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What impedes and enables flourishing among early career academics?

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Abstract

Early career academics face a rapidly changing higher education sector and too little is known about what helps them flourish in the profession. This paper responds to that gap by reporting research undertaken in a single or intrinsic case study of one Australian university. We invited participation from a full cohort of 1019 academics in one large College. Of those, 41 early career academics or ECAs and 45 more senior academics or MSAs engaged in a 50-question survey. Of those, 18 ECAs and 16 MSAs who had flagged interest then completed an in-depth interview. We learned about: ECAs' work; what they and MSAs think impedes and enables that work; work-life balance; and experiences of mentoring and career development. We also asked for their perspectives on the future. We found remarkable agreement across the two cohorts that mirrors concerns expressed in a growing, internationally significant literature. Members of both cohorts appealed for strengthened organisational and sectoral commitments to caring career pathways and sought more certainty in challenging times. Our findings led us to conclude that academics have high hopes that universities and those in higher education policy settings can address work overload; enhance professional development across all duties; make leaner systems and processes; have more realistic expectations about research; and better value academics' profound commitments to higher education. Those findings accord with other results reported in comparable jurisdictions around the world and add weight to an increasingly compelling case to recentre and refocus on people in university organisational cultures and practices.

Keywords Career planning · Early career academics · Infrastructures of care · Mentoring · Neoliberal higher education · Professional development · Qualitative research methods

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Introduction

Higher education is a sector experiencing exacerbated forms of precarity that deeply affect individuals, organisations, and systems. The challenges are long standing. They include certain characteristics of higher education as a social institution—the pace of change, for example. They include characteristics specific to each higher education organisation, such as the organisation's particular employment policies, which affect individuals' lives in different ways. They also include more recent trials, such as those wrought by the COVID-19 pandemic. Early career academics (ECAs) are among those most affected by both broad social and institutional challenges and specific organisational adaptations to them. This research responds to concerns *about* and *for* those individuals; has, as its single case study, one Australian university college (faculty); and maps onto an internationally significant literature about such matters. Specifically, we examined what impedes and enables ECAs to flourish.

There are relatively standardised definitions of stages in academic careers and broad agreement about how governance and operational structures work in universities and, thus, there is a reasonably sound grasp of impediments and enablers in universities. Understandings of flourishing are more contested, but the idea underpins our work on the assumption that when academics thrive they bring to their organisations and the sector their best in support of higher education's mission. The term *flourish* denotes vigorous growth and concerns what it means to live a purposeful, complete life exercising practical wisdom acquired from experience and study. This idea of flourishing being a deliberate and caring exercise informed by a significant sense of one's purpose serves as a reminder that *homo sapiens* is also *homo reparans*—a species exhibiting care for self and other (Aristotle, 350 BC; Calhoun, 2004; Tronto, 1993). We return to this idea of caring near the end of the paper, after we lay out various references to flourishing made by participants in our study.

Drawing inspiration from such ideas, we think universities can exemplify infrastructures of care (in other contexts, see Power & Mee, 2019). Our chief argument is that it is crucial to find more—and more effective—ways to care for the rising generation of academics, and that those approaches must be provided with greater consistency and vigilance by individual organisations and via sector reforms. Our initial motivation was to support the capacity of personnel to flourish in their work in difficult times. Yet the research is also significant, we hope, because it contributes to calls to re-place people at the centre of higher education and re-value career planning, professional development, and mentoring. By these terms re-place and re-value, we do not mean a return to some presumptive past that was 'better than' or 'more inclusive than' the present. Indeed, romanticizing the sector's past is far from our agenda. Rather, we are suggesting that it is imperative for people to be seen—witnessed, acknowledged, and valued—in whatever place they occupy in higher education.

Our use of those two terms, re-place and re-value, complements work on invisibility by McIntosh et al. (2022). Their paper draws from a larger study on the teaching-research nexus in neoliberal higher education and points to how corollaries of that system, such as competition, render some people highly visible and others invisible. Often among the latter are those in subordinate positions, those engaged in particular elements of collective work, and women—and we would add those disadvantaged by settler-colonialism. Either way, McIntosh et al. suggest that, as signifiers and technologies of neoliberal education, performance measures make visibility imperative, shape and distort academic practices, and diminish caring as a value. Among several important insights from their work is this: new ways of making visible are crucial to counteract practices that make people invisible. In short, in higher education as a social institution and in individual higher education

organisations if we are collectively to ensure people feel they have a place in academic communities and feel valued in the process, we need to *see* them and each other—at every stage—and we need to provide ways for that to occur and ways to evaluate how we are doing.

Following a review of the literature, we summarise the research design for the intrinsic case study being discussed, outline the ethics processes, and detail the data collection and analysis. Survey and interview methods and results are considered and then we draw conclusions about the findings' implications and reach.

Literature review

Focusing on a 10-year window, we searched databases for studies published since 2012. Thirty were selected: in English scholarly journals reporting on studies with or about ECAs at scales ranging from individual universities to groups of universities, including in Australia, and embracing several nationally and internationally comparative studies (see Merga & Mason, 2021a, b; Nicholas et al., 2019). Studies span the sciences, engineering, health and social sciences, business, law, and humanities. Yet, on reading them a compelling conclusion is that most impediments and enablers may have disciplinary nuances but are not specific to disciplines and are generalisable across fields.

