



How university climate impacts psychosocial safety, psychosocial risk, and mental health among staff in Australian higher education: a qualitative study

Xuan Luu^{1,2} · Christine Rathjens¹ · Michael Swadling¹ · Bronwyn Gresham¹ · Leya Hockman¹ · Christina Scott-Young³ · Katrin Leifels³ · Amy J. Zadow^{4,5} · Maureen F. Dollard⁴ · Lachlan Kent^{1,6}

Accepted: 28 November 2024

© The Author(s), under exclusive licence to Springer Nature B.V. 2024

Abstract

Research has reported an epidemic of mental health concerns among staff in higher education. Universities can improve staff mental health by creating work environments that are more psychologically, socially, and organisationally safe and supportive. Yet, qualitative evidence in this area remains limited, and there are calls for further qualitative research to understand how institutional and systemic conditions affect university staff mental health. We accordingly designed a programme of embedded mixed-methods survey research to explore how university climate shapes psychosocial safety, psychosocial risk, and mental health at one Australian institution. In this article, we present findings from the qualitative dimension of our work: an inductive qualitative content analysis of 857 staff responses to one open-ended survey question: ‘How do aspects of the university impact your mental wellbeing?’ Participants spoke to six distinct aspects of university climate: (i) workload; (ii) institutional systems and policies; (iii) institutional culture; (iv) local management; (v) senior management; and (vi) harmful behaviours. Together, these findings reveal great complexity in how systemic, institutional, and relational phenomena all impact university staff. We situate our findings within the context of existing scholarship on staff mental health in higher education; discuss their implications for future research, practice, and policymaking; and conclude with an urgent call to action.

Keywords Psychosocial safety · Mental health · University staff · Higher education · Australia · Qualitative

Introduction

Mental health in higher education is an urgent, growing, and widely researched topic (Abelson et al., 2022; Jayman et al., 2022; Pandya & Lodha, 2022)—yet, until recently, the focus has primarily been on students (Dinu et al., 2021). There is an epidemic of mental health concerns among university staff, demonstrated in part by high levels of burnout and stress (Urbina-Garcia, 2020) with increased support-seeking (Morrish, 2019). Less

Extended author information available on the last page of the article

than one-third of university staff report at least average levels of wellbeing and more than 60% meet thresholds for possible or probable depression (Wray & Kinman, 2021). In our part of the world—Australia—university staff were 2.5 times more likely than the national population in 2021, and twice as likely as public service staff in 2020, to work in environments presenting great risk to their mental health (Baum et al., 2022). The corrosion of university staff mental health is driven by longstanding institutional and systemic factors—including increasing student-to-staff ratios (Lee et al., 2022), ongoing workforce and course cuts (Thompson et al., 2022), rising managerialism (Bottrell & Keating, 2019; Watermeyer et al., 2024), and declining government support (Ohadomere & Ogamba, 2021; Winefield, 2014).

Despite growing empirical awareness and interest, much existing scholarship on staff mental health in higher education is quantitative by design (Urbina-Garcia, 2020). Consequently, there are calls for further qualitative research—especially to better understand how institutional and systemic conditions affect staff mental health (Nicholls et al., 2022; O'Brien & Guiney, 2018). With the present article, we contribute new knowledge on this topic, adopting a whole-of-institution view and bringing particular focus to the impact of university climate. The knowledge we contribute is vital for informing institutional action and change—across programmes, processes, and policies—to better address the conditions that affect university staff mental health.

Theoretical framework: Psychosocial safety climate

Research on mental health in higher education must be grounded in coherent theory (Dorris, 1999). Universities are large institutions that present opportunities to comprehensively improve and protect the mental health of staff—especially by creating psychologically, socially, and organisationally supportive work environments (Hammoudi Halat et al., 2023). Building on this premise, we adopted Psychosocial Safety Climate (PSC) as the theoretical framework for our research.

PSC concerns how organisations and their systems affect staff psychosocial safety—that is, the freedom from psychological and social risks and harms at work (Dollard & Bakker, 2010). It suggests that organisations and institutions differ in how—and how much—they prioritise staff psychosocial safety versus productivity (Loh et al., 2020). PSC specifically reflects collective (though not necessarily shared) perceptions of how key organisational and institutional factors—such as policies and processes, senior management attitudes and values, and job design—affect the promotion and protection of staff well-being (Hu et al., 2022). As an upstream organisation-level antecedent, PSC is a lead indicator—meaning it can predict later downstream outcomes that staff experience at work, such as social and emotional demands, job resources, and psychological health (Law et al., 2011). Four dimensions comprise PSC (Dollard, 2012) (Table 1).

Two tenets of PSC form the fulcrum for our research. First, PSC considers organisational and institutional systems as potential root causes of mental health concerns among staff—paralleling a broader movement in higher education scholarship that advocates shifting accountability for preventing health and social harms from individuals to institutions (Campbell et al., 2023; Nicholls et al., 2022, 2023; Povey et al., 2022; Xing et al., 2022). Second, PSC emphasises both organisational participation *and* management commitment—echoing developments across fields such as public health and organisational psychology, in which review studies have documented greater intervention effectiveness when (i) community members are both meaningfully

Table 1 Four key dimensions of PSC with definitions

Dimension	Definition
Management commitment	How senior management demonstrate commitment and support in preventing work-related stress, as well as promoting and protecting psychosocial safety, among staff
Management priority	How senior management demonstrate prioritisation of staff psychosocial safety versus productivity measures
Organisational communication	How the organisation listens to contributions and perspectives from staff, especially in relation to psychosocial safety and preventing work-related stress
Organisational participation	How the organisation encourages participation in efforts to improve psychosocial safety and prevent work-related stress, such as consultation involving staff, unions, occupational health and safety representatives, and senior management

listened to *and* actively involved in bringing about change (O'Mara-Eves et al., 2013), and (ii) there is top-down support *and* involvement among those with organisationally designated power (Zadow et al., 2019).

PSC in higher education

PSC has been researched in different work contexts—including universities (Amodu et al., 2023). Internationally, quantitative studies of PSC in higher education have yielded mixed findings. For instance, Gan and Kee (2022) found no significant relationship between PSC and work-related engagement—that is, a positive and fulfilling state of mind in relation to one's work (Schaufeli et al., 2002). Conversely, Juutinen et al. (2023) found that lower PSC corresponded significantly with lower work-related engagement. In Australian higher education specifically, recent cross-sectional research has reported that 72.8% of staff work in university climates that present high or very high risk to psychosocial safety (Neser et al., 2023)—a substantially greater number than a national average of 37.5% reported in a separate multi-sector study (Crispin et al., 2023).

