

What do business school academics want? Reflections from the national survey on workplace climate and well-being: Australia and New Zealand

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Abstract

This research discusses the findings from a study undertaken for an exploration of the critical issues around the working conditions, workplace climate, and well-being of business school (predominantly management) academics in Australia and New Zealand. With an ageing workforce, and almost half of the Australian and New Zealand workforce intending to retire, move overseas, or leave the sector within this decade, amidst rising demand in the tertiary education sector, the effective retention of this key skilled workforce is pertinent. With data from a survey conducted in 2017 involving 451 business school academics in Australia and New Zealand, this research note highlights several key issues around the areas of workplace climate and well-being which importantly, are within the control of management. Specifically, these salient workforce issues include work intensification, burnout, and poor work–life balance.

Keywords: Australia, work-related attitudes/behaviours, New Zealand, well-being and psychosocial risk factors

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It is simply very hard to be a super-person in every aspect; we are expected to write grant applications like a pro, supervise student projects and provide pastoral care, teach classes and innovate in teaching, while devising and designing effective research projects, executing projects, and writing these up professionally. Oh - and balance all those other service and administration tasks. Is there anything else they can want us to do? It feels like they want three or four distinct jobs out of each person and we are constantly 'split' between everything and unable to feel as though we have accomplished much anywhere in our job.

Pressure to excel on multiple metrics - teaching, publishing, industry engagement, tender awards, leadership

INTRODUCTION

The quotes above reflect the genesis of this research into Australian and New Zealand academics' workplace well-being from conversations at university business faculties and the annual Australian and New Zealand Academy of Management (ANZAM) conference. These themes increasingly test Frost and Taylor's (1996) seminal work on the rhythms of academic life, which highlighted the academic life as both a privilege and a challenge. Frost and Taylor conclude their tome with a look at the – Future Rhythms of Academic Life – and postulate that: 'It is likely that the rate of change experienced by academics and their professions and institutions will accelerate' (1996: 495).

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Many of us would agree, but do the negatives outweigh the positive changes? This research provides a glimpse into these issues.

As we would argue, much has changed in the 20 years since Taylor and Frost's publication not least in the way universities are managed. Managerialism: a set of market-based ideals and economic values (Deem, Hillyard, & Reed, 2008; Winter, 2017) has become firmly fixed in a corporate perspective of the university and as such, academic work needs to react in managerial and financial terms. This has largely reshaped academic work and identity in Australia and New Zealand. In this context, we would argue that such reforms have had the effect of emphasising the challenge of being an academic, rather than the privilege. As the boundaries of the traditional cloistered university department or faculty melt away, the central focus and expectations on academics in a globally connected and competitive environment is to attract external funding and publish in increasingly high-ranked journals. As such, these changes warrant a reflection on how they are impacting on the well-being of (business school) academics (Currie & Eveline, 2011). We anticipate that in putting some research behind these issues, we can generate a proactive debate around academic work across multiple levels.

BACKGROUND

This survey was carried out by ANZAM in collaboration with the Australian Consortium for Research on Employment and Work at Monash University on predominantly management and other business school academics in Australia and New Zealand. This study addresses the key indicators associated with workplace climate and well-being through a comprehensive national survey designed to explore the working conditions, well-being, and organisational and management practices that characterise the work environments of business school academics. As alluded to, the profession is facing increasingly challenging working conditions. Coupled with an ageing workforce, and almost half of the Australian and New Zealand workforce intending to retire, move overseas, or leave the sector within the next 10 years (Bexley, James, & Arkoudis, 2011), there is a rising need to provide detailed research and evidence as a catalyst and platform for intervention strategies to address issues facing the profession.

METHODOLOGY

The findings in this study are based on data from a survey conducted by ANZAM in collaboration with the Monash University. The survey was publicised by ANZAM through emails to ANZAM members in 2017. Individual respondents were informed of the survey through an email bulletin and at the 2017 ANZAM annual conference seeking their participation, which also contained a hyperlink to the survey. Potential respondents were advised that the survey was completely voluntary, anonymous, confidential, and independent, and that they were able to choose not to complete any of the individual questions. A total of 451 usable responses were received from business school academics currently working in Australia and New Zealand. All of the scales utilised in the survey had either been previously validated and published, or used in similar large-scale nationwide studies on academics.

