

# Teaching academics are shouldering the load to transform the university experience

The year 2020 may well be the year everything changed for Australian universities with the COVID-19 pandemic first making its mark on Australia in [March of that year](#). The impacts were immediate, profound and reverberated across the sector, with the forced movement of students and staff off campuses, the [mass migration of courses and subjects](#) to the online space, and a dramatic drop in international student enrolments, a [key income stream](#) for many universities.

Some of the commentary has heralded the pandemic as the catalyst for the long-predicted [transformation of the higher education sector](#). Finally, universities would transform their practices to embrace a new, digital age where [connectivity was integral to all university activities](#), including teaching and learning, research and industry collaboration. Finally, we would step into this new age and [campus technology infrastructure providers](#) would be ready.

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Unfortunately, the realities of this transformation for academics on the teaching and learning frontlines has, in many cases, been anything but energising.

It is fair to say that 2020 did bring about transformative change as universities across Australia shifted their courses online. However, it was also the year in which teaching and learning came under increasing pressure that is, as we continue to face the pandemic over halfway through 2021, **clearly unsustainable**.

At the curriculum level, some universities responded to **continuing budget shortfalls** by **removing subjects** or even whole **programs of teaching**. An estimated **17,000 job losses across the sector** has been devastating. Other academics have been the **target of redundancies**, voluntary or otherwise, and still others have taken on fragmented roles. The resulting pressure on the remaining higher education workers has been immense.

For many teaching academics, the requirement to move subjects and courses online has been a **significant shift** and has necessitated assistance from educational technology, learning design and academic development units.

These services help make possible the kinds of robust, evidence-based and engaging experiences that are demanded of the emergent blended teaching and learning environments

and highlight the **significant investment** of time and resources required to **implement quality online teaching**. However, responsibility for allocating time and other resources to determine and implement appropriate changes for their student cohort still largely falls to instructors themselves, and their teaching teams.

We know that Australian university students have found the disruption of their studies **challenging and unsettling**. But we also know, from decades of educational research, that the experiences of academics and their perceptions of the environment in which they work have clear and strong relationships with the ways in which students **experience their learning, and their eventual learning outcomes**.

Clearly, recent changes to the work environment of academics have been intense and profoundly disruptive, but how we respond to this disruption will also influence the **experiences of future student cohorts**.

Our **research in progress** suggests that teaching academics show a range of responses to the COVID disruption, reflecting in many cases a variation in their perceptions of how they are being supported. So, for some, a perceived lack of support for their work has been associated with an overall negative set of experiences, but others have shown more positive experiences and are more optimistic about their futures as teaching academics.



These include teaching-focused academics that have taken on greater leadership responsibilities as they guide their peers and colleagues in online learning design and form local supportive communities of practice.

As change fatigue sets in and the pandemic drags on with recent lockdowns across the country, it is critically important that universities **continue to support teaching academics** to implement changes to their curriculum to suit online and blended learning environments and invest significant additional time to **adapt to 'dual delivery' formats**.

Also important, however, are **initiatives to support curriculum changes** that move beyond crisis management and are sustainable over the longer term. These could include funding program-level curriculum reviews to ensure a coherent online experience for students, providing formal support for teaching and learning communities of practice across disciplines, schools and faculties, and recruiting more into teaching roles.

As we move into our second year of COVID-19 disruption, universities also need to recognise the effects of the ongoing challenges and inherent uncertainties on the **wellbeing of academics** and provide incentives and rewards for their teaching efforts, as well as tailored support.

There remain exciting, tangible opportunities in our Australian

universities for a renewed focus on creative, intentional learning design that **facilitates engaging student experiences in both online and on-campus formats**.

At our institution, curriculum changes have ranged from replacing core content with online videos, to interactive polling and online quizzes, through to the huge efforts of some instructors to provide rich, immersive online experiences for their students.

These latter efforts have included providing **remote lab kits** so students can perform experiments at home, and creating virtual worlds and experiences to **replicate artistic performance spaces** for instrumental students and **construction sites** for building and planning students.

To continue this curriculum transformation in a way that is successful and sustainable requires conscious investment in formal and informal support at multiple levels and greater recognition of teaching and learning efforts across the university. Teaching academics are the lifeblood of our universities. The challenges they face need to be recognised and the work that they do needs to be supported and valued as we move forward. ☺

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