The barriers and facilitators of mental health for a casual academic in higher education: An autoethnographic approach

Lauren Cox

Abstract

The mental health of academic staff is under increasing pressure due to the multiple layers of contemporary stressors. Casual or temporary academic staff are a unique group within higher education that experience additional stress inherent to precarious work. This paper applies an autoethnographic research approach to explore the barriers and facilitators of mental health experienced by a casual academic in Australian higher education contexts. Using a psychosocial risk lens, the nuances of stress-mediated challenges are analysed. Future interventions that move away from individually-focused approaches towards leadership and organisational level strategies to promote mental health among casual academic staff are then critically discussed.

Keywords: academic staff; casual; mental health

Introduction

Academia continues to evolve. This is exciting, as universities are key drivers in innovation—pushing the boundaries of human knowledge. Yet, the sustainability of adapting to continual change is coming into question as academics exit the academic arena due to burnout (Urbina-Garcia, 2020). This has escalated in the last decade due to a rapid shift towards the marketisation of universities (Mudrak et al., 2022; Schulz, 2013), whereby institutions compete, and academic staff are increasingly pressured to produce world-class university results (Brewster et al., 2022; Mudrak et al., 2022; Schulz, 2013). The complexity of the mental health problem within higher education has been explored in depth among tenured academics (for example, Neser et al., 2023; Urbina-Garcia, 2020;). However, the

perspectives of non-tenured academics (referred to herein as casual academics) are only now beginning to emerge (Chia et al., 2024; Meissner et al., 2024).

With the number of casual academics growing, this sub-group is becoming increasingly important in university outcomes (Bradley et al., 2008; Clarke, 2021). One Australian university reported 68.74% of university staff were in casual or temporary contracts in 2020 (Desierto & De Maio, 2020), with financial uncertainty shifting employment decisions towards a more agile academic workforce (Australian Government Department of Education, 2023; Clarke, 2021). The mental health of casual academics is multifaceted and impacted by many factors, including pressure to perform at the same level as tenured academic staff, job insecurity, lack of resources and reward, and minimal recognition (Chia et al., 2024; Clarke, 2021; Lazarsfeld-Jensen & Morgan, 2009; Meissner et al., 2024). With at least 50% of undergraduate teaching being delivered by casual academic staff (Baré & Bexley, 2017), this precarious workforce is on the frontline of teaching and student interactions. Therefore, the mental health of casual staff has far-reaching impacts on the quality of education being delivered (Brewster et al., 2022; Ohadomere & Ogamba, 2021) and performance of universities (Bradley et al., 2008). Thus, retention of casual employees is key to sustainability of the academic workforce.

This paper will use a psychosocial framework to explore the mental health crisis evident in higher education (Nicholls et al., 2022; Urbina-Garcia, 2020) through the lens of a casual academic working in the allied health sector of several universities in Australia. Using an autoethnographic approach, this paper will explore the following questions: What are the nuances of stressors (psychosocial risks) experienced by an allied health casual academic? What factors protect the mental health of an allied health casual academic? How can these experiences inform solutions in higher education health faculties? In exploring these questions, this paper critically reflects on the current mental health landscape through the perspective of a casual academic. It then highlights the importance of moving from a focus on individual-level mental health strategies towards collaborative leadership and university-level strategies to help protect the wellbeing of employees.

There is vulnerability in sharing lived experiences, particularly in how this sharing may impact future career prospects. Yet, armed with two intentions, I leaned into this discomfort. One intention, which prompted the start of my doctoral research journey, was to share the voices of lived experience. By having the courage to share my experiences in this paper, it is my hope that these experiences are accessible and relatable. The second intention was founded in witnessing some

family members exiting their workplaces due to structures that didn't support mental health (or mental illness). Without work, one's contribution to the world and society may seem diminished, and I saw the impact of this through my childhood and adult experiences. Thus, my second intention is to enhance workplace mental health, with this paper serving as a step toward creating a ripple effect. 'In the context of human behaviour, the butterfly effect means that the choices we make and the actions we take can have a ripple effect that touches the lives of others, sometimes in ways we never could have imagined' (Rayhan, 2023, p. 8). Whether this paper reaches one person or thousands, the potential to influence the sustainability of our profession remains equally significant.

