is deliberately vague to allow for flexibility and autonomy, but unfortunately this comes with the potential for misuse as 'accompanying activities are steadily but imperceptibly extended'. Existing alongside this vague definition, and often contradicting it, is a relatively rigid workload model. Almost half of the academics who responded to our questionnaire were contracted under a traditional 40/40/20 arrangement (47 per cent). A further 15 per cent operated under minor variants where each component was within +/− 10 per cent of the standard. There were some exceptions. Some respondents were teaching-focused (12 per cent of respondents), research-focused (7 per cent) or service-focused (3 per cent) where 80–100 per cent of their workload was allocated to these respective tasks. The remainder (15 per cent) had irregular allocations, including 20/70/10, 30/20/50 and even 38/52/10.

In general, though, 40/40/20 was commonplace for our respondents, one of whom described it as the 'golden rule' of academia. The model is even actively defended, as demonstrated by recent protests at the University of Sydney to protect against proposed increases to the default teaching allocation (see, for example, Harris, 2023; Espejo, 2021; and NTEU, 2023a). This is an aspiration for staff at Australian universities across all disciplines, though many institutions do not have this model explicitly codified in enterprise agreements or in practice (Second Interim Report, 2021).

Despite this propensity for 40/40/20, our participants largely agreed that the model was not a true reflection of their weekly workloads. Participants repeatedly told us that no academic they knew consistently spent 40 per cent of their time on research, 40 per cent on teaching and 20 per cent on service. This is partly due to natural ebbs and flows throughout the year as during teaching semesters there is, as one participant asserted, 'no chance to do anything else'. The accuracy of the model also depends on career stage, with one participant reflecting: 'at different stages of your career, you are called on to do different kinds of things'.

For most participants, the only way that 40/40/20 came close to representing their average workloads was if they consistently exceeded the standard 37.5 or 40 hours of work per week. This extended to participants who were employed under alternative workload models but seemed particularly pronounced under 40/40/20. Four participants, all working under 40/40/20 models at four different universities located in four different states or territories, reflected:

> ***[40/40/20] probably is realistic, but I don't sleep much. When I am working within the nine to five bounds, then I don't think it would be a true reflection.***
>
> ***It's beyond the 37 and a half hours that our position descriptions say that we do, and there's no way around that in order to have the outcomes that you're aiming for … If we all did 37.5 hours a week as we are being paid for, then so many things would just not get done.***
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> ***There should be some kind of acknowledgement that a lot of people are working weekends … I think there should be acknowledgement what you could do with the 40/40/20 is not what you see people doing with a 40/40/20 because they use their weekends to produce more articles or more books. People who do try to stick to their working hours are probably at a bit of a disadvantage because they're not producing as much.***
>
> ***Some of the people at my university who are just working 40 hours, then research disappears altogether for them.***

Such findings echo past studies of workloads in Australian universities done over the past two decades. A 2006 study of 27 Australian academics at eight universities concluded they were often working 50–60 hours per week and frequently experienced burnout (Anderson, 2006). In 2008, a report on the large-scale 'Australian University Stress Study', commissioned by the Australian Research Council with support from the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) and universities, condemned 'deteriorating working conditions' (Winefield et al., 2008). The study found that since the mid-1970s universities increasingly focused on profit, leading to competition and, consequently, to greater workloads, significant stress levels and job insecurity for academic staff. That study also found 'psychological strain was highest in junior academics … particularly those working in Humanities and Social Sciences'. In 2009, Coates et al. found senior Australian academics worked an average of 50 hours per week, which was 'among the highest of any group internationally'. A different study of 13 countries including Australia concluded that university lecturers worked about 47 hours per week (Bentley & Kyvik, 2012). A 2017 survey of 2,059 Australian academics reported 90 per cent of respondents felt 37.5 hours was insufficient to complete the work, with the average work week exceeding 50 hours (Kenny & Fluck, 2017). Unfortunately, it seems, little has changed despite union action in response to these consistent findings.

