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# Alleviating the human cost of COVID-19 in Australian universities

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## Introduction

The student cohort which commences or returns to Australian university campuses in 2022 will be vastly different to that which commenced in 2019. Not only will a substantial proportion of returning students in Victoria and New South Wales have had no or limited time on campus in 2020 and 2021 (they represent approximately 59% of the nation's returning students at universities<sup>2</sup>), the numbers of commencing international students may be limited and, in some Australian states, many first-year students will have experienced long periods of absence from school.

In the first half of 2020, staff at Australian universities performed the Herculean task of shifting teaching and learning interactions, assessment, and student engagement online; in some cases, having limited knowledge of digital pedagogy or technical expertise. As a result of a sustained effort, domestic students and international students who remained enrolled either in Australia or overseas were able to continue their education and complete course work. Courses requiring the exercise of practical skills or work-related placement experience faced significant problems in completing their courses in the relevant time frame. While the lived experience in Australian universities in 2021 has differed between states and student cohorts because of the extent of COVID infections and lockdowns, currently much teaching remains blended or digital, and students only attend campus in limited mode in the eastern states.

Many have argued that COVID-driven changes in pedagogy in 2020 were but an acceleration of trends already in play, and that a substantial proportion of undergraduate and postgraduate coursework teaching will remain on-line, at least in the near future, given the perception that this form of teaching is cost effective. It is estimated that staff reduction exercises across the whole higher education sector has resulted in the loss of approximately 40,000 people between May 2019 and 2020, with further restructures and downsizing being undertaken in 2021 impacting on fixed term and continuing staff<sup>3</sup>.

Changes of this magnitude come with significant loss of funding, intellectual capital and expertise, but equally as significant is the human cost in terms of staff and student engagement and morale.

A significant early warning lies in the decline in Learner Engagement<sup>4</sup> scores for both undergraduate and postgraduate coursework students in the 2020 Student Experience Survey (SES)<sup>5</sup> conducted as part of the Quality Indicators of Learning and Teaching (QILT)<sup>6</sup> surveys. As will be shown in the next section, the data suggest a level of disquiet with the quality and experience of on-line education delivery and a diminution in the sense of institutional belonging and support.

As students and staff return to campus, it is important that the human settings facilitate reengagement and commitment. Leadership is key to this and how leaders respond to the many challenges will determine the

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<sup>1</sup> The authors have worked many years in higher education at senior levels and draw on their experience and knowledge of the sector in writing this paper.

<sup>2</sup> The data in this report are derived from the Department of Education, Skills and Employment's Higher Education Statistics (HES) (uCube data and prepared reports) - <http://highereducationstatistics.education.gov.au/Default.aspx>, the [Department's Staff Time Series data using Visual Analytics from Microsoft Power BI](#), university annual reports and publicly available data on-line.

<sup>3</sup> Littleton, E. and Stanford, J. An Avoidable Catastrophe, pandemic job losses in higher education and their consequences. Centre for the Future of Work, September 2021.

<sup>4</sup> QILT Learner Engagement component of the Student Experience Survey - [https://www.qilt.edu.au/surveys/student-experience-survey-\(ses\)#latest](https://www.qilt.edu.au/surveys/student-experience-survey-(ses)#latest) (Date viewed 12 November 2021).

<sup>5</sup> QILT Student Experience Survey - [https://www.qilt.edu.au/surveys/student-experience-survey-\(ses\)](https://www.qilt.edu.au/surveys/student-experience-survey-(ses)) (Date viewed 12 November 2021).

<sup>6</sup> QILT - <https://www.qilt.edu.au/> (Date viewed 12 November 2021).

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degree of success. We elaborate some issues in the following sections and highlight five challenges faced by universities going forward, suggesting that additional attention must be paid to students and staff to ensure their health and wellbeing.