Definitional work points to two broad understandings of what *early career* means. Hemmings (2012) and Browning et al. (2017) mirror the Australian Research Council's description—5 years of full-time-equivalent experience following the award of a doctoral degree, but longer time spans have been specified (Bosanquet et al., 2017). Christian et al. (2021, p.1) define early career as being less than 10 years lapsed since PhD completion (see also Global Young Academy, 2021). We adopt the Australian Research Council's (2015) definition because it aligns with our university's own. We describe *more senior* as having a research higher degree awarded before 2016 and more than 5 years of full-time-equivalent academic work experience.

The literature also establishes consistency about the impediments faced: (1) neoliberal arrangements for governance and funding and structural changes affecting employment conditions; (2) shifts in universities' relationships to other sectors; (3) moves from a focus on learning and teaching to research excellence and impact; and (4) changes in how organisations and individuals view their own agency. These insights prompt us to advance three assertions pertaining to ECAs: (5) caring values need to be at the centre of operations; (6) failure to better support them presents real risks to universities' long term capacities and standing in society; and (7) transactional approaches hinder transformational changes oriented to flourishing as an outcome of care. For example, Hemmings (2012) argues that ECAs experience varied pressures related to job security, heavy teaching and administrative loads, limited access to resources, and imbalances between workplace and home-based responsibilities; the most significant 'challenge … is to build and refine their research skills and … produce research output' (p. 172). We think such insights extend to more senior academics (MSAs) but temper that observation by suggesting seniority brings advanced skills to advocate for oneself and others in the face of challenges. More than that, however, MSAs have simply had more time to accumulate forms of experiential learning from research, teaching, and service that are crucial for professional development and its corollaries for self-efficacy (Valiente-Riedl et al., 2022) Either way, being able to harvest

the immense benefits that derive from focusing on the teaching research nexus is certainly among the casualties from such imbalances, both within work roles and between work and home (McKinley et al., 2021).

One consistent critique is that structural changes to policy platforms favouring neoliberalism precipitate deep, even ontological, *uncertainty* about the sector and careers in it—both in Australia (Bosanquet et al., 2020; Davies, 2014; Marginson, 2012) and elsewhere, such as Canada and Hong Kong (Nichols & Hayes Tang, 2022). The effects on ECAs of those changes are documented by Cannizzo et al. (2019), Anderson et al. (2020), and Bosanquet et al. (2020). Audit and managerial cultures characteristic of neoliberal modes of governing come under scrutiny from Aprile et al. (2020) and Hollywood et al. (2020). Either way, uncertainty is 'linked to burnout, disengagement and poor mental health outcomes in ECAs' whose disengagement is likely to drain talent 'as gifted researchers leave academia' (Crome et al., 2019, p. 717).

Professional development is pinpointed as one important response to uncertainty and, sometimes, is an expression of care, often described as being people-centred. Browning et al. (2017) argue that ECAs require comprehensive professional development opportunities to support them to take on responsibilities left after the anticipated generational exodus of senior peers in coming years. Given evidence of conscious and unconscious bias, professional development could lead to a fairer and more just sector (Anderson et al., 2020; Greider et al., 2019; Oberhauser & Caretta, 2019; Reynolds et al., 2018; Tindall, 2006). Nevertheless, we surmise that professional development needs to avoid pathologizing individuals and exacerbating broader forms of 'prudentialism' based on 'normalizing, therapeutic and training measures' (Dean, 1999, p. 168), especially if systems go without critique and adjustment.

Relatedly, ECAs are experiencing a general malaise about 'failure' narratives, especially in relation to research and grants funding (Clare, 2019; Holdsworth, 2020; Sutherland, 2017). Bosanquet et al. (2020) argue that much time is 'wasted' or 'deferred' between applications' submission and outcome announcements, and high levels of 'failure' result in diminished levels of satisfaction with and in the sector. In comparative work between Australia and Canada, Willson and Given (2020) note that more research is needed on affect: stress and frustration and also stability and belonging.

Several approaches consider ECAs' experiences, perceptions, and situations: a few are quantitative (see Matthews et al., 2014); many are qualitative. For example, Anderson et al. (2020) used a collaborative autoethnographical approach to describe their experiences as ECAs from minority groups who teach marginalised subject matter about gender and race. Many studies use mixed methods. Bosanquet et al. (2020) interviewed 64 people and surveyed another 522. Christian et al. (2021) used a mostly structured survey of 658 ECAs employed at Australian research organisations and their dataset is available on figshare (see also Greider et al., 2019; Nicholas et al., 2019).

Findings from those studies and more recent comparative work involving Australia and New Zealand (Lee et al., 2022) tend to confirm that specific impediments confront ECAs—but also MSAs and the sector. Among those impediments are difficult work environments; tensions between allocated and agreed workloads and the realities of workloads as practiced; perceptual and attitudinal blocks; and struggles to navigate a sector-wide 'culture that equates performance with moral worth' (Cannizzo et al., 2019, p. 255). In turn, varied enablers are suggested, including helping ECAs develop and demonstrate intrapersonal resilience and self-efficacy—confidence, competence, and commitment—and interpersonal openness in formal mentoring arrangements and meaningful professional relationships (Crome et al., 2019; Hemmings, 2012; Hollywood et al., 2020). Browning et al. (2017)

establish that successful careers are characterised by having a research doctorate, being mentored, attending conferences, supervising postgraduate candidates, being part of active research groups, receiving assistance to develop grant applications, and securing start-up funds to establish major projects. There is a growing literature on how Indigenous academics are working together and with institutions to address specific matters related to higher education and decolonisation (for example, Baice et al., 2021, in New Zealand).