Regardless of which workload model they were employed under, our participants broadly reported that teaching commitments were hard to minimise or control and, frequently, were overwhelming. The above-mentioned 2017 survey found that, on average, it took academics 96 hours to plan a new unit, 8–10 hours to prepare a lecture or tutorial, and 1 hour per student for assessment feedback, with additional time for student consultation, moderating assessments, and preparing other content/classes (Kenny & Fluck, 2017). Since then teaching demands have further increased, partly in line with government policies and recent events (discussed in the next section).

Some of our respondents commented that it was a 'privilege' to be away from teaching or that those in senior management positions were 'fortunate' not to have to teach. This was not necessarily because teaching was seen to be inferior, as is often the assumption given the institutional prioritisation of research. Our participants, in general, noted that they enjoyed the teaching and that they firmly believe the best researchers are the ones who are also regularly in front of students. One respondent, for example, noted that 'the best teaching is done by people who are working in that area,' and that 'you have to create new work in order to teach'. Instead, then, the comments seem to be driven by an awareness that time away from teaching made it possible to conduct research or, more importantly, allowed some work–life balance. Although these are broad concerns, English academics work in a context where sole-authored monographs are prized, making research output inevitably slower than in disciplines that value multi-authored articles.

Many respondents were also frustrated with the ever-expanding amount of time that administrative tasks consumed. They described this aspect of their responsibilities as having 'spiralled out of control' and as interfering with their capacity to do the 'actual' work. One participant reflected:

> ***The processes [and learning management systems] are so administrative heavy and unnecessarily clerical. We used to have passionate engagement with material that we shared with the students and then assessed them on their learning and spent time marking, and now there's just so much policy discussion and meetings.***

Other respondents had service roles that far extended what their workload allocations suggested. This view was most common amongst senior academics who held positions within disciplinary associations or on the editorial boards of journals. These important roles – which carry significant

esteem and are critical to the survival of the field – are frequently not counted in service loads, even at the Group of Eight (Go8) institutions that pride themselves on having members in such leading positions.

For the majority of participants, it was research that did not fit into their regular work week amongst all the other demands on their time. Research was something that had to be 'squeezed in' during weekends, mid-semester breaks, or dedicated study leave periods. It even cut into annual leave, the summer break and other periods when academics are, notionally, away from work. One interviewee initially blamed their own habits for their inability to maintain the 40/40/20 division:

> ***I'm probably more like a 60/30/10 kind of person … That's not because the 40/40/20 is not accurate. It's just because I don't manage my time optimally. I think I could be 40/40/20 if I were really disciplined, but I let teaching take up more time. I let research slide away.***

Almost immediately, though, the same academic critically reflected upon this ingrained assumption. Their tone changed as they declared: 'I'm dreaming! … I think it's really hard to make teaching as little as 40 per cent of your work in a year'.

There were a few disputing voices. Some respondents remarked they had small service roles so that portion of their workload helped to offset administrative duties. A few participants felt even with 'overwhelming' teaching and administrative commitments they did 'have time to do research … it's just kind of up to me to make it happen'. These responses, though, tended to come from more senior academics who did not have the same teaching commitments as their more junior colleagues.

Beyond these outlier voices, there was broad agreement amongst our participants that demands of teaching and administration meant they had little time to do research, let alone to assign 40 per cent of their time to that activity. One participant concluded 'there are times when you're just not doing any research'. This situation is occurring even though universities have been giving research the highest importance in terms of promotion and hiring decisions. Julia Miller, in conducting an intensive case study of her own work allocations at an Australian university in 2019, commented: 'Research output is what many universities value most, especially in terms of promotion. Unfortunately, it is also the area which actual time allocation disfavours the most.'