## **The student experience**

### ***Learner Engagement***

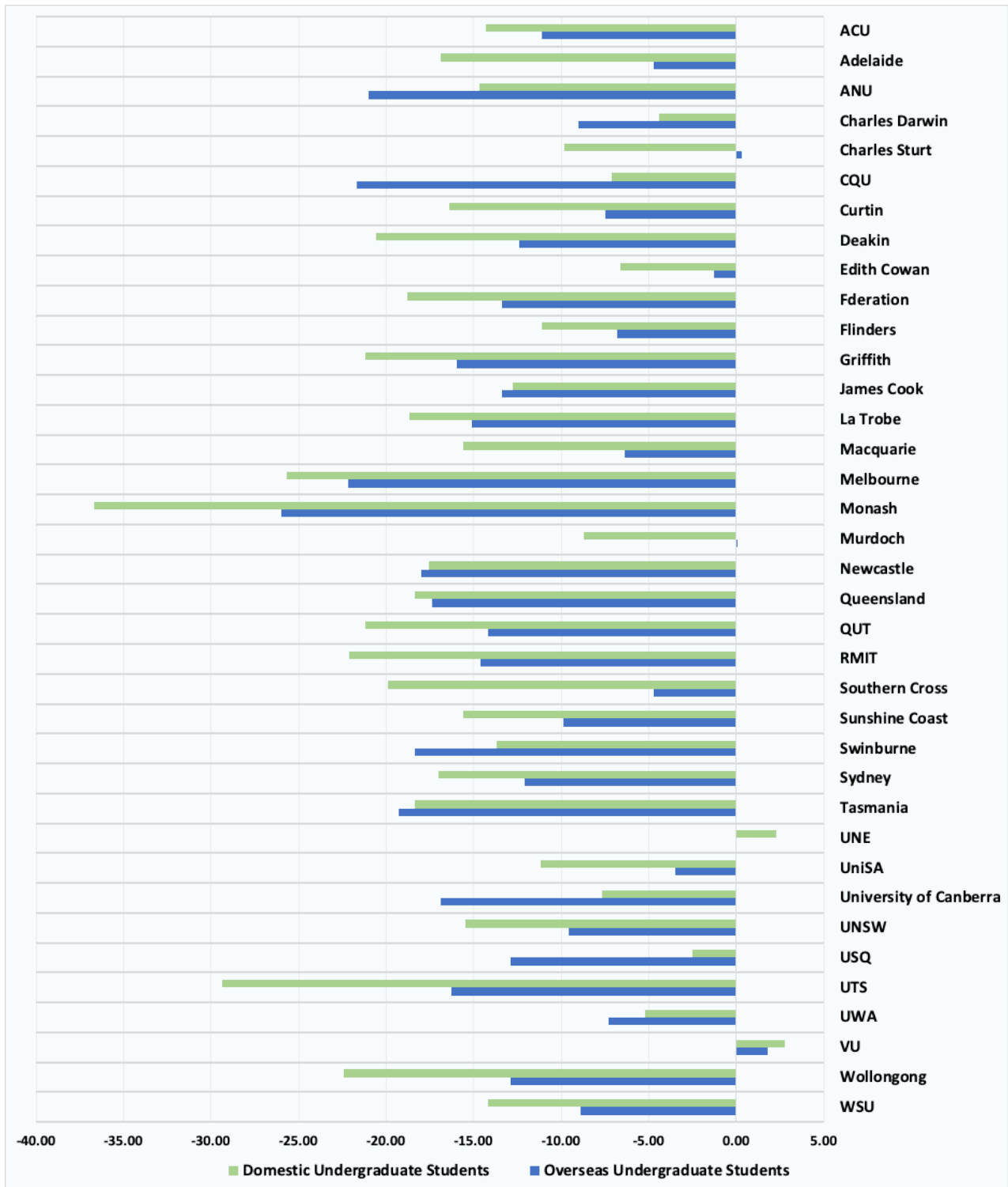
The QILT surveys collect a range of data on student experience, graduate outcomes, and employer satisfaction with graduates. The SES collects data by university and within universities by discipline, specifically on Skills Development, Teaching Quality, Student Support, Learning Resources, and Learner Engagement. Learner Engagement data are based on questions relating to the sense of belonging, extent of interaction with academic staff and with other students either inside or outside of formal educational situations (Appendix A)<sup>7</sup>.

Undergraduate Learner Engagement scores in Australia's universities fell from a satisfaction rate of 59.8% and 59.9% in 2018 and 2019 to 42.2% in 2020. Similarly, the scores fell for postgraduate coursework students from 53.1% and 53.6% in 2018 and 2019 to 41.4% in 2020. Domestic undergraduate student scores fell more than international undergraduate student scores, but the reverse was the case for postgraduate coursework students where international students recorded a greater decline. Scores fell even in States such as Western Australia where COVID has posed little disruption to daily life. **Diagrams 1 and 2** show the extent of decline in Learner Engagement scores by university between 2019 and 2020 for undergraduate and postgraduate coursework students respectively.