Qualitatively, scholars have found that improving PSC in higher education requires much more time, deliberation, and intentionality than expected (Sjöblom et al., 2022)—likely because universities are characterised by bureaucracy, work overload, and job insecurity (Pace et al., 2021; Urbina-Garcia, 2020; Woelert & Croucher, 2024). In a grounded theory study with staff working in high-PSC areas of an Australian university, Potter et al. (2019) identified three phenomena critical to strengthen PSC in the university context: (i) a shared sense of meaningful work and social support; (ii) high levels of job crafting, that is, capacity to align one's work with one's own needs, skills, and preferences (Tims et al., 2022); and (iii) high levels of managerial support for staff psychological health. While these studies provide important qualitative evidence, staff were sampled in limited work areas, and most participants held management positions. Further research must explore PSC throughout broader university staff populations—at many levels and across many areas of the institution.

Legislative and public policy context

Beyond theory and empirical research, universities' actions to improve mental health are also guided by wider contextual factors—particularly legislation and public policy. In Australia, the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (2023) monitors institutional compliance with the legislated *Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2021* (Department of Education, Skills and Employment, 2021), which specifies that (i) universities must promote and foster safe environments for students and staff and (ii) universities' support services must be informed by students' needs regarding mental health, wellbeing, and disability. Further, the National Mental Health Commission (2022) Blueprint for Mentally Healthy Workplaces outlines strategies for promoting and protecting mental wellbeing in all organisations Australia-wide—including universities. There is, therefore, structural motivation for more concerted institutional action.

There are also proposed changes to state-level occupational health and safety legislation in some parts of Australia. Proposed regulations would require all employers—including universities—to identify psychosocial hazards, to control risks arising from psychosocial hazards, and to implement written prevention plans addressing five particular psychosocial hazard types: (i) aggression or violence; (ii) bullying; (iii) exposure to traumatic content or events; (iv) high job demands; and (v) sexual harassment (Deloitte, 2022). These changes would add legal imperatives for driving university-level change.

At the time of writing, the Australian Government has also pursued the Australian Universities Accord—a significant review of the nation's higher education system involving several consultation processes (Department of Education, 2024). The review panel identified serious institutional problems that corrode the health, well-being, and safety of university populations—including precarious and insecure employment, wage underpayment, problematic institutional governance, sexual violence, and inadequacy and inappropriateness of university support services for some student communities (O'Kane et al., 2023). In some cases, issues were explicitly deemed institutional failures, and the review panel articulated several priorities for change—including stronger university cultures that meaningfully prioritise staff members' health and well-being (O'Kane et al., 2023). The review findings reflect a deep, collectively felt need for institutional and systemic reform.

The present study

Given opportunities for new research amid significant shifts in legislation and public policy, we designed a broad, exploratory programme of survey research to better understand PSC, psychosocial risk, and mental well-being among staff and students at an Australian university. This work employed an embedded mixed-methods design—bringing together a quantitative cross-sectional approach with a qualitative descriptive-interpretive approach—operationalised through population-based online survey methods. Our research received human research ethics approval in August 2021 (reference: 204025). In this article, we present qualitative findings arising from our work, focusing specifically on staff. We sought to answer two research questions: (i) *What* aspects of the university's climate shape staff experiences of psychosocial safety and psychosocial risk? (ii) *How* do these aspects of the university's climate impact staff and their mental health?

Methods

Participants

For our broader survey research, our population of interest comprised all current onshore staff and students at one Australian university. Participants were eligible to take part if, during survey implementation, they were (i) at least 18 years old and (ii) currently employed and/or enrolled at the university. Where a participant self-identified as both staff and student, they were asked to nominate the perspective from which they were responding. For this article, we excluded data gathered from students and from staff indicating they were responding in their student role. In total, qualitative data from 857 staff (61% of the total staff respondents to the broader survey) were analysed.

Survey design and implementation

Online qualitative survey methods are beneficial in researching sensitive topics as they can offer high levels of felt anonymity for participants (Terry & Braun, 2017) and may yield rich data (Braun et al., 2021). We therefore incorporated at the end of our mixed-methods survey an optional, open-ended question, inviting participants to share their perspectives on how aspects of the university impact their well-being.

Ethically and emotionally safe practices are crucial in researching workplace mental health (Fahie, 2014; Miralles et al., 2022). With this in mind, provision of demographic information was optional for participants in our study, and we book-ended the survey with contact details for both community- and university-based support services. We also included advice that participants could withdraw at any time during the survey, as well as up to 2 weeks post-survey completion if they provided their e-mail address. We implemented the survey online from late August to early September 2022, recruited participants via convenience sampling on a self-selection basis, and collected data via Qualtrics.

Qualitative data analysis

We adopted an inductive approach to qualitative content analysis (QCA) (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008) of the 857 staff responses received, amounting to approximately 55,000 words. QCA offers a systematic, flexible approach for describing multifaceted and important phenomena (Krippendorff, 2019; Vaismoradi et al., 2013), particularly when research is concerned with meanings, contexts, and consequences (Preiser et al., 2021). Elo and Kyngäs (2008) distinguish three phases in QCA: (i) preparation; (ii) organising; and (iii) reporting. Below, we outline our analytic processes for the first two phases. We then report our findings in detail, with subsequent discussion of them in light of existing scholarship and PSC theory.

Preparation

Preparation in QCA begins with selecting the unit of analysis, taking into account sampling considerations, underlying research questions, and researcher capacities (Elo &

Kyngäs, 2008). In our study, the unit of analysis was each individual staff member's qualitative survey response. One co-author (CR) led analysis, starting with several iterations of reading and re-reading all responses to become immersed in, and familiar with, the data.

Organising

While PSC served as our theoretical framework, we recognised that the language of PSC might not mirror the language that staff use in conveying their perspectives and experiences. As such, we adopted an inductive approach (i.e., bottom-up, data-led) in our QCA. Given the limited resources available to support our research, CR conducted analysis using Microsoft Excel, which can be a simple, efficient, and cost-effective solution for analysing large amounts of qualitative data (Bree & Gallagher, 2016; Ose, 2016).

Initially, open coding took place. Codes were generated based on both manifest and latent content and then applied to survey responses in spreadsheet columns adjacent to the data. As many responses included multiple sentences, several codes could be applied to a given survey response. Following open coding, codes were copied from the analysis spreadsheet, pasted into a new file, and brought together—with some similar codes merged in the process—under higher-order headings. The higher-order headings were reviewed and integrated to form meaningful, refined subcategories, with subcategories then grouped together to create a final set of main categories.