Finally, more situated studies could deepen understandings about ECAs and how the sector can support them. The rest of the paper is informed by that assertion and seeks to advance such an agenda.

Research design and analytical framework

We adopted a social constructivist approach widely applied in the humanities and social sciences on the understanding that some 'objects are caused or controlled by social or cultural factors rather than natural factors' (Mallon, 2019, n.p.). Such an approach to understanding ECAs' challenges could involve investigating a two-part claim that X socially constructs Y with Z effects. For example, neoliberal conditions in higher education (X) foster certain hyper-contractual working conditions (Y), which predispose ECAs to respond to the subsequent precarity in employment by experiencing high levels of anxiety (Z). Constructivist explanations are iterative and based on complex understandings of who or what has agency to construct and on the efficacy of both *a priori* theorising (deduction) and *a posteriori* analysis of empirical studies (induction).

Our mixed methods comprised: (1) design of an online survey using our own questions and others adapted from the literature—especially Christian et al. (2021) and the survey's completion by ECAs and MSAs in our College; (2) design and use of in-depth interviews with self-selecting survey respondents; and (3) analysis and synthesis of data with the literature.

Our university's Human Research Ethics Committee cleared the study on 7 April 2021 (Project ID 23988). We were alert to suggestions that ECAs in other studies experienced distress or anxiety because, in their responses, they sometimes confronted conflicting emotions and thoughts about their work, employers, work-life balance, structural constraints in higher education, and pressures upon them to perform. We were mindful that our College ECAs and some MSAs might feel exposed by disclosing their experiences and perceptions but anticipated that deidentifying data would minimise risk of harm, stigma, or devaluation.

Basic descriptive statistics from the survey are generalisable and converge with insights from the literature. Answers to open-ended questions were subject to narrative analysis, as were interview transcripts. Narrative analysis has at least four sub-types: structural, functional, dialogic, and thematic—and the last is used here because it captures fundamental qualities, characteristics, insights, or points that run through data. For example, the neoliberalisation of higher education is a theme in the literature but different categories of data accumulate to socially construct that theme—among them specific kinds of contractualism, productivity, or governance (see, for example, McIntosh et al., 2021).

Themes may be partly decided before data collection—mindful of existing assumptions, empirical evidence, theories, or speculation. They may also be applied after data collection, and that iterative approach enables analysts to work with tensions between deductive and inductive reasoning and proceed abductively before settling upon any larger theoretical

or practical insights. Our themes began with the literature about ECAs' experiences as they relate to neoliberalism, workload, sociodemographic transitions and precarity; the shifting relevance of higher education and its perceived societal value; and failure, agency in challenging work conditions, and transactional or transformational approaches to work. They were refined as data were analysed and as we focused on the 'substance of narratives' to discern 'what motifs are present in the stories [and] what types of stories are told' (Allen, 2017, p.2). In that light, in the findings below we use short and long quotations and conform to established practices when interpolating [our words] and excising participants' words […] from those quotations. Anonymity is preserved via a specific coding regime.[1]

Extensive insights about what impedes and enables

Extensive investigations involve identifying regularities, patterns, and features of a population, often by reference to a sample selected using random or purposive procedures to maximise the possibility of generalising to a larger population (Stratford & Bradshaw, 2021). Surveys exemplify such research and provide opportunities to assess a context prior to doing more intensive research such as interviews.

In line with the literature and our aims, we recruited academics in our College to learn from people working across diverse situations and disciplines. With the Executive Dean's imprimatur, at the end of March 2021, all 1019 academics were sent from the College Office a bulk bcc email signed by us and inviting participation in the study. The email included an embedded information sheet and link to SurveyMonkey. Two reminders were sent at intervals before the survey closed on 30 June. Ultimately, 59 ECAs (52%) and 54 MSAs (48%) opted in, providing an initial 11% response rate. We note that in organisational research, response rates of 5–30% are usual and, when triangulated by reference to literature and interviews, are acceptable for generalisation (Baruch & Holtom, 2008).

The survey had four parts. The first determined ECA or MSA status. The last invited both cohorts to self-select for interview, which required they provide their contact details. Fifty questions for ECAs required about 45 minutes of time and asked about qualifications and current work; work done, approach to work, and work-life balance; experiences of mentoring and career development; sociodemographic characteristics and personal circumstances; and views on their futures. Two questions for MSAs asked what they thought impedes and enables ECAs to flourish and what three recommendations they would make to better support their less experienced peers—those took about 10 minutes to answer. Of the 54 MSAs who opted in, 9 then immediately opted out for reasons we cannot ascertain and 45 completed the two questions. Of the 59 ECAs who opted in, 41 completed all questions asked, participants dropping out at several points in the survey—because of time constraints we suspect but cannot prove. The final response rate, then, is nearer 8% of the total complement of College academics.

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[1] In findings from the survey, after any quote is a code that provides the question number, the cohort, and the number allocated to the participant for that question. Therefore, 22ECA4 refers to question 22, an ECA, and the fourth such ECA to provide a qualitative response. A code 35ECA4 does not infer the same person. In findings from the interviews, after any quote is another code that simply refers to the ECA# or MSA# assigned to the participant in the deidentification process. There is no correlation between sets of codes, further enhancing anonymisation. Finally, where qualitative data are provided, use is made of the words "a few," "some," "several," and other such descriptors. Quantification is not appropriate here for one specific reason: frequency of utterance is no indication of the importance of what is being conveyed.

