

# Mid-Career Challenges in Australian Universities:

## A collaborative auto-ethnographic narrative

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This chapter highlights the challenges and complexities that mid-career academics need to overcome in the Australian Higher Education sector. The collaborative auto-ethnographic narratives of the authors from different institutions across Australia provide insights into strategies, life choices, and motivations for focusing on career progression in academia.*

**Keywords:** Collaborative Auto-Ethnography, mid-career academics, ROPE, Leximancer, conceptual map, Athena Swan, academic-motherhood, Australian Research Council

## INTRODUCTION

Gender inequities are prevalent in Australian universities. Inequalities in women's and men's academic careers are not new (Varpio et al., 2021; Nikunen, 2012; Valian 2005; Probert, 2005). The “academic parent”, predominantly female, struggles to meet performance expectations of self, supervisors, colleagues, and other stakeholders in today's modern world. In Australia, women continue to carry a much larger share than men of caring for others, both as unpaid carers in the family context and as paid carers in the Australian workforce (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2018). When women return to study or work after a career break, they are likely to do so “within the constraints of their competing responsibilities for households, partners, children and possibly other family members” (Stone & O’Shea 2019). Although universities are leaders among Australian workplaces in implementing policies to support parents, there is evidence that formalised institutional support, if not adequately designed or implemented, is sometimes ineffective or not accessed (Roberat and Erskine, 2005; Armenti, 2004, and can (re)create gender inequities (Marsh, 2015).

Drawing upon the authors' collaborative lived experiences, this chapter aims to define the meaning of a mid-career academic in Australian higher education and inform the reader about academic institutional structures, including opportunities for career progression. The authors' own narratives of career experiences and progression reflect on children, career, the pandemic, and the everyday conflict when balancing academic duties and caring responsibilities for the self and others.

The challenge of balancing work and care is not unique to women in academia. Women in professional careers face many of the same issues as academic women, particularly when the expectations of their workplace require long hours of work and long lead times on projects (Choroszewicz, M., & Adams, 2019). What sets apart the experience of academic women is the combination of insecure work while maintaining an ongoing flow of research outputs in order to maintain career progress leading to heavy workloads at a time when many women have significant caring responsibilities.

In the Australian work environment, Australian universities have been at the forefront of implementing gender equity policies and supports, including parental leave, phased-return-to-work, on campus childcare facilities and flexible working practices (Marchant and Wallace 2016; WGEA 2018). These policies and supports are available to both mothers and fathers, although they are not uniform in their application between genders or across universities and are intended to keep careers on track during the period that academic parents are raising families or undertaking other caring responsibilities (Roberat and Erskine, 2005).

Despite these supportive employment policies, the “leaky pipeline” is still evident in Australian academia, with women academics overrepresented in lower-level positions in universities and holding fewer than 1/3 of professorial positions, in spite of making up nearly half of the academic workforce. There are points at which female academics make decisions that affect their career progression in order to balance work and family obligations. These decisions often include the balance of research, teaching, and administration in their career. Women frequently take on administrative roles that are given less value than research in promotion proceedings. Further, as the Covid-19 pandemic has affected career cycles, progression, and work practice in Higher Education globally, there is a need for the University sector to fully acknowledge that it has also intensified gender inequities (Malisch et al. 2020; Willey 2020).

This chapter will explore the experiences of mid-career women in universities, including the effectiveness of gender equity policies in assisting academic staff in achieving work-life balance and building career trajectories. It is particularly relevant to mid-career academic women, as it is often at this stage of their career that they are raising families or providing assistance to other aging family members. We note that women working in professional and administrative careers, including women who move from an academic to a managerial role, also face challenges, particularly related to the career structure for non-academic administrative staff. However the narratives of these women are out

of scope for this chapter.

A collaborative ethnographic narrative of five academic women at different points in their careers, but all broadly in ‘mid-career’, will inform lived experiences as to what more needs to be done, especially in a post Covid-19 environment.

The structure of this chapter is as follows: first, we will set out the academic career structure in Australia, with particular attention to who would be considered to be an early or mid-career academic in the Australian context. Career progression in Australia moves through five levels from Level A, Associate Lecturer to Level E, Professor. Within this structure we will discuss two specific career transition points:

- Postdoctoral entry into an academic career; and
- Promotion from Level C (Senior Lecturer) to Level D (Associate Professor).

The chapter will then discuss institutional responses to the challenges faced by female academics, including the SAGE Athena Swan program and the reporting requirements of the Workplace Gender Equality Agency.

Although universities are implementing policies and strategies to support academic and professional parents, it is clear that academic parents are still experiencing challenges in managing the demands of work and family, exacerbated by the need and desire to build their careers. Based on the autoethnographic accounts, we will explore some of the issues that mid-career academics are confronted with, including:

- as members of the “sandwich generation”, mid-career academics are often juggling their obligations to care for growing children and elderly relatives;
- navigating entitlements to parental or carer leave and flexible work within the university sector in Australia;
- making caring more visible within the Higher Education sector; and
- how to balance caring responsibilities within an academic career trajectory
- all while maintaining self-care and personal wellbeing.

Finally we will address the contemporary post-pandemic ‘new norm’ of everyday work-life balance in Australia. We will discuss the impact Covid-19 has had on the university sector in Australia, the changes in working conditions and the effect that this is likely to have on mid-career female academics.

## **METHODOLOGY: COLLABORATIVE AUTO-ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCH APPROACH**

As authors, we employed a collaborative autoethnography, a research design well suited for this chapter. Chang (2021) highlights that collaborative auto-ethnography allows for the distinctive presence of self at the centre of the research. This approach engaged all contributors as authors with an equitable voice in the design of this study. Every author was encouraged to reflect and write in a non-academic way about the “challenges and opportunities” of their journeys to becoming mid-career academics and exemplify moving up the ladder post-career break and during the pandemic.

All five authors share a passion for writing in the space of gender equity and know each other from previous collaborations. The five authors are drawn from four institutions across Australia and have collective experience of 12 different institutions in social science, law and business schools over their careers to date. They range in academic rank from Level B to E, and have experience in teaching and research, with two having held research-focused positions at times during their career.

Our collaborative ethnographic data collection commenced in 2022 while some parts of Australia were still experiencing lockdown. One narrative per person was written in a descriptive and emotive format. We agreed on prompts to facilitate the diary-style journal entries to encourage different views about subject matters related to mid-career progression, lived experiences of career breaks and the return to work, and the available and received support at the institutional and personal level as well as the visibility of the concept of care in the workplace.

The following prompts encouraged us to reflect and recount our lived experiences:

- (1) What do we see as mid-career progression in Academia?
- (2) Post career break, what motivated us to go back to work and what are the challenges we encountered in our careers?
- (3) What environmental (institutional or professional) factors supported and/or hindered our career progression?
- (4) What personal (personal beliefs, abilities, or any other intrinsic drivers) factors supported and/or hindered our career progression?
- (5) How has the pandemic affected our academic career, well-being and work-life balance?