RESPONDENT DEMOGRAPHICS

On average, respondents were 50 years old ($SD = 10.9$) and the majority were female (52%) and were in job roles that involved research, teaching, and administration work (62%). Typically, respondents had 16 years of occupational tenure ($SD = 9.1$) and worked in their current and primary employing organisation for an average of 10 years ($SD = 8.0$). A large majority of respondents worked in permanent full-time positions (68%) and half of the respondents were either in lecturer or senior lecturer positions (50%).

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

This research note presents an overview of the findings. The survey examined academics' workplace well-being (e.g., workload, burnout, engagement, work–life balance, research motivation, occupational satisfaction, occupational embeddedness, and occupational turnover intentions) and workplace climate (e.g., participation and academic freedom, employee voice and silence, organisational practices, support at work, and trust) predominately of management academics within the business schools of Australia and New Zealand.

WORKPLACE WELL-BEING

Workloads

Respondents were asked to explore the intensity of their work by indicating how often the job required them to work very fast or very hard, with little time to get things done well. Overwhelmingly, the majority of respondents reported intensification of workloads with regards to its quantity, intensity, and complexity. The study found increased administrative work responsibilities and mounting pressures to publish in top ranking journals are key contributors. Respondents also reported that workload issues are exacerbated by the lack of provisions such as additional time or resources to shoulder added work tasks. Qualitative data also suggests that such intensification of work beyond an individual's capacity has also placed pressures on the quality of work, in particular, research. Indeed, 56% of respondents¹ indicated that they often had more work than they could do well. The concern here lies in the paradox that business school academics are under pressure to publish in quality journals, but the time to undertake such research is decreasing due to the addition of peripheral workload activities.

Change in workloads

Overall, the survey identified that majority of respondents felt that workloads had become worse over the previous 5 years. Over 70% of respondents reported that conditions surrounding administrative workloads, 'publish or perish' pressures, and the need to work during nonwork times such as evenings and weekends have worsened over the past 5 years. Particularly, respondents have flagged that changes in the area of teaching (e.g., multiple modes of teaching including face-to-face, online, or mixed; move towards blended learning methods; quality of students) have also compounded the levels of complexity in an academic's work. Sentiments of respondents generally resonated a lack of support available to cope with such changes in workloads. As such, it is not surprising that respondents have indicated the encroachment of work into supposed nonwork/recovery time (e.g., evenings and weekends). Qualitative data suggests that such conditions are likely to exacerbate burnout and diminish opportunities for creative thinking and scholarship.

Burnout

Close to 60% of respondents reported that they often or always felt worn out at the end of the working day and nearly 40% indicated that they regularly felt burnt out because of their work. Respondents have demonstrated signs of reaching a tipping point wherein the impingement of work on their nonwork and recovery time is worsening. This is likely to overspill and negatively influence an individual's overall well-being and quality of life.

¹ Fifty-six per cent of respondents indicated that they had to do more work than they could do well at least 'once or twice per week' to 'several times per day'.

Engagement

Despite increasing workloads, majority of respondents reported feeling engaged at their work. In total, 66% of respondents indicated that they were often proud of their work and 41% reported feeling immersed in their work every day. However, qualitative data from respondents indicated that chronic exposure to elevated workload and exhaustion, along with deteriorating aspects of workplace climate (e.g., increasing managerialism, employee silence, lack of training, and developmental opportunities) may be contributing to higher levels of discontent and the erosion of engagement among academics. If these issues are left unaddressed, qualitative data indicates that they could potentially lead to higher turnover rates in this sector.

Work–life balance

Almost half of respondents consistently indicated they were either dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with the way in which they were able to reconcile demands from both work and personal/family domains. In all, 51% of respondents were discontented with their ability to balance the needs of their job with those of their personal or family life. Consistent with findings related to previous indicators, respondents expressed that having to cope with elevated workloads that surpass their capacities without additional support has negatively impacted their ability to maintain an adequate level of work–life balance.

Research motivation

In terms of academics' motivation to conduct research, respondents reported being driven by both intrinsic and extrinsic aspects of engaging in research. However, it is noted that a comparatively larger percentage of respondents indicated that they conducted research for intrinsic reasons such as enjoyment and learning opportunities. Between 82 and 89% of respondents reported that they found great pleasure in conducting and learning new things through research on the indices. Compared to such figures, a relatively smaller proportion of respondents (69%) indicated that they wanted to be recognised by peers for conducting sound research.