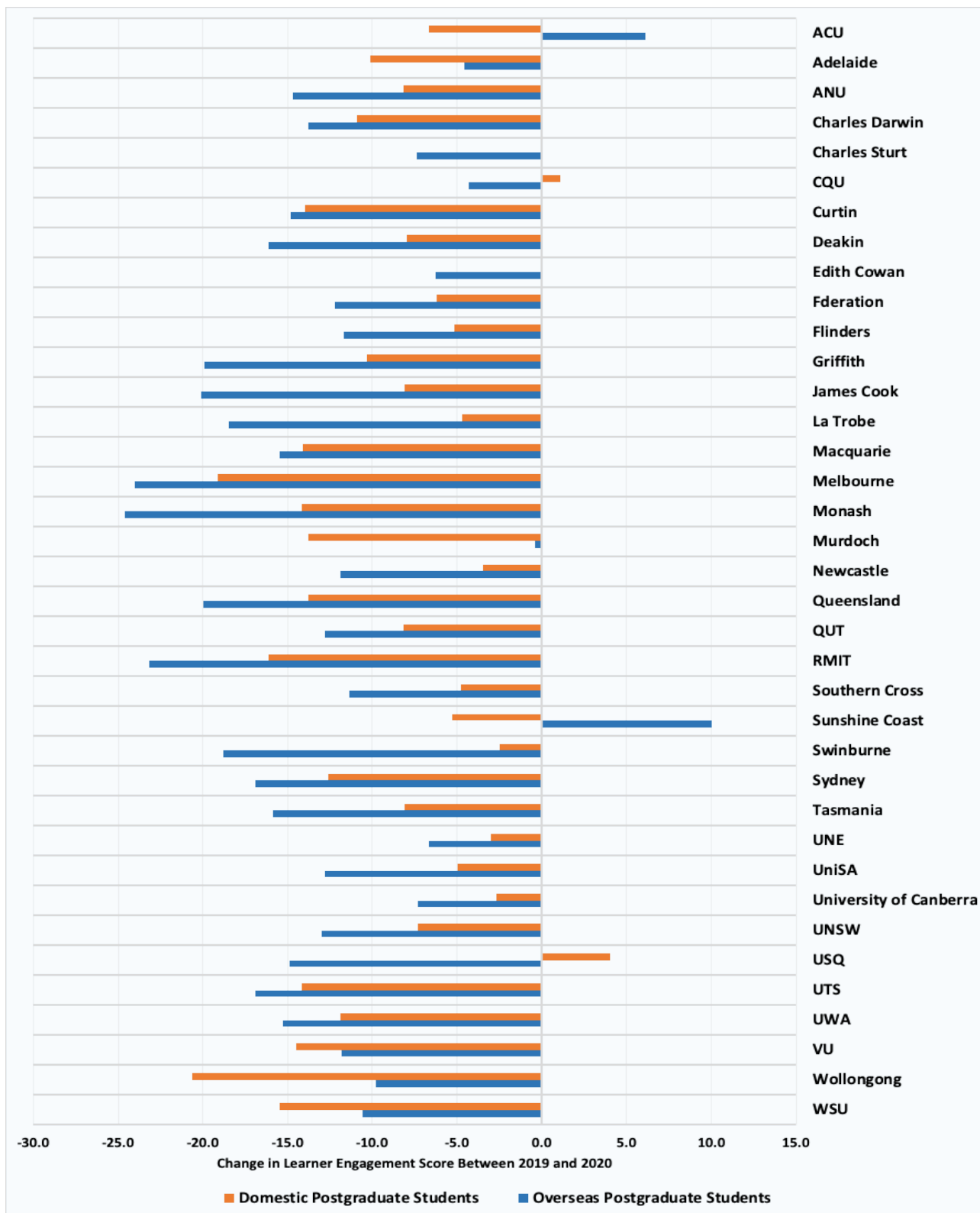
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<sup>7</sup> Appendix A lists the questions on which Learner Engagement in a QILT survey is based.

**Diagram 1: Change in QILT Learner Engagement Score Between 2019 and 2020 for Undergraduate Overseas and Domestic Students**



**Diagram 2: Change in QILT Learner Engagement Score Between 2019 and 2020 for Postgraduate Overseas and Domestic Students**



These results should not be surprising. In November 2020, TEQSA published an analysis by Dr Lin Martin of the results of student experience surveys conducted by individual higher education providers in 2020. The paper, “Foundations for good practice: The student experience of on-line learning in Australian higher

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education during the COVID-19 pandemic”<sup>8</sup>, found many positives and examples of best practice in the transfer to on-line learning, whilst also finding that:

“... the main themes raised by students in adapting to an on-line learning regime as:

- reduced interaction with academic staff and peers
- difficulties with IT and variation in staff expertise in its use
- assessment changes
- isolation, lack of engagement and reduced motivation
- difficulty with the translation of some subject areas from an internal to an on-line mode of delivery”

Significantly, the students in these surveys expressed concern over library closures, in part because libraries are spaces for access to IT resources and study, but also because they now serve as a key place for students to engage with others.

### ***Student sense of wellness***

During 2020, students had to adapt to changes in course delivery, modes of interaction with staff, and changes in assessment format and tasks. A survey of 700 Australian undergraduate and postgraduate students to establish the impact of COVID on wellbeing (sense of coherence and sense of anxiety about the future state)<sup>9</sup> indicated that, overall, 65.3% of the sample had a low or very low sense of wellbeing. Specifically, 74.7% of the sample found it more difficult to learn on-line than face-to-face, while 74.6% found it more difficult to interact with academic staff and 84.6% more difficult to interact with fellow students. A low percentage of students (16%) from the sample had accessed support provided by their university.

