

# EXPLORING THE EFFECTS OF COVID-19 ON SESSIONAL ACADEMICS IN UNDERGRADUATE SCIENCE EDUCATION: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on tertiary education institutions in Australia from March 2020 was abrupt and highly disruptive. Recent studies elaborate on the anecdotal experiences of academics during the pandemic, highlighting issues such as a lack of social interaction and communication (Bartolic et al., 2022), as well as financial strains and other challenges (Lee et al., 2021).

The role of sessional academics in the higher education sector is pivotal. They are responsible for laboratory teaching, tutorials, lectures and other teaching activities. With the sudden shift to online teaching, these casual staff had to quickly adapt to new technologies, while dealing with isolation and increased home responsibilities. This project was designed to seek the individual experiences of sessional science academics during the pandemic, providing documentation of events and perceptions for future online teaching practices.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with science sessional academic staff at two institutions located in Australia. The States and institutions had various responses to COVID-19 which led to different impacts. Sudden changes in teaching patterns caused immense mental pressure at the beginning of the pandemic. The main reasons for disappointment and anxiety were lack of interaction with students, challenges in monitoring student engagement, and most importantly job uncertainty. However, some participants expressed that teaching online could provide flexibility in terms of work-life balance, though others found it hard to separate work from personal life while working from home. Most participants mentioned that the level of support provided by the university management and unit coordinators was adequate although there was scope to make it better (Devi et al., 2024).

This paper will highlight some interesting findings from the interviews and recommend future directions to support sessional academics.

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