There is a prevalent narrative to downplay or offset this burden, one that was also voiced by our respondents: that academics maintained these additional hours because they enjoy the work and recognise it is a privilege to do what they do. Academia – particularly the research component – remains a chance to do what they love, even if a large component of that work is not reflected in their salaries. This is, in part, true. Yet evoking and promulgating this story masks another reality. Universities make decisions on hiring and promotion based on research records. So, enjoyment of work is never the only motivation for unpaid academic labour. One respondent in our study did not have any research allocation in their contract – they had 80 per cent for teaching and 20 per cent for service – but still spent their nights, weekends, and even annual leave conducting research that was then branded under their university's name. This was partly done out of love for their work but also to meet institutional expectations:

> ***I know this is standard practice. There's no downtime. On the other hand, you know, we love what we do. It's a privilege but it's still work… So the expectation to do research without the support for it is highly problematic.***

Importantly, other participants in our study were conscious that by working additional hours, they were helping to perpetuate and consolidate the problematic arrangement. One academic, in outlining how she works during her personal time in order to undertake research, reflected on the inequities involved but also the systematic pressure to do so:

> ***It's kind of cheating your colleagues. But on a personal level we've had a lot of redundancies and forced redundancies … there's not a lot of other jobs out there for me. So I know that I have to remain kind of competitive for whatever I may need to apply for in future.***

In addition to these sector-wide issues around workload, the current model also carries embedded biases around gender, career stage, and caring responsibilities. This was something that several of our participants pointed out:

> ***That works much better for me now than when my kids were younger. And works better for males than for women. It's not a great model for management of labour.***

> ***I do a lot of research in the evenings and on the weekends, and that's why I'm prolific because I don't do much else. I had a baby two years ago and I finished writing my book [while] on maternity leave. Every night, I would work on it, because I knew that I would not meet what was required if I didn't do that.***

This arrangement is clearly unsustainable. Thankfully, there are rumblings of change in the air, partly as a result of union action. The NTEU continues to actively campaign for better workplace conditions, including safer workloads and improved work-life balance. The NTEU (2023b) states:

> ***It's not fair or safe for staff to be forced to work late, on weekends or while on leave just to meet deadlines. It harms our health and our capacity to deliver excellent teaching, research and support services … A healthy work/life balance requires more than just work-from-home provisions. We need to stop our work seeping into our personal and family time. We need the right to disconnect from work outside work time.***

At one regional institution, at least, the NTEU has recently succeeded in passing new policies that attempt to counteract this trend of long work weeks. As one participant explained:

> ***Certainly, the institution this year has said no one should be doing more than their allocated 1,700 hours in a year … In the past, it used to be a case of we will accept up to an extra few 100 hours. The union has at least got the win. At the very least the institution came back this year with a very strong mandate to all heads of school that no staff member should be allowed to work more than their 1,700 hours per year. And if a workload formula ends up adding up to more than that, then they give some of the casual money to that person to buy out some of their teaching.***

Other institutions have moved away from the 'golden rule' of 40/40/20 in other ways. Alternatives usually involve highly complex systems for calculating workloads. For one respondent, this involved 'detailed spreadsheets that are updated every year' based almost exclusively on securing external funding such as an ARC grant, where success rates for English have declined over many years. Another institution starts with a baseline allocation for 20 per cent research and 10 per cent service. Academics can then 'document your activity … make a case for an allocation' increase in these areas then the remainder goes to teaching.

Unfortunately, these alternative systems come with their own problems. Some of our participants were unsure of how new workload formulas were applied at their own institutions, limiting their capacity to manoeuvre effectively within the system. The buy-out model often calls for the academic to use their research funding to hire casuals, usually postgraduate students, to cover teaching or marking work. Requirements around publication outputs are frequently unrealistic, particularly for academics with caring responsibilities. Here, too, there are embedded structural biases that favour more established staff. One senior academic reflected, 'I have a management role … I can fit my research in quite easily around [the admin]'. In contrast, academics with high teaching loads, particularly junior or emerging scholars, could not maintain the same levels of research output without working many additional, unpaid hours, yet they could not progress without it. They were therefore caught in a self-perpetuating system. One respondent explained:

> ***If you can't keep up your publication rate at the rate that's required, you soon fall pretty far behind 40/40/20 because you've got to make up your research allocation in teaching … once you fall behind, you're not only making up two publications per year, you're making up four.***

Under these models, academics are still facing extended work weeks, working on weekends, at night and in their leave to conduct research to meet mandated outputs.

