

## FEATURE ARTICLE

# Pandemic Pressures in Universities and their Libraries: a View from Australia<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** The COVID-19 pandemic has heavily impacted Australian universities and their libraries but has been felt most strongly by students and staff who are already marginalised. This article, written by Kay Tucker and Becky Batagol, draws upon both published literature and the authors' own experiences as a librarian and academic employed at Monash University, Australia's largest university. Important lessons from the pandemic for universities and university libraries at times of crisis and disaster include: actively recognising and responding to structural inequalities amongst students and staff; organising services so that all can participate to their fullest ability; providing students with opportunities for social connection, enhanced digital capabilities, safe and inclusive spaces and accessible materials; as well as flexible employment practices.

**Keywords:** universities; university libraries; COVID-19; Australia

Although Australia has ridden the waves of the COVID-19 pandemic relatively unscathed so far, its higher education sector has been pummelled. The Australian tertiary education sector experienced more job losses in the 12 months until May 2021 than almost any other sector of the national economy.<sup>2</sup> The COVID-19 crisis has heightened inequalities worldwide and is threatening to erase decades of progress on global poverty and gender and racial equality.<sup>3</sup>

This article focuses on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Australian universities and their libraries with a particular focus on gender equality and social inclusion. We have written this article using our experiences as employees of Monash University, Australia to illustrate our argument. Bringing together our perspectives as a law librarian and legal academic provides a holistic picture of working life at an Australian university during the first two years of the pandemic in 2020 and 2021.

Monash University is Australia's largest university with four campuses in the State of Victoria, one each in Malaysia and Indonesia, as well as various affiliations around the world. There are some 86,000 students and 18,850 staff; in 2019, there were 30,321 international students.<sup>4</sup> Monash employs more staff than any other Australian university.<sup>5</sup> The Faculty of Law is one of Australia's largest; it provides legal education and training to 4129 enrolled (2463 EFTSL) undergraduate and postgraduate students and has 79 academic staff.<sup>6</sup> The library comprises six branches on the four Victorian campuses, an associated library in Malaysia, a substantial electronic and print collection, and a range of services supporting education and research.<sup>7</sup> The law library is located within

the Faculty of Law building on the Clayton Campus, a south-eastern suburb of Melbourne, approximately 20 kilometres from the city and provides services for students and staff in the Faculty of Law.

To understand the impact that stringent public health measures can have upon universities and their libraries, it is particularly useful to use the case study of Monash University. Although the death toll of the COVID-19 pandemic in Melbourne, where Monash is based, remains low in a global context, Melbourne is the city in the world with the highest number of days spent in lockdown in 2020–21.<sup>8</sup> This occurred in a country with some of the toughest pandemic-related international border restrictions in the world.

In this article, we reflect on the pressures experienced by academics, students and libraries and argue that Australian universities must acknowledge and account for the multiple social inequalities created and exacerbated by the pandemic. The impact of the pandemic-related disruptions has been greatest for students and staff who are already marginalised. As leading institutions in thought and knowledge creation, it is incumbent upon tertiary institutions to demonstrate best practice in social inclusion with its student and staff body at this time of crisis.

We have structured the article by first setting out the Australian experience of the COVID-19 pandemic and explaining the big-picture impact of the pandemic on Australian universities. We then turn our attention to two specific aspects of Australian university life during the pandemic that reflect our positions as university employees: the experiences of academic scholars and the practices of Australian university libraries. Of course,

there are other important aspects of university work that we do not cover here, including, most importantly, an in-depth look at student experience of the pandemic, professional (non-library and non-academic administrative staff) experience, university operations (including human resources, property and procurement) and campus and community life. To inform our argument, we draw upon both published literature and our own experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. Throughout the article, we pay particular attention to the differential impacts of measures taken upon marginalised groups.

We know that large-scale disasters affect most profoundly those who are most marginalised, including women.<sup>9</sup> In many places, the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the unpreparedness of many universities and their libraries to deal with a national disaster.<sup>10</sup> Through this article, we show that the response of Monash University and its library to the pandemic provide important lessons for thinking about the role of universities and university libraries in preparing for disaster response and emergency management. These key lessons include that diversity and inclusion must be at the heart of what universities do, candidly recognising and responding to the impact of structural inequalities upon students and staff. Education and research, including services offered by university libraries, can be structured in a way that allows all students and staff to participate to their fullest ability. These include learning opportunities that provide students with social connection and interactivity; enhanced digital skills capability; safe, inclusive study spaces; openly accessible teaching and research materials; and flexible staff working models.

## IMPACT OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN AUSTRALIA

### Generally, and in Victoria

#### Key Facts: Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in Australia 2020–2021.

- The first case of COVID-19 in Australia was identified in Victoria on 25 January 2020.
- As of 26 October 2021, the death rate was 65 per million compared to 2,200 per million in the USA and 2,056 per million in the UK.
- International borders were closed between March 2020 and November 2021.
- Lockdowns were a regular measure, particularly in the State of Victoria.
- Young people (aged 18–24) account for 46% of the short-term casual workforce.
- Young women suffered greater job losses (45% compared to 34% for young men).

- Young women experienced greater negative mental health episodes (24% compared to 21% in young men).

Australia weathered the initial years of the pandemic with minimal deaths, mostly due to the country's geographical isolation that was reinforced through stringent public health measures. That meant for much of 2020 and the first half of 2021, there was almost no community transmission of COVID-19 in Australia.

Generally, Australia acted quickly to contain outbreaks by imposing restrictions to limit the spread of the virus, albeit battling problems with hotel quarantine<sup>11</sup> and, later, vaccination rollout.<sup>12</sup> The first case of COVID-19 was identified in the State of Victoria on 25 January 2020.<sup>13</sup> As of 26 October 2021, Australia's death rate was 65 per million compared to 2,220 per million in the USA and 2,056 per million in the United Kingdom.<sup>14</sup> A key measure used to control the outbreak of COVID-19 was the closure of Australia's international borders from March 2020 to November 2021. These restrictions meant that travel to Australia was almost entirely prohibited, with some limited exemptions for Australian citizens/permanent residents and some others. Fourteen days of hotel quarantine in a designated facility was required for all arrivals.<sup>15</sup> Australian citizens/permanent residents were also unable to leave the country without an exemption. Inter-state borders were frequently closed and travel between (and even within) States and Territories was limited during times of higher caseloads.<sup>16</sup>

Strict lockdowns, including stay at home orders, workplace and educational closures and curfews were a regular measure, particularly in the State of Victoria. Victoria's *Public Health and Wellbeing Act*<sup>17</sup> was used to declare a state of emergency on 16 March 2020, with subsequent extensions.<sup>18</sup> A state of disaster was declared on 2 August 2020, further restricting movement.<sup>19</sup> Although these measures were necessary to quickly contain the spread of the virus, there was a significant impact on many sectors of the community, notably businesses, universities and vulnerable members of society.

