

ENG ECAN COVID19 Impact 2021



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UNSW Engineering
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Below the surface - The impact of COVID19 on Early Career Academics

General information and objectives

In 2020, multiple surveys of Early Career Academics (ECAs)¹ highlighted the negative impacts that COVID-19 was having on ECAs^{2,3}. A year later, the Faculty of Engineering ECA Network (ECAN) is seeking to understand the ongoing impact to ECAs since COVID-19. The following report is a compilation of the most important findings from a COVID19 Impact Survey released on the 1st of March 2021. All academics from the Faculty of Engineering at UNSW were invited to complete the survey.

The aim of this survey was to gain insight into, and a better understanding of how COVID19 and the 'new COVID normal' has impacted Early Career Academics (ECA). This survey aligns with the goals of the Faculty of Engineering ECAN, which provides support and advocacy for ECAs within the Faculty. Findings will be used to inform decision making and the broader strategy moving forward from COVID and might also be used for research purposes (research study approved by UNSW Ethics Committee - HC Reference Number: HC201018).

Questions to be answered are:

1. How has COVID19 changed the current work and the work perspectives of ECAs?
2. What are ECAs concerns moving forward?
3. How different are ECAs concerns from those of non-ECAs? How different are tenure track ECAs concerns from those of non-tenure track ECAs?

¹ The employee is within seven years (relative to opportunity) of having been awarded a PhD or recognised equivalent, the employee is classified as a member of the Academic Staff of UNSW, and the appointment is at Level A-C.

² IMPACTS OF COVID-19 FOR EMCERS by the EMCR Forum as part of the Australian Academy of Science (<https://www.science.org.au/files/userfiles/support/documents/covid19-emcr-impact-report.pdf>).

³ COVID-19 ECA Concerns by UNSW ECAN (unsw.to/COVIDsurveyECA)

Key statistics

- 121 responses
- 85% identified as ECAs (103 vs 18) = 1/3 of all Engineering ECAs
- 66% Male, 31% Female - 3% Prefer not to say (80 vs 38 vs 3)

Demographics⁵

Table 1. Survey Participant Demographics relating to Contract type and Contract focus for ECA and non ECAs

	ECA			non ECA
	Non tenure track	Tenure + tenure track	Overall	
Research only	82% (62)	25% (5)	71%	17%
Teaching and Research	16% (13)	70% (14)	26%	72%
Teaching focused	2% (2)	5% (1)	3%	11%

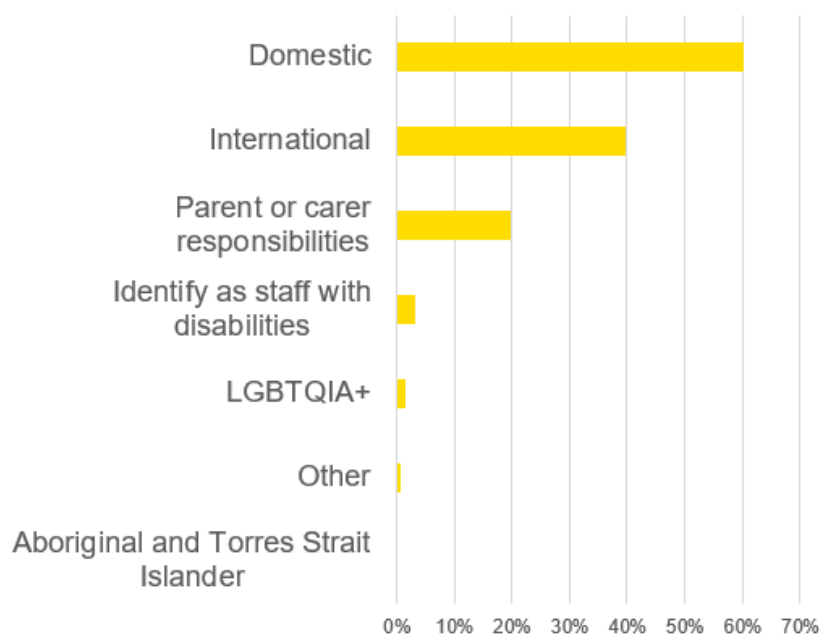


Figure 1. How ECAs identify themselves, based on those surveyed

⁵ As of May, 2021.

Results

Tenure-track ECAs

1. Tenure-track ECAs had much higher workloads than non-ECAs and non-tenure-track ECAs with 30% vs 22% vs 16% working 9 extra more hours /week, and 90% vs 89% and 54% working more than 1 hour/week extra.
2. Teaching was affected the most during COVID19 with higher workloads for 100% of teaching only staff, 88% of teaching and research, and 52% of research only positions.

Top support strategies

- Better grant writing support (65% in support)
- Better mentoring and supporting culture (46% in support)
- More opportunities for peer-networking (38% in support)

Effects on ECAs with carers responsibilities

1. The lack of being able to meet family responsibilities was the second highest negative impact of COVID19 after increased levels of stress.
2. Significant increase in uncertainty around starting a family as a result of COVID19 was also reported.

