

# Staying or going?

## Australian early career researchers' narratives of academic work, exit options and coping strategies

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Australian universities will lose a substantial proportion of their staff through retirement over the next decade. A recent study has indicated that attrition of academic staff that are not at the end of their career may exacerbate the problem. To assist in developing appropriate retention strategies, this article examines the ways in which early career researcher-academics across different Australian university sites currently experience work and the reasons why they consider leaving the academy. It explores the 'exit options' that they put forth as possible and desirable, and scrutinises what these exit options can teach us about what kind of work place and what kind of university we should build in order to retain academic staff, and keep them happy and productive. The article also discusses some of the strategies that the early career researchers use to cope with, and survive in, the contemporary university, and how these strategies might be neither individually nor institutionally sustainable.

Over the next decade, Australian universities will lose a substantial proportion of their staff through retirement (Hugo 2005). In some places, the loss is predicted to reach 35 per cent of academic staff (Hugo 2008). As a consequence Australian policy makers and university managers are beginning to express concern about the impending 'staffing crisis', and they are currently taking measures to identify ways to recruit, develop and retain academic staff. Some of these issues also pertain to other higher education systems, including the United Kingdom (HEFCE 2010).

A recent study has shown that more than 28 per cent of Australian academics have sought a job outside universities within the preceding 12 months (Coates, *et al.* 2009 p.16-17). This indicates that attrition is an issue that needs serious consideration and that finding ways to improve retention should be a top priority; not only understood as retaining-for-longer staff who would otherwise have retired, but also retaining staff who are not at the end of their careers.

This article aims to contribute to our understanding of the reasons for attrition amongst early career

researchers to assist in developing appropriate retention strategies. It provides qualitative insight into the ways in which this group of academics currently experience work and the reasons why they consider leaving the academy. It explores the 'exit options' that they put forth as possible and desirable, and scrutinise what these exit options can teach us about what kind of work place and what kind of university we should build in order to retain these staff, and keep them happy and productive. The article also discusses some of the strategies that the early career researchers use to cope with and survive the contemporary university, and how these strategies might be neither individually nor institutionally sustainable.

### The study

The analysis in this article draws on interviews with early career researchers from three different Australian universities.

While the term 'early career researcher' can take different meanings (Bazeley 2003) it was defined for

Univ.	Gender	Level	Discipline
Sandstone	Male	Senior Lecturer	Arts & Social Science
	Female	Senior Lecturer	Science
	Female	Lecturer	Professional degree
	Male	Lecturer	Science
	Male	Lecturer	Professional degree
	Female	Assoc Lecturer	Arts & Social Science
Gum tree	Female	Senior Lecturer	Professional degree
	Male	Senior Lecturer	Science
	Female	Lecturer	Professional degree
	Female	Lecturer	Professional degree
	Male	Lecturer	Arts & Social Science
	Female	Assoc Lecturer	Professional degree
	Female	Assoc Lecturer	Professional degree
'New'	Male	Senior Lecturer	Arts & Social Science
	Female	Senior Lecturer	Arts & Social Science
	Female	Lecturer	Professional degree
	Male	Lecturer	Professional degree
	Male	Lecturer	Science
	Female	Assoc Lecturer	Professional degree
	Female	Assoc Lecturer	Arts & Social Science

**Table 1 Overview of participant group by type of university, gender, academic appointment level and discipline**

\* Drawing on Considine and Marginson's (2000) typology the universities included a 'sandstone' ('old' research-intensive metropolitan university); a 'gum tree' (established in the late 1960s and purports some research intensity in some areas); and a 'new' university (in this case a regional post-1989 university (when colleges of advanced education amalgamated with universities or obtained university status) with an emerging research profile).

\*\* Academic disciplines were grouped in terms of Professional degree (Education, Nursing, Engineering, etc.), Arts & Social Sciences, and Science (including Medicine)

the purposes of this study as an academic working in an on-going teaching and research position, awarded a doctorate fewer than five years ago. This definition allowed for a focus on a group of, potentially, very productive academics. Because they had completed their doctorates, they were already potentially active in publishing, applying for research grants, and supervising postgraduate research students. Their status as on-going members of academic staff also meant that many of them had taken up various service or leadership roles, and because they all had teaching responsibilities, they were familiar with the full gamut of academic work life. In a highly competitive job market, which relies on extensive use of casual and contract

staff, these academics had been successful in securing an on-going position. In other words, this particular group is arguably the cohort that will be required to take up significant positions of academic and research leadership over the next decade.