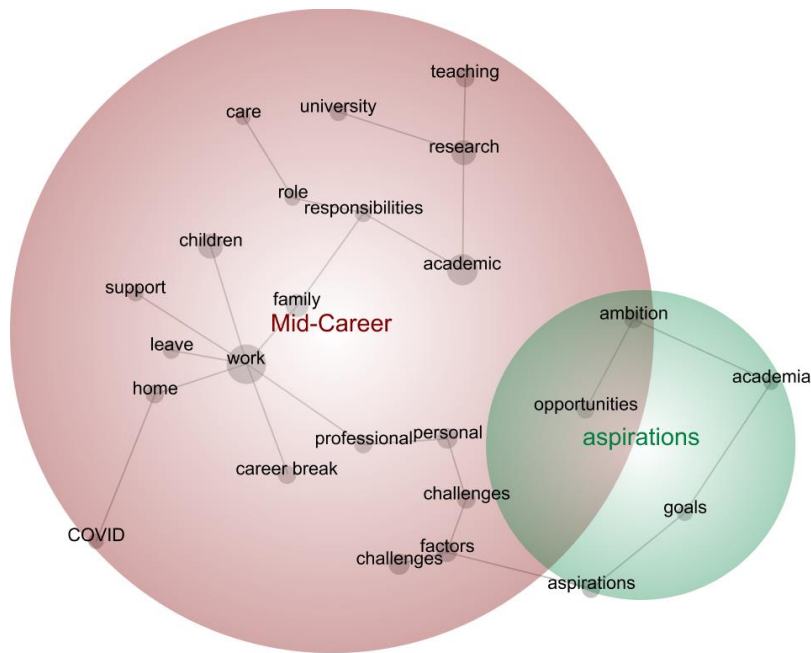
Each individual had a month to work on their own narratives. While each of us was encouraged to write it in our style and there was no specific word count or format given, the narratives had to be sufficiently detailed to conduct a data analysis that looked for similarities and differences in our stories. We met twice during the writing stage to discuss the issues and themes that emerged from the written narrative. All narratives, once finalized by the individuals, were collated and run through the Leximancer software package.

The recount of our stories explored our personal experiences. Each of us discussed our emotional and physical well-being, the joy and challenges of care and the many multi-tasking roles they have taken on to support their institutions before and during the pandemic. We looked to the future during our collaborative online meetings and brainstormed ways in which institutions could make career progression more equitable for female employees. Our recounts ensured that the collaborative autoethnography created a more inclusive and more methodologically rigorous approach to engaging with individual perspectives than solo autoethnography (Lapadat, 2017).

The data collected from five female mid-career academics from four Australian institutions was analysed using a conceptual and thematic analysis assisted by Leximancer 4.51, a Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS), which was developed to assist qualitative analysis processes. Leximancer text mines the content of documents (Thomas, 2014) and the lead authors are well versed in its utilisation. The software follows an automated content analysis approach (Smith and Humphreys 2006) using the thesaurus as a classifier. The co-occurrence of words and the word frequency allows the software to generate conceptual maps (Smith and Humphreys, 2006) as words correlate with other words in textual analysis (Spina et al. 2021, Lemon & Hayes 2020). The software package, widely used in qualitative research, helped us analyse the meanings within text passages by extracting the main concepts and ideas (Smith and Humphreys, 2006; Wilk et al., 2019; Sotiriadou, Brouwers and Le 2014).

An overview of the words used in narrating our lived experiences that indicate the emergent themes from our autoethnographic narratives is presented in the conceptual map (Figure 1). These maps assisted our chosen interpretative paradigm and the discussion of the findings in the chapter.

[Insert Figure 1 about here]



*Caption: Conceptual Map illustrating the Theme of Mid-Career & Aspirations*

*Source: Authors Analysis of autoethnographic narratives via Leximancer*

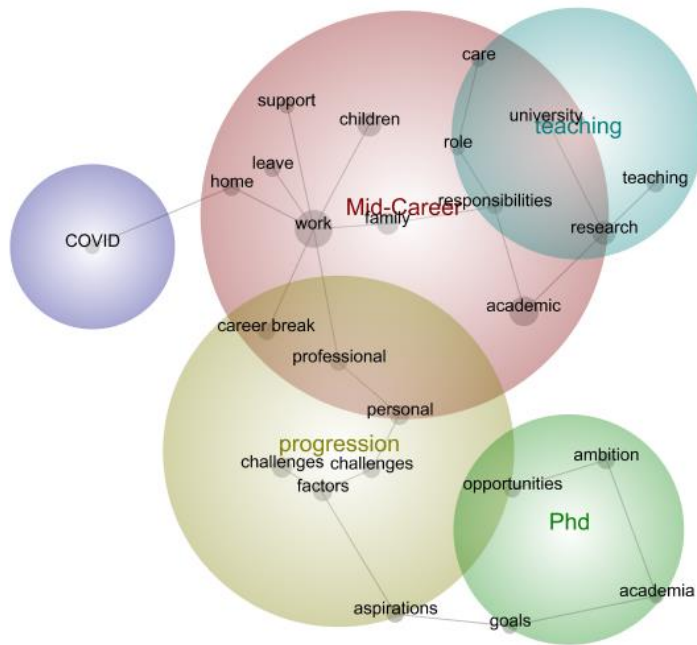
The generated conceptual maps were shared between the authors and allowed us to review and engage in more extensive collaborative discussions. The concepts Leximancer visually presented within the larger circles of themes were the starting point of our conversation. We met using video conferencing software (Zoom) where our discussions allowed us to expand on our detailed accounts, adding further context to our experiences in a safe environment. These discussions were recorded and transcribed and informed the development of this chapter. Our collaborative meetings accentuated challenges, complexities, difficulties, and generated a joint debate on workforce disparity regarding the availability, (or lack of) support mechanisms for career advancement within the higher education sector.

Figure 2 shows the details of the themes (displayed as the balloons in the map) that underpin the discussion that follows, marking the challenges, complexities, and nuances of female journeys to mid-career. A fundamental premise identified by the association of the concepts within the mid-career theme (concepts are the soft-grey words within the thematic balloons in the conceptual maps) was the importance of family. Despite the difficulties encountered, the strong family bond, personal support and family values that each author pointed out together with the joys of parenthood allowed them to view their achievements and accomplishments to date with pride, in particular with Covid-19.

*“Family is my foundation and much of my career actions and aspirations are driven by what is right for my family. This is not about money, this is about lifestyle, priorities and values. I had to let go of some of my set goals for the year... Covid-19 will hinder my career even further.” (A, 3)*

Our thematic and relational analysis has identified academic career progression post PhD completion, motherhood, and the pandemic as the overarching vital themes shaping the experience of transitions to mid-career.

*(Insert Figure 2 about here)*



*Caption: Conceptual Map illustrating the Major Themes linked to Mid-Career Progression*

*Source: Authors Analysis of autoethnographic narratives via Leximancer*

This research design is sufficiently robust to support the discussion that follows and the recommendations we provide in this chapter. The auto-ethnographic methodology is considered to be an appropriate methodology to explore a phenomenon based on personal experience (Bowyer et al, 2021; Statti et al 2021; Abdellatif and Gatto, 2021). The use of Leximancer software has been validated in diverse research contexts, including gender studies (Gelber et al., 2022; Jones et al, 2021; Octaviani et al., 2021; Haynes et al., 2019; Hyndman et al., 2018.) As collaborators on the research design and authors of this chapter, as well as being trained qualitative researchers, we were not removed from the analysis, instead led the research process and documented the steps involved to understand and derive conclusions from the data set.