Theoretical basis

When I started writing about my experiences, I approached it in a free-writing style. This was a liberating departure from the constraints of traditional academic writing. Autoethnography, however, requires 'systematic introspection… conscious attention to and focus on researchers' experiences, memories, emotions, insights, epiphanies, and life practices as a way to gain a fuller understanding of the interaction between one's inner world and the outer world encountered in human interaction' (Poulos, 2021, p. 16). This is a qualitative research method that utilises personal experiences and artifacts (in this instance, journals) to critically reflect on practices—balancing intellectual and methodological rigor, emotion, creativity and reflexivity—to determine the meaning of current challenges and improve the higher education landscape (Adams et al., 2015). With this in mind (alongside my preference for making sense of complexities), I turned to theoretical approaches to make sense of this information.

This paper is presented in three parts: barriers, facilitators, and critical insights. To understand the nuances of stressors (i.e., barriers to mental health) as a casual academic who transitioned from clinician to academic, I used a ten-factor workplace psychosocial framework (Way, 2020) to systematically categorise these experiences. As with all human experience, many problems didn't neatly fit into these categories, and those that sat outside of these boxes were explored accordingly.

Psychosocial risk factors, when present, can heighten the likelihood of stress-mediated harm in the workplace. Psychosocial risk factors include job demands (time pressure or role overload), low job control, lack of role clarity (including role ambiguity or conflict), emotional demands, low recognition or

reward, organisational change management, organisational injustice, interpersonal or team conflict, low supervisor and collegial support, and environmental conditions (see Cox et al., 2024; Safe Work Australia, 2022; Way, 2020). These factors have an interactive effect whereby the accumulation and interplay of risk factors impacts the overall psychosocial risk within a workplace (Safe Work Australia, 2022). Understanding the complexity of psychosocial risks in this environment is the first step to tailoring successful solutions (Kinman & Johnson, 2019). Facilitators to mental health, in my experience as a casual academic, are then explored using the four levels (individual, group, leadership and organisation) at which mental health initiatives can be implemented (Nielsen et al., 2017).

By applying these theoretical frameworks to both barriers and facilitators this approach provides the basis for the final section which provides critical insights and explores potential pathways toward effective solutions. To protect the confidentiality of indirect participants and institutions, enough data has been provided for context, but names have been excluded.

Barriers

Job demands
Many jobs and hats. My experience as a casual academic has been stepwise, moving from a clinical career (in allied health) to academia, over five years. When I started, I engaged in teaching assistant work once a week (supported by my clinical workplace). This was a pop-up opportunity, in a supporting role for practical teaching. At this time, it was low stress, as clinical work continued to be my main source of income, and I considered teaching to be a resume building exercise. However, the landscape briskly changed when I exited my fulltime clinical job and embraced academia as a career path.

Without a PhD (the entry-level to a lecturer position and secure work), holding multiple casual academic jobs, as well as private and clinical work, became the norm. Each semester, I undertook a multi-job, multi-institution puzzle: crafting a fulltime work schedule across many casual positions. It's quite like Tetris for the academic world—yet the pieces never perfectly fit together. This is a common experience, whereby casual academic staff tend to source income across multiple institutions and juggle commitments across a combination of teaching, research, and project contracts (Anderson, 2007; Florin Sädbom, 2024; Smithers et al., 2023). It is also important to stay up to date on industry practice and bring this specialist knowledge to the university environment (Bryson, 2013; Kimber, 2003; Wakely, 2021), which meant I continued to work in the clinic.

A clear example of this academic Tetris occurred in the summer of 2023: I held six casual or fixed-term contract roles across multiple institutions, which included course coordinator, work-site visits coordinator, two teaching assistant positions, research assistant coordinating the publication of two research handbooks, and clinical work. In this multi-job juggle, I would attempt to quarantine a day for each role. Yet, in reality, tasks and emails rarely aligned with this neat schedule, and I spent a lot of energy transitioning between roles and trying to stay on top of everything all at once. This felt much like having multiple tabs open on a computer—the tabs simultaneously require attention, distract from deep work, and none could be completely closed each day (buzzing away in the background).

Wanting to please and be seen as efficient, alongside maintaining quality of work (or for me, perfectionism—more on this later) meant the Tetris pieces didn't fit within the normal working hours, which is common amongst casual staff (Meissner et al., 2024; Murray et al., 2014). I also noticed a need to respond to emails almost immediately, which felt somewhat like a tennis match, whereby the goal was to keep as many balls as possible outside of my side of the court. Around me, I saw academics working well beyond the standard working week (Neser et al., 2023) and as such, this was normalised. An underlying rushing feeling became my norm, or in more technical terms, a chronic state of sympathetic nervous system activation.