Participant recruitment occurred through general calls for expression of interest on the universities' intra-net as well as some snow-balling. The final sample included early career researchers from all the major disciplinary groups, although there was markedly stronger interest in participation amongst early career researchers in the humanities, social sciences and professional programmes such as education, social work and business. Individual semi-structured interviews of up to 2.5 hours duration were held with 20 early career researchers and the data set also included detailed work logs that each early career researcher had kept for two weeks prior to the interview.

Conceptually and analytically the study is couched in narrative theory, which asserts that narratives are central to human meaning making and are constitutive of our sense of self, our feelings, thoughts and actions (Riessman 2008; Polkinghorne 1988). Narratives are the stories we live by (McAdams, Josselson & Leiblich 2006). Consequently, the early career researchers were prompted to give an account of their current work life and why they chose an academic career. The original focus of the study was to canvass early career researchers' work narratives generally, to understand their conditions and aspirations, yet it soon became apparent that narratives around leaving loomed large. The following analysis presents a snapshot of the dominant narratives around academic work-life, focussing on leaving and the various exit options, and coping and surviving.

### Widespread malaise

A 2002 study on occupational stress in Australian universities showed that Australian academics are highly stressed relative to other occupational groups and to general staff working in the academy (Winefield *et al.* 2002). The group of academic staff that reported the highest levels of strain and lowest levels of job satisfaction were academics involved in teaching, or research and teaching, middle-ranked, that is, level B and C lecturers (Winefield *et al.* 2002, p.11). These are the levels at which the majority of early career researchers work. The study at hand confirms that stress is rampant amongst Australian early career researchers. The par-

ticipants all told stories about excessive and unmanageable workloads and about the anxieties associated with not feeling in control or on top of one's load, and about the relentless pressure to do more and run faster. Many reported that they had experienced or experience regularly the physical manifestations of stress including chest pain, palpitations, insomnia, migraine, and regular headaches.

Whilst the levels and extent of stress certainly should be taken seriously, the stories early career researchers told indicate that stress levels ought to be considered in relation to what might be called a more general and very widespread malaise. The term malaise captures different things: dissatisfaction, alienation, disquiet, depression and melancholy. Across the three different university sites, across disciplines, ages and genders, the early career researchers told different but also similar stories about their frustration and disaffection with their everyday work life and conditions. A common thread in the stories concerned not being able to get to what the participants considered the 'real' work.

As one early career researcher in the social sciences said: 'it feels like I spend most of my time on things that I loathe doing and am not very good at or trained to do, and almost none of my time on the things I feel I should be doing; research and actual teaching'. One participant said that her work-life felt like 'a never-ending obstacle course', which left her exhausted and 'brain dead' and hence virtually incapable of doing the exciting thinking and writing she wanted to do (see also Askins 2008).

This feeling of spending most of your time away from what you consider to be the core of the work was often told in conjunction with stories of disaffection with many of the tasks, tools and practices of the contemporary Australian university. As one early career researcher said: 'it depresses me, the utter meaninglessness of much of what we do - it's like it's hollow at the heart. We spend so much time and so much energy on things that are ridiculous if you think about it'. Specifically, this early career researcher was talking about having to submit a report on a subject that she was coordinating which happened to attract a relatively low student satisfaction score. She had been told that nobody would actually ever read the report and her painstaking efforts to explain why this subject almost inevitably would attract a low score.

Yet, it was expected that subject coordinators wrote such a report when the score was under a certain benchmark so that it could be ticked off in the

system and declared that the issues were being fixed (with the unarticulated assumption that they can be fixed and that the subject coordinator can and should fix them).

Other early career researchers were disaffected that what they considered dubious or only marginally relevant attainments, such as obtaining a self-instigated teaching award, were highlighted and celebrated by managers, whereas other, and to them, more important achievements, were systematically over-looked or disregarded because they could not be quantified and/or put on display. Others again said that they felt alienated by their university's obsession with their placement on various league tables and on 'getting such and such scores on such and such meaningless chart' as one early career researcher put it.

Some felt disquiet about their superiors' fixation on them getting 'runs on the board' but not actually ever engaging with the substance or 'real quality' of what they do. (The phrase 'real quality' has recently entered Australian academic-speak, and it seems that it is used in opposition to the notions of quality spurned in relation to the current research assessment exercise). In that way, the malaise was not only about overwork and stress, and the feeling that you should be doing more, but also about the nature of the work actually undertaken and the nature of the organisation's engagement with this work (see also Berglund 2008).