Three dominant themes emerged from this process: Academic Career Progression; Motherhood and Unpaid Care and the Effect of the Global Pandemic which will form the basis of the following discussion.

## **Theme 1: Academic Career Progression**

The first issue that needs to be addressed is how to define a mid-career academic. There are several dimensions through which the academic career trajectory can be examined. While length of service cannot be disregarded, most commonly mid-career is viewed through a career trajectory lens. We have

conceptualised a mid-career academic based on the position held; security of tenure and successful promotion to a level that reflects performance.

### ***Defining a Mid-Career Academic***

Australian universities do not use the “tenure-track” common in North American universities. Appointments are categorised as continuing (tenured) that are confirmed after a probationary period of up to three years; or for a defined period or fixed term. The insecure outcomes of fixed term appointments will be discussed later in this chapter. Under the industrial relations framework in Australia, each university is bound by an Enterprise Agreement with its staff. Although the specific provisions of each agreement can differ, the framework in relation to the recruitment and progression of staff is set out in Schedule A to the *Higher Education Industry—Academic Staff—Award 2020* (HEIAS Award, 2020). Within this formal structure of five levels, academic staff may be engaged in a teaching-focussed, research-focussed, or teaching and research role. The academic trajectory will be different in each of these roles. The Minimal Standards for Academic Levels sets out the following schedule of responsibilities, subject to the expectations of the relevant discipline:

- Level A is the level with least formal responsibility. A Level A academic may be described as an Associate Lecturer or a Postdoctoral Research Fellow, and they will generally be working under the supervision of more experienced staff.
- Level B staff will be starting to exercise more autonomy in their work. At this level a Lecturer may be taking the full responsibility for teaching a particular subject, while a Research Fellow will be making an independent contribution to individual or team research.
- At Level C the Senior Lecturer/Senior Research Fellow will be making an original contribution that expands knowledge or practice in the discipline. They will be starting to be recognised by their peers as they develop a national profile for their work.
- A Level D academic, or Associate Professor, will be making an outstanding contribution, taking on a leadership role within the university and the discipline. They will be recognised as experts in their discipline within the academic community.
- Level E, Professor, is the highest level within the university rankings. At Level E the academic will be recognised nationally within their discipline, taking on a leadership role as a researcher, teacher or in the administration of the university.

An academic can enter the system at any level, depending on their experience and background. Most Australian universities require that a person employed at Level B or higher must hold a PhD, although this may vary according to discipline. Using this framework, Level C could be a useful point at which a person is considered a mid-career academic as they act autonomously and contribute to the discipline. However, the interpretation of mid-career may be defined by the person's role, with a teaching-focussed academic usually holding a position at Level B or C. Teaching academics who are promoted above Level C tend to be active in researching pedagogy and teaching practice, as research performance is one of the criteria for promotion.

Although mid career may be inferred from the appointment held by an academic, in practice the stages of a career trajectory are generally drawn from the Australian Research Council (ARC) eligibility guidelines regarding defining a researcher. The ARC is a statutory government agency that administers a number of competitive government-funded research programmes, including Discovery Early Career Researcher Awards (DECRA), open to applicants within 5 years of their PhD award, and Future Fellowship Awards, designed to assist mid-career researchers, open to applicants who were awarded their PhD between 6 and 15 years earlier. These are even more competitive than DECRA grants with about half of the number of grants available. In addition to these grants that support an individual researcher, the ARC and other funding bodies take account of the inclusion of early career researchers (ECRs) in a team project, increasing the prospect of successful project funding and giving indirect support to the ECRs.

An alternative, intrinsic, perspective, used by our authors in discussing the definition of mid-career, reflects the authors' views of a mid-career in terms of the autonomy that they have achieved and control over their own research, as set out in Table 1.

*Table 1. Author's definitions of Mid-career in the Higher education sector in Australia*

<i>Mid-career is when the academic has met the entry criteria for the discipline and has gained enough experience to be working autonomously and looking at promotion or career progression. This will generally require a PhD and the development of a personal research agenda, and the academic's teaching role will extend into curriculum design and administrative duties. (A,1)</i>
<i>Mid-career is undefined and somewhat meaningless for me. I see the wider academic context to reflect a Level C definition, but academia is not linear and there are some (especially women) for whom levels do not reflect career standing. (A, 2)</i>
<i>Mid-career is defined by the impact that an individual is making in their discipline, rather than their title. It's about engaging with the substantive knowledge of the discipline and about engaging with the wider community and making a difference to policy, education practices or another tangible output. It's not about the number of publications or the amount of grant funding necessarily – however, these components are part of the research to be done to start making a difference to the world in which we live. (A,3)</i>
<i>Mid-career is when you have completed your PhD and you have established your research area while at the same excelling in providing innovative and transformative teaching experiences to students. (A, 4)</i>
<i>Mid-career is a career stage (approximately 5-10 years post PhD completion) at which you have established your reputation as an expert in your field and have developed a sizable body of work on which to build. It is also, more qualitatively, a period in which you become more comfortable and secure in your place in academia. (A, 5)</i>

Source: Author narratives

Mid-career is regarded by the authors as a time when an academic can act autonomously, having developed the confidence to trust their knowledge and expertise in their discipline. The narratives exemplify that success at the mid-career level is not to be taken for granted nor easily attained and is definitely not standardized across disciplines, within- nor across institutions nationally, as the following observations demonstrate: .

*...different disciplines will see excellence differently. This is not always understood at senior levels within the university. (A, 1)*

*I am a non-traditional academic. It is like I wear a mark staining my standing in academia because of this. Not by choice. But I have come to lean in and embrace me – the unconventional academic – and run with it. If I can't be them, then I'll be the best me. (A, 2)*

Some authors acknowledged further that academia is often perceived as a lonesome workplace with journeys of career progression having its up-and-downs. However, when reflecting on one's work and belief, passion for social change emerged as the driver or motivation for having chosen an academic career in the first place.

*I often feel alone in my career endeavours. Many of my peers do not recognise the values that drive me and the motivations for my actions. My peers often see me as a bad (failing) academic. I don't publish like a machine, I don't publish where it matters, and I don't care what people think of me. I have come to describe myself as a bad academic, mostly because I want to shine a light on the failings of academia. I'm a bad academic and that's good. Good for my students, good for my community, good for society. (A,2)*



*“Once you get tenure or pass probation post PhD, you are considered mid-career” – well in my eyes this is not entirely true. I always thought mid-career is based on one's achievement at work and in academia and NOT on the position that one holds (B or C or D) however I was told a few years ago by senior executives in my school, that until you are Level C no matter what you do, you will not be respected. I passed probation to Lecturer Level B in 2004, I finished my PhD in 2009 (pre career break), and up until now I am juggling the constant ‘move up the ladder’ to become a Senior Lecturer. (A, 4)*

It was acknowledged that at mid-career there was more flexibility to manage competing work-life demands.