More senior academics

Forty-five MSAs wrote 7070 words responding to open questions about what impedes and enables ECAs and what could better support them; the longest was 537 words. Narrative analysis shows strong convergence *among* our participants and *with* themes identified in the literature. By response 32, saturation was reached—that point at which less and less new information is forthcoming and theme generation stops (Guest et al., 2020).

MSAs were clear that neoliberal structures, relations, and consequences profoundly shape higher education. Reference was made to increasing precarity, one suggesting that 'we are training too many PhD students … there simply aren't enough academic jobs, so the competition is brutal … Clearer expectations … would help' [3MSA9]. Another argued that job insecurity was forcing a focus on outputs 'useful in the short term … rather than those that have a long term career benefit' [3MSA29] (see Besselaar et al., 2017). A third described the relationship between job insecurity and sector-wide 'failure to recognise and support ECAs caring/parenting and health needs' [3MSA36].

Some wrote about how contracted and continuing ECAs have different pressures on them. The former face uncertainty and, like others elsewhere, appear to have lower levels of job satisfaction (Goldan et al., 2022). The latter also face such conditions—albeit in other ways—and seem to have to navigate more bureaucratic processes and heavier workloads. MSAs disparaged what they saw as a concomitant rise of audit and managerial cultures and loss of a 'collegial context [where] … all academic staff contribute to decision-making about academic matters' [3MSA43]. One pointed to the 'creation of a growing senior management class within universities … there is of course much good intent in this [change] relating to accountability, external governance … but perverse effects routinely trump this intent' [3MSA39].

MSAs referred to a sectoral shift over decades from a focus on learning and teaching to research and its excellence and impacts requiring academics at all stages to build, refine, maintain, and enhance research skills and produce outputs in ways that demand significant investments of time outside standard work allocations. They were clear about the need for better systems for research to address deep dissatisfaction with overloads, echoing Bosanquet et al. (2020). Some argued that such dissatisfaction is exacerbated by demands on academics to find novel ways to help increase student numbers crucial for pipeline and revenue at a time when there are significant changes to student cohorts, curricula, and technology and delivery modes. Several referred to a sector-wide failure to expect and provide qualifications in higher education learning and teaching. There was adamancy that ECAs should not be burdened with 'teaching and service overload … [and should be] given appropriate time to develop their research … [and] appropriate time for training' [3MSA11].

MSAs were conscious of effects on ECAs of how they are viewed and valued. One emphasised the need for ECAs 'make connections with the international research community' [3MSA20], and another argued that ECAs must 'have real roles in international … and local committees that focus on research outcomes' [3MSA23]. Unsurprisingly, narratives about failure were evident, one MSA observing that ECAs have a 'fear of failure and of taking risks' [3MSA42]. Another suggested that the inevitability of failure meant it was crucial to be 'honest about the realities ECAs will face; provide bridging funding to give competitive ECRs a chance to win funds or secure a place in a competitive lab; be clear that there are few options to build research careers [and that] all require extremely sustained hard work' [3MSA10]. One argued that 'ECAs are

vulnerable because their future is often in the hands' of line managers who fail to create conditions in which to thrive [3MSA18]. Such concerns point to others about transactional approaches to work described in the literature (Cannizzo et al., 2019).

MSAs also suggested how to deal with succession and foster workplace cultures supporting balance between professional and personal commitments. Those calls implied more than workplace flexibility, which can be code for putting in excessively long hours at home as well at work. Thus, balance was not synonymous with flexibility but was a value proposition needing morally strong leaders and managers, consistent contributions to a collegiality, more emphasis on diversity, more recognition, and cognisance of the importance of life outside the organisation. Many such enablers are based in conduct and behaviour, role modelling, and diligent care.

Finally, MSAs emphasised the vital importance of professional development—for ECAs and those who support, lead, and manage their work. Mentoring was deemed essential and suggestions offered about how to optimise its provision. The focus on mentoring embraced most activities in which all academics do, or will engage: research ideas and design, grant applications, grant execution, publishing, supervision, pedagogy and curriculum design, and impact and engagement, as well as leadership and management. The bottom line was that ECAs need to *be given and take time* to become proficient and excel.

Early career academics

Survey attrition meant only 37 ECAs answered questions about themselves from questions 37 to 48. They were mostly 25 to 45 years old, nearly 55% were females and nearly 75% were Australian or dual citizens with English as a first language who had relocated for work. About 40% had taken breaks from higher education; 68% lived with a partner; and 35% had minor dependants. When asked about their work, 88% had PhDs; 64% were in full-time employment; and 45% were doing research at least two days a week, 20% being employed on another person's grant. Nearly 30% were on contracts less than 12 months' duration; another 30% were on contracts up to 36 months long; and 25% were on continuing appointments, and the remainder deemed the question 'not applicable' for reasons we cannot establish.

Asked what were the most important disciplinary expectations upon ECAs in national and international contexts, publishing was first and linked to securing research funding, having impact, and being innovative. Sometimes, publishing was linked to attracting and retaining higher degree research candidates. However, ECAs felt those expectations clashed with some of those held by line managers in relation to learning and teaching responsibilities and workloads.