With respect to the scope of the malaise it is worthy of note that almost all of the early career researchers when asked whether they would recommend an academic career to anybody they cared about emphatically, and in many cases regretfully, said 'no'.

## Exit options

In recounting their disaffection, many of the participants said that they often considered leaving the academy. Some professed that they thought about it a few times a year, mostly around particular times in the course of a semester, some said that they would consider it on a weekly basis and some that the thought crossed their minds on most days. When thinking about leaving they considered, what one of the participants coined, their 'exit options'. These exit options are interesting to contemplate in relation to what it is these early career researchers feel is missing from their current work-life, and hence, what universities should be better at offering or enabling if they wish to retain these early career researchers.

The early career researchers in the professional programmes not surprisingly spoke of returning to the profession many of them had left to pursue an academic career. For example, as one teacher educator said, 'if I am asked to continue to teach as much as I do now, I might just as well go back to teaching. In fact, the teaching experience was better then, much more rewarding and positive, so it was time better spent if you know what I mean'. Teaching outside of the university was put forward as an exit option by others as well, for instance an early career researcher in the sciences said that he kept toying with idea of getting a teaching qualification so that he could go and teach science in a high school. He said: 'I like teaching; I really do, but not 300 students at a time'.

The exit option of returning to a profession that

you left, often after lengthy and serious consideration, significant financial loss, and sometimes despite the pleas from significant others, speaks of 'shattered dreams'. The early career researchers I spoke to who had left careers as teachers, social workers, business managers, journalists, and nurses, said that the reason

why they chose the career change in the first place was because they wanted, as one of them put it, to 'pursue a life of the mind'. Many of them said that they had always enjoyed learning, that they were turned on by ideas, that they wanted the intellectual challenge and craved the stimulation. The 'going back' storyline suggests that life in the academy turned out to not actually satisfy these desires, and that the lack is not off-set by other attractions.

Some participants spoke of becoming a writer (novelists, free-lance journalists, non-fiction writers, etc.), and it was put forward by the early career researchers who earlier in the interview had recounted that one of the key reasons why they had chosen to become academics in the first place was to pursue their love of writing. One early career researcher laughingly said that he had bought a book called 'How to write a best-seller', and the plan was to write a best-seller first so that he could afterwards turn to his 'real writing', understood as his academic writing. Leaving to write, to 'actually get some writing done' as one early career researcher put it, speaks to the abovementioned point

about not having enough time to undertake what is considered to be 'the real' work.

One early career researcher said that she considered leaving to become a librarian because she loved books and reading, and loved discovering new books in her field. She had thought that reading and spending time in the library would be an essential part of her work as an academic, but, she said, 'it's been over six months since I was at the library. There is just no time for it, let alone for reading properly. These days all I have time for is quick reading of what's available through e-journals in my field, which I can access while I eat my lunch. I am really disappointed about that'. Along these lines many of the early career researchers said that they had anticipated that they would have more time to 'actually read'. One said that she was piling up

books in her office at home to finally get to when she retired.

One early career researcher seriously considered changing career and entering politics. He said that he had wanted to become an academic because he thought it would be a way to make a difference and to change

the world, to affect the students and challenge them to think and act differently. However, he found that students were not interested; he felt his colleagues were only focussed on advancing their careers, and that nobody seemed to have any time to discuss ideas and create social change. He said 'I remember thinking, and this was probably naïve, that the university would be the place to develop and discuss ideas, but this does not seem to be the case'.

Considering these exit options makes for rather damning reading of the contemporary Australian university: unsatisfactory teaching experiences, no or not enough 'life of the mind', no or not enough opportunity to write, no or not enough time to read, and no or not enough time to discuss ideas. All these features are tied up with continuing narratives about what a 'real' university should allow for and support.

Other early career researchers contemplated setting up their own businesses, including coffee shops, second-hand bookshops, a lavender farm, or becoming a consultant in their area of expertise. The common storylines in this kind of exit option seemed to be

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about creating something that you can care about and put your heart and soul into, about directly reaping the outcome of your effort, about determining your own work and about working for yourself. This exit option was put forward by early career researchers who included amongst the top reasons for choosing an academic career the opportunity to work autonomously and to some extent being in control of their own working hours. The exit option appeared to be pitched against a feeling of disappointment with the realisation that this autonomy was not as widespread, encouraged and institutionalised as envisaged.