It seems that, despite its clear failings and in lieu of alternatives, 40/40/20 remains the preferred model for many in academia, and even actively

defended. As one participant noted: 'We've been on strike a couple of times this year, and a big part of that is trying to preserve 40/40/20. They want to take it away'.

An Amplifying Effect: The COVID-19 Era

Workload issues, including rising teaching commitments and expectations around research, are not new in academia (see Kenny, 2018). Yet, the past few years – the COVID-19 era – have exacerbated existing, problematic trends. A few months into the pandemic, in August 2020, John Ross and Anna McKie (2020) wrote an article for the *Times Higher Education*, commenting that the 40/40/20 model 'has been creaking' for years but 'the coronavirus pandemic could push the model to breaking point'. A 2021 report commissioned by the Australian Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) then remarked that the pandemic had accelerated 'many of the trends and changes that were already occurring in Australia's higher education system'. In the same year, a survey of Australian academics remarked the 'dominant theme was that of the changing nature of work as a result of the pandemic, especially relating to universities' responses' (McGaughey et al., 2021). Later, the NTEU (2023b) published a report that states: 'Workloads were already at crisis levels in our universities pre-COVID. Since then, job cuts and the demands of shifting online have tipped them further over the edge.'

The higher education sector was, and is, heavily impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Border closures halted the arrival of international students. The TEQSA report (2021) found that 77,900 temporary education visa holders had arrived in Australia in 2019–20. The inability of those students to travel to Australia in the pandemic amounts to a significant loss for the sector. A separate report by the Australia Institute found international student fees amounted to $14 billion in the years before 2020, and 'total university revenue fell by $1.9 billion or 5 per cent in nominal terms in the year to 2020' (Littlejohn & Stanford, 2021).

Even more problematically, Australia's public universities were excluded from JobKeeper, the national wage subsidy program. Policy expert Andrew Norton (2021) asserts universities did not meet requirements around income loss (despite reduced numbers of international students) as they already received a large proportion of their revenue from government. Others, though, have suggested the exclusion (driven by three separate changes to the program in 2020) was a more calculated decision. John Ross (2020), writing for the *Times Higher Education*, for example, declared the changes 'yet another ploy to exclude universities from the A$130 billion pandemic stimulus measure'.

This all amounted to a catastrophic situation. The Australia Institute report opened boldly: 'Australia's higher education system was hit harder by the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting recession than any other industry in Australia's economy' (Littlejohn & Stanford, 2021). The most evident impact were cost-cutting measures, including the cancellation of approved study leave which, in some institutions, has still not been restored. Even worse, though, were the soaring job losses. Across the sector, 12,185 jobs had been lost by October 2020, reaching 40,000 by May 2021, nearly one in five jobs in tertiary education (NTEU, 2020). In the early period, casual and sessional staff bore the brunt of these losses. However, by 2021 the impact increasingly fell to full-time staff – accounting for 90 per cent of those 40,000 job losses – as part of 'more permanent downsizing' (Littlejohn & Stanford, 2021). Similar losses in tertiary education were experienced in other countries (Ross & McKie, 2020). This was a continuation of longer-term trends in the industry around deregulation, casualisation (and associated job insecurity), privatisation, and reduced government support (Littlejohn, 2022).