The pandemic negatively affected businesses and not-for-profit organisations and brought changes to employment and employment practices. Working from home became common,<sup>20</sup> and while this suited some, for others it exacerbated or initiated mental health or family violence issues.<sup>21</sup> Young people, especially young women in their twenties,<sup>22</sup> reliant on casual employment, lost their jobs or had their hours drastically reduced as businesses closed, leading to financial insecurity and affected their ability to pay rent and bills. This was despite the introduction from 30 March 2020 of *JobKeeper*, a Commonwealth Government wage subsidy scheme consisting of fortnightly payments to eligible businesses based on the number of employees.<sup>23</sup> A coronavirus supplement was also added to the *JobSeeker* payment for

short-term casuals who lost their job. These temporary measures were replaced with various one-off financial support payments.<sup>24</sup>

The cohort of young adults aged 18–24 is most likely to be studying at university. Australian government support provided was inadequate for many casual workers, especially young people who account for 46% of the short-term casual workforce.<sup>25</sup> One Australian analysis of the effects of COVID-19 on the employment and mental health of young adults aged 18–24 found that this group ‘has been particularly vulnerable to the adverse effects of the pandemic’.<sup>26</sup> Young women in particular, suffered greater job losses with 45% job loss compared to 34% for young men, and greater negative mental health episodes (24% compared to 21% in young men).<sup>27</sup> The pandemic widened the economic gulf between older and younger generations of Australians with the consequences for young people being ‘job precarity, erosion of working rights, emerging permafexi arrangements and major shifts in career identity’.<sup>28</sup> It has been incumbent on universities (and their academics and libraries) to be cognisant of these issues for their students and to find effective ways to address them.

## IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITIES

### Key Facts: Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Australian universities 2020–2021.

- By 2020, tertiary education was Australia’s fourth-largest export industry.
- From March 2020 to November 2021, Australia’s international borders were closed due to the pandemic, locking out many international students until 2022.
- In 2020, Australian universities saw a 6% drop in revenue.
- From 2021 onwards, an annual revenue drop of 20–24% for Australian universities is predicted.
- From May 2020 to May 2021, nearly 40,000 jobs were lost in Australian tertiary education.

Australian universities have been hit hard by the COVID-19 pandemic and will be hit even harder in the coming years. This section explains why the COVID-19 pandemic has had such a significant effect on the sector.

The years immediately before the pandemic saw an explosion in the number of international students coming to Australia, a sector-wide response to successive decades of limited growth in Australian government funding for universities. International student fee revenue for Australian universities more than doubled between

2012 and 2018.<sup>29</sup> By 2020, education services were Australia’s fourth-largest export industry and international student fees amounted to 26% of total university revenue.<sup>30</sup> However the pandemic severely disrupted enrolments for international students for three academic years, the duration of most academic degrees. Between March 2020 and November 2021 overseas students enrolled at Australian universities were not permitted to travel to Australia.<sup>31</sup> Existing international students were told to leave. The loss of revenue for Australian universities in 2020 was less than expected, around 6% overall.<sup>32</sup> However, projections are that the worst impact of the pandemic upon the sector is yet to come, with international student enrolment expected to fall by 20–24% annually in the coming years as students are likely to switch to competitor markets in countries that have opened earlier.<sup>33</sup>

At our university, Monash University, it was estimated that in 2018, international student fee income represented 34.1% of total revenue.<sup>34</sup> 28,697 international students could not travel to their Monash campus in Australia in 2020, meaning that two-thirds of those students dropped out of their Australian degrees.<sup>35</sup> Fortunately, financial losses in 2020 (AUD\$ 145 million) were not as great as expected, partially because campus running costs were very low in 2020 because of extended closures.<sup>36</sup> In November 2021 it was announced that a small group of international students enrolled at Monash would be able to return by the end of the year. It was not expected that most international students would be able to return until 2022, sometime in the third academic year of the pandemic.<sup>37</sup>

Nonetheless, the consequences for Australian universities have been grim because of massive job losses. The Australian government excluded the university sector from its national financial assistance scheme *JobKeeper*.<sup>38</sup> When the pandemic first erupted in early 2020, Australian universities, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) and employees agreed on various temporary measures to save money and limit job losses including executive pay cuts, employee pay cuts or deferral of scheduled wage increases and limits on new employment.<sup>39</sup> Despite this, the higher education sector was hit harder by the pandemic recession than any other non-agricultural sector in Australia. Nearly 40,000 employees lost their jobs between May 2020 and May 2021.<sup>40</sup> Initially in the pandemic, it was casual employees who were not re-employed. However, by 2021 it was permanent employees in public tertiary institutions who were most affected, with 34,000 permanent jobs lost in the first half of 2021 relative to year-earlier levels.<sup>41</sup>

The COVID-19 pandemic has also been a significant stressor for Australian university students.<sup>42</sup> Many wondered if they would have a job upon completion of their degree.<sup>43</sup> As part of a worldwide trend, most teaching and learning shifted from largely face-to-face and on campus to emergency remote teaching at the start of the 2020 academic year. This was done without the usual

pedagogical design and development associated with effective online education.<sup>44</sup> Isolation from peers, campus and teaching staff have had a mostly negative impact on the overall learning experience and physical health and psychological wellbeing of Australian university students, especially amongst female and lower social status students.<sup>45</sup> The impact of the shutdown of higher education campuses and physical libraries was more evident for low socio-economic status and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students than others.<sup>46</sup> For students in rural areas, it may have been especially difficult to participate in online learning due to connectivity issues.<sup>47</sup> International students, unsurprisingly, experienced higher levels of anxiety than domestic students and were more likely to report using university COVID-19 support services than those from Australia.<sup>48</sup> International students in Australia were excluded from the *JobKeeper* scheme, despite many losing employment and being ineligible for any other government support.<sup>49</sup> Monash University provided \$30 million in hardship funds to international and domestic students affected adversely by the pandemic alongside significant donations from staff and the community.<sup>50</sup>

