

THE EXPERIENCES OF SESSIONAL ACADEMICS IN UNDERGRADUATE SCIENCE EDUCATION DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the higher education sector is undeniable. Sessional academics had to adapt to online teaching practices from their traditional teaching practices (e.g., face-to-face laboratories) with little to no training or prior experience. Recent literature describes the anecdotal experiences of individual teaching staff (or teams), such as lack of social interaction and communication (Bartolic et al., 2022; Pather et al., 2020).

Sessional academics play a crucial role in the higher education sector, as they are responsible for a majority of face-to-face laboratory teaching and other teaching activities. Due to the sudden transition to online teaching, these casual staff had to learn new software and tools, while isolated in a home environment and often with increased home responsibilities (Bartolic et al., 2022). This project aimed to capture the individual experiences and circumstances of sessional science teaching academics during the pandemic in order to keep a record of what happened and to draw together threads for future online teaching.

The study was conducted with the tutors and demonstrators within the faculties of Science at The University of Sydney and Deakin University. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 20 teaching assistants at these institutions located in different states. The states and institutions had different responses to COVID-19, which led to different impacts on the sessional staff. Lack of interaction with students, difficulty in monitoring student engagement, and most importantly, job insecurity, were the main causes of dissatisfaction and anxiety. It was mentioned by some participants that teaching online could provide flexibility in terms of work-life balance, while some stated that it was difficult for them to separate work from personal life due to working from home. Most participants agreed that the level of support they received from the university management and unit coordinators was adequate although the support could have been better.

Interesting findings from the interviews will be highlighted in this presentation alongside proposed future directions to support sessional academics.

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