One early career researcher said she was surprised to learn the extent to which her performance was scrutinised and how her department leaders had pushed her to change her research trajectory so that the department would do better in the current research assessment exercise. In terms of work hours, one early career researcher recounted how surprised he was to learn that he was expected to be in the office or at least on campus between 9am-5pm four days a week, and that he was expected to teach in the trimester from November to February, when he thought he would have time to get immersed in his research. Others recounted how in their institution regular study leave was no longer something that one could expect. Now they had to go through a time consuming process of application and 'hope you are in the Head of School's good books' as one said. Another one commented that study leave also required making, 'ridiculous over-inflated promises about outputs', which he felt inevitably set him up to fail.

As these narratives about exit options indicate, the early career researchers are thinking of taking up work that can feed their various desires and expectations to a meaningful work life. There was a strong link between the reasons for pursuing an academic career in the first place and the proposed alternative work scenarios.

### Coping strategies

A number of the early career researchers said that were they to leave they would want to take up some menial job and be purely and squarely 'wage earners'. As one said:

You know what, I'd work for McDonalds or be a check-out chick at Coles or something like that. I'd want a job I could leave behind at the end of the day, something that wouldn't eat at me constantly.

I don't think I would feel so sad because every day I feel that this should be an amazing place and we should be doing amazing things, but we are not, we can't, and that makes me so frustrated and so sad. At least at McDonalds I'd know that it never could be amazing.

Interestingly, the failure on the part of the university to be 'amazing' is constructed as having a direct impact on the early career researcher's work experience. That the university does not live up to its promise is taken personally and experienced emotionally. This speaks of a particular kind of investment in the work and the ideals that an 'amazing' university represents. At the heart of it is a passionate involvement, which is the hallmark of the 'vocational lifestyle' that this exit option speaks of leaving behind. As Auken (2010) argues, academics have traditionally epitomised this lifestyle, which includes being intrinsically motivated and driven, enthusiastic, always working or thinking about work, accepting a blurry line between work and leisure, being deeply emotionally invested in work, and working beyond contractual agreements. Significantly, however, while the wage-earner scenario was put forward as an exit option it was also evoked as a coping strategy, as we shall see later.

Many of the stories about exit options were interrupted by wry observations that unfortunately leaving was not possible at this time because of financial obligations. No doubt, part of the stress reported amongst lecturers and senior lecturers occurs because this career stage often coincides with starting up a family or having carer responsibilities of young children, which for many set a limit on the time and energy that can be devoted to work. As has been argued elsewhere, the 'greedy' university wants more than the time people in this situation usually can give (Bassett 2005). Most of early career researchers, both male and female, in this study said that they had dependants to support. But in the narratives told it was not only financial obligations that held the early career researchers back from leaving. Many wanted desperately to stay because of the love of the 'real work' and as a consequence attempted to develop various coping strategies.

Some told stories about putting academia on notice and/or giving it 'a bit more time' to see if things would change for the better. Some had developed firm deadlines for making the definitive decision to stay or go (e.g. 'if things don't improve within the next 3 years, then...'). Hopes were pinned on the possibilities of a new government, the fall-out of the baby-boomers

retiring, on a new vice-chancellor, and so forth. 'Trying to be optimistic' was presented as a way of muddling through the malaise.

An alternative to this coping strategy also emerged as mentioned before. Rather than thinking about or planning their exit options, several of the early career researchers told stories about trying to change the ways in which they think about and engage with their work as a strategy to 'leave-but-not-leave'. The strategy entails reconstructing the vocational storyline of their work narrative and all that that entails. As one early career researcher said: 'I feel that I have to just say 'well, this is work and I need the pay', you know, just treat it like any other job and not get so involved'. In other words, rather than leaving their current job to become wage-earners they propose to stay and reengage with their current job on those terms, which means working only the nominated hours per week and doing just enough so as to keep their jobs. In particular, what is at stake is the level and type of involvement. As we saw in the above quote, some say they need to completely sever the attachment to not be constantly

sad and frustrated. Correspondingly, one early career researcher said that she could no longer 'afford' to feel so passionate about her research, suggesting that the passionate involvement is 'too costly' in terms of well-being, health, etc. At the centre of these stories is a storyline about the cost of caring and the decision to withdraw the care.