Occupational satisfaction

Overall, more than half of the respondents indicated they were satisfied with their careers as academics. This was particularly so for the general success in the profession, and progress made towards income and skill development goals. However, more than a third of respondents were discontented with their progress made towards their goals for advancement. Qualitative data suggests that the combination of unrealistic performance goals with heavy emphasis on the production of publications in highly ranked and within restrictive lists of journals and a general increase in workloads are increasingly seen as unmanageable. These have contributed to feelings of demotivation as respondents report that career advancement opportunities, which are often tied to publication outcomes, are perceived to be increasingly unattainable.

Occupational embeddedness

When asked about individual perceptions on fit and link to the academic profession, the majority of respondents indicated feeling attached (76%) and tightly connected (61%) to the profession. However, close to 40% of respondents did not feel that the idea of leaving academia was unconceivable. Qualitative data suggest that respondents are connected to and do value the content of work and the network of professional colleagues. Nevertheless, mounting discontent with the issues presented above may be pushing academics to regard the decision of leaving the profession to be less difficult.

Intentions to leave the occupation

This study found that a quarter of respondents reported that they have considered leaving the academic profession and up to 23% of respondents indicated that they intended to seek employment in a different profession. These findings are concerning as they represent intentions to *exit the academic profession* as opposed to leaving the current employing organisation for another academic post. This also highlights a potentially significant exodus of skilled and experienced staff, which may exacerbate the strain on a workforce that has already been predicted to face impending shortages amidst an expanding sector (Bexley, Arkoudis, & James, 2013). Particularly with an ageing academic workforce, where up to half of the workforce is aged 45 and above (Australia Government Department of Education and Training, 2016) and approximately half of the Australian academic workforce intending to retire, move overseas, or leave the higher education sector during this decade (Bexley, James, & Arkoudis, 2011), such problems may pose significant challenges for the academic sector in the near future. We believe this is a finding that needs further investigation.

WORKPLACE CLIMATE

Change in participation and academic freedom

These findings relate to perceived opportunities to participate in decision-making and the perceived level of academic freedom an academic possesses in the pursuit of knowledge and decisions around teaching content or delivery methods, research topic choices and publication avenues (Brown, Cron, & Slocum, 1998; Arnold, Flaherty, Voss, & Mowen, 2009; Bentley, McLeod, & Teo, 2014; Teichler, 2015).

For policies involvement, this study indicates that conditions have worsened over the last 5-year period. Particularly, with regard to opportunities in relations to interaction with higher levels of management. For example, 41% of respondents felt that such chances in participatory decision-making at the departmental level have deteriorated, as compared with 48% at the faculty level and 51% at the institutional level. These results may paint a picture of a climate of diminishing participation and involvement of employees and a growing disconnect between employees and senior management. This may not be surprising given the lack of trust in senior management² and fear of negative repercussions for speaking up³ found in this study.

In terms of academic freedom, close to 40% of respondents indicated an overall decline in the 5 years, with only 18% of respondents reporting improvements in this regard. Respondents have elaborated that the increasing corporatisation of universities and the growing culture of managerialism has altered the landscape of academia. More specifically, respondents have indicated that such changes have stifled creativity, innovation, and autonomy both in the areas of research and teaching, and have dampened the culture of scientific inquiry.

Employee voice and silence

In an organisation, employee voice mechanisms are not only integral to the development of effective communication and the construction of cooperative workplace relations, but are contributors to greater employee performance too (Pyman, Holland, Teicher, & Cooper, 2010; Holland, Allen, & Cooper, 2013; Boxall & Purcell, 2016). At first glance, dialogues between senior management and employees in the form of staff meetings seem to be a common voice mechanism present at workplaces as a large

² Only less than a quarter of respondents felt that they could trust senior management to be sincere in its attempts to consider employees' perspectives.

³ Close to 60% of respondents indicated that they have remained silent in the workplace due to fear of negative consequences.

majority of respondents (83%) answered positively to this item. However, upon closer investigation, a comparatively smaller proportion of respondents have indicated that academics are involved in solving daily operational issues through the use of problem-solving teams with senior management (45%). This may suggest that although there are overt efforts to foster conversations between management and employees, the actual *depth* and *active involvement* of employees in resolving daily operational issues, which are likely to have a pertinent impact on workplace well-being may be lacking in comparison. In fact, a large percentage of respondents reported that they remained silent at the workplace due to fear of negative consequences (59%) and disadvantages from voicing their opinions and concerns (59%), and perceptions of futility (69%). In the context of the lack of trust in senior management, such issues are likely to reinforce the study's findings in relation to academics' feelings of discontent with the unmanageable workloads, unrealistic performance goals, lack of support for training and development, and burnout.

