THE
ELEPHANT
IN THE ROOM

Precarious work in
New Zealand's universities

Prepared by
Aimee B. Simpson, Apriel D. Jolliffe Simpson,
Max Soar, Luke D. Oldfield, Rituparna Roy,
& Leon A. Salter

Acknowledgements

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Executive Summary

Precarious working arrangements, defined by temporary casual and fixed-term employment agreements, are a complex, often hidden feature of academia in Aotearoa New Zealand[i]. At present, little is known about the conditions of insecure academic work, the size of this workforce, nor how these workers have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. This report provides an insight into the reality of insecure academic work in universities from those who responded to the 2021 *Precarious Academic Work Survey*.

We highlight that in Aotearoa we have a highly trained, casual and fixed-term academic workforce who are engaged in long-term cycles of precarity. Among the 760 participants surveyed, more than one-quarter (28.9%) had been precariously employed for five years or longer. Further, nearly sixty percent (59.2%) had accepted extra work to support themselves or their whānau, even when it jeopardised their other responsibilities (e.g., completing their degrees). Over half (52.7%) of all students, and nearly two-thirds (64.4%) of PhD students surveyed, had held three or more employment agreements at a university in the last 12 months. Financial need (71.6%) was most frequently cited as an important factor in participants' decisions to engage in precarious work, and over half (52.4%) of participants experienced a rise in their living costs due to working from home during the pandemic.

Our report also adds further evidence of inequities present in the academic pipeline. Just one in ten Māori (10.8%) and one in thirteen Pasifika (7.7%) participants were PhD graduates, a smaller proportion than the nearly one-third (31.5%) of New Zealand European/Pākehā. Over two-thirds (66.8%) of international students indicated they were employed in the most insecure forms[ii] of precarious work, compared with 60.5% of domestic students. Of those precarious workers completing a PhD, domestic students in our survey were far more likely to be receiving a stipend (73.9%) compared to international students (50%). Further, 63.2% of participants who were international students without a stipend

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[i] Aotearoa hereafter.
[ii] Casual or fixed-term contracts of six months or less.

reported that they lacked confidence in having sufficient ongoing academic work in the next 12 months.

Instances of discrimination, bullying, and harassment were also reported by survey participants, with 33.7% citing that they had been impacted by such issues. Other workplace safety concerns were evident: nearly half of participants (45.7%) described their workloads as always or often unsustainable and negatively impacting their health and wellbeing. Meanwhile, one-quarter (23.9%) of precarious staff rated their current stress level as an eight, on a scale of zero (no stress) to ten (completely stressed). Two-thirds (66.3%) of participants were not confident they would receive adequate support from their employer in the event of a future crisis (e.g., a natural disaster or outbreak of infectious disease).

On this basis, we encourage universities to do better for their casual and fixed-term employees through increasing job security, reducing inequities for Māori and Pasifika precarious staff, and improving conditions for postgraduate students, both domestic and international. In our final recommendations, we implore the government to work alongside universities to realise this change by investigating workloads, increasing, and rebalancing sector funding, and reinstating the postgraduate student allowance.

Introduction

The casualisation of academic labour is increasingly normalised in Aotearoa's university sector[1]. Changes to funding models combined with pressures to generate surplus revenue has contributed to the corporatization of universities[2] and the creation of an academic 'precariat' – a highly skilled workforce defined by insecurity, relative deprivation, and a sense of disposability and marginalisation[3]. The lack of information on the extent of precarity in universities in Aotearoa obscures the level of this marginalisation; official data only distinguishes between full-time and part-time staff, and collects no information on the relative *security* of these roles[4] (i.e., whether they are permanent or non-permanent appointments).

Precarious employment tends to be short-term, low paid, and with limited leave entitlements, meaning that employees often work multiple jobs in a variety of roles across different institutions to build a liveable wage[5,6,11]. It is also common for precarious academics to remain in this type of work for years, having to work unpaid hours in their own time (e.g., writing publications), to aid their own career advancement[12,13]. Precarious teaching-only staff in particular report high levels of stress[14], and a lack of professional recognition of the value they bring to student learning, which negatively impacts their wellbeing[15]. Problems associated with precarious employment intensified throughout the COVID-19 pandemic: universities reduced staff, increased workloads, and gendered divides grew[22–25].

A significant amount of precarious work is done by students, and indeed some roles – such as teaching support roles – may *only* be available to currently enrolled students[7,16]. International students are particularly reliant on precarious work to meet living expenses, due to the lack of access to local financial assistance, and the high cost of living in Aotearoa[17,18].

Scholars have identified that there has been a failure to retain and progress Māori and Pasifika through the academic pipeline resulting in an overall attrition of students entering into postgraduate studies and beyond[19–21]. It is therefore worthwhile considering how precarity may be a compounding factor in this area.

This report provides a snapshot of precarious academic work in Aotearoa's eight universities. It offers preliminary analysis relating to the current makeup of this workforce, their employment conditions, experiences in the workplace, the impact their work has on their health and wellbeing, and how they have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. We seek to highlight the experiences of an otherwise hidden section of university staff in Aotearoa, and provide evidence-based recommendations for reforms that universities and government need to enact in order to adequately support the people they employ.

Data Collection

The survey ran for four weeks between September and October 2021 and was open to anyone over the age of 18 who was precariously employed by any of the eight universities in Aotearoa in the last 12 months. We recruited participants ($N = 760$) via advertisements shared on social media (Facebook and Twitter) and non-institutional mailing lists (e.g., union and advocacy networks).

Broadly, we asked participants about their employment agreements; employment and workplace conditions; views on academia; health and wellbeing; and the impact of COVID-19. We also collected data on participants' age, gender, ethnicity, citizenship status, housing situation, household income, academic status, field of study, and whether or not they were: LGBTQIA+; diagnosed with a mental illness; deaf, disabled or had a chronic illness[iii]; or union members. After the main survey was submitted, we separately asked participants to indicate which universities they had worked for. This report provides a snapshot of the findings with more detailed analyses to appear in future publications.

[iii] Deaf or disabled, hereafter.

Our Sample at a Glance

We received responses from precarious academic staff at every university in Aotearoa.