I was not aware of this at the time, as I'd always juggled many things, but a therapist reflected to me that I was on the brink of burnout, which is a common experience in academia (Pope-Ruark, 2022; Urbina-Garcia, 2020). When I reflect on this, I recall that even in my high school years I studied hard to achieve high grades whilst working 20-30 hours a week. This busyness has remained across my working career, yet the environment and expectations have added an extra layer. Despite being in this hyperactive state, I recall a colleague mentioning that on the outside I always looked composed, calm, and like I had everything under control. However, I often felt a bit like the duck on water—paddling briskly under the surface to stay afloat but appearing as though all was fine above water. An important reminder to not compare another's outsides to your insides.

Concealed time. As a casual academic, invisible tasks, outside of contracts or paid hours, added to my already full load. With short, fixed-term contracts, there were numerous occasions of handing over responsibilities, in my own time, to the incoming academic and responding to emails from previous roles that I no longer held. This is referred to as *concealed time* in the literature and is common in casual

academics competing for future employment (Meissner et al., 2024; Smithers et al., 2023). Early on, I was happy to provide this support. However, I noticed this was a slippery slope, with concealed time occurring over many contracts. I also noted that boundaries were blurred due to technology and a feeling of needing to be contactable and responsive 24/7, which is increasingly common among casual academics (Meissner et al., 2024). This was heightened at times in fixed-term course coordinator roles, where I wanted to appear efficient and available for students and staff alike. This experience is not dissimilar to casual staff who explain that student consultation, responding to emails, and preparation for teaching tend to sit outside paid working hours (Clarke, 2021; Florin Sädbom, 2024; Lazarsfeld-Jensen & Morgan, 2009; Meissner et al., 2024; Ryan et al., 2013).

There was also a lot of time spent in forward planning: considering options for future jobs and ensuring the puzzle pieces aligned for ongoing work. Applying for jobs when in temporary positions is a regular occurrence. This process is not the same for every position, which means updates are required to respond to new role descriptions each time. I accept and appreciate that this is part of the process; however, it is notable that this additional job application time is more commonly experienced by those in precarious employment (Chia et al., 2024; Lazarsfeld-Jensen & Morgan, 2009).

Job control
Job insecurity. As a casual academic, being alert to job opportunities is a constant process (Chia et al., 2024; Lazarsfeld-Jensen & Morgan, 2009). My awareness of challenges with job security was highest between semesters when there was minimal academic work available, which created a wage hiatus (Lazarsfeld-Jensen & Morgan, 2009). Picking up roles when they were available became the new approach. Over three years, I saw my holidays disappear as I moved between swiftly saying yes to casual opportunities (in times when I could have taken leave) or wondering how I would keep the income stream flowing when work was precarious.

I remained in a perpetual cycle of insecure positions—a consistent picture for the casual academic workforce (Chia et al., 2024). I remember making assumptions that the temporary course coordinator positions I held would be offered to me the following year. However, despite delivering a successful course (as measured by student evaluations and staff feedback), this didn't transpire. With no PhD, I wasn't eligible to apply for the role. Instead, I continued to contribute to the course under the coordination of another academic—transferred back to a casual

teaching assistant role, but also stepping up to lead at times, albeit in my capacity as a casual academic.

Role clarity

Steps to progress. Acknowledging that academia was the career path I envisioned, I made steps to fulfil the criteria to be eligible for secure employment, including embarking on a PhD. What I discovered was a need to exceed across multiple areas, including teaching, research, and service—all with distinct and separate skill sets (Murray et al., 2014; Sutherland et al., 2013). Being excellent in just one of these domains may be seen as an achievement. Yet, in academia it is expected that you can achieve all of these, though the weight given to each in promotional pathways was often ambiguous (Bothello & Roulet, 2019; Murray et al., 2014). Individually, I found frustration in doing what universities deemed important verses my passion (Florin Sädbom, 2024). For me, teaching was where I found fulfilment (and what ultimately drove me to exit the clinical workforce), a common driver for allied health clinicians who transition away from the clinical arena (Murray et al., 2014). Yet, I now needed to fulfil many roles including but not limited to the following:

- Teaching: a need to be a presenter (engaging, performing), knowledgeable (subject matter expert), be up-to-date with teaching pedagogy and cater to diverse student cohorts
- Research: understand research approaches and analyses, be an excellent academic writer and be able to market myself in grants
- Service: be a great networker, engage industry stakeholders, perform duties in committees

Trying to tick the boxes on all three areas had hurdles. For example, when it came to service and being on committees, I wasn't eligible due to my casual work status. Despite indicating I was willing to perform service roles as a volunteer (acknowledging the benefits for network and relationship building), the doors remained closed. With perseverance—seeing roadblocks as opportunities to forge a different path—I instead joined an international committee that welcomed me as a casual academic and created a sense of community and contribution.