These findings align with media reporting of increased level of demand by young people for mental health and other psychological support. There is consistent anecdotal feedback about the experience with regards to lockdown fatigue for students in States that experienced long periods of lockdowns over the past two years, including high school students commencing higher education.

### **The staff experience**

#### ***Staffing structures in Australian universities***

At the beginning of 2020, Australia’s higher education sector had seen many years of growth and was a major contributor to national prosperity. Despite a 35% growth in student numbers between 2010 and 2019, as indicated in **Diagram 3**, the core of key staff involved in teaching, that is continuing and fixed term academic Teaching and Research (T&R) staff, has increased little since 2010. Over that period, continuing career academic roles have been generally scarce and hard to win. Career and reward structures, and internal and external pressures, such as ERA (Excellence in Research for Australia) assessments, mean that such staff are under considerable pressure to perform at high levels, particularly in the area of research.

The bulk of the extra teaching work generated by increases in student numbers since 2010 has been done by casual and full and part time Teaching-Only (TO) staff. Casual (or sessional) academic staff are generally only paid to teach or mark<sup>10</sup>. The opaque nature of data collection for university casual academic staff means that the actual number and breakdown of types of people employed as casuals is unknown, but conventional wisdom is that these staff are either higher degree by research students, retired academics, industry

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<sup>8</sup> Martin, L. (2021). Foundations for good practice: The student experience of on-line learning in Australian higher education during the COVID-19 pandemic. TEQSA. <https://www.teqsa.gov.au/latest-news/publications/foundations-good-practice-student-experience-online-learning-australian> (Date viewed 12 November 2021).

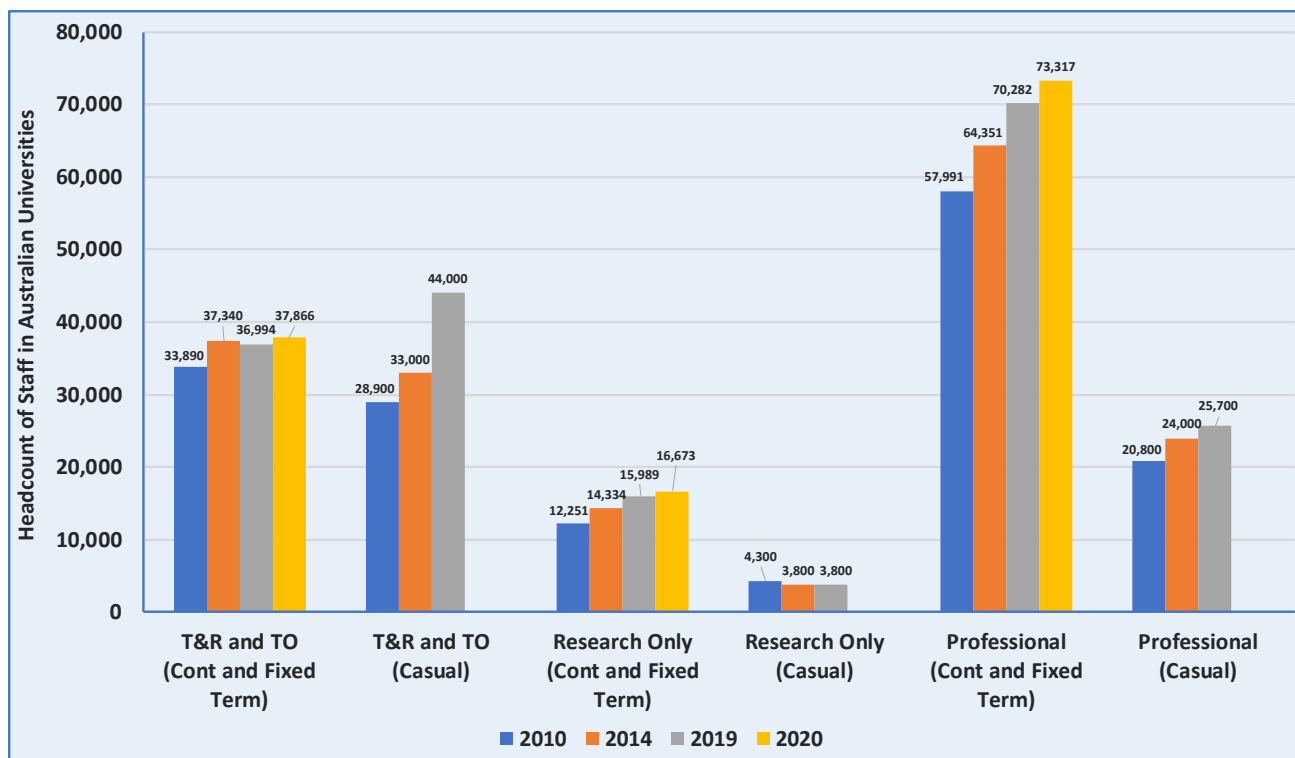
<sup>9</sup> Dodd, R.H., Dadaczynski, K., Okan, O., McCaffery, K.J. and Pickles, K. Psychological Wellbeing and Academic Experience of University Students in Australia during COVID-19. *Int. J. Environ. Res. Public Health* **2021**, *18*, 866. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18030866>

<sup>10</sup> Casual academic staff are paid an hourly rate to teach, doubled or tripled to cater for preparation and reasonably contiguous marking, but generally not paid for student consultations. Marking rates are set on an estimate of the number of items to be marked in an hour.

professionals or “treadmill”<sup>11</sup> academic staff. What is known is that, irrespective of their background or other employment status, it is these staff who work regularly on a face-to-face basis with students in tutorials and practical classes and undertake marking and give feedback.