It is worth reflecting on the implications of the storylines in the coping narratives. What does it mean to put academia 'on notice'? What does it mean to live and work this way? And how about coping by 'leaving-but-not-physically-leaving'? Further, what does academic work become without the passionate engagement? Can it be undertaken, and undertaken well, within a 'wage-earner mentality', which has been found to reduce or altogether eliminate risk taking, amongst other things (Godtfredsen 1997)? Is it possible to produce 'amazing' work without the 'vocational lifestyle'; without thinking about it all the time, without letting leisure and work blend, without letting it affect you, eat at you? Will good research happen if academics are not driven enough to find and insist upon the gaps

in time between everything else to do the difficult thinking and writing? Is the 'leaving-but-not-leaving' response to the malaise sustainable for the individual academic, both personally and in career terms? Or for the university? Or in the national interest for that matter (Auken 2010)?

In this regard one early career researcher said that she reckoned she was 'kidding herself' if she thought she could do her job without the personal and emotional involvement. She explained 'if I stay emotionally distant nothing happens; I can't do it. I just get depressed. It happens every time I tell myself to just treat this like a job'. Another early career researcher said, 'It's really hard because in some ways I don't feel I can really do my job without the excitement, or I do it poorly'. I asked him to clarify. He continued 'Well,

it's like I can't write in that space or think of interesting ways of teaching in that space. It's like there's nothing there if I just feel I have to produce, if that's the space I'm in.'

These narratives indicate that for some early career researchers the passionate involvement, or 'intrinsic motivation' as it is some-

times called, is not just an occupational partiality, an option or a marginal proviso, but a vital condition for undertaking the required work and for doing it well. The requirement to produce does not in itself enable academic work, despite what so many of the current performance management tools implemented in universities appear to assume. And so it seems that the implications of taking up as your own the 'wage-earner storyline' for some may be calamitous and entirely unsustainable.

Yet, an alternative strategy adopted by one early career researcher in the study involved redirecting the intrinsic drive, and rather than coping by thinking of academic work as any other 'job' they now think of it as a 'career'. One early career researcher in the participant group declared that he had reconstructed his initial understanding of what academic work was. He continued: 'It's no use being sentimental about these things. Now I think of my work purely in career terms. What do I need to do to get promoted? How do I do things most effectively? I am extremely good at bargaining and I always, always ask 'what's in it for me?'.

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The driver in this narrative-to-live-by is not about what is best or most important and interesting for the field of research or for the students, etc., but about what is best in terms of personal promotion. Of course, to obtain promotion the academic will need to provide evidence of 'success' in teaching, service and research; however this 'success' might be manufactured in certain ways. For example, specific strategies might be used to ensure good student evaluations (the focus being on getting good scores rather than good student outcomes). Or, the academic may agree to sit on various committees purely because it looks good on the CV, but not have any special interest in the work of the committee nor ever making a significant contribution. In terms of obtaining the recognition of being an active and successful researcher, the career early career researcher stated that he will direct himself towards the activities where there is pay-off in that regard. He explains:

I form my research ideas with an eye on where the money is, pure and simple. It's stupid to spend time on research that doesn't bring in the dollars. I think about how this grant will build track record towards a bigger and better grant, and in the end I do this so I get the brownie points and will get to Aspro [Associate Professor]. Sure, we do some interesting stuff along the way, but for me that's not the main game, not any more.

In a certain way this narrative makes perfect sense within the neoliberal enterprise university. As has been argued elsewhere (Petersen 2009) promotion is a central driver within this system; taken for granted as desirable, continuously reproduced as a meaningful and worthwhile desire; and structurally embedded into many performance management practices (with the manager providing advice about what to do more or less of in order to get promoted). Within the promotion narrative, climbing the ladder is the main goal and all the activities that are tied to getting you upwards and onwards are positioned in those terms and their relevance is weighted in those terms – as useful or a waste of time ('stupid').

The academic work is still being done, of course, but the question is how it is being done and what aspects of academic work will drop off the radar because they are 'stupid'. If the university and immediate academic leaders appear entirely uninterested in the academic work that cannot be put on display or measured in particular ways, as was mentioned earlier, then the academics themselves may follow suit.

The coping narratives presented here are interesting to consider in terms of the question of what the university is and may become. Institutions are made up of the people who inhabit them, who live them, who transform them by living them, and if current early career researchers are responding to the malaise by entirely dismissing the vocational orientation to become 'wage-earners' or 'careerists' then that will shape the university of the future. The coping strategies are also worth considering in relation to the on-going debates in Australia around the issue of 'brain-drain' (Marginson 2006).