Identity. Taking these steps towards academia meant reestablishing a professional identity. I was no longer purely a clinician, teacher, or researcher. This also included straddling the line between staff and student, as a PhD candidate, which felt like donning and doffing hats as I pivoted across roles. During this time, I became

intimate with imposter syndrome, feeling like a small fish amongst the big fish of academia—a common occurrence for many (Bothello & Roulet, 2019). I was new in this arena, where I felt I was at the bottom again and having to earn my stripes (through accolades and evidence) to prove that I was worthy in this new role. This is not dissimilar to others who move into a new industry, with evidence in transitions from allied health clinician to academic (Murray et al., 2014; Wakely, 2021). However, I felt academia had competing stripes, and it was difficult to distinguish which one to focus on—teaching, research, or service—an experience also identified by others in the literature (Adcroft & Taylor, 2013; Murray et al., 2014).

Recognition and reward
Expectations and perfectionism. From when I was in primary school, I learnt to strive for external validation. That is, if I could achieve good marks, I would make those around me happy and receive praise (from my parents, grandparents, and teachers). I now understand that my developing mind associated external validation with my own worth; a story that continues to pop up throughout my life. I have been grateful as this narrative has driven me to great achievements. However, this can be a downward spiral, especially in an academic world where this internal story is intensified due to performance being a key factor in securing ongoing casual work (Meissner et al., 2024).

I remember a colleague sharing with me that 'the academic environment has a way of making the most intelligent and successful people feel mediocre' (Deidentified Academic, 2022). When placed in alternate environments, academic staff members are seen as the top of the pool, the experts in their fields (Bothello & Roulet, 2019). However, in the academic world, excellence tends to be the baseline relative to colleagues' success or achievements, and academics may no longer feel special (Murray et al., 2014; Wakely, 2021).

In higher education, expectations are set by the faculty, team, or supervisors, and within this environment the bar tends to be high (Bothello & Roulet, 2019; Florin Sädbom, 2024; Murray et al., 2014; Nicholls et al., 2022). I found that expectations were communicated in a subtle way by casual and fulltime colleagues alike: in the review and rewording of text to a perfect expression, emails sent in the early hours of the morning, the normalising of 6am starts and trips to campus on weekends. These actions were not overt but accumulated to send a message that work-life boundaries were blurred (Meissner et al., 2024). In fact, a senior academic shared that 'working weekends is the only way to maintain or get ahead in the academic environment' (Deidentified Academic, 2023).

When it comes to setting expectations and striving for excellence, there is strength in this approach. It can be inspiring to set a stretch goal and then see it come to life. Rather, the challenge arises, when performance review processes as a casual academic are limited, and it's unclear where to focus efforts (teaching, research, and/or service). Sustainability is also at play, with a feeling that the bar is moved each time these stretch goals are achieved. One example is when I strived to tick all the boxes for a teaching award at one level, and before I felt I had a chance to pause and celebrate, I received a follow-up invitation to apply for an award at the next level the following year. Although I appreciated the shoulder-tap, I felt a sense of being on a treadmill.

Supervisor support
Leadership and supervision: A diverse approach. Throughout my time in casual roles across institutions, I have worked under and alongside many leaders. I have had some leaders that allowed me autonomy to drive the position, cheering from the sideline, and others that approached support through the lens of what I felt was micromanagement. As you can imagine, the latter increased my stress, and this aligns with the literature about micromanagement in academic environments (Ghamrawi et al., 2024; Lazarsfeld-Jensen & Morgan, 2009). I learnt a lot during my experience with micromanagement, for which I am grateful. However, I also felt little autonomy, where I was constantly mindful not to deviate from the plan and was reluctant to try anything new, seen with strict managerial oversight in academia (Florin Sädbom, 2024; Ghamrawi et al., 2024). I remember feeling like I was holding my breath in the hope that I did the right thing, fearful of making missteps. I will discuss the flip side of this experience under mentors later in this paper; however, it is important to signpost that this experience added to my stress at the time.