The distribution of responses across universities was roughly proportional to the staffing levels universities reported in their annual reports[26–33][iv].

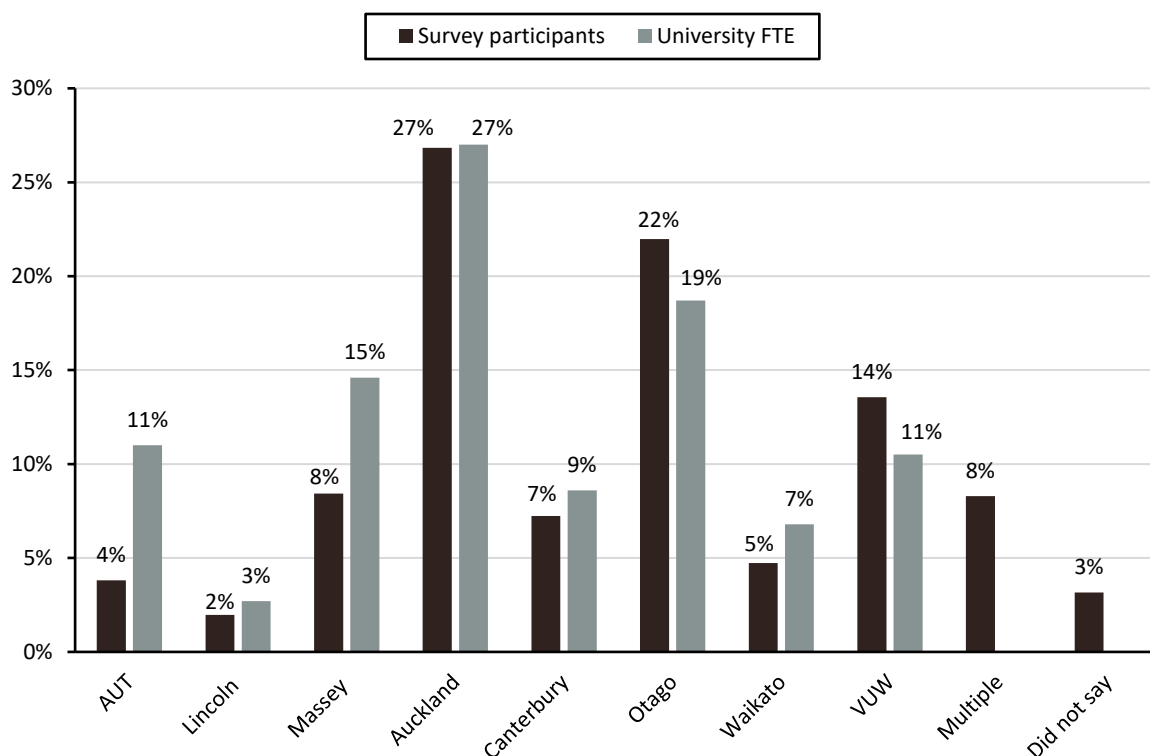*Figure 1. Proportion of survey participants compared with university reported full-time equivalent (FTE) staff.*

[iv] Although headcount and full-time equivalent (FTE) staff are not directly comparable, it does provide a frame of reference. Some, but not all, of the apparent under sampling is accounted for by those who worked for multiple institutions and, potentially, those who did not say.

Pacific Peoples
3.4%

Māori
11.1%

Asian
12.4%

Other
8.3%

Pākehā
64.9%

The distribution of responses across ethnicities was also comparable to the information universities report[v] to Education Counts[4].
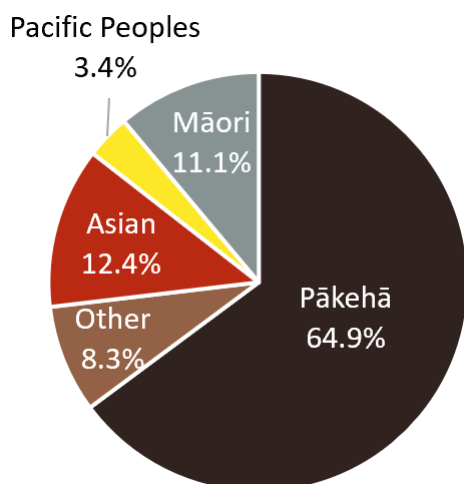
Figure 2. Ethnicity of survey participants.

Most (68.8%) participants were women, which was comparable to data reported by previous research[13].

One in twenty were gender diverse, and approximately one-quarter of participants indicated they were LGBTQIA+.

Gender Diverse
5.3%

Male
24.6%

Female
68.8%
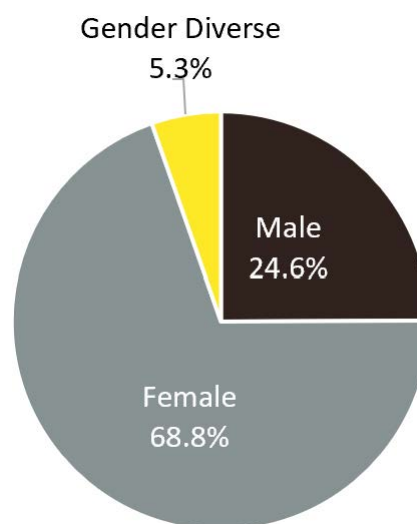
Figure 3. Gender of survey participants.

50 +
9.4%

35 - 49
27.0%

Under 35
62.4%

Almost 40% of participants were aged 35 or older.

Further to age, around half of participants were currently studying towards undergraduate, honours, or masters degrees, or were PhD students.
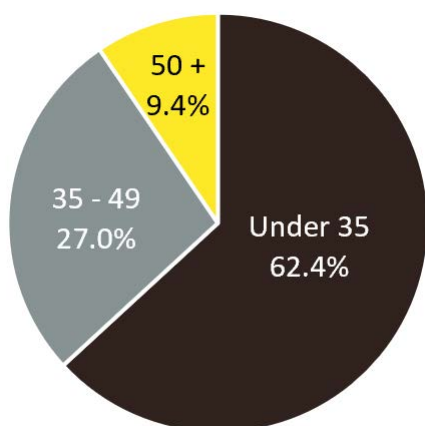
Figure 4. Age of survey participants.