Top support strategies

- Opportunities to engage and supervise students (62% F vs 38% M in support)
- Mentoring by senior staff (46% in support)
- Workshops on soft skills (42% in support)

Effects on research and teaching

Free answer responses to questions on how COVID19 has affected research and teaching could be grouped in the following themes.

Distraction and disconnection

“Too much other work to permit research”

“No idea who else is working on the same project. A bit tiring, the whole disconnection” “Not allowing me to focus on main research as FTE is now split over multiple projects”

Recruitment

“No students for supervision”

“Supervising/recruiting of international PhD students became difficult”

“Reduction of international scholarship and I could not find any PhD student to conduct research”

“No new students or postdocs”

“International PhD and Masters students not able to come to Australia”

Breakdown of (Dis)Satisfaction

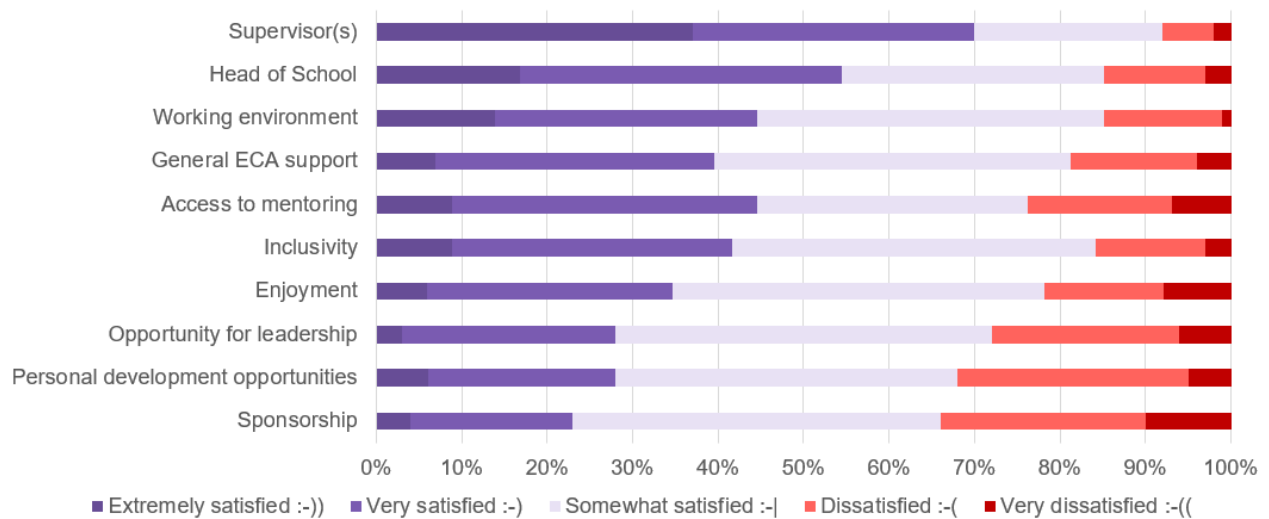


Figure 2. Reported levels of satisfaction on various facets of ECA work life

Key outcomes

Based on our analysis of the survey results, the following findings were apparent:

- Much higher levels of stress for ECAs
- Concerns regarding employment uncertainty (ECAs 77% vs non-ECAs 34%)
- 60% ECAs were affected in their employment condition
- Insecurity and reduced funding and research opportunities (45%)
- Adverse changes in contracts and responsibilities (40%) including higher workloads and reduction in pay
- 47% ECAs do need or likely will need a form of bridge funding, especially the nearly 35% of ECAs who only have a contract for ≤ 1 year

Opportunities to assist ECAs better

Free answer responses listing specific concerns and requests from ECAs are shown below.

- *“More budget for casual staff, more assistance with online teaching at the right time, more IT support. Less admin work”.*
- *“Training of supervisors to properly balance workload inflicted on junior staff. Hiring junior staff at their actual level instead of below their qualifications and skills.”*
- *“Become eligible for internal supports such as GROW, as a non-tenure track academic with 6 years of experience”.*
- *“Put people in a position to succeed.”*
- *“Technological tools support.”*

ENG ECAN Recommendations

Based on the survey findings, differences in the impacts of COVID19 within the ECA cohort were identified. In response ENG ECAN has proposed the following focus areas and actions:

Support for non tenure-track ECAs

- Addressing specific concerns relating to job security
- Supporting access to research and training

Support for tenure track and tenure ECAs

- Addressing issues with work loads
- Supporting access to requested support areas relating to grant writing support, mentoring and peer-networking (See Page 4)

Support for ECAs with carers responsibilities

- Addressing concerns relating to starting a family and meeting family responsibilities for ECAs in general.
- Supporting access to requested support areas relating to the supervision of students, mentoring and workshops on soft skills (See Page 4)