As a research team, we recognised that a climate of formalised, collective, and collaborative support was important for our analysis—especially given the sensitive phenomena at hand. Qualitative research on sensitive topics can have profound impacts on the emotional health of researchers (Dickson-Swift et al., 2007). As such, during the organising phase, we held regular team meetings to reflect and debrief, as well as to perform analytic work such as reviewing and revising open codes, subcategories, and main categories.

Findings

In total, 857 staff contributed responses to our open-ended survey question. As demographic data provision was optional for participants, and moreover given that reporting demographic information in qualitative institutional research can be problematic when there are concerns about confidentiality (Dodge & Parker, 2023; Moríña, 2021), we have not provided detail on participants' demographics herein. Through our analysis, we derived six main categories reflecting six aspects of university climate discussed by participants (Table 2): (i) workload; (ii) institutional systems and policies; (iii) institutional culture; (iv) local management; (v) senior management; and (vi) harmful behaviours.

We narratively discuss our findings below, supported by illustrative quotes grounded within (some) participants' perspectives. Throughout, we attribute quotes via participant codes assigned during data cleaning, de-identification, and analysis.

Workload

Workload was the most prominent issue discussed. Many participants considered excessive workloads to be a persistent and pervasive problem. Within this, hidden

Table 2 Main categories and subcategories

Main category	Subcategories
Workload	Excessive workload Unfair work distribution and expectations Resource insufficiencies Administrative burden Lack of clarity and control at work
Institutional systems and policies	Hybrid and flexible working Unfair and insecure employment Poor change management Need for better staff support and advancement
Institutional culture	A supportive university Supportiveness in local work areas Lack of psychosocial safety and support
Local management	Managers are supportive Managers' unsupportiveness affects wellbeing Abuse of power Lack of capacity and capability among managers
Senior management	Disconnect between senior management and realities on the ground Strategic planning and resourcing
Harmful behaviours	Discrimination and exclusion Lack of civility, respect, and professionalism Behaviours of concern among students

work was a critical concern: additional work undertaken, most often unpaid and most frequently by precariously employed staff:

Over the past few years, we have had a number of permanent staff leave and they have not been replaced. This has resulted in a lot more work for the existing permanent staff and sessional staff. Sessional staff are not paid for all the extra work they do. (P558)

Inequitable distribution of work led to excessive workload among some staff cohorts, with inequity often driven by managers. P529 reflected: “There is a group of staff that do very little and a group of staff that are responsible for work that requires significantly more [full-time equivalent]...There [are] ineffective work planning processes”.

There was a discernible sense that “doing more with less” (P62, P113, P433) was the norm. Long-term under-staffing was a standout concern. Institutional budget pressures and constraints further exacerbated workload issues—despite stronger financial positions being later reported: “Overall workloads are too high. We get surveyed every few years about workplace stress and mental health and nothing ever changes. There is always a narrative of budget pressure ... every year—and every year there is a surplus” (P277).

Workloads were also influenced by large-scale organisational and technological changes, as P151 described: “It is impossible to focus on and be productive doing actual work because in almost any aspect [it] requires some form of administration or centralised service, things are crippling and ineffective from any angle”. Such changes contributed to heavier administrative burdens upon staff throughout the institution.

Institutional systems and policies

Participants also discussed the university's systems and policies. For some, there was great benefit in policies of flexible and hybrid working: "Working from home 3 days a week with two days in the office has been a really good ratio for improving my mental health" (P108). This was echoed by other, such as P324: "Coming [into] the office 2–3 days a week [gives] me a real boost in happiness, connectedness and overall productivity. The change of scene lifts my mood over the whole week".

Yet, participants also shared concerns about policies that shape unfair and insecure employment. There was clear frustration about inequitable pay—particularly when comparing senior staff with the wider staff community: "Paying exorbitant, near million-dollar, salaries to the very senior while we rip off the people doing the hard work is not fitting for an educational institution. The sense of unfairness permeates all areas" (P437). Insecure employment placed great stress and strain upon staff. P11 highlighted that "work is too casual. Demands...are extreme. There is poor inclusion of casual staff or willingness to hire...in a responsible manner...This places great stress on employees".

Significant changes in university-wide technological systems were felt to be poorly implemented, with negative consequences for workloads. P400 remarked: "A self-service system deployed on staff during such a massive time of upheaval i.e. the pandemic, was wrong. Many academic staff were adversely affected i.e. loss of time/resources, new unnecessary [workflows], stress leave, [and] damaged external relationships". Aside from technology, participants also discussed recent reforms to the university's curriculum: "It has such great potential to really change the learning environment and journey for our students, but it has been rolled out so poorly" (P166).

Some participants highlighted considerable inconsistencies in career progression and capacity-building opportunities. P432 spoke of "very little room for career progression in some teams (mostly because of the structure)...no focus on upskilling staff across the whole university". This reflected several institutional barriers—including rigid classifications of work with few upskilling programmes universally available. Beyond this, participants also discussed broader systemic barriers felt throughout the broader higher education sector with institutional implications:

*The lack of ongoing (permanent) academic roles for recent PhD graduates is very stressful and, at times, distressing. Even when these roles are advertised, the competition is *so* fierce and the expectations are *so* high that getting the job seems near impossible. (P280)*

Institutional culture

Many participants shared views on the institution's culture. For some, the university was a caring and supportive workplace, particularly early on in their employment: "Having only been here for a few months, I am really impressed with the approach to staff wellbeing. Having said that, being so new, I am yet to experience whether this is actual care or rhetoric" (P387). Others spoke of a caring, supportive culture specifically within their immediate team; P50 stated that "I feel my mental wellbeing is only kept well by the supporting nature of my local working area and close team".

Institutional culture was also perceived via management-led work conditions. Direct managers played a significant role in building and sustaining supportive work cultures. For some participants, this manifested in feeling cared for and prioritised: “My manager is genuinely engaged with the wellbeing of her team and cares deeply about providing a safe and fair environment that puts people first” (P469). For others, supportiveness of institutional culture arose when raising concerns about workplace issues. P402 recounted: “My manager took immediate action when I reported [a behaviour of concern] so I was relieved. Very grateful to be...taken seriously in the team”.