For a full picture of the sample please see Tables 1 and 2 in Appendix B.

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[v] Comparisons are made in reference to non-prioritised data in Appendix A as national data is not prioritised.

Precarious Academic Work: An Overview

Although precarious employment agreements may often be short-term, many survey participants said they had engaged in this kind of work for extended periods of time. One-third (33.9%) of participants had been employed on casual and fixed-term employment agreements for between two and five years and 28.9% had been employed for more than five years.
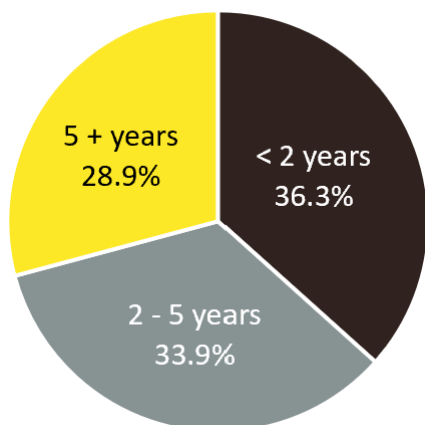
Figure 5. Total length of time participants had been in precarious university work.

In terms of the kind of work participants were doing, 61.1% indicated that they had been employed in some form of *Teaching Support* role and 43.8% had been employed in a *Research Support* capacity in the last 12 months. Just under one-quarter of participants had been *Primary Instructors* (23.2%) and one-fifth were *Researchers* (20.3%). A smaller proportion (17%) of participants had *Other* university roles (i.e., professional roles), were involved in *Equity Support* (8.3%), and / or were not currently employed (5.5%).

Figure 6. Participant precarious university employment in the last 12 months by type of role.
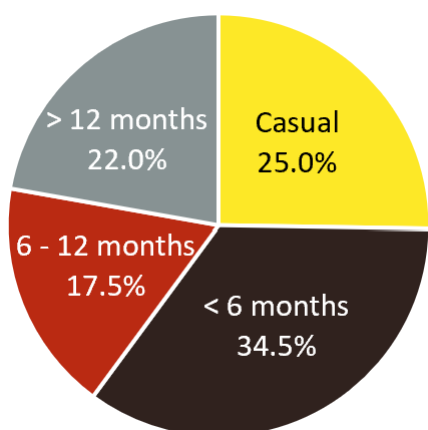
Figure 7. Highest paying employment agreement held by participants at a university in the last 12 months.

Three-fifths (59.5%) of participants stated that their highest-paying employment agreement in the last 12 months was either a casual appointment or a fixed-term agreement of less than six months. Only 22% of participants had fixed-term agreements of a year or longer. Participants on a casual or a fixed-term agreement of less than six months reported the lowest levels of confidence in having sufficient ongoing employment at a university in the next 12 months (30% and 26.3%, respectively).

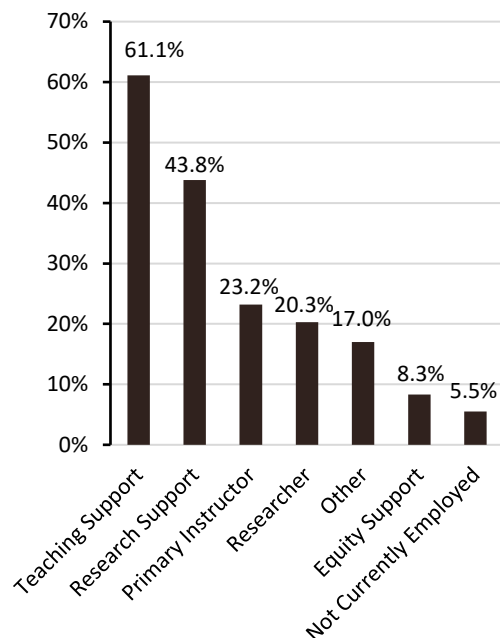Almost half (47.8%) of participants had three or more employment agreements in the last 12 months. Most (70.5%) of these multiple-agreement holders suggested that a casual or a fixed-term agreement of less than six months was their highest-paying role in the last year. When looking at participants who ***only*** worked as *Teaching Support* and / or *Primary Instructors* (*n* = 223) in the last 12 months, 60.1% said that they had held at least two agreements in the last year, and 35.4% said three or more. Three-quarters (75.3%) of teaching-only

Figure 8. Number of employment agreements held by participants at a university in the last 12 months.

participants said their highest paying employment agreement in the last year was a casual or fixed-term appointment of less than six months. This suggests that precarious teaching staff are repeatedly employed in similar roles throughout the year.

The survey asked participants to rate the influence that various factors had on their decision to engage in precarious academic work. Figure 9 highlights that most important reasons as to why participants engaged in precarious work were *financial need* (71.6%), followed by *career advancement* (70.8%).
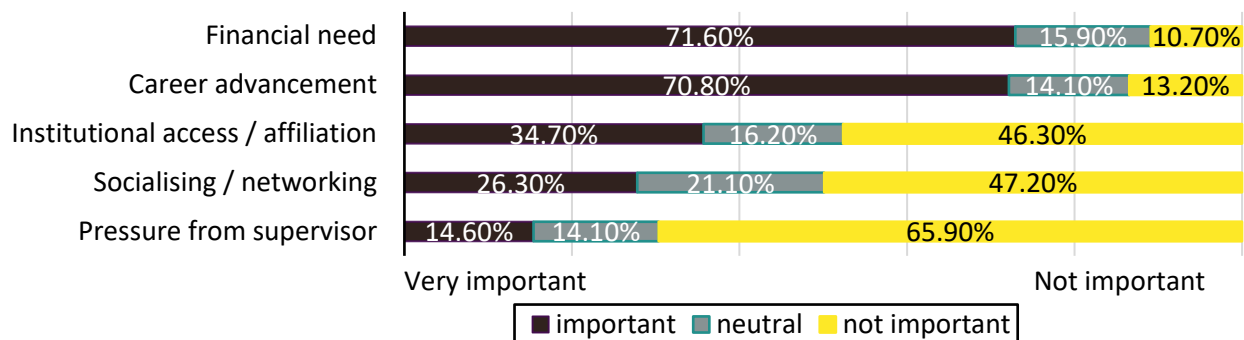
Figure 9. *Responses to the question: To what extent were the following factors important in your decision to engage in casual or fixed-term academic work? (1 = not important; 5 = very important)*

When examining differences in responses by enrolment status, only 10.6% of participants who were currently enrolled indicated that maintaining *institutional access or affiliation* was 'very important', compared with 29.8% of participants who were not currently enrolled. This indicates that maintaining *institutional access or affiliation* is most important for people who would not have it by other means (i.e., by being an enrolled student).