Emotional demands
Pastoral care of students is something that I engage in frequently due to the pedagogy of kindness (Denial, 2024) I instil in the classroom. I still remember a situation in an institution where I worked one day a week. After noticing the strange behaviour of a student during class, I gently drew them aside where my concern for their mental health was confirmed. This led to actioning of crisis support for which I had no immediate contacts at the time (due to the casual role I was in). After a rather clunky experience, I left that day feeling a tension between being glad I had observed this student's behaviour and acted out of concern to get them support, yet, also exhausted from the emotional load of having to navigate this unclear pathway.

Similar experiences have been described by academic staff, where there is often a lack of support services (Urbina-Garcia, 2020) and casual staff are not always aware of, or able to access, these services when present (Meissner et al., 2024).

Organisational injustice
Being sick was not an option. As a casual academic, you get paid when you're present and not when you're sick (Chia et al., 2024); a trade-off between a reward of a higher pay rate and a precarious position. Importantly, this also means working when you're not at your best. The most obvious example of this occurred when I unknowingly fractured my ankle. Convincing myself it was merely a sprain, I was determined to see through the day of teaching. I persevered for a few hours, with my foot propped up and ice in situ until an astute first aid officer, who suspected a fracture, called an ambulance. By the end of the day, I had a cast applied and would spend a semester teaching on crutches. Although all staff and university supports were excellent throughout this experience, I feel that this story highlights the normalisation of the feeling that I had to keep going despite setbacks. I wonder how much of this 'persisting despite setbacks' feeling comes from my personality, versus being in stress response and normalising discomfort, versus the nature of insecure work. Possibly, a combination of all the above.

On the periphery. Being in a casual role tends to mean that our voices and input are often undervalued in organisational decisions (Florin Sädbom, 2024). For example, invitations to participate in staff surveys typically focused on fulltime, continuing staff and weekly email updates did not always include casual staff. When I was under contract I was included in all correspondence and then tended to be removed when the contract ended (despite remaining on the casual teaching team, fulfilling large teaching requirements over many courses). I acknowledge that inboxes tend to overflow and that not all casual staff may welcome regular emails. However, when casual staff are performing substantial teaching loads, being offered the opportunity to be included in communication is a subtle, yet important, way of creating a sense of inclusion (Clarke, 2021; Florin Sädbom, 2024; Meissner et al., 2024).

Environmental conditions
Having no real home or place to store things is experienced by many in the temporary workforce (Clarke, 2021). Over several years, my name would go on and off doors as I moved in and out of short, fixed-term contracts. Having an office during my contracts reinforced the feeling of being part of the team, important for

creating a sense of belonging (Florin Sädbom, 2024; Meissner et al., 2024). However, when in casual positions (outside of fixed-term contracts), I often peered over the fence, wondering if some spaces may be repurposed for casual staff, in a hot-desking capacity. This would be a small step that may create a sense of belonging for those in the temporary workforce.

Personality traits
The psychosocial risks explored above can be exacerbated or buffered by individual personality traits (Way, 2020). When reflecting on my own personality traits, I display a cocktail of perfectionism, people pleasing, and conscientiousness that tend to accumulate and interact within the higher education environment.

For me, my perfectionism dances with the perfectionism (or expectations) of others in the workplace. Receiving awards becomes a demonstration that "I can do it" and there may be a moment of joy, but this is briskly shifted to the next goal post (as seen in the rewards story). Brene Brown's work around shame highlights the ways perfectionism and people pleasing arise. 'Women reported experiencing shame as a web of layered, competing, and conflicting expectations that insist that they do it all, do it perfectly' (Brown et al., 2011, p. 358). To deal with shame, some move towards people pleasing or seeking approval (Brown et al., 2011), this is clear in the following reflection.

When I stepped into a (temporary) course coordinator role, my striving to always 'do things right' (perfectionism) and keep students happy (people pleasing) was challenged early on. Due to a sequence of events, results for a mid-semester exam were released on a Friday afternoon (not ideal with students transitioning into weekend life). I remember looking at my emails when out for dessert that evening, noticing a few students had emailed indicating concerns about their score. A sinking feeling hit me—did a whole cohort of student data get released incorrectly? My mind went into overdrive. I could no longer eat ice-cream and needed to get home to my computer and check the spreadsheet as soon as possible. I dashed home and checked data until I went cross-eyed. Although there was a swift resolution, it was now late into the night and winding down after going into fight or flight took some time. These after-hours moments highlight the work not captured in casual appointments (Florin Sädbom, 2024; Meissner et al., 2024;), a tricky combination when mixed with perfectionism.