**Diagram 3** below illustrates the staffing distribution on a headcount basis noting that the data for casual staff are estimates.

**Diagram 3: Headcount of staff in Australian universities by function and work contract: 2010-2020**



**Notes:**

- Headcount (except for casual staff) is from DESE Higher Education Statistics<sup>12</sup>.
- Headcount data for casual staff - Casual data are collected from Australian higher education institutions and reported on the basis of Full-Time Equivalent (FTE) staff. Headcount data on the number of casual staff in these institutions are rarely publicly available, and then only for individual institutions. A conservative estimate of headcount for casual staff has been made using a FTE/Headcount ratio of 1:3 (see Footnote 15).
- FTE data on casual staff for 2020 were not available at the time of writing.

**Change, restructures, and downsizing**

In line with projections of falling international student revenue, universities planned and executed restructures and/or staffing reductions during 2020 aligned to anticipated future income. Higher Education Statistics (HES) reporting of full staffing data for 2020 and 2021 is not available, however a survey of Victorian public university Annual Reports, where reporting of annual staffing numbers is mandatory, indicated that at the end of 2020 there were 932 (4%) fewer continuing staff and 7,356 (21%) fewer fixed term and casual staff

<sup>11</sup> Treadmill academic staff = "People with research qualifications, particularly doctorates, who aspire to but cannot secure a substantive academic appointment". Reference: Coates, H. and Goedegebuure, L. (2010). The Real Academic Revolution: Why we need to reconceptualise Australia’s future academic workforce, and eight possible strategies for how to go about this. LH Martin Institute. [https://melbourne-cshe.unimelb.edu.au/data/assets/pdf\\_file/0007/2565070/Why-we-need-to-reconceptualise-Australias-future-academic-workforce.pdf](https://melbourne-cshe.unimelb.edu.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0007/2565070/Why-we-need-to-reconceptualise-Australias-future-academic-workforce.pdf) (Date viewed 18 November 2021).

<sup>12</sup> Ibid 2.

in the eight universities while higher education student enrolments declined by 2.4%. The NSW Auditor-General's report on its 2020 audits of universities indicated that between 2019 and 2020, student enrolments declined by 3.3% and academic staff and professional staff numbers in NSW universities declined by 7.6% and 7.9% respectively (3,200 FTE)<sup>13</sup>

The data provided by the Australian Higher Education Industry Association's (AHEIA) members to the Senate Select Committee on Job Security<sup>14</sup> indicated that, between June 2019 and June 2020, casual academic staff numbers declined by 7.8% and casual professional staff numbers by 18.6%. At the same time, there was marginal growth in the numbers of continuing staff. These data suggest that, in line with past downsizing exercises, universities are initially prioritising reductions in professional staff numbers (**Table 1**).

**Table 1. Variations in staffing levels in 37 Australian universities 2019 - 2020**

		2019	2020	Change 2019/2020	% Change 2019/2020
<b>Full-Time Equivalent (FTE) staff at June 30</b>					
Casual	Academic	5,839	5,384	-455	-7.8%
	Professional	3,620	2,966	-654	-18.1%
Fixed Term	Academic	11,465	11,464	-1	-0.0%
	Professional	13,036	12,784	-253	-1.9%
Continuing	Academic	19,090	19,525	434	2.3%
	Professional	31,272	31,962	690	2.2%
<b>Staff headcount at June 30</b>					
Casual	Academic	44,417	42,020	-2,407	-5.4%
	Professional	34,927	28,439	-6,488	-18.6%
Fixed term	Academic	13,947	13,947	0	0.0%
	Professional	15,000	14,710	-290	-1.9%
Continuing	Academic	20,298	20,779	481	2.4%
	Professional	33,822	34,620	798	2.4%

The FTE data provided by AHEIA members are different from the 11,531 FTE academic and 17,644 FTE professional casual staff which these universities reported to HES as being employed in 2019<sup>15</sup>. This difference may be explained by different reporting periods and methods, but the publicly available data suggest that the number of people (headcount) employed in the higher education sector is much higher than FTE data suggest as **Table 1** illustrates, especially for casual staff. Thus, the impact of job losses on both employment and student education is greater in numeric and human terms than mere consideration of FTE staff numbers would indicate. A substantially larger number of people keep the system running and are primary points of contact with students. University responses to COVID means that many of these people will no longer be around.