However, some participants also relayed a lack of psychological safety and support at work. In some institutional areas, care, trust, and respect were diminishing: “The constant mental load of being under-appreciated, overworked and not listened to is emotionally disturbing” (P483). Several participants spoke of few opportunities to socialise and build relationships with colleagues; P428 reported a noticeable “lack of people coming onto campus to fill out the socialisation of [the] workplace”. There was an underlying recognition that despite university-wide discourses of care and well-being, there was little actual change in the institution’s culture and ethos: “There is a lot of talk about care and consideration of one’s well-being but not action around changing [culture] and values. Psychologically safe spaces are talked about and stated but rarely genuine” (P514).

Local management

Participants reflected prominently on management in their immediate team or department. For some, these managers were very supportive—exemplifying understanding, respect, and genuine valuing of staff mental health: “Our manager is really fantastic, treats our team with respect, leads by positivity, and values people’s mental and physical wellbeing as well as their work output” (P311). In some cases, supportive managers also went above and beyond:

My direct management are wonderful and I don’t want any negative feedback to fall on them. They are so supportive and do everything they can to help their staff, including stretching themselves unreasonably thin to ensure their direct reports suffer the least. (P554)

However, other participants shared markedly different perspectives. Managers were also perceived as unresponsive and unsupportive, especially when work-related concerns—such as excessive workloads—were raised:

Managers are unwilling to listen to concerns about workloads and often act in a hostile manner and occasionally blame you for things that are out of your control and should be managed by the university i.e. excessive workloads ... and never checking in on staff to see how they are going. (P40)

Some participants also recounted situations involving managers’ abuses of power, leading to adverse outcomes such as bullying and discrimination. P46 noted that “some managers pay lip service to bullying and harassment and espouse the virtues of fairness in the workplace but when it comes to leadership meetings, the coercion and verbal bullying is quite overt”. Favouritism was also reported; P139 stated that managers “only liaised with their favourite staff members on a regular basis or those whom they had project work with”.

Supportiveness (or a lack of such) and abuse of power shaped some participants’ perceptions of overall managerial capacity. Managerial miscommunication, non-consultation,

and obfuscation were notable issues. P328 described, for instance, that they had “just resigned due to lack of flexibility in my work hours and place of work – no [working from home] and limited understanding from management about the demands of being a parent. My managers changed my work hours ... without one-on-one consultation”. To address this, some participants suggested more meaningful managerial capacity-building: “I feel like the ... leadership in our team could improve. There is little support [and few] resources to work through serious and difficult problems” (P476).

Senior management

Members of senior management—including institutional leadership (such as the Vice-Chancellor, Deputy Vice-Chancellors, and Pro Vice-Chancellors), academic leadership (such as Deans and Associate Deans), and professional leadership (such as Chief Officers and Executive Directors)—were widely discussed. There was a strong sense of disconnect felt between what senior management say and what they actually do. P301 commented that “actions need to match the rhetoric...we can’t keep saying ‘you need to take it easy and look after yourself’ but then at the same time load up staff with more and more to do...it feels disingenuous”. Some participants also reflected on power distance, with a consequence being little recognition among senior management of the challenges and issues impacting staff “on the ground”. This was described by P167: “There is a complete disconnect between upper levels of management...on how good their wellbeing is and how bad wellbeing is for staff below them in the organisational structure”.

Participants also shared perceptions of strategic misalignment. At times, senior management planning and decision-making grated against the university’s overall strategic goals, reflecting a decoupling of policy and practice. P59 suggested that “stress at times may be due to lack of communication on over-arching initiatives and university wide strategy. [It is] unclear post-Covid if new [restructures] and other employment role changes are looming in the future”. Further, senior management practices of under-allocating resources across the institution ultimately created stress among staff:

The senior leadership of the university is directly responsible for the high levels stress experienced by staff ‘at the coal face’. The increase in class sizes, slashing of budgets, cutting of research resources and needless restructuring have taken [their] toll. (P13)

Harmful behaviours

Accounts of harmful behaviours were woven throughout the data. In some situations, power differentials and systemically entrenched differences perpetuated experiences of discrimination and mistreatment at work. P504 indicated that “there is reward for extroversion and de-valuing of diversity in working styles...Meanwhile, other people and teams are overworked, bullied in to doing work which doesn’t even relate to their jobs”. In other circumstances, behaviours were more exclusionary: “I currently feel like I am being singled out for underperformance as I am older than most of my colleagues and don’t seem to be respected as much, despite my experience” (P18). Participants also spoke of disrespect and a lack of professionalism. For instance, while P236 felt that “people, managers, teams, are at a loss as to how to address ongoing issues of passive disrespect,

withholding information, not including colleagues in work process related discussions”, P529 noted that “there is general kindness within teams but ... unreasonable behaviour tends to occur across units”.

Some participants also discussed situations in which teaching staff and student-facing professional staff experienced concerning student behaviours. Some behaviours occurred in digital contexts—such as “students behaving inappropriately through communications and anonymous feedback” (P160) and “a constant lack of respect in communications... online trolling by students on email” (P134). In contemplating what needed to change, P494 offered:

[Student] facing staff face the most stress and harassment from students... too many students are rude and disrespectful when they get stressed at assessment time. Better and early support for students, and easy-to-find support for students, would help reduce the incidence of rudeness and aggressiveness service staff face.

Discussion

With this study, we aimed to better understand *what* aspects of university climate shape staff experiences of psychosocial safety and psychosocial risk, and *how* these aspects of university climate have an impact on staff. Six main aspects of university climate were derived from participants’ perspectives: (i) workload, (ii) institutional systems and policies, (iii) institutional culture, (iv) local management, (v) senior management, and (vi) harmful behaviours. In this section, we discuss our findings in synthesis with existing literature; reflect on the limitations of our work; outline implications for future research, practice, and policymaking; and conclude with an urgent call to action.

Synthesis with existing literature

In our research, we found that excessive workloads and increasingly insecure employment were prominent and profound issues for participants. This reflects findings in existing systematic review research identifying excessive workloads, job insecurity, and minimal institutional support as key stressors for university staff (Urbina-Garcia, 2020). Workload imbalances and workforce casualisation have also been discussed in scoping review research on occupational stress among university academics throughout our region of Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand specifically (Lee et al., 2022).

Beyond system- and policy-oriented considerations, many participants also discussed relational phenomena—such as relationships with colleagues and direct managers, experiences of support and harm at work, and perceptions of how senior management (do not) relate with staff ‘on the ground’. In this light, our findings add to a mixed evidence base. While some scholars have noted little research on the breadth of stressors impacting university staff (Ohadomere & Ogamba, 2021; Urbina-Garcia, 2020), others have highlighted social issues with deeply negative effects on staff mental health—including discrimination (Arday, 2022), sexual harassment (Bondestam & Lundqvist, 2020; Henning et al., 2017), moral injury (Hanna et al., 2022), and ostracism (Sherratt, 2021).