Employment Agreements

We asked participants to rate their understanding of different aspects of their employment agreements, ranging from 1 (no understanding at all) to 4 (complete understanding). Over one-fifth (21.4%) of participants indicated that they had no understanding at all of what their *leave entitlements* were. A similar proportion of participants had no understanding at all as to who to approach over common workplace issues such as *disputes with their line manager* (17.6%) or support for their *wellbeing or mental health* (20%).

We also asked participants to rate how often they had experienced various issues relating to recruitment and induction processes as part of their casual and fixed-term work at universities, from 1 (never) to 5 (always). Two-fifths (39.1%) of participants suggested that they *often* or *always* experienced delays in having their employment agreements processed (i.e., being added to payroll and / or receiving back-pay). Over one-third (35.9%) of the total sample said they *often* or *always* experienced an expectation to begin work before receiving an employment agreement. When looking at participants who had worked as a *Primary Instructor* (*n* = 176) in the last 12 months, this figure increased to half (51.1%).

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Remuneration

A concerning finding of this survey was that over half of participants stated that their precarious employment agreements either *never* (23.9%) or *occasionally* (27.8%) accurately accounted for the hours that they worked. Only 11.3% of participants said that they felt their employment agreement(s) in the last 12 months *always* accurately accounted for the hours they worked.

Participants who stated that their employment agreement(s) *usually*, *occasionally*, or *never* accurately accounted for the hours they worked were asked a follow-up question about pay inaccuracies (*n* = 653).

Figure 10. Responses to the question: In the last 12 months, do you feel that your employment agreement(s) accurately accounted for the hours you worked?

Two-thirds (66%) of these participants said they were required to work more than the hours listed in their employment agreement(s). When looking at responses from participants who worked as a *Primary Instructor*, over three-quarters (77.7%) said that they had worked more hours than was listed in their employment agreement(s), higher than the proportion of any other role type (*Teaching Support:* 70.5%; *Research Support:* 63.4%; *Researcher:* 61%; *Equity Support:* 65.5%; and *Other*: 66.4%). Close to half (46.9%) of participants reported working outside of business hours (e.g., 8:00a.m. – 6:00p.m., Monday – Friday), over one-third (35.4%) indicated they worked faster and had to sacrifice the quality of work to meet deadlines, and over one-quarter (28.6%) performed tasks unrelated to their job description.

Other (7.2%) inaccuracies in their remuneration that participants described in the text field were: employment agreement errors (e.g., casual staff having standard hours of work, or being paid at the incorrect rate); non-standard pay (e.g., being paid in gift cards, receiving annual leave or a stipend in lieu of a wage); and overpayment (e.g., with the expectation they would work later). It is also worth noting that many participants used the 'other' text field to stress that there was a cultural *expectation* (as opposed to an explicit requirement) of working beyond their set hours and carrying out additional tasks in their workplaces.

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Figure 11 below details the range of strategies survey participants engaged in to financially support themselves or their whānau while precariously employed. The overwhelming majority (87.4%) had engaged in at least one strategy, and the median number of strategies selected was three. Almost sixty percent (59.2%) of participants suggested that they had accepted work, even when it jeopardised their other responsibilities (such as completing their degrees), and a similar number (55.8%) reported relying on personal savings.
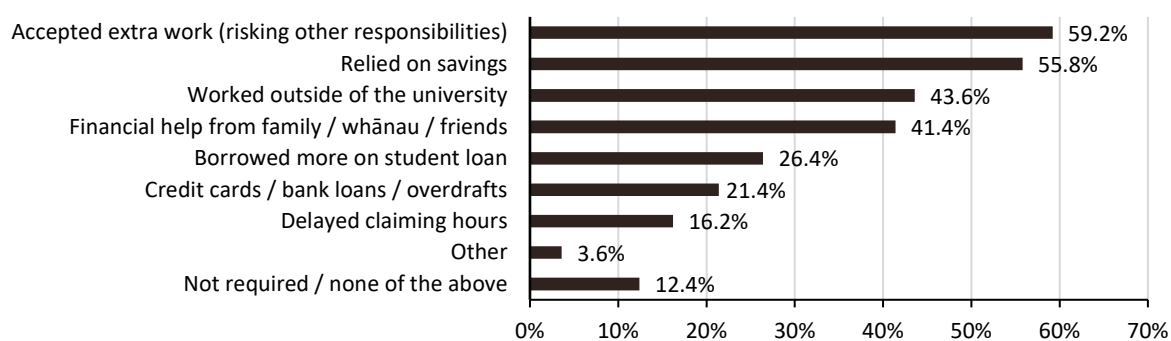
Figure 11. Strategies participants used to support themselves or their family since they first began working in casual or fixed-term appointments at a university.

Over 40% of participants worked outside of the university to supplement their income, and a similar proportion (41.4%) relied on financial assistance from whānau and friends (including having a partner in permanent employment). One-quarter (26.4%) of participants borrowed more on their student loan, and when examining this by enrolment status, 38% of currently enrolled students had used this strategy. Other (3.6%) strategies participants stated that they used in the text field included: making personal sacrifices (e.g., forgoing medical treatment, safe housing, food expenses), working under the table and/or in excess of their scholarship regulations, and relying on social welfare support (e.g., benefits, grants, superannuation).