The other trait, conscientiousness, shows up for me in wanting to efficiently complete (and excel) in my work (Wilmot & Ones, 2019). This means I work best with organisation and structure (or what I now understand as certainty and control), which is welcomed amongst students and staff alike. This is consistent with

literature that shows conscientious employees prefer well-structured, predictable environments (Wilmot & Ones, 2019). However, the academic environment is dynamic, and last-minute items often pop up that require urgent attention (and thus cannot be planned for). This felt like I was constantly chasing my tail, whilst trying to stay ahead of the game. I learnt that this rigid control needed to be replaced with flexibility if I was going to remain in the academic environment. I continue to work on this area and now recognise that my 'near perfect' is sometimes good enough.

Facilitators

I opened with discussions on the barriers and challenges I faced. Yet, I continue to remain in this environment. Therefore, I got curious about the facilitators that buffer these challenges and support me in sustaining the academic roles. The following section explores the strategies specific to my experience as a casual academic, using the four levels (individual, group, leadership and organisational) at which workplace mental health interventions can be targeted (Nielsen et al., 2017).

Individual strategies
Purpose and values. My purpose and why I teach is what I keep coming back to. This includes the joy of connecting with students, the excitement of seeing those lightbulb moments and the fulfilment of educating our future workforce. The love of teaching and working with students are common motivators for casual academic staff (Clarke, 2021; Meissner et al., 2024; Murray et al., 2014). I get so much value from being one part of a student's journey, one that I hope steers them in the right direction. This purpose has ignited goals along the way, including innovation in teaching, fostering safe learning environments and a sense of belonging, so I can create places where students want to come and learn (Denial, 2024).

Looking at my journals where I circled around values, entry into academia, and research in mental health, my reflections were grounded in what I now call the three C's: compassion, curiosity, and connection. *Compassion* for those who resist challenging conversations, for sitting in my own (and other's) discomfort, and compassion for not always getting it right. *Curiosity* about lived experiences (from those at the 'bottom' to those at the 'top' of the hierarchy); being curious about what challenges persist and what we can do better. *Connection* to people who want to make a difference, to a community, to understanding my own and others' experiences along the way. When things got challenging, the three C's were my anchor, my values, and allowed me to keep going.

Purpose may be a key to sustainability in the profession (Pope-Ruark, 2022). However, it is important to note that Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1943) indicates physiological (for example, food and sleep), safety, love and esteem (see strategies within my control below) need to be met prior to focusing on self-actualisation (purpose).

Strategies within my control. Research demonstrates a higher quality of life for academics who maintain regular routines in physical activities, sleep, meals, and social activities (Yao et al., 2022), and for those who make time for family and leisure (Padilla & Thompson, 2016). This is consistent with Maslow's hierarchy of needs, which claims that 'the appearance of one need usually rests on the prior satisfaction of another' (Maslow, 1943, p. 370), and that physiological needs are the basic needs we must fulfil first.

There are many individual strategies that have (and continue to) impact my work capacity. Exercise is important from a physiological point of view (Maslow, 1943) and a supportive strategy in academia (Yao et al., 2022). However, exercise is also my mental training playground, where I learn to get comfortable in discomfort and discover I'm capable of more than I thought possible. This has included cycling up mountains, running faster and further, and the mental discipline to continue even when it rains (and on humid summer days!). These are the experiences that I draw on in academia, knowing I can persist even when things are hard. If I was unwell and couldn't exercise, I noticed the impact of this—it was like a double hit for my physical and mental health.

Social connections have been a huge buffer to the challenges in higher education. Connections include my partner, friends, community (cycling and running) and collegial relationships (academic and PhD). This is supported by literature indicating that social support was related to a decrease in stress and burnout (Pignata et al., 2017; Zábrodská et al., 2018) and acts as a positive coping mechanism for academics (Gannon et al., 2019; Mark & Smith, 2018;). Making a conscious decision to create social connections in my week has been key. I have also proactively sought professional support through psychology—which allows me to sound board ideas, normalise my experiences, and continue to build strategies that support me in this environment. I hesitate when sharing this, out of fear of judgement. However, my hope is to start normalising the experience of proactive therapy rather than waiting for crisis.