Our findings contribute new knowledge about how PSC unfolds and is perceived in higher education. Previous scholarship has reported that meaningful managerial

support for psychological health—including open and honest prioritisation of such—is crucial for nurturing PSC in universities (Potter et al., 2019; Wray & Kinman, 2021). In our study, we found that participants' perceptions of managerial support, commitment, and prioritisation differed depending on the level of management discussed.

Many participants shared positively about direct managers who helped them to feel supported at work. This reflects findings in the broader literature; previous research has reported that staff experiences of university climates are shaped by managers' approaches *and* their practices (Schulz, 2013), with supportive and collaborative management being central to greater job satisfaction (Liou et al., 2014). This becomes doubly critical given that repeated cross-sectional survey research, conducted over 6 years in the UK, has found deteriorating perceptions of managerial supportiveness among university staff over time (Wray & Kinman, 2022).

At the level of senior management, the story changed. We found a stark disjunct, in which senior management-led narratives of caring about staff well-being directly contrasted the realities lived by staff 'on the ground'. The veneers of superficial institutional narrative—theorised by some scholars as 'institutional speech acts' (Ahmed, 2006, 2009; Chapman et al., 2015)—were divorced from the issues and impacts affecting staff throughout the university. Our findings build on existing themes of disconnection and disregard in the literature. For instance, researchers have argued that there is a lack of compassion among university leaders (Denney, 2020, 2023), who have built problematically competitive business models that continually drive unhappiness among staff (Heller, 2022). Moreover, mixed-methods research involving 5888 academic staff in the UK has reported an average proportion of 10.54% feeling satisfied with how their institution is managed, along with concerns about silences in the accountability and evaluation of senior management (Erickson et al., 2021).

In addition to contributing new knowledge, our research also offers methodological innovation. Our study is the first to adopt population-based, institution-wide qualitative methods for exploring staff mental health with PSC as the guiding theoretical framework. Existing scholarship has, to date, prioritised more granular foci—including university work areas characterised by high levels of PSC (Potter et al., 2019) and cohorts of academic leaders in how they build PSC (Sjöblom et al., 2022). Our study has synthesised the perspectives of staff at a whole-of-university level, presenting a rich institution-wide view that transcends roles, cohorts, and work areas.

Study limitations

Our exploratory focus at a single university is a key limitation of this work, with reduced transferability of our findings to different contexts (such as other universities). Moreover, there were limitations in how we could approach qualitative analysis. While we agree with Braun et al. (2021) that online qualitative survey methods can yield rich understandings across data, the breadth of our study and the limited resources available for analysis hindered our ability to deeply examine contextual nuances in participants' perspectives—such as particular situations, teams, work units, or academic disciplines. Potter et al.'s (2019) grounded theory study is an example of deeper, more intensive qualitative inquiry with specific university work areas—equally essential and complementary alongside an institution-wide view such as ours.

Implications for research, practice, and policymaking

With respect to future research on staff mental health in higher education, we advocate for greater uptake of qualitative methodologies and methods. Groundwork has been laid at multiple scales—such as a smaller scale focusing on high-PSC work areas (Potter et al., 2019), and a larger scale spanning a whole university (our study). In particular, we recommend qualitative work exploring further spaces through the lens of PSC—including low-PSC work areas, specific types of university work, and particular levels of pay.

In light of our findings, there is a clear need for further quantitative research to investigate how workload and other factors influence staff mental health—both at a population level over time (such as interrupted and uninterrupted time series analyses) and at a case-specific level (such as cross-sectional research with particular staff subgroups). There would also be great benefit in assessing how different degrees of power distance relate to and influence PSC—especially as universities are large organisations and institutions in which power and control rest disproportionately with senior management (Akanji et al., 2019; Heffernan, 2021; Lizier et al., 2024; Marginson & Considine, 2000).

Across practice and policy, further institutional efforts are needed to understand relational issues in the workplace (such as discrimination, harassment, moral injury, and ostracism). Informed by these understandings, universities must develop, implement, and evaluate multiple interventions to meaningfully address issues identified. This could—and *should*—span programmes, processes, and policies. We suggest that our work demonstrates an approach to building understandings that can shape future evidence-informed practice—particularly in explaining and corroborating issues that necessitate institutional action to strengthen PSC in higher education.

Conclusion

Our research highlights great complexity in how aspects of the university climate affect staff mental health—particularly regarding psychosocial safety and psychosocial risk. It uncovers organisational and institutional determinants (such as workload, employment security, institutional systems and policies, and workplace hierarchies) as well as relational determinants (such as interactions with colleagues and perceptions of senior management). In particular, there is deeply felt disruption and stress amidst institution-wide change, such as large-scale organisational restructuring and the blanket implementation of new systems and processes. However, to counter this, managerial supportiveness and opportunities for flexible working are two crucial contributors to improved university staff mental health.

We conclude with a call to action. There is an urgent need for more genuine and meaningful enactment, assessment, and improvement of PSC by all institutional leaders in universities; this would complement existing strengths, such as positive outcomes that occur when direct managers are supportive and flexible working is encouraged. There is also a need for further scholarship and practice-based evidence utilising multiple research approaches and methods. New evidence is critical to advancing knowledge and action on how we can—and indeed *must*—re-orient institutional conditions to improve staff mental health in higher education.

Acknowledgements We acknowledge, and are immensely grateful to, the many university staff who took time to participate in our research.

Author contribution XL: conceptualization; formal analysis; methodology; project administration; visualization; writing—original draft; writing—reviewing and editing. CR: data curation; formal analysis; methodology; project administration; writing—reviewing and editing. MS: conceptualization; investigation; project administration; writing—reviewing and editing. BG: conceptualization; investigation; writing—reviewing and editing. LH: conceptualization; resources; writing—reviewing and editing. CS-Y: conceptualization; data curation; project administration; writing—reviewing and editing. KL: conceptualization; data curation; project administration; writing—reviewing and editing. AJZ: conceptualization; writing—reviewing and editing. MFD: conceptualization; writing—reviewing and editing. LK: conceptualization; investigation; methodology; project administration; resources; supervision; writing—reviewing and editing.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare no competing interests.

