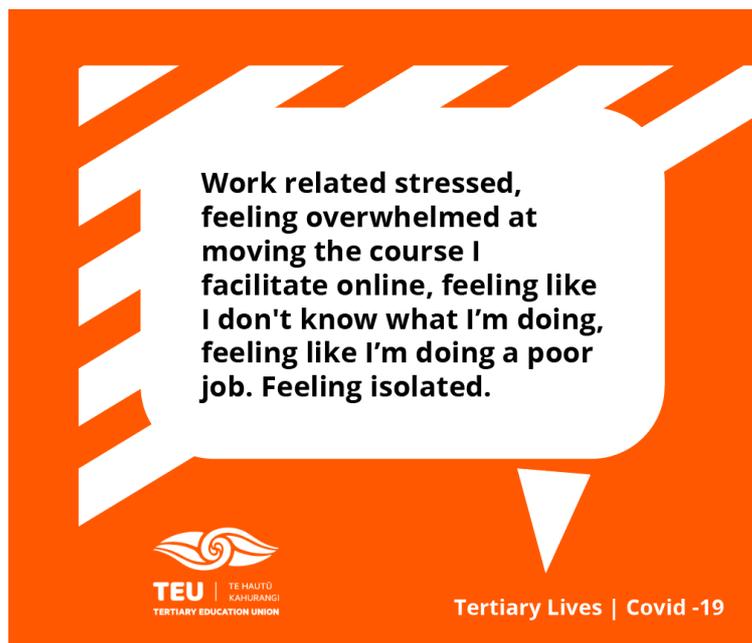


Tertiary Lives | COVID-19

12 May 2020

Executive summary of a survey on the impact of COVID-19 on tertiary education staff



Dr Charles Sedgwick

Published by Te Hautū Kahurangi | New Zealand Tertiary Education Union

As New Zealand enters a period of hopeful recovery from COVID-19 it is imperative that public, private and community education institutions are strong and prepared to play their part as the frontline of economic and social recovery. Education is incredibly important to re-integrate a large proportion of our population back into community life and hopefully future employment.

So, what is the current state of the tertiary education sector from a staff perspective?

Te Hautū Kahurangi | New Zealand Tertiary Education Union (TEU) has conducted a survey of membership to provide some answers. [For the full report click here.](#)

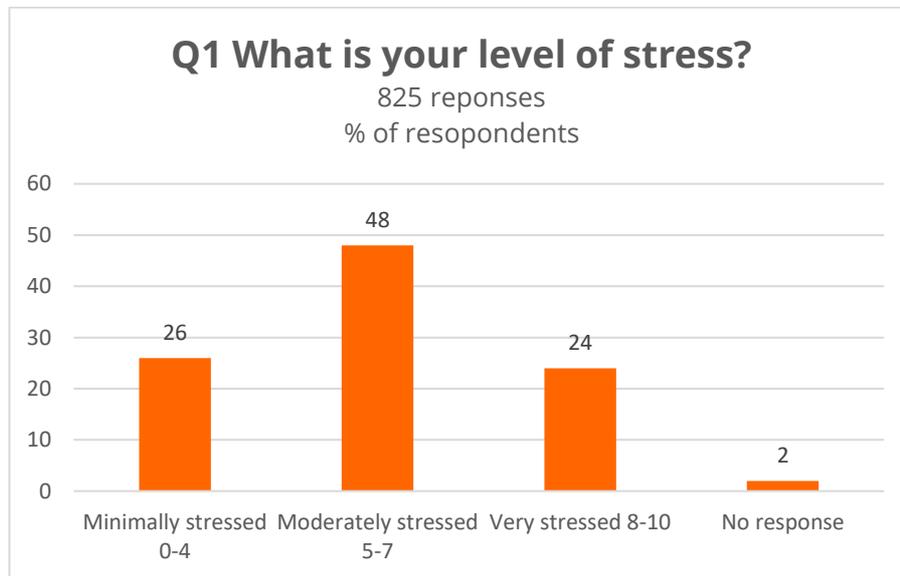
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Working in a COVID-19 tertiary education world

Before looking at the next phase for New Zealand's tertiary education institutions, it is important to start with what staff are currently experiencing. The most obvious result was the serious stress amongst staff.



So, what is causing that stress?