Professional Development

Nearly half (44.9%) of all survey participants said that they had no access to any form of professional development in their role(s). Only one-quarter (26.3%) of participants had access to performance reviews, one-fifth (21.4%) had access to peer reviews or mentoring,

and one-eighth (12.5%) had access to formal role-specific upskilling (i.e., teaching certificates).
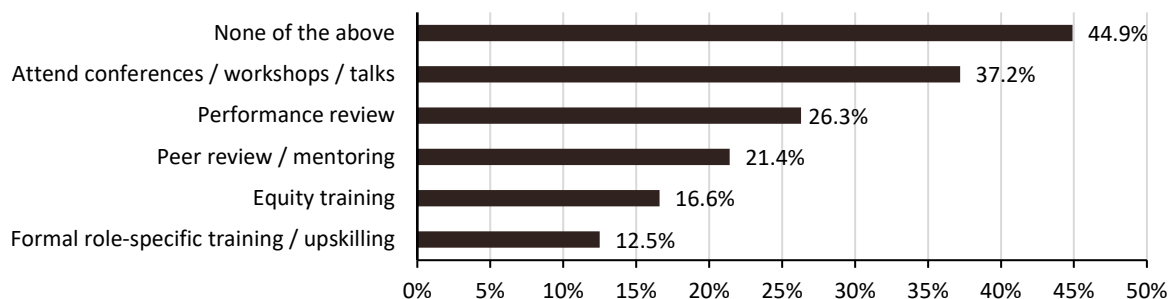
Figure 12. *Forms of professional development participants have access to as part of their casual or fixed-term role at a university.*

The observed lack of professional development available to participants was concerning, particularly given many participants reported working on successive contracts. Indeed, when examining the availability of professional development on the basis of employment duration, 39.1% of participants employed for between two and five years, and 35.5% of participants employed for five years or more did not have access to any of the listed forms of professional development.

Intention to Stay in Academia

Only 26.4% of survey participants felt it was unlikely that they would pursue a career in academia. Participants who indicated that they were *very unlikely*, *unlikely*, or *likely* (*n* = 435) were asked to state the primary reason for their response in a follow-up question to ascertain the reason(s) why they might not pursue a career in academia. Thematic coding of these responses revealed *job insecurity* (22.7%); *a lack of permanent academic job opportunities* (23.5%); and *work environment* (most often expressed as 'toxic') (22.2%), were the most frequently cited reasons as to why participants were thinking of leaving the profession.
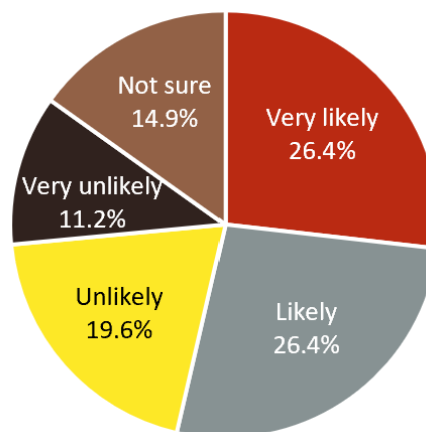
Figure 13. *Responses to the question: How likely is it that you will pursue a career in academia? (1 = Very unlikely; 4 = Very likely)*

Students

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🎓 **51.9% of participants were currently enrolled students**

🎓 **64.4% of participating PhD students held 3 or more precarious jobs in the last 12 months**

🎓 **80.3% of participating PhD students accepted extra work, even when it jeopardised their degrees, regardless of if they received a stipend or not**

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Over half (51.9%) of our participants were also currently enrolled students. Of the total sample, 27.2% were undergraduate, honours, or masters students and 24.7% were PhD students[vi].

Similar to the overall sample, it was common for students to be involved in precarious academic work for extended periods of time. While 29.4% of currently enrolled students surveyed had been precariously employed for less than a year, 33.7% had been employed for between two and five years, and 14.9% suggested five years or more. Currently enrolled students were also underrepresented in the proportion of participants who said that their work was 'always' or 'usually' accurately accounted for in their employment agreements.
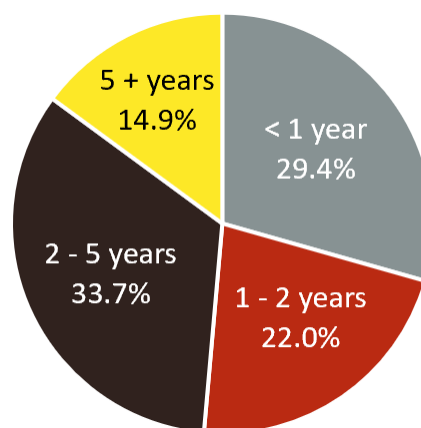
Figure 14. Total length of time currently enrolled students surveyed had been in precarious university work.

Surveyed students were predominantly engaged in support roles. Most (78%) had worked in some form of *Teaching Support* role, 46.1% had been *Research Support*, and they constituted 65.1% of the total participants employed in *Equity Support* roles. One-third of

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[vi] This figure does not include a further 4.1% of participants who were PhD students that had submitted their theses for examination or were awaiting conferment.

Primary Instructors (33%) and two-thirds (65.9%) of teaching-only staff were currently enrolled students. Currently enrolled students also faced the most job insecurity of any group in the survey. Most (81%) students suggested that their highest paying employment agreement in the last 12 months was either a casual appointment or a fixed-term appointment of less than six months. Only an eighth (12.9%) identified agreements that were between 6 months and a year, and just 6.1% had agreements lasting a year or longer.

Over half (52.7%) of currently enrolled students surveyed were multiple-agreement holders (a figure which increases to 64.4% when examining PhD students only). This finding is higher than both of the percentages of the total survey sample (47.8%) and that of non-students (43%). Further, when looking at students who held teaching-only roles, many (63.3%) said that they had at least two agreements in the last year, and 35.4% said three or more. When asked how important a range of factors were in their decisions to engage in precarious work, more students rated *financial need* as 'very important' (50.1%) than *career advancement* (44.1%) in this survey; the opposite was true among participants who were non-students.