References

- Abelson, S., Lipson, S. K., & Eisenberg, D. (2022). Mental health in college populations: A multidisciplinary review of what works, evidence gaps, and paths forward. In L. W. Perna (Ed.), *Higher education: Handbook of theory and research* (vol. 37, pp. 133–238). Springer. https://link.springer.com/10.1007/978-3-030-76660-3_6
- Ahmed, S. (2006). The nonperformativity of antiracism. *Meridians*, 7(1), 104–126. <https://doi.org/10.2979/mer.2006.7.1.104>
- Ahmed, S. (2009). Commitment as a nonperformative. In B. Ö. Firat, S. Mul, & S. Wichelen (Eds.), *Commitment and complicity in cultural theory and practice* (pp. 23–44). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230236967_2
- Akanji, B., Mordi, C., Ituma, A., Adisa, T. A., & Ajonbadi, H. (2019). The influence of organisational culture on leadership style in higher education institutions. *Personnel Review*, 49(3), 709–732. <https://doi.org/10.1108/pr-08-2018-0280>
- Amoadu, M., Ansah, E. W., & Sarfo, J. O. (2023). Influence of psychosocial safety climate on occupational health and safety: A scoping review. *BMC Public Health*, 23(1), 1344. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-023-16246-x>. Article.
- Arday, J. (2022). No one can see me cry: Understanding mental health issues for Black and minority ethnic staff in higher education. *Higher Education*, 83(1), 79–102. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-020-00636-w>
- Baum, F., Dollard, M., Fisher, M., Freeman, T., & Newman, L. (2022). The corporate university and its impact on health in Australia. *Social Alternatives*, 41(1), 52–62. <https://search.informit.org/doi/abs/10.3316/informit.423093210796265>
- Bondestam, F., & Lundqvist, M. (2020). Sexual harassment in higher education – A systematic review. *European Journal of Higher Education*, 10(4), 397–419. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21568235.2020.1729833>
- Bottrell, D., & Keating, M. (2019). Academic wellbeing under rampant managerialism: From neoliberal to critical resilience. In D. Bottrell & C. Manathunga (Eds.), *Palgrave critical university studies* (pp. 157–178). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-95942-9_8
- Braun, V., Clarke, V., Boulton, E., Davey, L., & McEvoy, C. (2021). The online survey as a qualitative research tool. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 24(6), 641–654. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13645579.2020.1805550>
- Bree, R. T., & Gallagher, G. (2016). Using Microsoft Excel to code and thematically analyse qualitative data: A simple, cost-effective approach. *All Ireland Journal of Higher Education*, 8(2). <https://ojs.aishe.org/index.php/aishe-j/article/view/281>
- Campbell, R., Munford, A., Moylan, C. A., Pettyjohn, M. E., Schweda, K., Fedewa, T., Rosen, H., Ferguson, M. A., Beal, J., & Buchanan, N. T. (2023). Creating a university strategic plan to address relationship violence and sexual misconduct (RVSM): An application of principles-focused evaluation at Michigan State University. *Violence against Women*, 29(1), 3–34. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10778012221130106>
- Chapman, A., Mangion, A., & Buchanan, R. (2015). Institutional statements of commitment and widening participation policy in Australia. *Policy Futures in Education*, 13(8), 995–1009. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1478210315581462>

- Crispin, C., Nesar, D., & Dollard, M. (2023). *Psychosocial safety climate: Lead indicator of psychosocial hazards, mental health and wellbeing — Australian working population, key highlights 2023*. <https://stresscafe.net/superfriend-collaboration/>
- Deloitte. (2022). *Occupational Health and Safety (Psychological Health) Regulations Amendment 2022: Regulatory impact statement*. <https://engage.vic.gov.au/download/document/23765>
- Denney, F. (2020). Compassion in higher education leadership: Casualty or companion during the era of coronavirus? *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Leadership Studies*, 1(2), 41–47. <https://doi.org/10.29252/johepal.1.2.41>
- Denney, F. (2023). 'Get on with it. Cope.' The compassion-experience during COVID-19 in UK universities. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 14, 1112076. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1112076>. Article.
- Department of Education. (2024). *Accord review consultations*. <https://www.education.gov.au/australian-universities-accord/accord-review-consultations>
- Department of Education, Skills and Employment. (2021). *Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2021*. <https://www.legislation.gov.au/F2021L00488>
- Dickson-Swift, V., James, E. L., Kippen, S., & Liamputtong, P. (2007). Doing sensitive research: What challenges do qualitative researchers face? *Qualitative Research*, 7(3), 327–353. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794107078515>
- Dinu, L. M., Dommett, E. J., Baykoca, A., Mehta, K. J., Everett, S., Foster, J. L. H., & Byrom, N. C. (2021). A case study investigating mental wellbeing of university academics during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Education Sciences*, 11(11), 702. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci11110702>. Article.
- Dodge, M., & Parker, M. J. (2023). What now and how? Publishing the qualitative journal article. In R. Faria & M. Dodge (Eds.), *Qualitative research in criminology* (pp. 241–253). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-18401-7_15
- Dollard, M. F. (2012). Psychosocial safety climate: A lead indicator of workplace psychological health and engagement and a precursor to intervention success. In C. Biron, M. Karanika-Murray, & C. Cooper (Eds.), *Improving organizational interventions for stress and well-being* (pp. 77–101). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203723494-6>
- Dollard, M. F., & Bakker, A. B. (2010). Psychosocial safety climate as a precursor to conducive work environments, psychological health problems, and employee engagement. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, 83(3), 579–599. <https://doi.org/10.1348/096317909X470690>
- Dooris, M. (1999). The 'health promoting university' as a framework for promoting positive mental wellbeing: A discourse on theory and practice. *Journal of Public Mental Health*, 1(4), 34–43. <https://doi.org/10.1108/17465729199900032>
- Elo, S., & Kyngäs, H. (2008). The qualitative content analysis process. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 62(1), 107–115. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2648.2007.04569.x>
- Erickson, M., Hanna, P., & Walker, C. (2021). The UK higher education senior management survey: A stactivist response to managerialist governance. *Studies in Higher Education*, 46(11), 2134–2151. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2020.1712693>
- Fahie, D. (2014). Doing sensitive research sensitively: Ethical and methodological issues in researching workplace bullying. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 13(1), 19–36. <https://doi.org/10.1177/160940691401300108>
- Gan, K. H., & Kee, D. M. H. (2022). Psychosocial safety climate, work engagement and organizational commitment in Malaysian research universities: The mediating role of job resources. *Foresight*, 24(6), 694–707. <https://doi.org/10.1108/fs-01-2021-0019>
- Hammoudi Halat, D., Soltani, A., Dallli, R., Alsarraj, L., & Malki, A. (2023). Understanding and fostering mental health and well-being among university faculty: A narrative review. *Journal of Clinical Medicine*, 12(13), 4425. <https://doi.org/10.3390/jcm12134425>. Article.
- Hanna, P., Erickson, M., & Walker, C. (2022). UK higher education staff experiences of moral injury during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Higher Education*, 86(5), 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-022-00956-z>
- Heffernan, T. (2021). Examining university leadership and the increase in workplace hostility through a Bourdieusian lens. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 75(2), 199–211. <https://doi.org/10.1111/hequ.12272>
- Heller, R. F. (2022). *The distributed university for sustainable higher education*. Springer. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-16-6506-6>
- Henning, M. A., Zhou, C., Adams, P., Moir, F., Hobson, J., Hallett, C., & Webster, C. S. (2017). Workplace harassment among staff in higher education: A systematic review. *Asia Pacific Education Review*, 18(4), 521–539. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12564-017-9499-0>
- Hu, Q., Dollard, M. F., & Taris, T. W. (2022). Organizational context matters: Psychosocial safety climate as a precursor to team and individual motivational functioning. *Safety Science*, 145, 105524. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssci.2021.105524>. Article.