Analysing Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) payroll data, the Australia Institute's Centre for the Future of Work estimates that of the 40,000 jobs lost in the whole higher education sector, 35,000 jobs were lost in

<sup>13</sup> NSW Auditor General. Universities 2020 Audits, 18 June 2021. p5.  
[https://www.audit.nsw.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/FINAL%20report%20-%20Universities%202020%20audits\\_1.pdf](https://www.audit.nsw.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/FINAL%20report%20-%20Universities%202020%20audits_1.pdf) (Date viewed 12 November 2021).

<sup>14</sup> Select Committee on Job Security (October 2021). Second interim report: insecurity in publicly funded jobs. Data provided by members of AHEIA pp 182-183.

<sup>15</sup> The AHEIA data suggest that the ratio of casual academic staff FTE/headcount is 1:7 and casual professional staff FTE/headcount is 1:9. If these ratios are applied to the HES casual FTE data, then in 2019 there were 102,700 casual academic staff undertaking teaching and research and teaching only duties and 220,000 casual professional staff suggesting that the total number of people employed in Australian universities in that year was 440,000. We have adopted a more conservative ratio of 1:3 in **Diagram 3**.

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public universities between May 2020 and May 2021<sup>16</sup>. Unless revenue streams are supplemented, staff reductions of this level are unlikely to enable universities to operate in their pre-COVID mode and, increasingly, continuing staff will be affected. A key limiting factor is the extent of the return of international students. Estimates suggest that this may gradually resume between 2022 and 2026. Declining revenue, and potential salary increases and bids to retain workload allocations for research time arising from the currently commencing round of enterprise bargaining<sup>17</sup> means that most of the 41 Australian public universities have executed or foreshadowed reductions in continuing and fixed term staff roles. Most of these reductions are facilitated by organisational restructures and voluntary or other redundancy arrangements.

### ***Impact of change and restructures on staff***

Like for many in the broader community, 2020 and 2021 were difficult years for staff in higher education. COVID isolation meant a rapid and, in many cases, a comprehensive shift of teaching and learning interactions and assessment online, together with the need for significant initiatives to support students, which was often unsupported by relevant training. In some states, neither staff nor students have been on campus for the majority of 2020 and 2021. Staff worked from home for large portions of that time, combining work and family life. Anecdotal evidence suggests that many academic staff do not want to continue teaching in these ways in a post-COVID world whilst others felt they had increased autonomy and flexibility and they appreciated the opportunity to exercise initiative but became tired of constant on-line interactions.

As part of a broader international exercise, 370 Australian academic staff responded to a survey on the impact of COVID in 2020<sup>18</sup>. Many were positive about the flexibility afforded by remote working and acknowledged the increase in skill and competence in pedagogy forced by the rapid transfer to digital modes. But they also reported stress arising from the rapid conversion to online pedagogy, concerns over its longer-term implications, not only for student learning but also for jobs, increased workloads, and work intensification. There was also a pervasive sense of uncertainty about the future of higher education, projected income cuts and significant reductions in the staff available on campus, and the overall size of the workforce.

In 2021, as part of a log of claims in the upcoming round of enterprise bargaining, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) at the University of Sydney highlighted similar factors such as the impact of government funding models on particular disciplines, the workload demands in teaching with new forms of pedagogy and their impact on time available for research, failures of internal systems and processes, and the “corrosive uncertainty” arising from restructures.

The data in **Table 1** suggest that universities have felt they have had little option but to seek cost savings through the reduction of professional staff roles, either through:

1. generic invitations to staff to seek a voluntary redundancy,
2. restructures designed to streamline management structures and reduce administrative support, or
3. complex exercises designed to align organisational structures to future strategy often resulting in extensive ‘spill and fill’ exercises with some jobs being downgraded in classification level.

These COVID-driven changes come after at least one wide-ranging restructure in the past five years for NSW universities<sup>19</sup> and this is likely to be the case for many universities across Australia.

Reductions in casual academic staff are likely to diminish the number of available contact points for students and increase the amount of student support/pastoral care work required of full and part time TO and T&R

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid* 3.

<sup>17</sup> Workload allocation models enshrined in enterprise agreements commence at a base of allocating 40% of a Teaching and Research academic’s time to research.

<sup>18</sup> Fiona McGaughey, Richard Watermeyer, Kalpana Shankar, Venkata, Ratnadeep Suri, Cathryn Knight, Tom Crick, Joanne Hardman, Dean Phelan and Roger Chung (2021). ‘This can’t be the new norm’: academics’ perspectives on the COVID-19 crisis for the Australian university sector, Higher Education Research and Development.

<sup>19</sup> Data provided to the NSW Legislative Council enquiry into the Future Development of the NSW Tertiary Education Sector in 2020 indicated that all NSW universities had commenced or planned restructures.