Nearly 67% of ECAs thought they had insufficient human, financial, and infrastructural capacity to effectively carry out their work. In open-ended responses, 16 referred to making do; being baffled by constant change and not knowing where or how to secure resources; having to deal with outdated equipment and infrastructure no longer fit for purpose; being subject to unrealistic learning and teaching workloads for online environments; experiencing highly competitive grant regimes; not being given requisite equipment for work; being ill-prepared, poorly briefed, and under-resourced for engagement duties; and having to put research on hold to deal with competing demands.

When asked about work, approaches to work, and work-life balance, ECAs reported putting in from 20 to 60 hours a week—loosely linked to full-time equivalent status. No one reported working more than 60 hours—a figure cited in studies in Australia and overseas

(Kenny, 2018; Woolston, 2017). Nevertheless, 63% described having too much work to manage; 45% wanted to spend less time on administration; and 48% wanted less teaching. Approached differently in another question, over 50% of ECAs wanted more time to publish; 40% wanted more time to supervise; and 25% wanted more time to apply for grants. Many fewer sought out engagement, learning and teaching, or teaching scholarship. Although ECAs wanted professional development in such activities, they saw little prestige attached to them.

Juggling competing demands was, then, a prevailing narrative crossing several themes described earlier. As one ECA wrote:

> It's extremely difficult to grow as an academic in all areas simultaneously—which is what we are expected to do. Developing new teaching materials on top of learning how to teach, manage students, grade and examine, use [the online learning platform]—should be a full-time focus. Yet, at the same time it's expected that you are also applying for and securing grants, generating projects, writing papers, developing [doctoral] projects, supervising [doctoral] students, and doing research. Not to mention potentially managing large research projects and groups. This could also be a full-time focus on its own. On top is a university service and admin load, which I believe is much larger than anyone realises. [20ECA2]

When asked about mentoring and career development, some ECAs referred to suboptimal induction processes and opportunities to improve line management and increase professional development about systems and processes central to core responsibilities. They valued mentoring from informal conversations and watching effective role models. Just over 60% had a formal mentor in the last 5 years and found it useful—especially for performance appraisal and career advice. Asked to describe an ideal mentoring program, ECAs prioritised learning about research, then time management, networking, goal setting, promotion, teaching, leadership, supervision, engagement, resource management, and then sundry forms of self-development.

Last, when asked to consider the future, ECAs mostly wanted to stay in academic work because of the intellectual stimulation, sense of purpose, autonomy, and agency. One wrote: 'I love my job, there is no other job I want. I would love to continue developing my expertise, form my own research group … train high quality PhD candidates within exciting and important research projects, and become recognised as a thought leader' [49ECA3]. Yet only 38% (14) of the 37 ECAs who responded to the question thought they would be in academic work in 5 years. Most thought that challenges would keep funding tight and career pathways insecure and uncertain.

Intensive insights about what impedes and enables

Intensive investigations are useful to understand what actors do and why and to ascertain what produces change in those actions and their contexts. Interviews provide effective and efficient means to generate intensive data from people in structured, semi-structured, or unstructured formats amenable to qualitative analysis. Representativeness is not at issue and emphasis is on analysis of meanings and the relativities of experience. Rigour is ensured by ethical oversight, participant engagement in checking transcripts, and

triangulation—reference to multiple sources, methods, investigators, and theories (Stratford & Bradshaw, 2021).

Recall that at the end of the survey, respondents were asked if they were prepared to expand on their responses in an interview, and 57 respondents wrote yes and provided contact details. We planned to be able to complete a universal sample of both cohorts if those volunteering numbered 20 or fewer in each cohort. But we also elected to undertake semi-structured interviews with no more than 20 in each group because of logistics and because that number often provides saturation. We note that the more disparate a population is, the more individuals have to be interviewed for that point to be reached, but such was not the case in our work. Even accounting for internal heterogeneity, all participants are academics and hold much in common.

Those MSAs and ECAs self-selecting for interviews worked with just one of the three authors. She conducted all work related to interviews to ensure participants were anonymous to the other two authors, who are senior academics and have had positional power in leadership roles in the College. In all cases, participants were approached by personalised emails signed by all three CIs but sent only by the interviewing researcher. The email included both an invitation to take part in an interview by email or by Zoom and an embedded information sheet. Of the 33 MSAs and 24 ECAs who initially stated that they were open to conversing, 16 MSAs and 18 ECAs eventually took part in an interview. Others withdrew because of workloads or leave commitments.

Of 34 interviews, 13 were consented to and done via email and produced just over 14,000 words and 21 were done on Zoom with consent captured on recordings. Those interviews were transcribed using a commercial service and produced just over 108,000 words. All interviews were then member-checked for validation and credibility (Birt et al., 2016). All names were removed and replaced with aliases prior to thematic analysis in NVIVO, and attention was paid to what motivated engagement in academic work and what impeded and would enable ECAs to flourish. In what follows, MSA and ECA responses are reported together because they closely overlap.