The online workload

"...work related stress, feeling overwhelmed at moving the course I facilitate online, feeling like I don't know what I am doing, feeling like I am doing a poor job. Feeling isolated." (University)

Technology support and availability

"Most of the IT technology does not work properly from home. No adequate computer equipment, internet, etc. Very little real support for IT issues. Lack of adequate response to requests for computer assistance either in hardware or software. Lack of recognition that staff cannot just teach from home or do everything else adequately." (University)

Concerns about students

"Anxiety that teacher is not up to par. I have a dialogic pedagogy and have tried implementing drop-in zoom sessions to foster conversations that we might have had in the classroom. However, I am unsure it is reaching all students and decreasing the quality of the education they are paying for." (Polytechnic)

"Not being able to hear from students as often as I wanted because I am not able to determine their mental health wellbeing." (University)

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“Trying to do the best for low level literacy students who don't have resources e.g. laptop or tablet and limited wifi access.” (Polytechnic)

Work, family and home

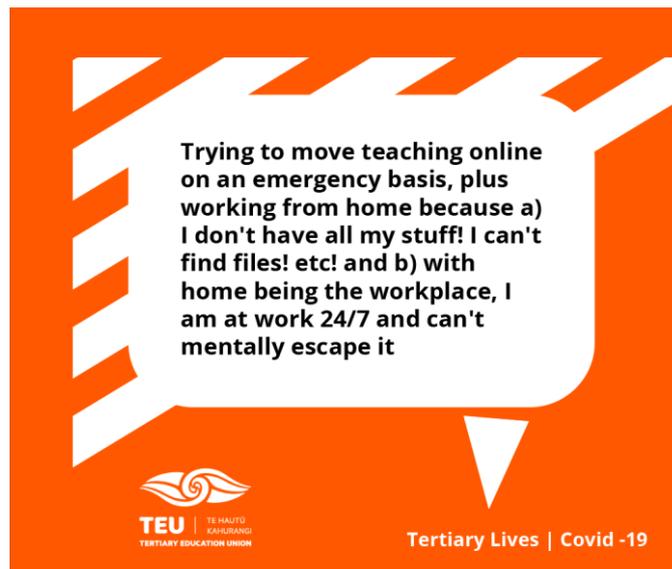
“Trying to parent as well as being an academic (I'm just concentrating on teaching and supporting students; I've long given up trying to do any research). Also the knowledge that lots of people without kids/caring duties are loving this and writing a manuscript a week, and the inequalities for things like promotions etc are going to be MONUMENTAL. Rather than everyone being disadvantaged, some people have been advantaged and others disadvantaged. How is that going to be addressed?” (University)

“It's a mixture of everything really - I don't think I'm highly stressed and then I react badly to small problems, my brain doesn't seem to want to function to do high level academic work so that feels stressful as my workload hasn't eased off. And I have two school age kids and am trying to manage their online learning/them being at home while I try to work - pretty much impossible really. My family are overseas and my brother is currently ill with COVID so lots to worry about really!” (University)

Management's responses

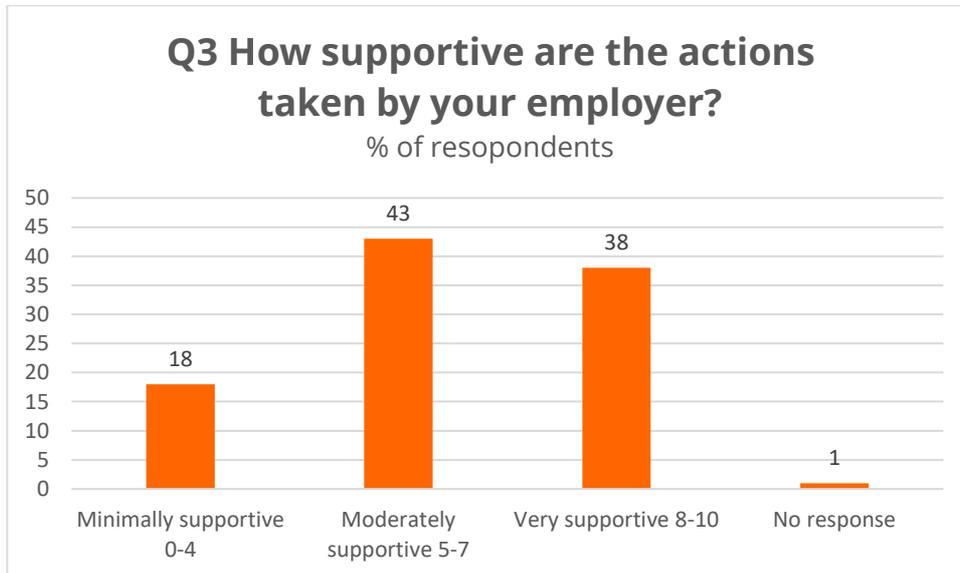
“... unsustainable workload thrust on me by my employer with insufficient support.” (University)