*A successful career would be the adoption of policy solutions and an improvement in the lives of those whom the policy affects. Therefore, what defines a successful academic career? It is one that has made a difference to the lives of others—using knowledge creation through teaching or research to benefit other people. To achieve this, an academic needs to be flexible within the often changing university structure. However, were I to reach this goal and not maintain a good relationship with my family it would be considered a failure. I am a mother/wife/child/granddaughter/sister first and somehow, I have to balance the competing aspects of my life. I don't want my work life to be so consuming that I don't have energy left for my family when I get home. Therefore, if a successful career is the progression of policy and student outcomes, I simultaneously raise my family in an environment where they are the focus when I am at home with them. I think this definition then informs any motivation for career progression. (A, 3)*

A key finding in all narratives was that there are two key transition points that mark a mid-career academic: security of tenure and promotion above Level C. Our study extends Reynolds et al. (2017), That collaborative autoethnographic study of Early Career Researchers' self-reflections found that women define success in varied terms, and highlighted that universities need to understand the differences in how women may approach career progress and incorporate this into support processes and in the alignment of individual and university goals (Reynolds et al. 2017).

### **Security of Tenure**

The first transition point that we have identified is the transition from casual employment to more secure employment, which in an Australian context, means being appointed to a continuing or permanent position at the university.

Regardless of level, academic tenure in Australian universities can be categorised based on the security of tenure. The least secure is a casual position where employees are engaged for a particular task: teaching a specified course or as a research assistant. This is short term employment with no guarantee of being renewed and is therefore insecure work. There is evidence that across the sector, casual staff have been underpaid for the work that they have undertaken (Brown et al. 2010; NTEU 2020). Under s.66F of the *Fair Work Act 2009* (Cth) a casual employee who has been employed for at least 12 months and can show a regular pattern of work for the last six months, may apply to have the employment converted to a part time fixed term contract. This position is more secure than a casual role and staff are eligible to access to leave entitlements among other employee rights. However, casual academic employees are rarely eligible to convert their role to this type of contract as teaching staff are not employed during semester breaks, and tuition patterns vary according to enrolments meaning that the regular pattern of work cannot be demonstrated.

Regardless, many aspiring academics who have worked hard to complete a PhD seek sessional or casual work as an entry pathway into employment. The narratives demonstrated this: highlighting the post PhD career aspirations of the authors and their belief in the institutional order at the beginning of their academic career; and how this belief diminished over the journey to mid-career.

*My post-PhD goals were shaped by the factors that initially motivated me to pursue an academic career. I wanted to develop the skills to be able to research and make change through that knowledge.*

*Therefore, with 6 months to go on my PhD I started applying for positions for research-only jobs. In 2008, these were not all that common nor were roles in my area of research. The institution mattered less than the opportunity to research in my area. (A, 3)*

*Post PhD completion, I didn't have clear goals. I was already in a research-only role and I just had a generalised sense that I wanted to do well on key metrics such as publications and grant funding. (A, 5)*

*Post PhD I just wanted a job in the sector. I knew I did not want to work in the public service and the lure of the freedom and flexibility of academia was my main motivation. My only drive was to teach, share my academic expertise, and enjoy academic freedom. I know what I did not want and leaned towards what was most personally rewarding while also meeting my family's needs. (A, 2)*

Women are overrepresented in insecure academic contracts. Commonwealth Government Department of Education, Skills and Employment (DESE) Data from 2020 shows that 14.6% of the total Australian university workforce was made up of casual employees, of which 58% were female.

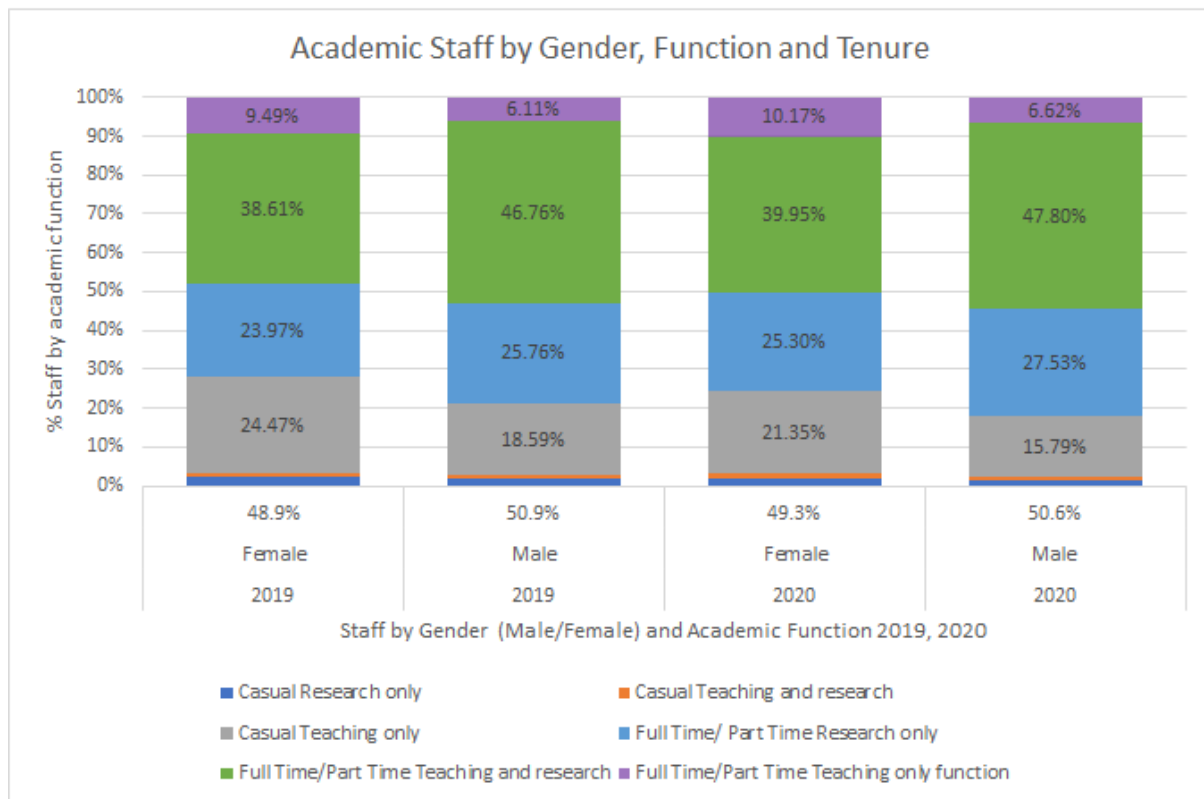
Fixed term contracts are also prevalent in the Australian university sector. Under the Award (cl. 11) fixed term contracts should only be offered to employees in limited circumstances, including:

- in respect of a specific task or project;
- a research role that is less than five years;
- where the person is replacing an employee who is temporarily absent or seconded to another role or where recruitment action has commenced;
- where the role is a clinical role requiring recent practical experience; or
- where the employee has given notice of their intention to retire within the next five years.

In practice, fixed term contracts are frequently seen as a way to manage faculty budgets. DESE data show that 62% of full-time and fractional full-time staff, including professional staff, are tenured, but of the remaining 38% on limited term contracts, 42% are males and 56% are women (DESE, Table 2.8). This is particularly problematic for researchers. As a project comes to an end, they are reliant on new funding or a new project, and this insecurity continues through much of their career.

DESE Data also shows the different employment patterns for male and female academic staff. Although the full-time equivalent hours (FTE) are nearly equal, there is a higher proportion of female staff than male on casual contracts, and on teaching-only appointments, regardless of contract type.