Past pandemic experience tells us that the Australian university operations may bounce back quite quickly. The 1919 influenza pandemic killed over 15,000 Australians (at a time when Australia's population was just 5 million) more than 8 times the number of deaths than the current COVID-19 pandemic. The influenza pandemic disrupted university activities (including closing the University of Sydney campus for six weeks), vacations were shortened and exams were delayed, held in the open air, or inside with density limits and with exclusions for sick students.<sup>51</sup> Medical staff and students voluntarily worked in hospitals and advised governments on policy.<sup>52</sup> Inoculations and mask-wearing were mandated at the University of Sydney at the height of the pandemic in April 1919.<sup>53</sup>

## IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON THE AUSTRALIAN ACADEMIC WORKFORCE

### Key facts: Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on Australian academic workforce

- Most of the higher education workforce in Australia are female (58.3%).
- Gender inequality, especially in pay and status, is a feature of academic employment in Australia.
- Less than 1% of Australian academic staff are Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander.
- Approximately 65% of all Australian university staff are employed casually or on fixed-term contracts.

- 61% of the job losses in Australian public tertiary education in the first half of 2021 have been women.

The inequalities that we have seen grow worldwide as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic have been replicated in Australian universities. The impact of the pandemic-related disruptions has been greatest for tertiary staff with precarious employment and those with caring responsibilities, usually women, and may have been greater for women from minority groups. Encroachments upon job security and upended working arrangements have 'created an unpleasant dynamic that threatened overall well-being and output' for many university staff.<sup>54</sup> Australian law professor Katy Barnett described the shock of the pandemic on colleagues as a 'biting and persistent insecurity about what is going to happen to our jobs, and to our institutions more generally.'<sup>55</sup> This section first describes the Australian academic workforce before focusing on the impact of the pandemic on academic staff at Australian universities, that is, staff engaged in teaching and/or research (in addition to administrative activities).

The majority of the higher education workforce in Australia are female (58.3%), including academic staff.<sup>56</sup> 'Employment in tertiary education (like other public services) is an important source of good, relatively well-paid jobs for women that helps to offset overall gender inequality in Australia's labour market.'<sup>57</sup> Nevertheless, gender inequality, especially in pay and status, is a feature of academic employment in Australia.<sup>58</sup> Continuing and fixed-term academic staff at Australian universities are employed across five levels, ranging from Level A (assistant lecturer) to Level E (professor). Academic staff can be employed to do both teaching and research, just teaching or just research.<sup>59</sup> Women tend to be clustered in the lower echelons of academic employment.<sup>60</sup> In 2019, women made up 54% of Level A academics (assistant lecturers) nationwide, but just 35% of Level D and E scholars (associate and full professors).<sup>61</sup> Women are more likely to be employed part-time than male employees.<sup>62</sup> The gender pay gap has grown across all industries in Australia over the COVID-19 pandemic, increasing 0.8% between November 2020 and May 2021.<sup>63</sup> The gender pay gap in the tertiary sector sits around the national average, currently at 14.2%, or, on average, AUD \$261.50 per week.<sup>64</sup>

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders are Australia's first peoples but are dramatically underrepresented in the academic workforce in Australia, tending to be female and in the lower levels of academic employment. In 2019, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people made up 3.1% of Australia's working-age population but just 1.3% of Australian university staff (and less than 1% of academic staff).<sup>65</sup> Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university staff are more likely to be female than non-Indigenous staff.<sup>66</sup>

Even more problematic is that a greater proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander academics were employed at more junior academic ranks compared to non-Indigenous staff (although the share of Aboriginal and Torres Strait staff in senior academic roles has doubled since 2005).<sup>67</sup>

At Monash University, the workforce is the largest of any Australian university, with 17,562 (9,950 full-time equivalent) staff in 2020.<sup>68</sup> Women at Monash make up 57% of staff, but only 37.6% of Level D and E academic staff (associate professors and professors).<sup>69</sup> Of the six most senior university positions at Monash, four are currently women, including the Vice-Chancellor and President, effectively the Chief Executive Officer of the University.<sup>70</sup> In 2019, Monash set an ambitious target to realise 42% of women in senior roles (including Level D and E academic staff and senior managers) by 2022 and to halve the organisation-wide gender pay gap by the same year.<sup>71</sup> The gender pay gap at Monash University was 13% in 2019, under the national average.<sup>72</sup> In 2020 Monash reported that it employed 49 full-time equivalent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff, of which 13 were academics.<sup>73</sup> To achieve its commitment of employing Indigenous staff in line with national population parity by 2030, Monash has specific annual Indigenous employment targets: currently 90 full-time equivalent Indigenous staff by 31 March 2023.<sup>74</sup>

The Australian university sector is dominated by staff with precarious employment. Approximately 65% of all university staff are employed casually or on fixed term contracts.<sup>75</sup> The number of casual teaching staff has grown significantly over past decades with an estimated 80% of undergraduate teaching in Australian universities done by casuals.<sup>76</sup> Casual employees are more likely to be female and in their 30s or younger.<sup>77</sup> Casual staff provide universities with employment flexibility, without the rigidities and safeguards of other forms of employment, and reduces salary expenditure.<sup>78</sup> After an initial drop, casualisation seems to have increased during the COVID-19 pandemic at Australian universities.<sup>79</sup> At Monash, casual staff made up approximately 47% of staff in 2016–17 which was just above the average for Australian universities in that year.<sup>80</sup>

It has been estimated that nearly one in five employees in the Australian tertiary sector lost their job during the pandemic and most of these have been women.<sup>81</sup> 61% of the job losses in public tertiary education in the first half of 2021 have been women.<sup>82</sup> Eliza Littleton and Jim Stanford argue there are acute gender dimensions to pandemic-related employment changes in Australian public universities:

*Both during and after the pandemic, therefore, women experienced a larger share of the impacts of university job cuts. And women's greater precarity of employment in the first place (disproportionately concentrated in casual positions), and generally heightened economic insecurity, make these gender*

*dimensions of higher education job cuts especially painful.*<sup>83</sup>

Monash University was one of the few Australian universities to negotiate a variation to the governing employment agreement with staff in alignment with the Jobs Protection Framework, settled nationally between the NTEU and a group of Vice-Chancellors in early 2020.<sup>84</sup> Monash's agreement was designed to minimise forced unemployment and involved a limited number of voluntary separation packages (voluntary job losses), deferral of scheduled pay rises, executive pay cuts, internal redeployment schemes, limits on external employment and paid leave for those diagnosed with COVID-19 or required to isolate.<sup>85</sup> The University reported that this saved 190 jobs.<sup>86</sup> 277 Monash employees left through the voluntary separation process by the end of 2020 as a result of the pandemic.<sup>87</sup> This was a positive opportunity for some and devastating for others, including those who remained employed while colleagues left.

### Academic staff experiences of the pandemic

So far, we have examined the generalised impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on Australian universities. In the remainder of the article, we reflect on two specific aspects of Australian university life during the pandemic that mirror our positions as university employees: the experiences of academic scholars and the practices of Australian university libraries. We use an account of our own experiences at Monash University together with published literature to understand how Australian academics and university libraries responded to the pandemic.

Australian academic staff who retained their jobs throughout the pandemic experienced significant interruptions to teaching, research and administrative work. For some staff however, especially more junior staff and those with caring responsibilities – both more likely to be women and perhaps women of colour – the impact was felt more heavily. A consciously intersectional approach is crucial to understand the true impact of the pandemic on academic staff.<sup>88</sup>

In Australia, lockdowns were longer and most intense in the State of Victoria and especially in the city of Melbourne. Around 93% of Victorian university staff surveyed by the NTEU in October 2020 reported working from home with nearly 20% of those surveyed saying they had inadequate resources when working from home.<sup>89</sup> Many staff held a dim view of their future in the sector with just 68% of Victorian university staff hoping to maintain their employment in the sector over the next three years and with low confidence that this would happen.<sup>90</sup>

For teaching staff, the sudden shift to emergency remote teaching was hard. Australian law teachers at one

Victorian university reported challenges fostering dialogue and connection with students in periods of remote emergency learning and the constant need to refine newly acquired online learning techniques.<sup>91</sup> Other law teachers reported greater labour intensity of online teaching and grief over loss of connection with students.<sup>92</sup> For those required to instruct in person during the pandemic, a complex safety risk assessment was necessary.<sup>93</sup> Like their primary and secondary school counterparts, Australian university teachers found that online teaching during the pandemic had a significant impact on their workload.<sup>94</sup>

*Many reported working 60% to three times more hours than they were contracted and paid. The sudden shift to online required teachers to self-manage production and delivery of online teaching and learning materials, without adequate training and resourcing.*<sup>95</sup>

One area especially affected by campus closures was Monash Law Faculty's flagship clinical legal education program. Monash Law Clinics provide both free legal services and high quality work-integrated professional education. In this program, students, under the supervision of a practising solicitor, learn by providing legal services to clients. In 2020 and 2021, Monash clinics operated almost exclusively online, with client and court interactions and student supervision and collaboration adapted to online platforms.<sup>96</sup> For staff, maintaining service delivery in the face of intensified client need alongside providing a coherent clinical legal education program was particularly challenging.<sup>97</sup>

The pandemic points towards bigger social inequalities. Female academics generally have a higher teaching load than male colleagues, reflecting systematic gender imbalances.<sup>98</sup> Female academics often carry a heavier burden of student pastoral care and the COVID-19 pandemic has dramatically increased student need for emotional and mental health support.<sup>99</sup> There is also evidence of systematic bias against women and people of colour in student evaluations of university teaching.<sup>100</sup> The sudden shift to online teaching with the associated labour may have impacted female academics disproportionately.<sup>101</sup> Evidence from the United States suggests that female academics with caregiving responsibilities across the full range of disciplines experienced more difficulty in late 2020 carrying out routine remote teaching tasks such as adjusting courses for remote learning, supervising teaching assistants and answering student emails, compared with male academics who also had caregiving responsibilities.<sup>102</sup> All caregivers, regardless of gender, found it more difficult to answer student emails about coursework, compared with non-caregivers in remote learning contexts.<sup>103</sup> The burden of teaching through the pandemic was significant for all, but greater for marginalised academic staff.

For many researchers, data collection became more difficult. In one US survey, all academics across all disciplines reported difficulties undertaking a range of research tasks during late 2020 including qualitative and quantitative data collection, collaborating with other researchers, submitting ethics applications and writing grant proposals.<sup>104</sup> However, it was female academics and those with caregiving responsibilities whose research productivity was especially impacted, because of time constraints.<sup>105</sup> Conferences, an essential tool for sharing, peer reviewing ideas and establishing academic networks went online if they went ahead at all.

Historical gender inequalities in career progression, pay and workloads at Australian universities provide the context for the COVID-19 crisis which has systematically disadvantaged female academics.<sup>106</sup> Barbara Pocock argues that Australian employers continue to structure their workplaces around the archetypal male breadwinner employee and are actively hostile to female employees who are also carers.<sup>107</sup> In Australian universities, a neo-liberal culture entrenches employment inequalities for academic mothers by reifying the masculine worker, devaluing motherhood and maternalising administrative workplace tasks.<sup>108</sup> Emilee Gilbert and Carla Pascoe Leahy argue that 'COVID has amplified existing asymmetries within academia. For those with caring roles, most often women, research and writing has become impossible amidst these competing claims for time and space.'<sup>109</sup>