Mindset plays a key role in how I show up, including awareness strategies, a growth mindset and gratitude. These strategies are recognised as positive coping strategies in academic staff, improving personal outlook and the ability to self-

manage (Pignata et al., 2017). In practice, awareness strategies include breathwork, mindfulness, priming to focus on goals, or listening to podcasts. These strategies allowed me to catch unproductive thought processes and do some reality checking on the urgency of tasks. This particularly helps with the tennis match of emails that happen in a day and appreciating that 24 hours isn't going to make a difference in the scheme of things. Cultivating a growth mindset is another strategy that has helped me manage my perfectionism and better embrace a learner's perspective. (Dweck, 2017). I'm not saying I'm perfect at this, and there have been many times throughout my academic journey where it creeps back in. However, if I found myself going down the road of perfectionism (and being self-critical), embracing the learning perspective (as I encourage my students to do) has helped shift this mindset towards growth. Lastly, gratitude has been a simple mindset practice that supported me through some challenging moments including rejected job applications, being physically unwell for months, and sleepless nights with a new puppy. This is supported by literature which explains joy fostered in academia can create positive effects, even in challenging academic environments (Gannon et al., 2019). Just to be clear, I'm not implying that I bypass the struggle; however, gratitude (and acceptance) has been the entry point to learning and moving forward.

Setting boundaries has been a strategy that I learnt over time. This includes boundaries around communication—corresponding within work hours and saying no to jobs that aren't in alignment with my purpose or goals. This is supported by Ylijoki (2013), who found that establishing work-life boundaries is connected to meaning and values derived from academic work.

With these strategies and supports in place, the flow-on effect shows up in how I respond to students with concerns, how I greet those in the hallway, or how I meet the bare minimum or strive to exceed it. It would be inaccurate to claim that these individual strategies are the answer to all the challenges described earlier as the system, leaders and teams all contribute to mental health (Nielsen et al., 2017). However, I have found that these practices have buffered some challenges in the higher education environment.

Leadership strategies
Throughout my experiences as a casual academic, I found the perceived pressures to fulfil the work of those who had come before me, whilst maintaining perfectionism, was somewhat challenging at times. Having a mentor who I could be open and honest with was key. For me, this person worked in academia so there was a lot of understanding of the system and as such a lot of normalising (and empathy) of my own experiences in this environment. This helped counteract my

internal stories about not being 'good enough,' highlighting the key emotional support leaders can provide in the workplace (Mathieu et al., 2019; Pignata et al., 2017). Mentors also helped me navigate choices throughout my transition into academia—when to choose academic work over clinical work and, when many opportunities were thrown in the air, navigating which one aligned with my trajectory and purpose. I still fondly recall a great analogy shared by a mentor, asking whether I was using the flood light or spotlight. That is, saying yes to all the things (flood light) versus being discerning with yeses and choosing those that aligned (spotlight) with my goals and purpose. As I transitioned, there were many times when I moved between spotlighting and floodlighting.

Throughout my time across several teams and institutions, I found that my supervisors (middle management) were the facilitators of being part of a 'team,' whereas executive level leaders tended to be operational (signing contracts, providing resources such as a desk), which is supported in the literature (Smithers et al., 2022). A team environment was created when supervisors used language like being part of a 'crew' and recognised that the success of teaching came about because of the sum of parts that each of us contributed. I recognised that in teaching assistant positions, this made me feel valued and recognised for my contributions and that I belonged to a team (even for that short period)—a key to buffering burnout and improving employee retention for health professionals (Coffey & Coleman, 2001).

Balancing the landscape

When reflecting on barriers evident in this autoethnographic account, there are many system-related challenges which require organisational input. Strategies such as having clear development pathways and employment processes for clinicians progressing into academia, providing sustainable and clear expectations of roles, providing opportunities for casual staff to be involved in communication (including boundaries), valuing casual staff by granting them a voice in organisational change, having oversight on allocation of work (inclusive of handover time in temporary contracts) and providing an ongoing place to work (for example, shared hot-desks) are strategies that require system-related input. These strategies would target challenges experienced in casual academic work and are corroborated in recent literature on academia and precarious work (Allen et al., 2024; Meissner et al., 2024). It would be important for universities to also consider employment practices including how casual work is positioned and whether roles could be converted to more secure employment (Chia et al., 2024).