Stipends

Participants who indicated that they were PhD students were asked if they received a scholarship with an annual stipend. Two-thirds (67%) said yes, and most (78.6%) were limited in the number of hours they could work as a condition of receiving their stipend.
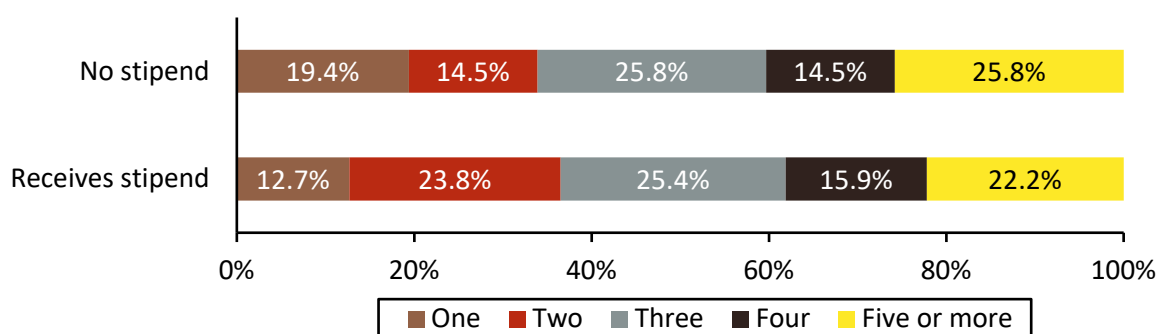
Figure 15. Number of casual and fixed-term employment agreements held by PhD students at a university in the last 12 months by stipend status.

As Figure 15 shows, the proportion of stipend holders that worked three or more agreements was comparable to that of non-stipend holders (63.5% and 66.1%, respectively). When examining differences in terms of the reasons these groups engaged in precarious work, *financial need* was 'broadly important' (i.e., participant selected 4 or 5 on the scale), to 90.3% of non-stipend holders and 83.3% of stipend holders. The majority (80.3%) of PhD students in this survey reported accepting extra work even when it risked jeopardising other responsibilities (i.e., completing their degree), regardless of whether they received a stipend. One-third (33%) of participating PhD students (36.5% of stipend holders and 25.8% of non-stipend holders) reported that they had borrowed more on their student loans to support themselves or their families. These findings suggest that even with a stipend, participants who were PhD students were still struggling financially and were consequently taking on additional precarious work at universities.

Equity

> 🎓 **77.4% of Māori and 76.9% of Pasifika participants were students**
>
> 🎓 **67.7% of deaf or disabled participants cited a casual or a fixed-term agreement of less than six months as their highest paying role in the last 12 months**
>
> 🎓 **56.7% of participating international students were not confident about having sufficient work at a university in the next 12 months**

This section addresses some of the potential inequities in employment experienced by the following key demographic categories: *ethnicity, LGBTQIA+, disability,* and *citizenship status*[vii].

Academic pathways for Māori and Pasifika scholars

There are disproportionately fewer Māori and Pasifika engaged in academia as students[34] or staff[4] than other ethnicities, and indeed recent research has described the academic pathways for these scholars as broken[16]. While it is difficult to make inferences about the demographic makeup of the precarious academic workforce nationally because this data is not collected[4], some can be made about the academic pipeline based on enrolment data[viii].

In the sample, over three-quarters of both Māori (77.4%) and Pasifika (76.9%) participants were currently enrolled students. This was higher than both the proportion of the overall sample (51.9%), and that of any other ethnic group.

[vii] Due to existing inequities resulting in the low employment rates of certain groups in academia, particularly Māori and Pasifika[4], the survey sample size was too low to determine if the reported differences were statistically significant.

[viii] To assess the validity of our data, we compared (non-prioritised) ethnicity data for PhD students in our sample with that reported nationally by Education Counts[34] and found that the percentage of Māori and Pasifika PhD students in our study was consistent with nationally reported figures.
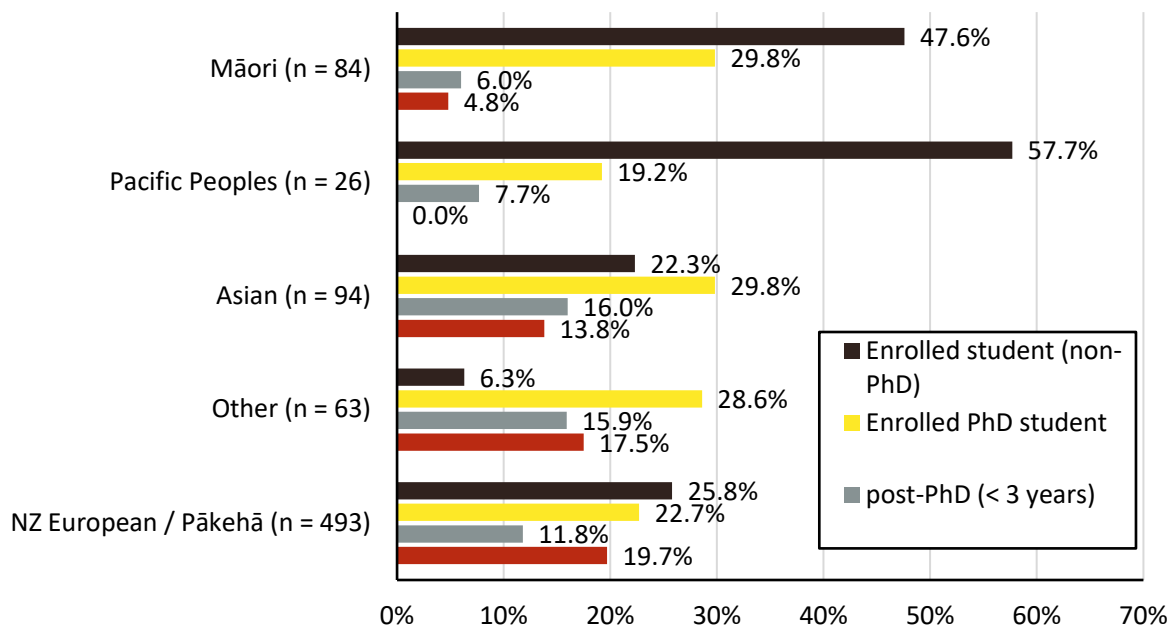
Figure 16. *Enrolment status of survey participants by ethnicity.*

Further, as Figure 16 illustrates, the majority of these students were non-PhD students (i.e., enrolled in undergraduate, honours, or masters programmes). In line with our findings on students, two-thirds of Māori (67.9%) and Pasifika (65.4%) participants selected a casual or fixed-term agreement of less than six months as their highest paying role in the last 12 months. Further, 40.5% of Māori and 34.6% of Pasifika participants were currently enrolled students *and* multiple agreement holders, compared with 25.8% of New Zealand European/Pākehā participants. One possibility is that the higher rate of precarious work among Māori and Pasifika students impacts their studies and, consequently, their pathways into PhD programs.