Widespread lockdowns and isolation measures including workplace and school and childcare closures in 2020 and 2021 significantly increased the amount of unpaid domestic work performed by Australian men on average by two and a half hours a day and for Australian women on average by three and half hours per day.<sup>110</sup> Australian academics working across teaching, research and administration were frequently combining work with care responsibilities including supervising remote learning for those with school-aged children or caring for aged parents and relatives. One of the authors, Becky Batagol wrote this account of supervising her two children homeschooling and caring for them while working as an academic during Melbourne's 5th lockdown from 16–27 July 2021:

*I write from a position of incredible privilege as my partner and I are able to isolate and stay home and still earn our living. There are many here in Australia who must risk their health to go to work and those in countries such as Indonesia and Fiji, where being a working parent entails fatal choices. Despite that, not all those who are able to work from home have this burden of care.*

*Our kids are at home, as they should be, when we are not essential workers. Can [my partner and I] get our work done at home this lockdown? One of us can, but it is noisy and interrupted. The other one of us might get 1–2 hours plus meetings done in small*

*bursts across the day. They end up with more work at the end of the day than they started. They must spend the entire morning helping and monitoring kids' with their online learning. That consists of finding the teacher's instructions (and for our Grade 1, reading them for him), ensuring devices are plugged in and charged up, troubleshooting internet, password and access problems, finding each child's meeting schedule and making sure they log in on the right platform at the right time, arranging snacks and scheduling breaks around grumpiness and exhaustion from isolation, actually helping with work (for our Grade 1, task by task), communicating with teachers, negotiating with kids what they do and do not have to do, reading with our Grade 1, and arranging some online chats or walks with friends' parents. Our Grade 5 is teetering on the edge of the abyss with her mental health this lockdown, so she needs extra parent time and someone to make life fun. She needs her people, but she is not old enough to be able to contact friends or family without her parents. In the afternoons, kids squabble and get whatever TV they want while parents try to work (around dealing with the fights).*

*The days don't end, they crumple.*

Some academic parents reported that it was easier during the pandemic to combine care responsibilities with attendance at 'optional' events such as faculty seminars and workshops.<sup>111</sup> Multiple studies worldwide have shown that research productivity of female academics with caring responsibilities was disproportionately impaired during the COVID-19 pandemic compared to previous periods or to male academics in the same period.<sup>112</sup>

Early career and junior researchers, who are more likely to be female, have been especially at risk of career limitations caused by the pandemic. Conference cancellations and public health and budgetary travel limitations as well as requirements to assist with a practical or clinical response to the pandemic have particularly impacted upon early careers academics who are at the critical building phase in their academic career.<sup>113</sup>

Widespread racism may also have played a role in heightening inequalities between academic staff during the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>114</sup> Although we do not have specific Australian data on the racialised impacts of the pandemic on Australian academics, we know that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff face additional workload responsibilities for maintaining university Indigenous policies and community relationships, as well as pastoral care of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students (known as a 'cultural load').<sup>115</sup> Across Australia, female Aboriginal and Torres-Strait Islander employees with caring responsibilities are more likely to be in culturally unsafe and unsupported employment and have higher cultural loads than male Aboriginal employees.<sup>116</sup> Professor Chelsea Watego described her experiences of racism at an Australian university as a Munanjahli and South Sea

Islander woman: 'In my time in that faculty, I did not know of any other Indigenous academics with PhDs, nor did I ever get a sense that there was to be such a substantial investment in boosting our numbers.'<sup>117</sup> In the US and Canada, the pandemic has placed women law professors, particularly women of colour, at a severe disadvantage.<sup>118</sup> Research conducted in Brazil showed that the race of academic staff, in addition to gender and parental status, played a key role in limiting research productivity during 2020, with Black women academics (regardless of parental status) most negatively affected by the pandemic, followed by white mothers.<sup>119</sup> The researchers concluded that structural racism was determinative here:

*Working from home poses unique authenticity challenges for Black people, especially Black women, whose colleagues now have windows into their personal lives that could amplify portrayals of them as the 'other. This is because 'professionalism' is coded by white middle-upper-social-class standards and Black workers are disproportionately affected by judgments of professionalism and cultural fit.'*<sup>120</sup>

The COVID-19 pandemic has strongly affected most academic staff in Australia. However, the burdens of conducting teaching, research and service in the pandemic were heaviest for those employees already marginalised by the Australian tertiary education system.

## University responses to academic staff needs

This section sets out actual and proposed responses by Australian universities to employee needs during the COVID-19 pandemic. Responses between universities were not consistent, generally lacked substantive references to care and caring responsibilities during the pandemic and maintained a 'gender-neutral façade', thereby prioritizing a childless, male 'ideal worker.'<sup>121</sup>

In the initial months of the COVID-19 pandemic, the key support generally offered by universities across Australia for staff with caring responsibilities were leave (annual, carer's leave or a special form of 'COVID-19' leave) and/or discussing flexible working arrangements with a line manager.<sup>122</sup> Meredith Nash and Brendan Churchill critique the over-reliance on leave as a response to the pandemic upon university employees because it is a short term solution to a long term problem of children being out of school for months and is not available to precariously employed casual staff. They conclude that

*Australian institutional responses to COVID-19 and remote working are premised on neoliberal assumptions including the public-private divide and gendered division of labour. Overall, the results of our desktop analysis highlight the continuing challenges of*

*combining work and care for Australian women in academia and that a lack of institutional policy supports during the pandemic reinscribes and privileges a male 'ideal' worker.*<sup>123</sup>

At Monash University's Australian campuses, ongoing and fixed-term staff working from home and balancing work, homeschooling, and childcare responsibilities were entitled to take between one and two days of carers leave per week from 18 May 2020, taken from existing accrued sick leave. Additionally, these employees were able to temporarily reduce their fraction of employment, top up their salary by using accrued leave or take annual or long service or purchased leave. Importantly, the University extended paid isolation leave to all staff, including casual or sessional staff, when diagnosed with COVID-19 or in some cases where they were close or casual contacts of those diagnosed. COVID-19 vaccines were available on campus to all staff and students eligible under government guidelines.