- Jayman, M., Glazzard, J., & Rose, A. (2022). Tipping point: The staff wellbeing crisis in higher education. *Frontiers in Education*, 7, 929335. <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2022.929335>. Article.
- Juutinen, S., Sjöblom, K., Dollard, M. F., & Mäkikangas, A. (2023). Psychosocial safety climate: Measurement and relationship with well-being in a four-wave longitudinal study during remote work. *Scandinavian Journal of Psychology*, 64(4), 504–511. <https://doi.org/10.1111/sjop.12917>
- Krippendorff, K. (2019). *Content analysis: An introduction to its methodology*. SAGE. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781071878781>
- Law, R., Dollard, M. F., Tuckey, M. R., & Dormann, C. (2011). Psychosocial safety climate as a lead indicator of workplace bullying and harassment, job resources, psychological health and employee engagement. *Accident Analysis and Prevention*, 43(5), 1782–1793. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.aap.2011.04.010>
- Lee, M., Coutts, R., Fielden, J., Hutchinson, M., Lakeman, R., Mathisen, B., Nasrawi, D., & Phillips, N. (2022). Occupational stress in university academics in Australia and New Zealand. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 44(1), 57–71. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1360080X.2021.1934246>
- Liou, D.-Y., Tu, C.-C., & Chang, S.-H. (2014). Mediating effect between supportive culture and job satisfaction in administrative services at higher education institutions. *Human Factors and Ergonomics in Manufacturing*, 24(6), 627–640. <https://doi.org/10.1002/hfm.20502>
- Lizier, A., Brooks, F., & Bizo, L. (2024). Importance of clarity, hierarchy, and trust in implementing distributed leadership in higher education. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 52(4), 901–915. <https://doi.org/10.1177/17411432221105154>
- Loh, M. Y., Zadow, A., & Dollard, M. (2020). Psychosocial safety climate and occupational health: What we know so far. In T. Theorell (Ed.), *Handbook of socioeconomic determinants of occupational health* (pp. 1–27). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-05031-3_17-1
- Marginson, S., & Considine, M. (2000). *The enterprise university: Governance and re-invention in Australian higher education*. Cambridge University Press.
- Miralles, M., Lee, B., Dörfler, V., & Stierand, M. (2022). Guest editorial: Investigating trauma: Methodological, emotional and ethical challenges for the qualitative researcher. *Qualitative Research in Organizations and Management*, 17(4), 397–405. <https://doi.org/10.1108/qrom-11-2022-999>
- Moriña, A. (2021). When people matter: The ethics of qualitative research in the health and social sciences. *Health & Social Care in the Community*, 29(5), 1559–1565. <https://doi.org/10.1111/hsc.13221>
- Morrish, L. (2019). *Pressure vessels: The epidemic of poor mental health among higher education staff* (No. 20). Higher Education Policy Institute. <https://healthyuniversities.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/HEPI-Pressure-Vessels-Occasional-Paper-20.pdf>
- National Mental Health Commission. (2022). *Blueprint for mentally healthy workplaces: Release 2, July 2022*. <https://haveyoursay.mentalhealthcommission.gov.au/71672/widgets/348959/documents/239095>
- Neser, D., Lushington, K., Zadow, A., Potter, R., Parkin, A., Richter, S., Pignata, S., Afsharian, A., Bakker, A., & Dollard, M. F. (2023). *Work, digital stress and wellbeing survey report: Australian university staff 2020–2023*. https://stresscafe.net/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/12022024_AA_E-stress-2023-Dashboard-Report.pdf
- Nicholls, H., Nicholls, M., Tekin, S., Lamb, D., & Billings, J. (2022). The impact of working in academia on researchers' mental health and well-being: A systematic review and qualitative meta-synthesis. *PloS One*, 17(5), e0268890. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0268890>. Article.
- Nicholls, H., Lamb, D., Johnson, S., Higgs, P., Pinfold, V., & Billings, J. (2023). "Fix the system ... the people who are in it are not the ones that are broken" A qualitative study exploring UK academic researchers' views on support at work. *Heliyon*, 9(10), e20454. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.heliyon.2023.e20454>. Article.
- O'Brien, T., & Guiney, D. (2018). *Staff wellbeing in higher education: A research study for Education Support Partnership*. Education Support Partnership. https://www.educationsupport.org.uk/media/fs0pzd02/staff_wellbeing_he_research.pdf
- O'Kane, M., Glover, B., Macklin, J., Nash, F., Rimmer, B., & Wikramanayake, S. (2023). *Australian Universities Accord: Interim report*. Australian Government Department of Education. <https://www.education.gov.au/download/16699/australian-universities-accord-interim-report/33941/document/pdf>
- O'Mara-Eves, A., Bruntton, G., McDaid, G., Oliver, S., Kavanagh, J., Jamal, F., Matosevic, T., Harden, A., & Thomas, J. (2013). Community engagement to reduce inequalities in health: A systematic review, meta-analysis and economic analysis. *Public Health Research*, 1(4). <https://doi.org/10.3310/phr01040>
- Ohadomere, O., & Ogamba, I. K. (2021). Management-led interventions for workplace stress and mental health of academic staff in higher education: A systematic review. *The Journal of Mental Health Training, Education and Practice*, 16(1), 67–82. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JMHTEP-07-2020-0048>
- Ose, S. O. (2016). Using Excel and Word to structure qualitative data. *Journal of Applied Social Science*, 10(2), 147–162. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1936724416664948>