Organisational practices

Despite being a highly skilled sector of the workforce, there is an underlying concern with regards to training and development, career management, and job security. Of particular concern was the finding where 52% of respondents did not feel that their organisation had dedicated much effort or resources into providing training opportunities to equip employees to be competent in their job roles. Only 2% responded felt strongly that they have received adequate training to be proficient in their roles. Similarly, 2% of respondents were in strong agreement that their organisation had proactively located opportunities for the expansion of employees' knowledge and abilities. This is likely to compound frustrations among academics as there is little support to help equip individuals with the elevating intensity and complexity of service, administrative, teaching, and research workloads, and performance requirements. Despite almost 70% of this survey's respondents being permanent and tenured employees, it was surprising that only 29% felt that they were provided with adequate levels of job security.

Support at work

Overall, there is a general perception of inadequate support and appreciation from management. Almost 40% of respondents were not in agreement that their organisation valued their contributions and 57% of respondents did not feel that their organisations cared about their well-being. However, smaller proportions of respondents harboured such sentiments towards their direct supervisors. For instance, only 15% of respondents reported that their supervisors did not value their contributions at work. This may speak to the underlying issues that may be contributing to the growing disjuncture between senior management and employees in this sector.

Trust in senior management and direct supervisor

Similar to the findings related to support at work, relatively less respondents reported having trust in senior management as compared with direct supervisors. For instance, a much higher proportion of respondents (63%, e.g., 'agreed' and 'strongly agreed') were confident that their supervisors will always treat them fairly as compared with senior management (26%, e.g., 'agreed' and 'strongly agreed').

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This survey set out to provide an overview primarily of the workplace well-being and climate of the business school academic sector in Australia and New Zealand. Initiated by ANZAM, the primary aim of this study was to gather information that could be useful in an environment of constant government

review and efficiency drives within the higher education field. As one of the top exports for both countries, issues pertaining to well-being and climate of this workforce are particularly relevant.

Although preliminary findings show that academics are highly engaged and embedded in their occupation, a key feature to emerge in this research is the concerns regarding increased job insecurity, work intensification, and the impact of these issues on work–life balance and general well-being. Much of this was seen to be a result of pressures and expectations on academics now in a globally connected and increasingly competitive environment. Such findings corroborate similar national surveys conducted in Australia (Bentley, McLeod, & Teo, 2014; National Tertiary Education Union [NTEU], 2015), where academia has been regarded as a relatively high-stress working environment particularly with increasing levels of workload and poor work–life balance. The NTEU (2015) have also reported that the majority of academics indicated high job satisfaction (76%), however, only 30% regarded their workload to be ‘manageable’ or ‘reasonable’.

Taking the theme from Frost and Taylor’s seminal book on academic careers, we picked up on several points linked to the notion inherent within the career and role of an academic is the opportunity to make mistakes and see the academic world from different vantage points. This implies time to learn and develop knowledge, skills, and ability in the craft of academia. However, particularly for early career academics, this time appears to no longer exist (see Bolden, Gosling, O’Brien, Peters, Ryan, & Haslan, 2012). Rather than undertaking a PhD whilst learning the skills of the craft, these academics are expected to have publications in high-ranking journals and on-going research projects to compete for academic jobs. Indeed, with the ANZAM conference falling in December, it is increasingly seen as a default marketplace for jobs for these early carer researchers.

For middle and late career academics, the traditional roles of supervision, professional service for journals and the university are juxtaposed with the ever-increasing demands of high-level publications and the need to be applying for dwindling external funding. Such academics are also faced with the consequences of increased teaching loads and remedial performance management if these criteria are not met. This competitive climate developed in an era of managerialism can tip the balance from privilege to an overwhelming challenge (Brown, Cron, & Slocum, 1998; Arnold et al., 2009), as work intensification increases the likelihood declining workplace well-being as employees move from engagement to burnout. This is particularly so given the current research’s finding whereby such increased pressures in academia has intensified the encroachment of work into nonwork or recovery time such as evenings, weekends, and holidays (Kinman & Jones, 2008; Cannizzo & Osbaldiston, 2016).

Findings of this study into the workplace well-being and climate of academics highlights the emergent of significant issues. In an environment exacerbated by an ageing workforce (Bexley, James, & Arkoudis, 2011), there are signs of the potential problems for the labour market in the not-so distant future.

Significant issues that also came to light in this study of climate and workplace well-being include the often related areas of job insecurity, high levels of employee silence, work intensification, and an increasing disjuncture between senior management and the academic workforce. This paints a picture of workforce under increasing pressure.

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