Measures used by universities to mitigate the gendered and racialised impacts of the pandemic upon academic staff are important during the time of active disruptions for the pandemic. To address structural inequalities and avoid creating them, it is necessary to equitably evaluate and take into account contributions to the pandemic response, disruptions that affected work, and caregiving responsibilities in the longer term.<sup>124</sup> 'Gender-neutral' university responses which apply to all employees regardless of gender, race and pandemic impacts are unlikely to reduce structural work-force gaps and may exacerbate inequalities by giving a leg-up to those less impacted by the pandemic.<sup>125</sup> For this reason, universities must invest explicitly in gender and race equality amongst employees by actively taking steps to understand and mitigate the uneven impacts of the pandemic upon employees.<sup>126</sup> Crucial in any university response is for institutions to listen to the needs of their employees who are most deeply affected by the pandemic,

*Needs may vary from school to school and from person to person; by listening carefully to what faculty members share, institutions may avoid well-intentioned supports that in reality exacerbate rather than alleviate disparities.*<sup>127</sup>

Researchers have proposed a range of measures to mitigate the gendered and racialised impacts of the pandemic upon academic staff. These include short-term measures such as:

- Temporarily reducing or suspending research publication requirements.<sup>128</sup>
- Temporarily reducing expectations around hours worked.<sup>129</sup>
- Contributing towards pandemic-occasioned childcare, meal and/or cleaning costs to assist employees to

perform work duties such as teaching during period of lockdown.<sup>130</sup>

- Optional exclusion of student evaluations from promotions and performance development processes during periods of forced remote learning.<sup>131</sup>
- Provide flexibility including in meeting times, in work hours, in scheduling teaching, in extending funding application and report due dates.<sup>132</sup>
- Prioritising, simplifying and reducing tasks: including allowing teaching staff to teach the same courses they have in the past rather than new ones.<sup>133</sup>

Longer-term mitigation and accommodation strategies proposed include:

- Development of institution-wide strategic action plans, which include public metrics, targets and accountability for dealing with changes in staff productivity through the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>134</sup>
- Taking COVID-19 pandemic disruptions into account in recruitment, career assessment, probation and promotion applications including broadening the criteria for appointment and promotion/ adjusting promotion benchmarks and using guidelines to quantify impacts of the pandemic.<sup>135</sup>
- Create bursaries or research scholarships specifically for marginalised scholars and those with caring responsibilities who have been impacted by the pandemic.<sup>136</sup>
- Advocating for national funding bodies such as the Australian Research Council and the National Health and Medical Research Council to provide additional funds for more time for chief investigators on time-limited funded projects and fellowships where the investigator demonstrates pandemic-related career interruptions.

One especially useful tool to account for the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on academic careers is the COVID-19 CV matrix created by Vineet Aroha and colleagues to allow academics to document and promotions committees to equitably evaluate contributions to the pandemic response, disruptions that affected work, and caregiving responsibilities during this period.<sup>137</sup>

The work of equitably accounting for the impacts of the pandemic upon university workforces should be central to Australian university recovery plans and any future disasters. This will require universities to first overtly recognise the role of gender, race and marginalisation in employee performance and advancement. It then requires universities to be proactive in transparently and actively minimising gender and race gaps amongst employees.



## IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES

As for universities and academics more generally, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted and exacerbated inherent social and economic inequalities that are particularly relevant to academic library users and staff. In 2020, library staff were thrown into daily uncertainty and new ways of working, causing anxiety and stress, but also serving to bring out examples of agility and initiative in addressing problems for library users. This section focuses on some of the problems created or heightened by the pandemic, and the practices put into place by the Monash University Library.

The undergraduate academic year for most Australian university courses starts in March, coinciding with the first of Victoria's Stage 3 restrictions which included lockdown and came into effect on March 30, 2020.<sup>138</sup> Along with libraries across the world, Monash went into crisis management,<sup>139</sup> with leaders convening regularly to make decisions on changes to services, discuss risk assessments, and set staff up both physically and mentally to work from home or onsite as needed. Staff expertise, collections and spaces are at the heart of library services, so ensuring the continuation of these in some way during this time of uncertainty formed the basis of business continuity planning. The Library followed advice from the University, endeavouring to ensure that vulnerable students continued to have access to safe, welcoming study spaces and online access to their unit readings, and that researchers could access the resources they needed to progress their research. Then, as noted above, from the middle to end of 2020, universities and their libraries faced staff losses stemming from the financial impact of the pandemic,<sup>140</sup> necessitating revised planning on how to best structure services in the short and longer terms.

The experiences of academic libraries, including their law libraries, in Australia reflect those of academic libraries in other parts of the world,<sup>141</sup> whilst dealing with the particular challenges posed by our national and state governments. What have we learned from this experience? Thomas Sneed poses the important question, 'what will law libraries look like on the other side?'<sup>142</sup> More broadly, what will academic libraries look like on the other side and will they have successfully addressed some of the issues raised in this article? The pandemic has thrown us even deeper into the online world, so that teaching, resources and communication are more reliant on access to reliable and secure technology. Libraries will continue to strive for inclusiveness and equity through Open Access models for electronic resources, digital skills education for students, and safe, technology-enabled learning spaces.

### Creating an inclusive virtual library

While acknowledging that academics and students have their individual preferences for researching and learning

in the online or physical environment, the pandemic accelerated the existing shift by academic libraries to providing resources and services predominately online.<sup>143</sup> Virtual help services such as centralised email and online chat services have been around for some time, however face-to-face support in libraries has continued to play an important role in the on campus experience. During lockdown periods, staff and students were fortunate that some Monash library branches, unlike those at many other Australian universities, were permitted to remain open as study spaces to cater particularly for students living in residences on campus; many of these being international students with families overseas. These students, and others permitted to be on campus, were able to continue to use the physical library and interact with staff virtually. The staffed Information Services Points were replaced with Virtual Information Points, so that staff working onsite away from the public areas, or from home, answered queries from users using Zoom on a dedicated computer screen. This provided a level of safety and flexibility for both library staff and users.

More complex research skills queries, including legal research, in the past handled by librarians at a physical research desk at each branch library, moved to a central, facilitated drop-in advice service on Zoom. Although Zoom was initially beset with problems caused by the huge global uptake at the start of the pandemic,<sup>144</sup> Library Staff quickly became experts, aided by the Library's digital learning and teaching team. Student feedback indicated that students appreciate being able to join remotely from home or overseas, ask a question as it occurs to them without being in the library (within the hours of service), and easily share their screens to discuss assignments. As an example of the uptake, the number of queries from law students rose from 441 queries recorded at the physical research and learning service point in 2018 to 732 recorded via Zoom in 2020. Providing this service virtually has addressed some of the inequities experienced by students who could not come physically to campus both in and out of lockdowns due to remote location, work commitments, or other reasons.