- Pace, F., D'Urso, G., Zappulla, C., & Pace, U. (2021). The relation between workload and personal well-being among university professors. *Current Psychology*, 40(7), 3417–3424. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12144-019-00294-x>
- Pandya, A., & Lodha, P. (2022). Mental health consequences of COVID-19 pandemic among college students and coping approaches adapted by higher education institutions: A scoping review. *SSM - Mental Health*, 2, 100122. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssmmh.2022.100122>. Article.
- Potter, R. E., Bailey, T. S., & Dollard, M. F. (2019). A qualitative investigation into high psychosocial safety climate university work groups. In M. F. Dollard, C. Dormann, & M. A. Idris (Eds.), *psychosocial safety climate* (pp. 251–270). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-20319-1_10
- Povey, R., Trudgett, M., Page, S., & Coates, S. K. (2022). Where we're going, not where we've been: Indigenous leadership in Canadian higher education. *Race, Ethnicity and Education*, 25(1), 38–54. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2021.1942820>
- Preiser, R., García, M. M., Hill, L., & Klein, L. (2021). Qualitative content analysis. In R. Biggs, A. de Vos, R. Priser, H. Clements, K. Maciejewski, & M. Schlüter (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of research methods for social-ecological systems* (pp. 270–281). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003021339-23>
- Schaufeli, W. B., Salanova, M., González-romá, V., & Bakker, A. B. (2002). The measurement of engagement and burnout: A two sample confirmatory factor analytic approach. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 3(1), 71–92. <https://doi.org/10.1023/a:1015630930326>
- Schulz, J. (2013). The impact of role conflict, role ambiguity and organizational climate on the job satisfaction of academic staff in research-intensive universities in the UK. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 32(3), 464–478. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2012.680209>
- Sherratt, S. (2021). Workplace ostracism in academia. *Australian Universities Review*, 63(2), 35–43. <https://search.informit.org/doi/abs/10.3316/aeipt.230492>
- Sjöblom, K., Mäkinen, J.-P., & Mäkilangas, A. (2022). 'I was given three marks and told to buy a Porsche'—Supervisors' experiences of leading psychosocial safety climate and team psychological safety in a remote academic setting. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 19(19), 12016. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph191912016>. Article.
- Terry, G., & Braun, V. (2017). Short but often sweet: The surprising potential of qualitative survey methods. In V. Braun, V. Clarke, & D. Gray (Eds.), *Collecting qualitative data* (pp. 13–14). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781107295094.003>
- Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency. (2023). *Our approach to quality assurance and regulation*. <https://www.teqsa.gov.au/how-we-regulate/our-approach-quality-assurance-and-regulation>
- Thompson, M., Pawson, C., Delfino, A., Saunders, A., & Parker, H. (2022). Student mental health in higher education: The contextual influence of “cuts, competition & comparison.” *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 92(2), 367–393. <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjep.12461>
- Tims, M., Twemlow, M., & Fong, C. Y. M. (2022). A state-of-the-art overview of job-crafting research: Current trends and future research directions. *Career Development International*, 27(1), 54–78. <https://doi.org/10.1108/cdi-08-2021-0216>
- Urbina-García, A. (2020). What do we know about university academics' mental health? A systematic literature review. *Stress and Health*, 36(5), 563–585. <https://doi.org/10.1002/smi.2956>
- Vaismoradi, M., Turunen, H., & Bondas, T. (2013). Content analysis and thematic analysis: Implications for conducting a qualitative descriptive study: Qualitative descriptive study. *Nursing & Health Sciences*, 15(3), 398–405. <https://doi.org/10.1111/nhs.12048>
- Watermeyer, R., Bolden, R., Knight, C., & Crick, T. (2024). Academic anomie: Implications of the 'great resignation' for leadership in post-COVID higher education. *Higher Education*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-024-01268-0>
- Winefield, A. H. (2014). Job stress in university academics: Evidence from an Australian national study. In P. Y. Chen (Ed.), *Wellbeing: A complete reference guide* (vol. 3, pp. 1–21). John Wiley & Sons. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/9781118539415.wbwel1033>
- Woelet, P., & Croucher, G. (2024). Polarisation and casualisation: The changing academic workforce at Australian universities. In G. Strachan (Ed.), *Research handbook on academic labour markets* (pp. 280–289). Edward Elgar Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781803926865.00032>
- Wray, S., & Kinman, G. (2021). *Supporting staff wellbeing in higher education*. Education Support. <https://www.educationsupport.org.uk/media/x4jdvxpl/es-supporting-staff-wellbeing-in-he-report.pdf>
- Wray, S., & Kinman, G. (2022). The psychosocial hazards of academic work: An analysis of trends. *Studies in Higher Education*, 47(4), 771–782. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2020.1793934>
- Xing, C., Mu, G. M., & Henderson, D. (2022). Submission or subversion: Survival and resilience of Chinese international research students in neoliberalised Australian universities. *Higher Education*, 84(2), 435–450. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-021-00778-5>

Zadow, A., Dollard, M. F., Parker, L., & Storey, K. (2019). Psychosocial safety climate: A review of the evidence. In M. F. Dollard, C. Dormann, & M. A. Idris (Eds.), *Psychosocial safety climate* (pp. 31–75). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-20319-1_2

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

Springer Nature or its licensor (e.g. a society or other partner) holds exclusive rights to this article under a publishing agreement with the author(s) or other rightsholder(s); author self-archiving of the accepted manuscript version of this article is solely governed by the terms of such publishing agreement and applicable law.

Authors and Affiliations

Xuan Luu^{1,2}  · Christine Rathjens¹  · Michael Swadling¹  · Bronwyn Gresham¹ · Leya Hockman¹ · Christina Scott-Young³  · Katrin Leifels³  · Amy J. Zadow^{4,5}  · Maureen F. Dollard⁴  · Lachlan Kent^{1,6} 

✉ Xuan Luu
Xuan.Luu@rmit.edu.au

¹ Health, Safety and Wellbeing, Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, Victoria, Australia

² School of Medicine and Public Health, The University of Newcastle, New South Wales, Australia

³ School of Property, Construction and Project Management, Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, Victoria, Australia

⁴ Psychosocial Safety Climate Global Observatory, Centre for Workplace Excellence, The University of South Australia, South Australia, Australia

⁵ School of Psychology, The University of Adelaide, South Australia, Australia

⁶ Institute of Health and Wellbeing, Federation University, Victoria, Australia