Such changes were occurring in an environment where academics, as all Australians, were experiencing a public health emergency and repeated lockdowns. This situation impacted mental health and wellbeing, bringing with it heightened anxiety, isolation and other mental health conditions (especially as pandemic fatigue set in). For many academics, lockdowns also meant increased caring responsibilities within the home (see also Biddle, Gray & Rehill, 2022). They affected female academics in particular with findings from a survey of academics at an Australian regional university showing that women 'modified their workday to accommodate increased requirements of their paid work, caring at work, and domestic caring responsibilities' (Hands et al., 2024).

On top of these challenges, academics who retained their jobs faced significant operational changes in the sector. The most significant of these was the rapid, unexpected shift to online learning, with the first lockdown occurring right at the start of the Australian university semester in March 2020. The necessity to quickly pivot to online delivery of classes further expanded teaching loads with reduced support from their departments and minimal capacity to hire additional sessional staff. One respondent explained the situation at her institution:

> ***It's really hard to have sessional staff. Unless you could demonstrate that you just didn't have enough space in your work plan to teach all the classes. Whereas in the past [having a tutor] was standard.***

For this respondent, 'teaching relief' (that is, the capacity to hire sessional staff) only came with being successful in a large grant and using those funds to employ other staff. Overall, Humanities academics submit fewer ARC grant applications and the success rate is somewhat lower than that of STEM disciplines (Australian Research Council, n.d.). This is a situation which has been exacerbated by political interference in recent years. In 2021, Stuart Robert, acting Education Minister vetoed six ARC-approved research projects, all of them in humanities, with four of them in literary studies (Lamond, 2022). At many institutions, expectations around research outputs also climbed, despite the global pandemic. It is worth pointing out that the sorts of outputs that are valued in vary by type, quality and quantity within and among disciplines and universities (Mrva-Montoya & Luca, 2021). In addition, the increased teaching demands due to COVID-19 disruptions and staff losses disrupted study leave patterns due to funding cuts and inability to travel.

Administrative duties associated with teaching also increased. Many institutions reduced their employment of professional staff, so academics were forced to compensate for these losses by taking on additional tasks. Simultaneously, pastoral duties skyrocketed as students were also operating in an unprecedented environment. One of our participants, a senior lecturer at a regional university, commented:

> ***Students have become extremely anxious and that got worse with the increasing of the online space and the pressures of COVID. So a huge amount of time is spent communicating with students.***

Inevitably, this further squeezed in on the capacity for our participants – and all academics – to 'do' their research. In examining these changes within the tertiary sector during and as a result of the pandemic, Ross and McKie (2020) posed an interesting question:

> ***Will this be the moment that leads to the creation of new employment models, perhaps ones that give equal prestige to teaching and to research? Or, more depressingly, are those academics lucky enough to keep their jobs destined to wilt under ever more unreasonable workload demands?***

Unfortunately, it seems the latter has occurred. The situation around mounting workloads with no improvement to contracts did not end when lockdowns ended. Impacts continue to be felt into 2024 as, at most institutions, staff have not been replaced despite universities generally returning to financial surpluses, student enrolment numbers have not returned to pre-pandemic levels, and hybrid teaching is now the norm in many places, usually without compensation for staff in terms of workload or additional support to facilitate this change (Littlejohn, 2022; TEQSA, 2021). A survey of historians at Australian universities found, as with our study of English academics, a 'discipline in considerable distress', with staffing and student numbers impacted by COVID-19 and changes to undergraduate fees (Crotty, Sendziuk & Winter, 2023).

As is well-established in scholarship on the COVID-19 pandemic, this period did not impact all academics equally. Some actually reported higher productivity. The Australian Research and Education Efficiency Frontier Index (REEF) found that, on average, Australian universities had stronger publication outcomes in 2020, with no discernible decline in quality, and predicted that this growth would continue unabated into 2021 and 2022. Significantly, though, the conclusions of this study were limited. Any impacts to output as a result of the pandemic would involve a time lag due to slow academic publishing cycles, so would not have been visible in the 2020 data

(Houghton, 2022). On an anecdotal level, some individuals have reported no changes or even increases to their publication rates. Noah Riseman (2021), a history professor then at the Australian Catholic University, has written publicly about how the pandemic unexpectedly led to a 'boom' in his research output, making it 'one of the most productive periods' in his career. It is significant, though, that Riseman had no teaching commitments at the time and, as he openly acknowledges, enjoys other privileges that allowed for this boom. Indeed, he lists some of the disruptions that his colleagues faced then notes 'none of this affected me because I was not teaching … I have not had to manage the transition to online learning, support the mental health and wellbeing of students and deal with the uncertainties of what will happen next.'