When reflecting on facilitators, it is interesting that strategies are largely dependent on people – that is, strategies at the individual and leadership levels. I have been fortunate to have leaders (supervisors) who supported and buffered the psychosocial risks in this environment, keeping me buoyant. This demonstrates the central role leaders have in supporting casual staff mental health via emotional and practical strategies (Mathieu et al., 2019). However, this isn't true for all casual staff, with destructive leadership evident in academia (Ghamrawi et al., 2024). At an individual level, I can now see I was also cognisant of having strategies in place to allow me to continue to show up. However, placing this responsibility on individual staff members to survive in this environment is not sustainable, with research demonstrating this can in fact be harmful if organisations don't address strategies to minimise or eliminate psychosocial challenges (Padilla & Thompson, 2016; Way, 2020). These facilitators also have a temporal element as, five years on, I note the stressors (barriers) are now starting to weigh down my ability to remain buoyant in this system, which requires more protective supports for casual staff.

The future of the higher education environment cannot rely solely on people (individuals and leaders) to support and retain casual staff. I strongly advocate for individual responsibility, however it is clear that individual strategies will only get us so far and they are not sustainable in the long term, when work-related stressors are prolonged (Way, 2020). In fact, the research tells us that a united front (inclusive of individual, group, leadership, and organisational strategies) is required when overcoming psychosocial challenges (Brewster et al., 2022; Nielsen et al., 2017; Suárez-Reyes & Van den Broucke, 2016), and initiatives need to include prevention and promotion strategies, not just reactive mechanisms (Brewster et al., 2022).

In a journal entry on September 25, 2022, I asked the question in relation to this problem: do we go from the top (organisations) or create ground swell from the bottom (individuals)? My answer at the time was:

> It's not going to come from the top or the bottom. It actually needs to come from all angles—organisations, leaders, individuals all standing side by side and turning a ripple into a wave. It will ebb and flow through the process (just like the wave!). However, the long-term idea is that we create enough swell that the impact is seen and sustained.

> There's no one "right way" to ride these waves. For every environment there will be a different approach, a different intensity, a different current, a different set of riders. Going with these waves and navigating them instead of resisting them is what the journey will look like. Adapt, change, ride the

waves and then stand on the shore and realise that we can create something new!

By remaining curious and diving into uncomfortable conversations, we can continue to learn and improve these problems. Sharing our stories is one step on the path to understanding the nuances of mental health challenges. One step to creating ripples of change for casual academic staff.

This paper has offered a unique contribution by exploring both the barriers (using a psychosocial framework) and facilitators (using the four-levels of strategic supports) to mental health. The insights demonstrate an unbalanced landscape that currently relies on people to buffer system-related challenges. This work contributes to bolstering next steps towards solutions which may support our valuable casual academic workforce to continue to bring their real-world knowledge to university environments and foster the sustainability of this engagement. Future research should explore additional casual academic experiences within allied health faculties and their recommendations for change. By doing so, this could grow into a wave of change for the casual academic workforce.

Conclusion

This autoethnography has explored mental health through the lens of an Australian casual academic in allied health. By using a psychosocial framework, this autoethnographic account has demonstrated an unbalanced landscape with the scale tipped towards greater barriers to mental health for a casual academic in allied health. Facilitators described in this account also demonstrate a reliance on people (individuals and leaders) to buffer the challenges in this environment. This work has offered insights into areas to conduct further research and has helped identify factors that could be addressed in next steps towards a solution for casual academic staff in allied health faculties.

Since writing this autoethnography, legislation in Australia has been deployed, whereby employers now have a responsibility to protect the psychosocial safety of employees as far as reasonably practicable (Safe Work Australia, 2022). With this legislative change, Australian universities may be prompted to implement institutional and leadership level changes, such as those proposed in this paper— rebalancing the scale (reducing barriers/psychosocial risks) and building a sustainable future for the casual academic workforce.

Acknowledgements

Author biography

Lauren Cox's academic career has included casual academic roles across multiple Australian universities. At the time of publication, she has secured a continuing academic position—a milestone that marks both personal achievement and a new chapter in her professional life. In this role, Lauren is dedicated to supporting casual academics and contributing to ongoing efforts that promote a sense of belonging, recognition, and career development within the academic environment. She believes that meaningful change in academia begins with curiosity, collaboration, compassion, and is sustained through commitment. As her career progresses, Lauren hopes to be a voice for those in casual academic and early career roles, helping to shape a more supportive and sustainable future for all educators.

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