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staff. At the same time, performance pressures remain and may be intensified for staff, and existing workload management processes guarantee teaching-free time to undertake research.

## Going forward

Unlike many other sectors of Australian society, there will be no quick return for higher education to a pre-COVID 'normal'. Universities will be poorer and will need to develop sustainable operating models in line with reductions in international student fee income and domestic undergraduate funding. Postgraduate and undergraduate students are likely to seek greater interaction with peers in structured learning environments and with both academic and professional staff, at a time when the actual numbers of staff available to support them are declining. Students may demand more academic support than previously, especially those commencing students where Commonwealth Supported Place (CSP) loans are significantly increased for the disciplines which they are studying and/or where they have not attended campus or school for the last two years.

Complex new demands are being placed on universities as they navigate the Job-Ready Graduates Package (JRGP) with altered student contributions and progress requirements for the cohort commencing in 2022. Changed rates of CSP student contributions will impact on internal budget arrangements placing financial pressure on some disciplines, and the reintroduced Student Learning Entitlement (SLE) which will place emphasis on ensuring student progress and completions<sup>20</sup>. Universities are already planning for the introduction of JRGP, including student support and early interventions to ensure they meet the SLE and low completion rate requirements, as well as implementing relevant policies, systems, and processes.

In 2022, staff who worked hard in 2020 and 2021 to create and sustain a largely on-line environment and ensure student education and completions may see some of their personal freedoms diminish while they continue to live with the uncertainty of job loss and increased workloads due to departures of casual and fixed-term academic staff and reduced administrative support. They will be required to meet new demands from students, particularly in mental health and wellbeing, and from international students returning to Australian campuses. All this may be exacerbated by a sense that there is little appreciation by the public or government decision-makers of their efforts and the contribution which they and the students they have educated make to the community, directly in terms of health care and wellbeing, and through their policy and scientific contributions to the management of COVID, as well as more broadly in terms of expertise contributed to social and scientific initiatives and debate.

While universities are faced with many challenges, some of which relate to the broader community and events, over which they have little control, they do have influence over relationships with staff and students and the settings in which staff and students interact. We suggest that these will need to be reviewed and reframed as universities move forward to deal with new circumstances.

Universities are actively exploring how to reap and retain the benefits of the changes over the past two years. As they do, they must also address the challenge of ensuring that human settings are optimised and that staff and students are engaged, feel supported and can flourish. This is not an easy task in a time of diminishing revenue and high levels of uncertainty. We identify five immediate human challenges for university leaders:

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<sup>20</sup> <https://www.dese.gov.au/job-ready/improving-higher-education-students> (Date viewed 12 November 2021).

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## **1. Optimising support for students**

Academic staff, particularly casual academic staff, have the greatest level of face-to-face engagement with students and are able to identify support needs for individuals. The data from Victoria and NSW referred to earlier suggest that in 2020 the number of academic staff available to support students may have declined at a greater rate than the level of student enrolment, resulting in potential pressure on academic and emotional support for remaining staff, particularly dealing with several cohorts of students new to campus. It is likely that students will continue to require the academic, financial and psychological support that has been provided by all universities over the past two years. But going forward, universities will also need to monitor the ratio of academic staff to students and provide strong support to all academic staff (including casual staff) and to help them identify, manage and, where required, refer students with emerging issues to appropriate support services.

Professional staff numbers have declined in greater proportion than academic staff numbers and many such staff are essential to ensuring that students flourish. As with academic staff, appropriate staffing ratios will need to be maintained in libraries, learning skills development, IT support, financial aid and student services, as well as in student advising, counselling and psychological support.

A further issue for universities to resolve is whether to try to diversify the international student population to grow numbers and be less dependent on a small number of source countries. Diverse student groups, including diversity within domestic students (eg socio-economic, socio-cultural-linguistic, rural and city, physical and learning disability), have different learning and support needs; one size will not fit all. Universities need to consider their mix of international and domestic students and how they deliver to specific cohorts within that mix to ensure a high-quality student experience and successful outcomes.

## **2. Retaining and building staff capacity**

Staff reductions represent a human impact on those staff who remain as well as those who leave but, as importantly, a loss of knowledge and expertise necessary to rebuild and reframe institutions. 2021 marks the beginning of a further round of enterprise bargaining for almost all universities, and the NTEU has made salary claims of 10% -12% over a three-year period. Such increases can only be paid for by increased revenue or reduced costs, the latter in the form of reduced staff numbers, with further loss of intellectual capital and future capacity. Strategies focused on developing a better understanding of the casual workforce, on improving conditions for casual staff, and on the retention of existing talent in the short and medium term at the expense of pay increases, may be necessary to secure a foundation for future stability and growth including pay rises for staff.