[Insert Figure 3 about here]



*Caption: Staff Full Time Equivalence: percentage of total FTE across all Australian Universities by gender, function and tenure*

*Source: Author calculations from Department of Education, Skills and Employment: Selected Higher Education Statistics – 2021 Staff data*

At mid-career, an academic will be seeking tenure as a continuing employee. It is more difficult for the university to terminate a continuing employee as it is required to comply with industrial law regarding performance management or demonstrate that the position is no longer required (Award, Part 7).

Our narratives confirmed these experiences of career insecurity in progressing to mid-career status. Notably the fear of not having secure employment to support a family when not tenured stood out; and wondering what the next steps ought to be to maintain the institutional momentum post-PhD completion.

*I did not want to look incompetent. Imposter syndrome was ever present. It took 12 months of being on a permanent contract to feel secure. (A, 3)*

*While some of the pressure is off when you transition from ECR to mid-career because you become more secure about your academic identity and more experienced at navigating the system, a new sort of pressure emerges, to become a 'leader' and maintain this leadership through new activities, like*

*leading research teams, showing international leadership, exhibiting thought leadership, and so on. This is intensified if you reach mid-career and are still not tenured. (A, 1)*

*After my second child arrived and I had been out of the workforce for around 4 months, the fear gripped me that if I did not get back into the workplace soon, I would be locked out from a career in academia and not have enough money to house/feed our family. (A, 3)*

In addition, the narratives revealed psychological and emotional stress associated with returning to academia after a prolonged career break or carers' leave of absence, and the risk that they would not be able to resume their career.

*"... the intense pressure makes me feel as though I must always be striving for the next thing, and I have always felt high pressure and worked nights after my kids are in bed. This has taken a very large toll on my health and wellbeing. I experience high stress and anxiety which manifests in a range of health conditions." (A, 5)*

*"...being back on a fixed term contract, for me, has intensified the pressure to be high performing in order to ensure contract renewal or the attainment of a new role when the current contract finishes." (A, 3)*

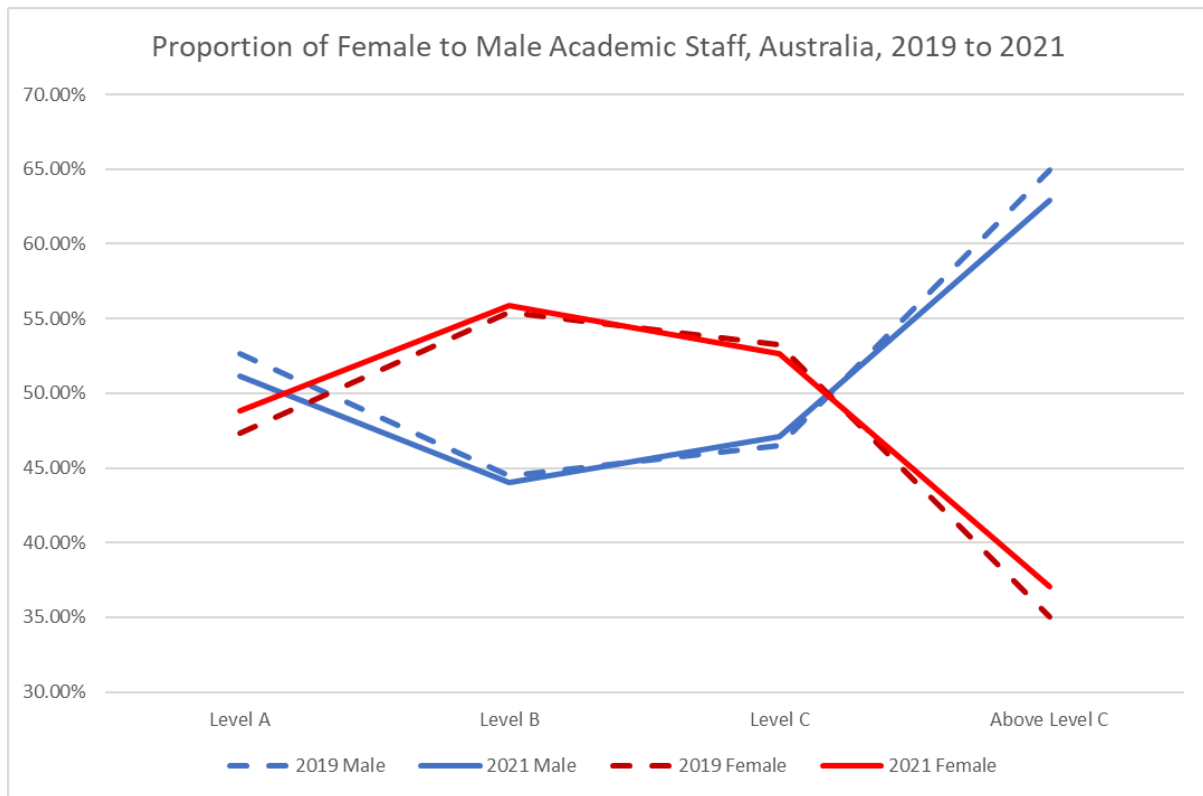
*It is precisely because I have been trying to build a smooth and strong career trajectory that I have these health conditions. (A, 5)*

### **Promotion**

After an academic has achieved a permanent position and completed their probationary period, the second transition point in an academic career path is promotion to a level where the person feels that their expertise has been recognised, generally at Level C or D. Promotion between levels at a particular university is managed internally and will usually be based on the academic being able to show that they are performing above a certain benchmark in the three domains of research, teaching and engagement, as relevant for the type of appointment. The benchmark is generally performance above the level to which they are applying for promotion. Most universities call for applications for promotion annually, although it may be expedient to promote an academic outside the normal promotion round, for example to respond to an offer from another institution.

The data show that there is clearly a gender dimension to the appointment of academics in Australian universities, with the proportion of women appointed at levels C and above across all disciplines diminishing at more senior levels:

[Insert Figure 4 about here]



*Caption: Proportion of Proportion of Female to Male Academic Staff at academic levels: Australia, 2019 to 2021*

*Source: Author calculations from Department of Education, Skills and Employment: Selected Higher Education Statistics – 2021 Staff data*

Although there has been some narrowing of the gap at senior levels over the last three years, at the current rate of change it will take another two decades for the gap to disappear. The metaphor used to describe this phenomenon is the ‘leaky pipeline’, with women not progressing into the higher levels of the system (Buckles, 2019). The leaky pipeline has been observed for decades with the gender imbalance in universities, most notably science departments, being discussed thirty years ago (Etzkowitz, 1994; Winkler et al 1996).

One of our key discussion themes centred on the meaning of promotion, and whether all academic women aspire towards holding a title.

*“I have a heavy teaching load, conduct public policy research, publish in audience-appropriate and impactful ways, and do a great deal of outreach work. I lack private school and other political-type connections. A successful career in academia comes down to titles. Promotion-based titles that do not always reflect effort and contributions.” (A, 1)*

A common theme pointed out in the author narratives, and in the online discussion, was frustration at witnessing unfairness, gender discrimination, and gendered bias while progressing through their academic career. Authors were dismayed and at times surprised at the insidious ways in which gender bias in academia manifested in spite of the sector’s well-developed policies, rules and regulations.