When looking at the early career academic landscape (i.e., post-PhD graduation), there is an observable dip in the presence of Māori and Pasifika scholars. One-tenth of Māori (10.8%) and one-thirteenth of Pasifika (7.7%) participants were PhD graduates. No Pasifika participants, and fewer than 5% of Māori (4.8%), had held a PhD for more than three years. Comparatively, for New Zealand European/Pākehā participants, there was a greater number of people who had graduated more than three years ago (19.7%) than people who had graduated less than three years ago (11.8%).

Māori and Pasifika academic pathways also lack access to professional development. Over half (53.6%) of Māori and just under half (46.2%) of Pasifika participants reported having no access to any of the forms of professional development listed in the survey. Additionally, the proportion of Māori (7.1%) and Pasifika (7.7%) participants who had access to formal role-specific training or upskilling was half that reported by New Zealand European/Pākehā (14%). These findings, when combined with those presented above on Māori and Pasifika students, might help to explain some of the reasons for the underrepresentation of Māori and Pasifika scholars in the PhD and post-PhD landscape[19–21].

Employment agreements and remuneration

Across all demographics, the proportion of staff who reported that their highest paying employment agreement in the last twelve months was a casual or fixed-term appointment of less than six months was above 55%. This included most LGBTQIA+ (71.8%) participants, and two-thirds of Māori (67.9%), Pasifika (65.4%), and deaf or disabled (67.7%) participants.

In terms of the payment of participants on the basis of ethnicity, a smaller proportion of both Pasifika (38.5%) participants said that their hours were always or usually accurately accounted for in their employment agreements than other groups (e.g., 46.4% of Māori; 47.9% of Asian; and 47.7% of New Zealand European/Pākehā). Seventy percent (70.1%) of eligible Pasifika participants (*n* = 24) reported working more hours than was listed in their agreements, and 45.8% reported having to work faster and decrease the quality of their work to accomplish their tasks. Over half (59.7%) of eligible Māori participants (*n* = 72) reported working outside of business hours, and one-fifth (20.8%) suggested they had worked on a public holiday. Over one-third (36.1%) of eligible Māori participants reported having to perform duties outside of their job description. This was higher than the percentages of eligible participants from any other ethnic group (Pasifika, *n* = 24: 20.8%; Asian, *n* = 78: 28.2%;

Other, *n* = 52: 26.9%; and New Zealand European/Pākehā, *n* = 427: 28.1%), potentially indicating evidence of a 'cultural double-shift'[ix] among Māori participants.

Precarious work and international students

Since 2010, there has been a 55.8% increase in the number of international PhD students in Aotearoa[34]. Despite the significant contribution of international students to New Zealand's economy and Tertiary Education[17], there has been little acknowledgement of their experiences in, and contributions to, the sector[36]. To offer some insight, this report compared the experiences of participants who held either a student visa or a post-study work visa with New Zealand citizens or permanent residents.

A greater proportion of participating international students (66.8%) selected the least secure agreements as their highest paid role in the past year than New Zealand citizens or permanent residents (60.5%). Specifically, 30.4% identified a casual role and 36.2% indicated a fixed term agreement of less than six months (compared with 25.5% and 35% respectively of New Zealand citizens or permanent residents). In addition, only 50% of international PhD students surveyed received a stipend, compared with 73.9% of PhD students that were New Zealand citizens or permanent residents.
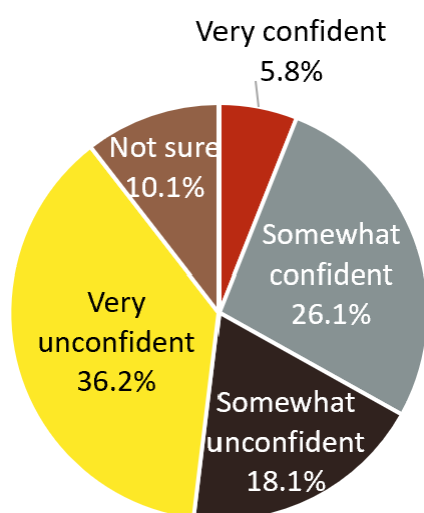
Figure 17. International students' confidence in having sufficient ongoing employment at a university in the next 12 months.

Over half (56.7%) of international students expressed a lack of confidence that they would have sufficient ongoing academic work in the next 12 months and relied on personal savings (63.8%) and accepting extra work even when it risked jeopardizing the completion of their degrees (60.9%). For those on a post-study work visa, a majority (57.9%) said that maintaining institutional access was an 'important' or 'very important' reason for accepting precarious work.

[ix] Haar and Martin[35] suggest that Māori scientists face a culturally-driven increased workload as a result of performing important cultural roles (such as consultation and engagement) on top of their jobs as scientists.

Staff Health and Wellbeing

> 🎓 **64.6% of participants rated their current stress level as a seven out of ten or higher**
>
> 🎓 **33.7% of participants had experienced discrimination, bullying, or harassment in their workplace**
>
> 🎓 **80.1% of participants affected by discrimination, bullying, or harassment in their workplace said a fear of repercussions stopped them from speaking out at least some of the time**

The survey asked participants a range of questions relating to their health and wellbeing. When asked to rate their current stress levels from 0 (no stress) to 10 (completely stressed), the mean stress rating reported by participants was 6.94, and Figure 18 demonstrates that responses skewed high. An average stress level of between 6.5 and 7.5 was reported across all demographic categories, suggesting that precarious work impacts employee stress levels irrespective of demographics.
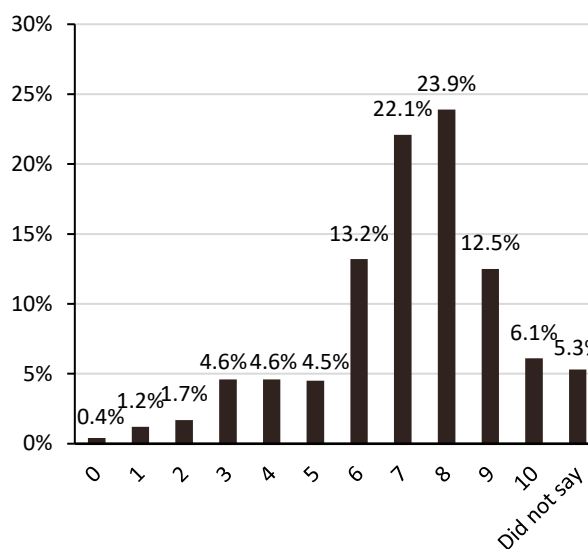
Figure 18. *Participant self-rated stress levels (0 = no stress; 10 = completely stressed).*