Motivations

Interview participants were asked what motivates them to be an academic; what is the main promise of academic life in general; and what keeps them in academic life? They described being driven to be in higher education, some referring to its broad societal mission and values Some referred to how academic life gave them a constructive and applied purpose. For example, one ECA said, 'I'm absolutely committed to supporting gifted and high achieving students. I love researching and reading in that area' (E09, July 2021). For another, the motivation centres on the:

chance to solve problems … in the context of my discipline … [and] transdisciplinary spaces … I work for a good team on projects that I know are having a really tangible, immediate, real-world impact. And everyone I work with is … in it for public good, and that's really energising and brings a lot of satisfaction. (E13, July 2021)

A few suggested that they cannot imagine doing anything else because of the intrinsic qualities of higher education at its best. For example,

There is incredible privilege in being able to think as deeply as we are about topics of interest, and be materially very well-supported in that …both the infrastructure … and academics get paid really well. I know that's not often said. (E12 July 2021)

and

… you go into science so you can discover new ways of doing things better, whatever your discipline is, and improve general human life through that discovery. And of course the curiosity … [which is] why a lot of people do go into academia. Because we certainly don't go into it for becoming millionaires. Or at least I haven't met anyone who thought that's what's going to happen! (E07 July 2021)

Overall, motivations were multifaceted and a long list was generated from transcripts but analysis suggests several themes, and these represent the "flipside" of the seven challenging themes to which we have referred already. In short, participants were motivated to: counteract neoliberalism; manage workload requirements; actively engage with sociodemographic change and precarity; be relevant and valuable and define what that means; reframe narratives of success; seize agency; and approach work in transformational ways that value higher education's intrinsic worth. Participants referred to being motivated by autonomy, working on topics that mean something, and enjoying relative intellectual freedom and flexibility compared with work in other sectors. Some valued the salary and superannuation. Some were driven to support minorities; help people reach their potential and create their own knowledge; supervise students; or advocate for women in science. But the prevailing motivation reported by participants related to higher education's transformational potential and intrinsic worth: being driven by discovery and the quest for new knowledge, including in terms of innovation; being intellectually challenged and stimulating intellectual discussion; problem solving in a particular field; being passionate about interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary research; and sharing all that with students, peers, and members of society.

Such motivations keep participants in the sector despite the impediments they face.

Impediments

MSAs and ECAs tended to touch on the same areas of challenge but provided different examples. Impediments raised were extensive in number and related to different scales, including global trends and cultures, national governance and influences, and organisational processes and cultures across the university, the College, academic units, teams, and individuals. Several referred to endlessly changing goals, systems, and processes, structural upheavals that centralised administrative support and effectively removed it from the 'coalface' of research and learning and teaching—exacerbating workload burdens. For example, 'there seems to be a lack of understanding the real "on the ground" challenges those doing research and teaching face by those higher up in decision making roles' (E17 July 2021). Underpinning these various observations about impediments to ECAs' capacities to flourish was a deeper sense that higher education is not well-favoured by the (then) Australian Government, industry, and the community.

MSAs were very concerned about challenges for ECAs. They perceived the current context in which ECAs are having to work as complicated, difficult, and unclear, often competitive and unfair, and with demanding and conflicting priorities. For ECAs, there was a

sense of experiencing significant, unrelenting, underlying pressure and of having too many responsibilities.

Job insecurity for ECAs and academics more generally was a prevailing narrative and participants drew from personal experiences and made observations about precarity that related to the university, other Australian universities, and the sector. ECAs are challenged by contract culture. For example, a research-active ECA passionate about staying with the organisation spoke about working intensively to apply for large grants but being thwarted by their contracted status:

> When you're in a contract or short-term job you're not able to apply for research fellowships. First I wasn't eligible because I wasn't a permanent resident. Second I wasn't eligible because my contract. Then [when I was eligible, the] deadline was in March [but] … my job was ending in August [and] …the fellowship would have been from October, but I needed to have a job. (E05 July)

Large, often unachievable workloads and a persistent sector-wide culture of overwork were commonly reported. For one, there was 'the expectation that a full-time workload is a lot more than full-time, with no space for other interests, pursuits, or family' (E02, July 2021). For another:

> Work/life balance. I think that's probably the biggest issue faced and definitely for the teaching intensive academics even more severe. I'm putting in way, way, way more time than I do that I do as a full-time academic than I would as a full-time professional staff. Significantly more, I'd say easily 30 to 40 per cent more. (E03, July 2021).

Participants referred to competing work demands, significant work pressures creating work–life imbalances, untenable expectations, jobs needing in reality more than contracts allowed for, and the pressure to juggle complexity in multiple roles. Finding and securing funding was a challenge for multiple reasons, which included the shadow cast by Australia's Group of Eight universities; restricted access to opportunities because of contracts; having insufficient time to apply for funds because of excessive teaching loads; applying for heavily oversubscribed funding grants; being on contracts that limited work to one active job; limited invitations to be on grants; lack of professional development about how to grant applications; having to move fields to follow funding and associated and seemingly constant changes to what was considered strategic research within the University and in Australia.

Inclusion, diversity, and equity barriers include gender imbalances, systemic unconscious bias and exclusion, sexism, cultural exclusion and racism, and organisational barriers for those not in balanced workload positions. One participant said:

> what happens when we don't support early career people is that diversity drops out and the 'same old, same old' progress up through the system. I would desperately love for it to become compulsory for anyone [who hires staff] to undertake unconscious bias training. I think that would help. (E06, August 2021)

Older ECAs reported that their prior work lives felt too readily dismissed in academic circles, despite their views that industry and educational experiences elsewhere could have been drawn upon at the university. Some ECAs wrote that it became hard to achieve performance expectations and progression, especially if their sub-field was poorly understood or valued at discipline or school level, or if it involved non-traditional research outputs.

Enablers

Interview participants were asked about what should be done to enable flourishing. They were not always sure where opportunity and responsibility for change might reside but offered rich ideas often addressing several challenges.