*I am a very fair and rules-based person and was told my appointment was in accordance with the college rules. Around the time of my appointment two men without PhDs were appointed in my college in senior academic positions, without a recruitment process – their industry experience drove their*

*appointment. I realised at that point that I would be fighting every day of my academic career to justify my existence. Rules might exist, but they only apply to people like me – women, without connections and with family commitments that limit their ability to move for employment. (A, 2)*

*(Barriers) Academic jealousy and empire building by colleagues. (A, 1)*

*Desire to have a family hindered my progression – discussions about a new contract evaporated once it was known that I was pregnant with baby #2. (A, 3)*

*When deciding to take an extended career break of 22 months after the third child, I learned not to worry about my return; as I knew from my first two experiences of return post leave that one has to always start fresh -almost as a newbie in an ECR status; having to prove who one is in a male dominated world; my supervisor even suggested I shall rethink my return to part-time as looking after children is quite a time-consuming effort. (A, 4).*

Although gender balance in higher education institutions has improved in many disciplines since the 1990s, the problem remains intractable. This led the authors to explore the underlying reasons for the imbalance, specifically the caring responsibilities taken on by women.

## **Theme 2: Motherhood and unpaid care**

There are many reasons for the leaky pipeline. The factor that persists is the gendered expectations about the provision of unpaid care, which is not easily balanced against the demands of an academic career (Cervia & Biancheri, 2017; Canetto et al, 2017). This is not unique to the higher education sector, but a phenomenon that persists globally (OECD 2012; ILO 2005).

The biggest challenge faced by women who are developing an academic career remains the balance between an academic career and unpaid caring responsibilities (Cervia & Biancheri, 2017). For academic women, mid-career is often a time of family formation, after completing a PhD and obtaining work in their chosen discipline (Canetto et al, 2017).

Under Australian legislation, the National Employment Standards set out in the *Fair Work Act 2009* (Cth) set out a minimum standard of employment conditions that an employer must provide. Section 70 of the Act includes parental leave entitlements, allowing a parent who is the primary carer of a child up to 12 months unpaid leave on the birth or adoption of a child with the guarantee of being entitled to return to the same job when they return to work. Since 2010 this has been supplemented by access to a Commonwealth parental leave pay scheme that provides the primary carer with up to 8 weeks of pay at the equivalent of the national minimum wage under the *Paid Parental Leave Act 2009* (Cth). There are a series of requirements to be eligible for Parental Leave Pay, the most significant of which, for our purposes, is that section 67 of the *Fair Work Act 2009* (Cth) requires a person to have worked for an employer for at least 12 months to be eligible for unpaid parental leave *and* to be eligible for parental leave payments section 32 of the *Paid Parental Leave Act 2010* (Cth) requires that they must have worked 330 hours over 10 of the previous 13 months. These requirements limit access by workers who are on, or have been on, casual contracts in the lead up to family formation.

The parent of a child who is school aged or younger is also entitled to request access to flexible working hours under section 65 of the *Fair Work Act 2009* (Cth), including changes in hours, patterns of work and work locations. The employer may only reject this request based on reasonable business grounds that may include cost; the effect on other workers; or a significant effect on the efficiency or productivity of the business. In Australia, it is common for parents returning to work after a period of parental leave to return on a flexible and/or part-time basis (ABS, 2013).

These rights are a minimum standard with which employers must comply. More generous provisions can be incorporated in an award for workers in an industry; an Enterprise Agreement in respect of a workplace or an individual contract. Notably parental leave may be paid leave, and the government

Parental Leave Pay can be topped up or extended by an employer. Gender equity in Australia is also monitored through the Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA), a body set up under Commonwealth legislation that requires major employers to report against a set of gender indicators.

In Australia, employees in the higher education sector have traditionally had access to enhanced employee leave programs to assist in negotiating family formation. Data extracted from the Workforce Gender Equality Agency (WGEA, n.d.) in respect of the Higher Education sector shows that the average duration of paid parental leave entitlement across the higher education sector is 16.1 weeks, compared to 10.9 weeks paid leave across all industries. WGEA does not report on individual employers but on industry sectors.

However, access to lengthy, or multiple, periods of leave can still be viewed as detrimental to an academic career because of the ‘interruptions’ these periods produce in an individual’s track record. As a consequence, it is common for academics on parental leave to continue to work, participating in research projects to meet previously negotiated deadlines and maintain the pipeline of publications. The availability of more generous provisions in academia than in other professions also carries a level of career risk as time away from the workplace extends the interruption, further delaying career progression.

The authors in this study spoke of the joy of parenting; however, they also spoke of the guilt that they feel when work demands limit the time they can spend with their children. Allowing for motherhood to be visible among colleagues in the workplace was something some authors preferred to keep personal due to negative past experiences. A key finding pointed towards re-prioritising their work-life balances post ECR status once they felt confident speaking up about the everyday juggles and granted colleagues a glimpse of insight into their personal lives.

*It is an everyday struggle of getting out of the house on-time and refreshed with a "I can do it" attitude - day in and out. Not many colleagues understand, especially the male colleagues. (A, 4)*

*My motivation for career progression recently changed once I saw its impact on my family. My children groan when they know that Semester is starting because they know I will be working late most nights trying to balance the demands of research and teaching. They know when the funding rounds are because I work even more during those times. (A, 3)*

*At the same time, while I have been very careful to protect the extremely valuable time I have with my children when they are young, the stress has at times affected my capacity to be the best version of myself for them, which upsets me terribly. (A, 5)*

Caring for parents, grandparents and loved ones and the additional complexities the pandemic has created in managing care responsibilities was a common theme in the narratives. Parental leave is becoming normalised due to the recognition afforded through the industrial relations system and the provision of appropriate leave. An aspect of caregiving that does not have enough recognition is care of other family members.

*After my third career break, I decided to be a proud visible working Mom having three wonderful children and a wonderful long break. However, when my father living overseas has become terminally ill, the importance of time with family has become even more visible due to personal family circumstances. One’s career sometimes needs to be put on hold for a while (guilt free) in situations as such. However, it is not easy of letting go of one’s aspirations and the hard work, as after returning back to work and losing my dear father ...and then my mother overseas fell ill and needed surgery and no one was able to fly out of “fortress Australia”. I felt powerless and uncomfortable sharing it at work due my negative experiences when returning post-career break. (A, 4)*

Our authors have all taken on caring responsibilities for older relatives: parents, grandparents or other family members who need support and practical assistance. It is difficult to assess how this affects the

career trajectory of a mid-career academic, as this form of care, ranging from occasional support to crisis care, is less visible than caring for children, and is not recognised in university policies.

### **Research Opportunity and Performance Evidence (ROPE)**

Using a career timeline to determine eligibility for opportunities for career development, can discriminate against women, who are more likely to experience career interruptions. An extended period of leave can have significant effects on a research portfolio as the researcher may not be able to complete a project, may be excluded from new opportunities during the period of leave and thus interrupting the pipeline of research outputs (Oleschuk, 2020). In recognition of the effect that family formation can have on a career, the ARC has adopted the Research Opportunity and Performance Evidence (ROPE) principles to support career interruptions.

‘Legitimate’ career interruptions include: caring responsibilities; illness or disability; lack of access to facilities; or not being employed in a research position (ARC, 2021a). The ROPE is a section of a grant (or promotion) application that is explicitly designed to situate, both in a narrative and numerically through the calculation of the impact of career interruptions on time for research outputs, a person’s research performance in the context of their career opportunities for research. This, at least in principle, more equitably compares research performance by taking into account an applicants’ different opportunities for research. A person who has taken periods of maternity leave, has taken prolonged leave due to ill health, or has worked part time because of young children, has not had the same opportunities to produce research outputs as a person without those interruptions and so the assessment of their research performance should be adjusted accordingly.