In contrast to the REEF Index and Riseman's story, our survey found the pandemic negatively impacted the capacity of almost all respondents. Most reported this period had a stymieing effect on their research outputs. Impact differed depending on an individual's position (see Table 2), though this is inconclusive as 100 per cent of both lecturers and professors reported impact. It is difficult to draw broader conclusions here due to the sample size. We did note a clearer division based on relative teaching and research workloads. Research-focused academics – like Riseman – were more shielded as they did not have to contend with the same teaching challenges in this period.

Table 2: Proportion of respondents who experienced negative impact from COVID-19

Position	Proportion
Lecturer	100%
Senior lecturer	79%
Associate professor	77%
Professor	100%
Other	100%

Gender is also usually reported as a significant factor. Even before the COVID-19 era, female academics, in general, faced more obstacles than their male counterparts due to home life commitments (O'Farrell, Kuteeva & Soler, 2024). Previous studies and anecdotal evidence conclude the shift to working from home during the pandemic exacerbated this situation. Amidst the shrinking of physical space and blurring of work/home boundaries, female academics, in general, assumed more family/caring responsibilities at home as well as more pastoral duties towards students at work (often invisible or outside of management structures), all of which impeded their research capacity and output. There are numerous studies that consider this gendered impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in academia (see, for example, Meri-Yilan, 2024; Lerchenmuller et al., 2021; Kasymova et al., 2021; Gorska et al., 2021; and Hands et al., 2024).

Women were also disproportionately impacted by employment changes in this period, accounting for 61 per cent of job losses in the first half of 2021 (Littlejohn, 2022). Other studies, though, are less conclusive. A 2022 study of 75 million scholarly articles published over the past 50 years found a narrowing of the gender gap over time and suggested 'female research productivity seems to have been more resilient' during the pandemic, especially in the Netherlands, Germany and the USA (Haghani et al., 2022). However, as with REEF, lags in publication are likely a factor here. The full impact of this period on publication rates is not yet known. Interestingly, our study found no significant difference in impact on academics based on gender. Eighty-three per cent of female respondents and 86 per cent of male respondents reported that the COVID-19 crisis had impacted their capacity and output. Further research of a larger sample of the Australian university sector is needed to provide more insight here.

Variances in impact were more visible at the institutional level. Regional universities were disproportionately affected where 95 per cent of academics reported they were impacted, compared to 80 per cent at non-regional universities. When considered by university type, Innovative Research Universities were the least impacted (71 per cent of respondents reported impact), compared to New Generation (80 per cent), Group of Eight (83 per cent) and, particularly, the Australian Technology Network (100 per cent).

Conclusions

Australian academics, then, are facing ever-mounting responsibilities around teaching, service and administration that render the traditional 40/40/20 model increasingly unrealistic in practice. Yet many academics are actively defending it as there are, so far, few alternatives that do not encroach further on their research time. This situation has been exacerbated by decasualisation trends as well as job cuts and other pressures experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this environment, there is little time for research, even though research is one of the bedrocks of academia and the benchmark that universities use to evaluate individual performance. The English academics interviewed here – articulating problems common across the sector but frequently experienced across disciplinary lines – reveal that the only way that many academics find time for research is if they work well beyond their contracted hours. Most affected are junior academics as well as those at regional institutions. This is an unsustainable situation that leaves academics feeling squeezed from all directions.

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