Some ECAs suggested they did not know higher education or university systems well enough to propose changes; they knew their fields but little beyond them. In short, there are areas of higher education and the university's systems that ECAs are completely unclear about but they know that those have significant effects upon them. Enabling a better understanding of both the sector and its organisations should be relatively straightforward and could involve formal qualifications in higher education per se; certainly the lead author benefitted from just such a qualification.

Participants have high hopes that major dilemmas related to workload will be better addressed and one said, 'you start initially taking whatever you're given. And then, as you establish yourself, you start to get a little more leeway to start to negotiate how your workload shapes' (E03, July 2021). Balanced workload allocations assigned to most academics could work, except that each element of the allocation—research and supervision, learning and teaching, and engagement and service—each contain unrealistic expectations shaped by sectoral pressures, academic traditions, disciplinary norms, and cultural practices. One participant observed in this respect:

> perhaps give more feedback [to us when we ask], 'OK, well, what's enough?' Yes, we're all big people … but if you're just chucked in this world where there's this … constant demand … having to manage that takes energy in itself and having to set those boundaries for yourself all the time takes energy when you're not being given any feedback about what's reasonable. (E13, July 2021)

Arising from the tendency to cram each part of the total allocation with too many expectations were varied outcomes ranging from overwork to disengagement to 'failure'. Many participants were passionate about learning and teaching and teaching scholarship but were sure that advancement comes primarily from research, a treasured but deeply flawed pursuit mired in structural impediments, under-resourcing, and capacity deficits. Many were concerned about how sociodemographic changes in the sector and in society would affect universities, and precipitate (more) mass redundancies and retreats from the sector. Narratives for those in either research or teaching intensive positions differed, their focus often on the precarity of multiple contracts and associated gaps in how they were approached by managers compared with colleagues on balanced workloads in continuing contracts.

Participants also have high hopes that specific methods to enrich people-centred approaches will be reprioritised in higher education. Very significant numbers of comments focused on opportunities to improve how:

- jobs are framed, advertised, and filled;
- line managers induct, support, lead, and engage with personnel;
- work is organised in people plans and its effectiveness and efficiency are measured in terms of performance—including in ways in which reasonable forms of risk are taken and associated instances of failure are celebrated (and here we distinguish those forms from, say, cavalier or unconscionable approaches to work);

- personnel are mentored, provided with meaningful, regular, and continuous professional development opportunities, and supported to develop appropriate and sustained local, national, and international collaborations and networks;
- personnel are engaged in the granular translation of strategy into operations in ways that make more sense to them;
- explanations are given to personnel about the volume, rate, and reasons for change processes that affect them;
- personnel can show more agency, express their experiences more resolutely, and have confidence that they will be listened to, cared for, respected, and understood;
- imperatives for inclusion, diversity, and equity are addressed, and a fair or more just culture are shaped and valued;
- work-life balance is protected and considered; and
- to address the overarching sense that too much of what we do is still insufficiently lean; too much remains ad hoc; and too much lacks integration, robust monitoring and evaluation practices to gauge efficacy, and is too short term in its implementation.

Among participants, there was a strong sense that better systems are needed in support of research and all that comprises it—grant applications, funding regimes, publishing, supervision, industry engagement, and innovation.

There was a strong sense of the need to provide much more in the way of basic inductions, instruction, and coaching in learning and teaching and all that comprises those activities—understanding curriculum and pedagogy, delivery, assessment, quality assurance, and administration. Doctoral degrees in themselves, do not provide for such capacity building, nor for teaching scholarship.

Underpinning all these other perspectives and experiences was a pronounced sense that participants are overwhelmingly committed to the mission of higher education and to universities as a particular social institution of longstanding. As one participant said:

> I think ECAs are here because they're so passionate about higher education, and most of them are far less jaded than the very senior academics can be sometimes. And it's a shame that we don't value that. When we value it in students so much. (E11, July 2021)

And another observed:

> I think being an academic should be about being cutting edge, about being supported to think differently about being innovative, and about what is best for our students. That's the promise of academia to me as a new academic, but also from me to my students. That's what it should be … idealistic I know. (E09, July 2021)

Such foundational commitments prompted participants to be generous in sharing their views on what might happen next. Participants were hopeful that several benefits may derive from this study. To begin with, and as reported elsewhere in the literature, ECAs welcomed the opportunity to discuss their views, share their experiences, and explore the relationship of their aspirations to the realities of the organisation and its sector. We were heartened by the number of MSAs who engaged with the study, who reflected on their own experiences of being novices, and who staunchly advocated for more support for their ECA colleagues. We take seriously the comment by at least one participant that practical outcomes from the work must be framed, enacted, and disseminated in ways that honour the investment they have made in the study. In addition, participants were interested in the fact that the study had been framed as such, and not simply as a series of workshops, inquiries,

or emails, and they were taken with the idea that what is experienced and perceived at this university has elements in common with sibling organisations elsewhere. There was hope that the results, as research findings, would influence internal policy shifts, even if less could be done about those external to the university. It was noteworthy that participants also understood that ECAs can be, often are, and should be better supported to step into their agency, knowing that the societal goods and social, cultural, economic, and environmental gains to be forged in higher education will rest with them. Ensuring their experiences are optimised in higher education will, we suggest, lead to gains in those goods.

Conclusion

This study has been an inquiry into what impedes and enables early career academics to flourish. The work's remit has been informed by the idea that universities can and should be infrastructures of care—settings in which personnel flourish. These ideas reinforce calls to re-place people at the centre of these organisations and re-value them in new ways. On that understanding, we sought to give voice to both early career and more senior academics whose own work includes helping novice colleagues. In the process, we sought to explore approaches to research, learning and teaching, teaching scholarship, and engagement and service.