Typically this discussion is centred on concerns with losing 'the brightest minds' to other countries, and especially losing 'our top researchers' to universities overseas (see for instance Wood 2003). Meanwhile, both the coping strategies presented here could in a certain sense be read as forms of 'brain-drain' too; with the 'wage-earner' not applying themselves, and the 'careerist' applying him or herself in highly circumscribed ways.

## Conclusion

At the outset it was claimed that policy makers and university managers should listen carefully to the narratives that current early career researchers tell about their work. That there is much we can learn by listening to the stories about 'life after the academy' and about 'surviving the academy'. It is a truism that universities are changing, yet to understand how, and in order to reflect on the implications, it is important to listen to academics' meaning-making practices.

In my observation of several university organised workshops and seminars on the 'impending staffing crisis' university managers and various 'consultants' often list as their first go-to solution, both in terms of retention and recruitment, 'more competitive financial remuneration'. Yet, in the descriptions and explanations of the various exit options it was interesting that none of early career researchers in this study asserted 'more money' as a concern in the deliberations to leave or stay (and all of the professionals who chose to become academics had accepted a loss of income, and for some the loss was quite substantial). Whilst academics might want reasonable pay, a narrow focus on the question of pay may divert attention away from more important discussions around working conditions and the notion of the university tied up with these conditions. As we saw, the narratives about leaving or staying centre on

undertaking meaningful work, work the early career researchers are and can be passionate about, and about obtaining a reasonable balance between the aspects of work that drew them to academia in the first place and the actual everyday realities in the contemporary university. Significantly, the early career researchers want to be able to do 'good' work; they want to teach well and do good research; they want to contribute to the operation of the university by participating in its governance, and to achieve that they need different conditions to the ones they are offered at this point.

The early career researchers interviewed for this study say they want better teaching experiences, which in some cases may mean 'less teaching'. They want time to think, analyse and write and they want to have time to go to the library and to keep up with their field of study properly. They want to make a difference and affect students and they want autonomy and trust, and work arrangements that enable sustained thought and writing. Above all, they want their willingness to commit heart and soul to their work, to work long hours, weekends and so on, to be recognised and not taken advantage of. Finally, they want universities to be places of excellence, places that do amazing things, not 'hollow at the heart' and fixated on the dubious or marginally relevant.

In this context, it is worth mentioning that in the reflections on the current working conditions, the early career researchers appeared to believe that the possibility of change was limited and the only thing they could really do was to either leave or change their mindsets. There was not a strong sense that they were able to change the system and/or demand better working conditions. This contributed to the disaffection as well.

In terms of Australian higher education policy development it is significant that the stories told by the early career researchers in this study, as well as the similar reports from other studies on academic work (e.g. Wood and Meek 2002; Currie 2004; Davies 2005), continue to be dismissed or even denigrated by those who should be listening extra carefully. At a conference held in Melbourne in 2009, vice-chancellors were reported as saying that the level of dissatisfaction amongst academics was overstated and reflected an idealised view of universities (Trounson 2009). One vice-chancellor said 'We have to get rid of the old view of what universities were like and we have to get the new normal' (Trounson 2009, p. 21). In this statement, there seems to be lodged impatience with these recalcitrant academics who refuse to 'get with the

programme'. There is no concession that it might not be the academics that are the problem. Yet, if the 'new normal' means that highly qualified and experienced academics leave the university or new attractive candidates choose other career paths because the 'new normal' is highly unappealing and unworkable, then it might be worth taking more seriously both the reports about dissatisfaction and what the so-called 'idealised view' of the university represents. In my interviews with the early career researchers there was not much mention of 'going back' to some alleged golden age. The main concern was about doing good work and creating great universities now and for the future.

The account that academics are unhelpfully pining for 'the good old days' has strong synergies with, and feeds on, the commonly heard saying in Australia that 'academics are just a pack of whingers'. Both these storylines, and the many others that deride academics' concerns about what is happening to universities, make it easy to dismiss and ignore the malaise and disaffection, and to uphold the status quo and/or implement even more strategies aimed at making academics 'more productive and responsive'. Meanwhile, as is suggested here, this policy might just mean that those who are able to will decide to take their talent, expertise and experience elsewhere.

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