When the first lockdown was imposed, onsite classes were cancelled. With only a couple of weeks to prepare, library staff brought their teaching to Zoom, as did academic and library staff worldwide. Student surveys at Monash indicated a preference for live streaming over pre-recorded classes, so research skills workshops were adapted accordingly. As noted earlier, there were often challenges fostering dialogue and connection with students, caused either by technical problems or unengaged students with video off. Positives of teaching this way included the chat box for students to ask questions either publicly or privately, shared screens, and break-out rooms for small group discussions. Using this forum for teaching means that we can more easily pivot from the physical classroom to online when required to respond to emergencies such as pandemics. How well the students retain the skills we teach them through this mode

compared to the physical classroom remains to be tested. Not all students are equally at ease with technologies, but libraries play an important role in helping to 'overcome digital divides and inequalities',<sup>145</sup> and improve student digital skills capabilities, or 'dexterities'.<sup>146</sup> The online classroom requires and teaches digital skills — skills that students will need in the workforce, be it a virtual courtroom or virtual lawyer-client meeting. The heavy reliance on online learning and associated technologies during the pandemic has further served to heighten the need for students to acquire enhanced digital skills.

### The physical library as a safe study space

In Australia, many of us take for granted that we have a comfortable space with adequate technology to work or study in. But loss of employment, loss of housing, isolation, and lack of motivation were of increasing concern during the pandemic and lockdowns.<sup>147</sup> As well, reduced social interaction and engagement with fellow students affected student wellbeing.<sup>148</sup> Academic libraries provide equipped and comfortable spaces in which to study or socialise, with equality of access to everyone in their community. This might be a quiet place to study away from a difficult home environment or a meeting place for student social interaction.<sup>149</sup> As noted above, while many Australian university libraries were forced to close, some of the Monash library branches remained open, providing safe, technology-equipped spaces for students and staff permitted to be on campus.

The Victorian government's regularly changing rules to address the pandemic necessitated agility and quick decision making by university and library leaders. Opening and closing branches with often only a day's notice became commonplace and has resulted in documented procedures and risk assessments that will be useful for disaster management generally. Ensuring that researchers had access to the print-only materials they needed when movement was restricted became a priority. When physical libraries were required to close during lockdowns, some library staff worked onsite and provided a delivery service for print books requested by researchers. These staff were included in the government category of 'essential onsite worker' and were granted permits to attend onsite work. A popular service brought in by many libraries during the pandemic was Click and Collect or Click and Send. Click and Collect was preferred by many public libraries and some other academic libraries, notably in the UK<sup>150</sup> and Victorian university libraries at Swinburne, La Trobe, and Deakin Universities. Monash opted for Click and Send, which was deemed more helpful during lockdown with closed branches and travel restrictions in place. To speed up delivery, a parcel delivery service was used to ensure that books were delivered within two days. This service enabled research students and academics to continue their research where it was reliant on print materials, while the library also purchased electronic copies where

available. Sustaining this service for a large population was, however, a staffing challenge. As time progresses, robust strategies for the remote operation of academic libraries is a priority.<sup>151</sup>

Australian academic libraries rose to the challenges of the pandemic through physical distancing, safe handling of materials, quarantining books, improved cleaning routines, and sanitising.<sup>152</sup> As the pandemic continued, we juggled the changing restrictions and relied on university security staff and 'COVID ambassadors' to monitor student adherence, especially for QR code check in to buildings, physical distancing and mask-wearing. As libraries become more focused on providing resources digitally, the space is used less to store print materials and more for study purposes.<sup>153</sup> Future space management considerations include considering demand from students for spaces and furniture that allow them to join online classes more privately and study safely. Self-service options for borrowing books, booking discussion rooms and consultations have been around for some time and are well suited to a COVID safe environment. They will continue to grow and improve.<sup>154</sup> It is important to ensure that the library's physical spaces remain inclusive, safe, technology-driven learning spaces for students.

### Providing equitable access to resources

The pandemic increased the reliance of students and academics on digital study and research resources. Academic libraries, including Monash, have invested heavily in electronic resources and provided seamless access methods, so library users continued to easily access a great many digital resources when the pandemic struck. Providing access to online resources is a priority, however, there is a pressure point when physical copies are the only way to provide certain resources important to particular disciplines. As the Law Librarian of the High Court of Australia, John Botherway, notes, 'in law, there is significant material not readily available in digital format'.<sup>155</sup> Continued digitisation projects, such as those conducted by AustLII,<sup>156</sup> will continue to address this divide. But other solutions are also needed to ensure equity of access to academic resources.

Problems with access to student readings, both print and electronic, caused heightened anxiety during the pandemic. The often prohibitive cost of textbooks for individual purchase affected students who may already have been economically disadvantaged or become more so through job losses caused by the pandemic. This created further reliance on library copies, many of which could not be easily accessed, either due to print only availability or restricted user licences. A few publishers have embraced the provision of eTexts to libraries by providing eBook versions with affordable pricing models. Many have taken advantage of the market to charge exorbitant prices for limited user licences, charging up to 500% more than the print version.<sup>157</sup> Others do not provide digital versions via institutional licences to libraries at all.

The COVID-19 pandemic drew significant attention to and exacerbated an existing, known problem for libraries in being extremely restricted in how they can make textbooks available to students and staff in anything other than print format. This has now become a much more obvious problem to students and academics; one which academics can perhaps influence. Academic authors of textbooks are urged to sway these publisher models through their licence agreements, or better, consider Open Access publishing models. Lecturers are urged to set their unit readings with a view to accessibility, incorporating Open Access resources. Libraries will continue to negotiate with publishers for better deals and easier access, as well as advocate and provide expertise for Open Access publishing during and after the pandemic.