## **3. Aligning reward to the new reality**

The casual academic workforce has contributed to a significant increase in research productivity of Australian continuing and fixed-term academic staff, who generally must achieve explicit standards for research output and who have industrially sequestered time for research against which teaching duties cannot be allocated. While this output has resulted in the increased international status of Australian universities, bolstered its attractiveness in the international student market and is a significant consideration in academic promotion systems, time demands on continuing academic staff arising from increased teaching and pastoral care demands may result in a decline in research productivity. Universities may need to reconsider existing performance standards around research productivity to align with this new reality noting the importance of this for early career researchers.

## **4. The 'sticky campus' for the commuter students and staff**

Currently, students are indicating a strong desire to return to a campus experience and peer-to-peer networking and learning. For staff, it's more differentiated; some staff and management are eager to return to campus and others would like to retain the flexibility and autonomy of working from home for at least part

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of the week. Surveys of workplaces, such as the recent Committee for Sydney's report<sup>21</sup>, indicate office workers and those who work in city centres prefer the flexible work arrangements. After the initial excitement and effort, there is a risk that students will return to pre-pandemic commuter student behaviour. These include declining attendance within the first few weeks after the commencement of classes, limited campus attendance outside class times, and lack of participation in extra-curricular or social activities. At the same time, international students may be returning in small numbers initially, but with numbers increasing over time will want to become involved in on-campus activities. Universities have demonstrated agility and responsiveness to student and staff needs in the past two years which, if embedded as institutional capability as a blend of on-campus experiences together with sophisticated on-line teaching and learning methodologies and with capacity for staff to work flexibly, can ensure a vibrant campus experience for students and staff in coming years.

## 5. Optimising human digital connectivity

Before the pandemic, many students opted to watch recorded lectures rather than attend face-to-face. There is an active debate as to whether the traditional lecture will survive and about the optimal mix of face-to-face and on-line teaching. Digital technology provides many exciting opportunities for learning and engaging with others, but learning is also about human engagement and interaction with teachers and peers. The challenge for universities will be to develop new forms of learning experiences where on-line and highly engaged face-to-face teaching blend seamlessly, which are appropriately aligned to course content and can be flexibly deployed to meet the needs of specific cohorts of students. Changes such as these involve not only academic and administrative staff but also the configuration, usage and the availability of IT and internet access. To avoid entrenching a new area of student disadvantage, any wholesale move to digital learning will require universities to ensure that all students have reliable access to the internet, as well as for those staff who work from home.

## Conclusion

The COVID pandemic has had a major and lasting impact on higher education in Australia. International student numbers have declined and may take some time to return to pre-COVID levels, if indeed this is achievable given strong international competition and fracturing international geo-politics. Universities have shrunk their workforce in the light of forecast student and revenue reductions to a greater extent than actual reductions in student numbers or revenue suggest. Universities must manage staff numbers and staff wellbeing carefully as student numbers grow, to ensure that students have a high-quality experience and that staff remain productive rather than over-committed and stressed. Remaining staff will need support to build on the lessons of 2020/2021 to develop curricula which achieves an appropriate blend of face-to-face and on-line delivery. Ensuring that students' learning and wellbeing needs are met is critical, and this should be underpinned by finding new ways to provide greater certainty and support to those casual academic and professional staff who deal directly with students.

As the country edges towards a new COVID-normal, university leaders face challenges to ensure that universities continue to educate the nation's future workforce, drive the nation's research, re-establish international standing and relationships, and can operate with reduced income and fewer staff. These are complex and difficult tasks which can only be achieved if the human impact on staff and students over the past two years is taken into account. We suggest that universities will need to increasingly focus on wellbeing, support, inclusion and trust for both staff and students; this will be a key ingredient to a vibrant and healthy higher education system.

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<sup>21</sup> <https://sydney.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/CFS-Sydney-Leadership-Survey-August-2021.pdf> (date viewed 12 November 2021).  
<https://www.theguardian.com/business/2021/oct/25/cluster-commuters-how-returning-to-the-office-could-change-our-cities-and-our-lives> (Date viewed 12 November 2021).

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## Appendix 1: Questions asked of students in QILT's Student Experience Survey

### Learner engagement - Students who were positive about their interactions with staff and students

The percentage of students who rated learner engagement at their institution positively. This indicator is based on the average of a student's responses to the following seven questions from the SES:

During <year of survey>, to what extent have you:

1. felt prepared for your study?
2. had a sense of belonging to your institution?

In <year of survey>, how frequently have you:

1. participated in discussions on-line or face-to-face?
2. worked with other students as part of your study?
3. interacted with students outside study requirements?
4. interacted with students who are very different from you?

During <year of survey>, to what extent have you:

1. been given opportunities to interact with local students (where applicable for international students)?

Ref: [https://www.qilt.edu.au/surveys/student-experience-survey-\(ses\)](https://www.qilt.edu.au/surveys/student-experience-survey-(ses)) (Date viewed 12 November 2021).