The eligibility guidelines also change the way in which ‘mid-career’ is calculated within the ARC structures, by extending the timeframes in which a person is entitled to apply for a scheme, or in which a person is entitled to hold a grant, according to the career interruptions they have had. Female applicants are more likely to utilise these extensions than male. In the 2022 applications round, over 5% of all applications were females with more than 6 years’ experience, which was about three times the rate of male researchers with more than six years’ experience. The peak year for applications was three to four years post PhD, with about 18% of applications being males in this cohort, about 50% higher than females (ARC, 2021b).

Many universities are changing their policies to adopt the ROPE statement within the promotion context to account for gaps in research activity and publication records.

However, these formal requirements need to be grounded in a supportive culture within the university. The inclusion of a ROPE statement is a relatively new process within institutions and its success relies on the adequate interpretation of the statement and equitable and uniform application by those making decisions on promotion or grant panels.

The auto-ethnographic recount of individual experiences when assessing their research opportunities relative to their opportunities was varied, but largely sceptical.

*I know of times when my time spent having and rearing children has affected how I am perceived as a scholar. For example, as recently as 2020, I applied for a large grant with some colleagues. I was to lead the grant, and by that stage had extensive experience in project leadership, leading dozens of projects. Yet the grant assessor said they were unable to say with confidence that I could lead the grant because “given my career interruptions, I was to be considered an early career researcher or at best mid-career.” They viewed my achievements through the lens of my career interruptions in the wrong way to what is intended in the ROPE process. Yet despite these instances, I still felt I was able to progress and have a family at the same time. (A, 5)*

*Career progression in academia is a competitive pageantry that drives academics to take on ridiculous workloads to demonstrate service. When it comes down, it does not necessarily benefit universities.*



*Academic promotion is a means to an end and often fails to recognise the contributions of people like me. (A, 2)*

The narratives further point out that having supportive management and male or female colleagues with care responsibilities has positively affected their career progression to mid-career.

*I am very lucky to now work alongside a team who are all at a very similar stage of life. We all have families with children of similar ages. Moreover, the men in the team are very involved in the child-rearing in their respective households. This puts us all on an equal footing and I have always felt very supported and understood in terms of the challenges of raising children while working. (A, 3)*

### **Athena SWAN in Australia**

The challenges faced by female academics have been recognised with the development of the SAGE Athena Swan program, sponsored by Science in Australia Gender Equity (SAGE), to support the career progression of academic women. The program is based on the program that commenced in the United Kingdom in 2005. The first cohort of academic institutions were granted Bronze status in 2018 based on an audit of the policies and procedures in place within each institution.

The next stage, SAGE Cygnet awards, requires the participating organisations to remove barriers in key structural, systemic and cultural areas identified as barriers to gender equity, diversity and inclusion, consistent with the university's strategic priorities (SAGE, 2021). Some examples include retention of female employees following parental leave; increasing the promotion rate among women; increasing the number of male employees accessing parental leave entitlements. Silver status will be awarded when the organisation has achieved five Cygnet awards. Although sponsored by SAGE, the program now has a broader reach across institutions' operations, as driven by that institution's strategic priorities.

It is too soon to see concrete outcomes of this program as a driver of cultural change, particularly given the effect of the Covid-19 pandemic on academic institutions.

### **Theme 3: The Effect of the Global Pandemic**

Globally, the Covid-19 pandemic had a major effect on the higher education sector. Teaching staff were required to transform their teaching strategies to remote learning, learning unfamiliar technology and new assessment and teaching strategies in a very short period of time (Casacchia et al, 2021; Watermeyer et al, 2020) while also managing home learning requirements for school aged children (Guy and Arthur, 2021). Smith et al. (2021) identified the importance of hearing directly from academics about their experiences during the pandemic as academic identity, in an increasingly neoliberal sector, was already a topic of interest, with tension and insecurity affecting work practices, including interactions with students. The auto-ethnographic approach adopted in this chapter responds to this call.

Australian universities also went through significant workforce reductions in 2020 as international students were unable to travel to Australia directly, affecting the financial position of universities (Universities Australia, 2021), and universities were excluded from the government support packages that propped up some other industries during the pandemic. Researchers faced similar challenges: research had to change focus, methods, or be delayed, and researchers balanced large workloads with home learning of children. The ARC has extended the "Post-PhD" eligibility timeframes for DECRA and Future Fellowships by accepting post-dated applications.

Job losses during the pandemic were largely among casual workers, although permanent employees in many institutions were offered redundancy packages, resulting in experienced academics bringing forward their retirement. Although final casual employment data from the 2021 academic year has not yet been published, data of estimated casual employment shows a reduction of 15.2% in casual FTEs

between 2020 and 2021, compared to a reduction in full-time staff of 7% and fractional full-time staff of 6.2% (DESE, Table 1.1).

Early research has shown a reduction in research outputs by women compared with men, largely because the responsibility for home learning of children and other care responsibilities was disproportionately shouldered by women (Wright et al, 2020; Bowyer et al, 2021; Statti et al, 2021). Although academics have traditionally had more autonomy over their working conditions than other workers, but this advantage evaporated in the context of the pandemic environment, Australian universities were less likely to provide information about caring in relation to remote working than their international counterparts and were less flexible in respect of leave during this period (Nash and Churchill, 2020). Academics are also a highly mobile group of workers, and many with family overseas have experienced stress as they maintain relationships remotely with aging parents (Cohen et al, 2020).

The narratives pointed to the constant juggle between the additional academic workload; the pressure on the authors to carry out the necessary care and domestic duties within their homes and that the mental, physical, emotional, and psychological stress which emerged as a critical effect of the pandemic might take time to overcome. These findings are consistent with collaborative work done by Spradley et al (2022), which found that the pandemic imposed interruptions upon, and created challenges for, the nexus between maternal identity and work, in particularly in regard to being a ‘good’ mother.

*The most difficult part was when being so exhausted from the work/care juggle that by the end of the 17 weeks I didn’t always have the resources to be as patient and present with my children as I wanted to be. I still feel a lot of guilt and regret about this. (A, 5)*

*My excitement quickly vanished about working from home when home-schooling was announced. I have become a teacher to my children, a moral support provider to my parents overseas, a full-time lecturer and researcher with ambitions that were hard to let go, a housewife, a dog walker and a gatekeeper so my husband could do his work. Something had to give, I really did not know how to cope and the lockdown seemed endless. (A, 4)*

*The working from home period lasted a number of months. During this time, my husband was working feverishly to ensure that his business remained afloat and that his staff were looked after. Due to this, I was largely single parenting. Days started early and finished late to make sure all work and remote learning expectations were achieved. It was hugely stressful. (A, 3)*

*I was fortunate to have domestic support when it all became overwhelming. My colleagues on committees became very jealous at seeing fresh cups of tea handed in during meetings. I can see why some male colleagues have found their research outputs increased during this period, if they had a domestic setup with a separate workspace and no children. (A, 1)*

*I was feeling constant pressure from work and catching up on all my work until late into the night. I learned during the many hours on zoom and e-meetings that I cannot hide my children (and the dog) any longer .... I realised that I should feel proud of managing it all to make myself feel better. (A, 4)*

While the long-term consequences for the higher education sector are still unclear, the evidence and narratives of academics that emerged from the pandemic has highlighted the challenges, as they detail some of their experiences balancing care and work (Boncori, 2020; Statti et al, 2021; Abdellatif, 2020). Among our authors, there is a determination to give a higher priority to wellbeing and family. This could mean that academic advancement slows down.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

Reflecting on the varied lived experiences of five business and social-science academics who have worked at nine different universities in Australia over their careers to date, this chapter has illustrated

that there is no clear definition of what mid-career is in the Australian academic context. The authors support Geist Martin et al. (2010) that presenting mothering experiences through collaborative autoethnographic practice creates opportunities for growth and self-reflection, as our stories highlighted a part of our existence. Us taking pride in telling these stories would have remained unexamined in other methodologies. The authors found more similarities than differences in their experiences, despite their discipline and institutional diversity. By focussing on these experiences we can drive the necessary change.