During 2020, library organisations around the world and in Australia advocated for publishers to relax their licencing conditions to allow free access.<sup>158</sup> Publishers responded in a variety of ways, from free access to online platforms and specific resources for a set time period to providing temporary pdf versions of selected chapters for lecturers to load to an institution's learning management system. At Monash, we also negotiated with several legal publishers to provide a gratis eBook version to students experiencing financial hardship. Law library staff monitored these applications and liaised with the publishers. At the end of semester 1, 2020, over 100 law students had received a gratis ebook copy of their textbook. A combination of less restrictive ebook access models and moving to Open Educational Resources would negate the need for this work. There are a small number of Australian Open Access law texts currently available,<sup>159</sup> but much opportunity for this to grow. The key findings of a national survey conducted by Deakin University's Centre for Research in Assessment and Digital Learning found that social justice relating to the cost and content of textbooks matters to staff and students.<sup>160</sup> This builds on surveys in the United States which found that 'COVID-19 has underscored existing fault lines of inequity across the country, especially in higher education' and recommends 'funding and infrastructure support for free open textbooks and open educational resources'.<sup>161</sup> Academic libraries play an increasingly important role in advocating, promoting and publishing Open Access resources,<sup>162</sup> supported by projects led by the Council of Australian University Librarians (CAUL).<sup>163</sup> This is a strategic priority at Monash and many Australian university libraries.

### A new way of working

Working from home during the pandemic also served to highlight economic and social inequalities. While the University quickly stepped up to provide portable equipment, flexible arrangements and carers leave to support staff, some staff struggled to find a suitable work environment at home, coping with homeschooling, child care or inadequate infrastructure such as reliable internet

connection and adequate heating or cooling. Those living alone also felt more isolated from their work social structures. To help address isolation, 'Mental Health Ambassadors' were recruited amongst library staff to keep teams communicating via Zoom, Google Hangouts, and other online forums. Juggling working from home with homeschooling during lockdowns was a particularly stressful extra burden on parents. The positives of more efficient meetings over Zoom and savings in commute time were often offset by the toll of a day spent online with few breaks between Zoom sessions. Some staff found this way of working challenging, while others embraced the flexibility it affords. During and after the pandemic, options for flexible models of working onsite and from home are growing in popularity across workforces. Universities are well placed to support this new way of working.

### CONCLUSIONS

The COVID-19 pandemic will have long-lasting effects beyond the immediate public health response. Previous experience tells us that when the pandemic is over, universities will act quickly to restore business as usual rather than dwell on the crisis, as occurred after the 1919 Spanish influenza pandemic.<sup>164</sup> As we write in October 2021, vaccination rates are finally high enough to allow the city of Melbourne to emerge from its sixth lockdown, lasting 77 days. Australian university operations are shifting from a COVID-zero approach to living with COVID. Monash plans are underway to resume on-campus activity for fully vaccinated staff and students. It is too early to tell yet how Monash has fared through this pandemic. Although there are government plans to open overseas travel and start admitting small numbers of international students, the impact of much lower numbers of international students will continue for some time. Across the board, the news is mixed, with reports that some Australian universities have performed better than expected, but that the immediate future threatens more staff redundancies due to continued dependence on dissipating international student income.

It will be some time before we know the full social and educational impact of the pandemic. However, we have learned about some of its effects and pressure points. We know that it magnifies inequalities amongst students and staff. Especially hurting are those without continuing or stable employment, foreign students in Australia, those with families overseas, students stranded overseas, those with caring responsibilities, particularly with children who need homeschooling, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff and students, those who live alone and suffer the isolating effects of working from home and lack of contact with family and friends, and those with mental illness, abusive partners or compromised health.

Universities have experienced drastically reduced numbers of international students and decreasing funding likely to last for many years. Academics and PhD students have faced difficulties continuing their research, particularly

where it may be dependent on overseas colleagues and empirical research. Students have coped with two years or more spent entirely in online classrooms. Staff have juggled work with homeschooling, childcare, and often isolation and anxiety. Universities, including Monash, have learned a lot about the needs of their staff and students during this time and have stepped up to adjust policies such as accommodations for students in assessment and results, assisting with working from home, and carers' needs. Libraries have provided safe and equipped spaces for students and negotiated to provide increased electronic and open access versions of essential resources.

So much of what we do know about the stratifying impact of the pandemic upon Australian universities is based upon anecdotal and short-term evidence. There are ample opportunities for further research including into the comparative, longer-term impacts on Australian universities, into how university and library responses to students and staff have systematically reduced or entrenched marginalisation, and into the specific experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff through the pandemic.

Disaster planning is an important part of every university's operations in a changing climate. There is much that we have learned in Australia during the COVID-19 pandemic that should stay with us. First, is that universities, in all aspects of their operations, should overtly recognise the role of gender, race and marginalisation in student and staff activity. Diversity and inclusion must be core university business, embedded in key performance indicators and values. The pandemic has opened up new social inequalities and further entrenched others. Universities

are well-placed to lead the way in focusing research, teaching and operations on understanding and responding to marginalisation.

Second, providing remote learning opportunities will be important for a long time yet, but this should be in conjunction with the on campus experience, which we know provides the social connections and interactive learning our students need. Third, an increased focus on improving students' digital skills will help them to succeed wherever they may be located. Fourth, the way we provide library spaces has been coloured by our pandemic experiences, so that we are even more conscious of the importance of safe and comfortable spaces in which to study, socialise or participate in online learning for students or staff who cannot do so at home.

Fifth, libraries should continue to prioritise fair and equitable electronic access to readings and research materials and step up the growing movement to Open Educational Resources with inclusive content. This needs to be in conjunction with improved strategies for the provision of effective and sustainable access to valued print only resources, especially during times of restricted movement.

Finally, for employees, universities must be proactive in actively minimising gender and race gaps amongst employees through long term strategies such as targeted bursaries and taking COVID-19 pandemic disruptions into account in career assessment and promotion applications for years to come. Interwoven throughout is the need for universities to continue building diverse, inclusive and supportive organisational cultures and frameworks for the wellbeing of staff and students.

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> We wish to thank our generous colleagues, Associate Professor Tom Clark, Lisa Smith, Professor Amy Cohen and Professor John Thwaites for their comments on an earlier draft of this article. Together, we are better.

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