“Not being consulted or included in decision making. Job security.” (University)



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If one contrasts the above responses to those presented in answer to the question: 'What are the worst things your employers have done?' 572 commented in a critical fashion noting a range of problems including, communications which were mixed, inconsistent, contradictory, incomplete, arbitrary, indecisive, lacking empathy, and insisting on business as usual, i.e. talking about restructuring, redundancies, pay cuts or detailed micro management of work requirements/expectations. Other issues included a lack of concern for students and lack of consultation on issues and additionally, a lack of IT support, equipment, and training.

"The management of this university could not care less about their employees. Makes me worry about what pressures staff will be put under when the lockdown ends." (University)

"Important and urgent decisions not being made in a timely manner. Prioritising money over staff and student wellness (but pretending they care about students)." (University)

"Reduced our hours and pay. Made some non-academic staff members redundant. Made the announcement a day into lockdown, gave us 24 hours to make a decision whether to take redundancy or the pay cut. Gave us longer when the Union got involved." (PTE)

IT Facilities

It is clear from staff comments that IT solutions are not a panacea in difficult times but in reality, become an additional burden. Many staff were left to cope with inadequate equipment or support.

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“Not having the adequate IT planning in place. Many students and staff have been left struggling to continue to work due to IT issues.” (Polytechnic)

“Not recognising that we don't all have home offices, scanners, smart phones, technical know-how, unlimited internet nor the salaries to pay for them. A total lack of empathy for employees who work part-time and have never had the training or need to work from home.” (Polytechnic)

Was genuine Leadership missing?

“Tell us how greatly we are all doing, rather than telling us it is okay not to be doing great. This stance has given lots of us so much stress.” (University)

The clear message from very consistent responses is that staff desperately needed consultative, informed, democratic leadership in these institutions. Instead what transpired, clearly expressed in responses, was crisis driven management by email and directives without leadership and this tendency extended from line

What next - Level 3 and beyond

In the last part of the survey staff were asked about what should happen in Level 3 and beyond.

Limited return is seen as necessary for practical studies and for those supportive of returning to face-to-face teaching and learning, but only with planned, co-ordinated, safe practices and distancing within small stable groups. Online provision was not to be the new norm.

management to SLT and chief executives.

“This is primarily a leadership issue. It is also an issue of staff morale, and the support and backing of University managers. University leaders need to communicate with staff beyond managerial layers.” (University)

Additionally, staff saw that they were being put in a position where their performance was to be judged in what were really experimental responses to a crisis driven learning and teaching environment.

“Some senior managers are stipulating unwieldy bureaucratic requirements when teaching staff are trying to be responsive and flexible. The initial assumption of senior managers that all students and staff had the capacity to work online from home. These sorts of issues arise because of the top-down autocratic management style, which means senior staff are often out of touch.” (University)

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“Everyone has to pitch in but I feel that councils and VCs should be held criminally negligent if they require return to BAU without adequate changes to all aspects of teaching and research.” (University)

“Remain online teaching - I am not prepared to return to the classroom as social distancing is impractical.

However, this is only for the current situation. The TEC and the Ministry and Polytechnic management cannot be tempted to put in place online teaching permanently.” (Polytechnic)

This is not an opportunity to make academic staff redundant by switching to more precarious contracts for gig teaching labour.” (University)

While the above speak to more general levels of requirements, health and safety provisions (PPE, cleaning and social distancing) were equally as important. It is clear from staff concerns that no matter what kind of education is provided or where it is provided it must be done in conditions that ensure the health and safety of all concerned - whether they be cleaners, lab technicians, librarians, instructors, lecturers or general staff. To forego these concerns for the sake of financial savings, by any means would be unacceptable.

Conclusion

The results of this survey, while not presenting a quantitative view of the current reality capture a real sense of commitment, concern in the midst of extreme change and disruption. The detailed and concerned comments indicate a workforce ready and able to produce a dedicated response to the continuation of teaching and learning for all tertiary students in difficult times

According to a recent [Times Higher Education](#) article ‘Institutions that excel in planning, communication and problem-solving are primed to respond to global challenges by improving the way they work’ provided they can ‘Ensure operating models can **prioritise** student and staff requirements, focusing on what makes the most impact and has the most value’.

Next steps together

Please get in touch with TEU if you have any concerns about what is happening in your workplace AND with suggestions for how we ensure that staff, students, and communities have a better future.

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