Fundamentally, universities in Australia should embrace a more holistic rather than metric-driven approach to academic career progression and institutionally driven expectations for mid-career. Metrics take account of publications, grants and external speaking engagements and do not adequately account for the impact of non-traditional forms of research. Some academics publish a great deal and/or attract large grant funding, while others excel in teaching methods and embedding student-centric transformative learning experiences or embrace their outreach and public service work. A metrics-based approach is theoretically objective, but it prioritises quantity with a limited conception of quality and fails to consider the impact or broader value of outputs to the community. Even the ROPE system, while taking account of the challenges in terms of time away from a career, views the equation through a metrics-based lens. The metrics-based approach to promotion drives competition, with women too often missing out. In addition, ROPE systems must be adequately understood and applied by those assessors and promotions committees who use them, otherwise they are at risk of being compromised.

For cultural change to occur within the Australia academic context, the coexistence of caring roles played by male and female employees and their academic careers needs to be normalised. Although universities have traditionally led in this space, the corporate world is moving faster through measures that facilitate shared parenting, which will drive cultural change. Positively, a small number of initiatives set out to promote some of this cultural change.

For example, the Athena Swan program requires institutional participants to look closely at their internal cultures in order to identify and address areas where culture must shift to ensure that women can be successful in their careers. As academics based in business and social science schools, we know that a career trajectory is even more precarious in the STEM disciplines (SAGE 2021; DEET: Blickenstaff, 2005). Strategic decisions made by senior university leaders must be implemented in a way that effects change, which means creating policies and precedents that are implemented within the wider institution. However there is a real risk that strategic reforms such as Athena Swan will be relegated as universities focus greater attention on the economic challenges within the higher education sector globally following the financial impact of the Covid-19 pandemic (de Aguiar et al, 2022).

In this collaboration authors felt that they can be changemakers by working outside traditional academic conventions. An academic career path must be broad enough to accept alternative pathways that are driven by the academic's values and self-belief.

*I don't publish where it matters in an academic sense, I am more focused on publishing where it will contribute towards change. (A, 2)*

*I am a hard worker and goal orientated. The inability to say 'no' gave me more opportunities on the one hand, which enabled me to progress my career, but also made me busier around the clock. (A, 3)*

In addition, mentors and sponsors, both formal and informal, can open opportunities for women scholars and help and encourage them to achieve their goals. Most universities provide focussed institutional support through mentoring programs and networking opportunities; but our authors also remember the individuals who supported them at a time when they most needed it.

*I have been extremely lucky to date in my career progression trajectory. I was mentored by extremely inspirational and supportive leaders (mostly women). I worked on their projects and received mentorship on methods, academic writing, grantspersonship, and policy engagement. (A, 5)*

As noted, above, Australian universities have policies in place to support parents, but there is little support available for other caring responsibilities, such as caring for elderly parents, grandparents, partners, older children and relatives with special needs. This care is currently invisible, with women relying on flexible work hours and personal leave entitlements to meet these needs. Universities need to better recognise other forms of care.

*If I had known how the year would have turned out with all the endless hours of work that led to nothing, it makes me regret not having spent these additional hours in a day with my Dad and Mom when I visited them overseas and when he was so ill. I do not know if I ever get to see my Mum again, I missed out on attending the funeral of my beloved father and one thing for sure is that none can turn back time.....The older the kids get, the more challenges and complexities to overcome. And the more juggling one needs to do whilst maintaining a clear focus about the future in terms of what I want to achieve. (A, 4)*

*The most difficult aspect has been the work life balance. I have been able to have my wonderful children and to continue my career as I hoped but it has come at a personal cost. I feel immense pressure from the academy to achieve excellence. (A, 5)*

One effect of the global pandemic has been to reshape expectations of workplaces in respect of working conditions. Many academics have traditionally had access to flexibility in the way in which they structure their work, but our authors found that the working conditions imposed by the pandemic reduced their autonomy over their working arrangements. One of the lessons from the pandemic must be to respect the autonomy of workers when negotiating working conditions.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

This chapter has highlighted the challenges and complexities of mid-career academics in Australia's Higher Education system, as experienced by five women from four Australian universities. A collaborative auto-ethnographic approach was used to collect the data in the format of narratives and analyse them using Leximancer. This was followed by applying an interpretative paradigm to the identified critical themes employing collaborative discussions to extend the individual lived experiences. The collaborative auto-ethnographic analysis revealed the following three vital themes, the impact of academic career progression post PhD completion, the visibility and everyday struggles in mastering academic motherhood, and the pandemics' impact on the well-being of women academics. The chosen narratives highlighted the considerable strain and gender biases experienced by academic women as they balance work and family commitments.

Universities have adopted a range of programs to support women balancing their needs with the demands of an academic career. Parental leave programs are more generous than other sectors, but accessing these programs results in career interruptions that can have long term effects on their career. This has led to the introduction of ROPE assessments that purport to take these career breaks into account for promotions and grant applications. However, these are still based on outputs, and do not adequately take account of different values and ways of working and are not always applied in the ways in which they were designed.

The findings and discussion provided insights into strategies, life choices, and motivations for career progression in academia. There are structural and cultural impediments, which ultimately reflect on the challenge that women face in many professions when balancing family and career. Although the parental support systems in place are more generous than those available to women in other professions, the effect of a break in continuity of work has not yet been addressed.

Ultimately, in order to succeed as an academic – however each person chooses to define success – their own resilience and self-compassion is vital.

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## KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

**Auto-Ethnography:** A technique that captures a researcher's personal experience

**Leximancer:** A computer software developed in Australia in 2006 at the University of Queensland by Dr Andrew Smith, that allows the conduct of quantitative content analysis using a machine learning technique.

**Conceptual Map:** A Leximancer concept map illustrated the 'Theme', a group or cluster of related concepts. It assists the thematic and relational analysis of qualitative data.

**ROPE:** sResearch Opportunity and Performance Evidence. A Statement that researchers write as part of a funding application. This statement includes additional information about a researcher's achievements to date about their career breaks.

**Mid-Career:** Mid-career is a time when an academic act autonomously, having developed the confidence to trust their knowledge and expertise in their discipline.

**STEMM:** Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics and Medicine are disciplines where women are underrepresented.