Drawing on insights from a select literature, we discerned themes characterising much that has been written about ECAs' experiences over the last decade and that is related to neoliberal orientations in sector, workload, sociodemographic change, and precarity, shifts in how universities are viewed, failure, perceptions about limits to agency, and transactional and transformational values and the need for care in order to flourish. Mindful of that larger scholarly context, the study has used social constructivist lenses; been alert to specific ethical questions; drawn on extensive and quantitative and intensive and qualitative methods in surveys and interviews; and used deductive, inductive, and abductive reasoning.

Much of what was shared by ECAs and MSAs points to how structural and systemic challenges in higher education shape what happens within our university. Some such challenges relate to the declining national public share of higher education expenditure (Universities Australia, 2020). The net effect has been profound in terms of how universities conduct what, in neoliberal settings, are multi-billion dollar businesses with growing but variable reliance on international students; marketisation and commercialisation more generally; contractualism and precarity; shifts in how learning and teaching are constituted as goods and services sold to customers; the penetration into higher education of private providers with growing and significant reach; questions from outside the sector about its relevance; increasingly narrow understandings of productivity and performance; and the dilution of what community engagement is seen to comprise. These changes were clear to participants, alongside a sense among them that the structural components of the challenges faced—and opportunities to be seized—were beyond any individual's or any university's capacity to tackle. In short, stronger, more supportive, and less febrile national policy settings are needed. Either way, we perceived a generalised world-weariness among participants about the ways in which higher education seems devalued in societal terms and 'brutal' in its *modus operandi*. Not surprisingly, participants tended to focus on the local: on that which they thought the university, College, line managers, colleagues, and they could reasonably influence. One might suppose that such focus signifies agency. At the same time, the constraints that characterise local and individual actions arguably perpetuate forms of

prudential neoliberalism that Dean (1999) described some time ago and that fail to tackle deep structural flaws in the sector. What goes begging here is how universities support each other to deal with these flaws and who exemplifies the leading edge of such work.

In broader terms, our sense is that recalibration is needed between transactional approaches that deal with the instrumental aspects of care and focus on procedural matters and transformational changes that do not ignore those necessary approaches but that embed care into the infrastructures of social, cultural, spatial, and thus into the fabric of each higher education organisation.

Clearly, time is crucial for such recalibration work and it is a profoundly important and scarce resource. Our time-as-labour is often stretched to breaking point because of fiscal and financial challenges or competing demands or certain decisions informed by particular preference hierarchies in which explicit commitments to care may not even register.

Space, too, is a profoundly important resource and one that is under-valued and poorly understood. The social and cultural dynamics of our organisations are always, already spatialised and significant improvements could be made to support people to feel as though they have a *place* in the organisation. And note that place is not a static concept; it is the expression of connection at nodes along pathways. Acknowledging that it can be ephemeral or durable, it should not be obdurate and can and should be made welcoming.

Larger structural challenges characterise how higher education is viewed. There was a strong sense among our participants that the sector's intrinsic value is not well understood by those outside it, not well represented externally by those in the sector, and under constant threat of claims about irrelevance. That zeitgeist is unsettling but it should not preclude caring work.

Ultimately, new pathways need to be forged or perhaps age-old principles need to be revisited and reshaped for current and emerging contexts. By that we do not mean pathways to promotion, which is often how that phrase is understood. Rather, we mean routes to meaningful careers in universities that are underpinned by deep commitments from governments and communities. Some pathways invite those in formal leadership positions in government and in the sector to forge structural changes to how higher education is funded and to create communicative changes that strongly and positively reframe the sector's value and relevance. Some involve those in other sectors then responding positively to those messages and rethinking their support for the sector in philosophical, financial, or practical terms. Even better would be their initiating some of the conversations. Some pathways invite leaders in universities to engage in difficult conversations about preference hierarchies in operation in their organisations that may have perverse outcomes for people's personal and professional wellbeing and to rethink how physical, social, and other infrastructures can also be reframed so that care and caring work are intrinsic to them. One profoundly important pathway inside organisations must surely involve exercising a truly caring and consistent duty of care in relation to career planning, including among the growing numbers of casualised or contract staff; this work should not be an optional extra or add-and-stir approach but embedded deeply in organisational psyche and practices. And some invite individuals in the sector to engage in constructive discussions and debates about the extent to which, and in what ways, personal agency can also effect change.

Finally, as authors, we hope that this work will advance the international knowledge base on an important topic about how ECAs work, how they experience their professional lives, how those experiences affect their work-life balance, and how the university can better support them. There was remarkable coherence in individual and collective views offered to us; few surprises, some distress, and a lot of hope; and a great deal of accord about the need to strengthen an approach to ECAs that focuses on vocation, career

pathways, and as much certainty and care as are possible within the organisation's circle of influence. There was also almost universal agreement that current practices and conditions cannot continue if that means ECAs are scrambling to secure whatever measures they can to show worth, while typically being assigned duties most established academics would consider dross, as if they need to earn their keep via rites of passage that should not apply. Ongoing deliberations about what constitutes quality (generated caringly) are warranted.

Our unalloyed conclusion, then, is that more needs to be done, robustly and caringly to ensure that ECAs have a genuine understanding of the realities of the system and, simultaneously, to ensure the odds of success are fair and well understood. Building their confidence from the disciplines up is crucial.

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