The stress measure in this survey was the same as that asked by the Tertiary Education Union (TEU) in their *State of the Sector* and *COVID-19* surveys. The percentage of participants who reported high to very high (8 - 10) stress levels in this survey was comparable to that of staff surveyed in May, 2021 by the TEU[37] (43% and 40%, respectively). In addition 40% of participants in this survey and 43% of staff surveyed by the TEU[37] reported moderate stress

(5 - 7). Across the surveys, many people reported moderate to high stress levels, a concerning finding given the figures reported by the TEU in May, 2021 showed an increase from stress levels in May, 2020[37].
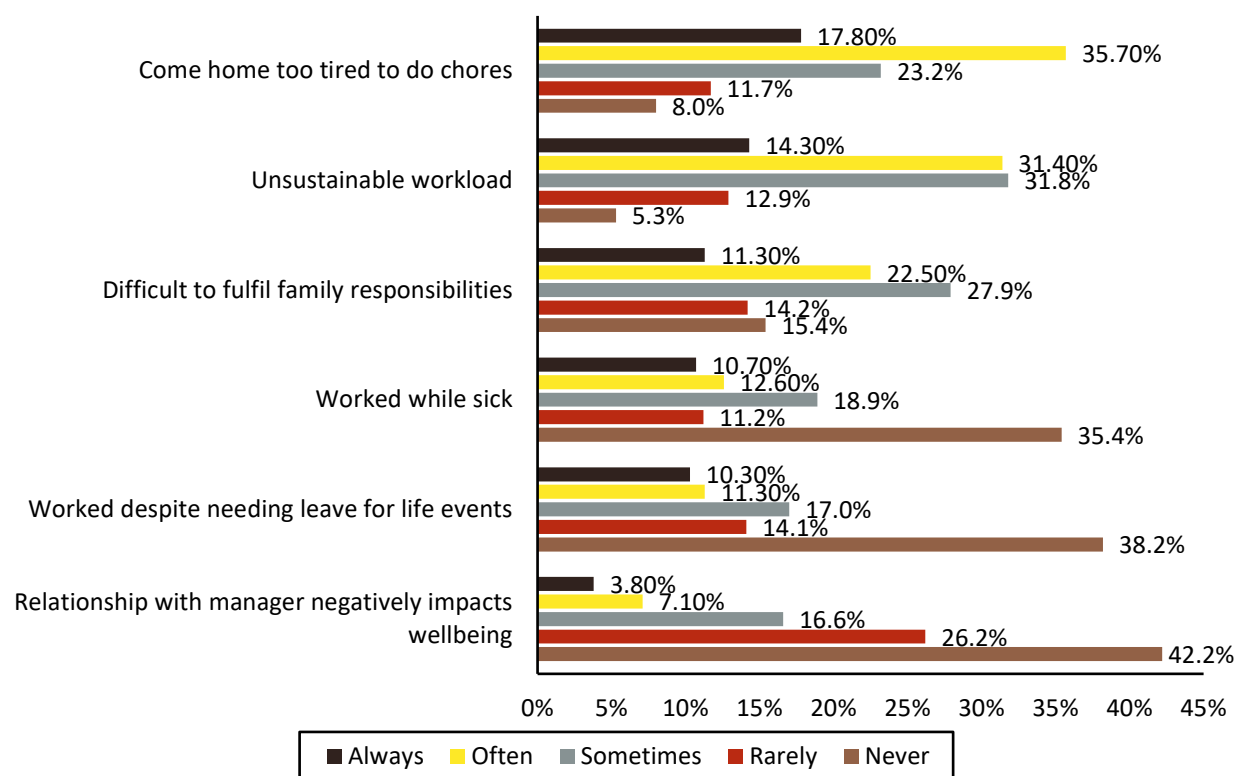
Figure 19. *Responses to the question: Since the beginning of 2021, how often have you felt or experienced the following? (1 = never; 5 = always)*

The survey also asked how often participants experienced a range of negative impacts from their work on their wellbeing, from 1 (never) to 5 (always). Figure 19 illustrates the responses to these six items. The most frequent impacts were an *unsustainable workload* (45.7% *always* or *often*), *coming home too tired to do the chores* which need to be done (53.5% *always* or *often*), and, finding it *difficult to fulfil family responsibilities* because of the amount of time spent on work (33.8% *always* or *often*). Just under one-quarter (23.3% *always* or *often*) of participants had *worked while sick* because they were not entitled to sick leave. One-fifth (21.6% *always* or *often*) had *worked despite needing time off for important life events* because of a lack of cover or leave entitlements, while one in ten (10.1% *always* or *often*) felt that their *relationship(s) with supervisors or managers* was negatively impacting health and wellbeing.

25

The two measures relating to tiredness and difficulties fulfilling family responsibilities were identical to items asked by the TEU in their *State of the Sector* survey[38]. Similar to stress levels, the proportion of precarious staff in this survey who selected *often* or *always* was similar for both tiredness (53.5%) and difficulties fulfilling family responsibilities (33.8%) to the proportion of staff surveyed by the TEU (50% and 28.7%, respectfully)[38]. This suggests that precarious work is demanding and encroaches on the lives of participants in this survey as for staff surveyed by the TEU.

Thirty percent of survey participants disclosed that they had a mental illness. These participants reported one of the highest mean stress levels (7.39) of any subgroup. Further, over half (52.6%) of these participants suggested that an *unsustainable workload often* or *always* impacted their wellbeing, which was higher than that of the total sample (45.8%) and staff who reported no mental illness (43.6%). Just under two-thirds (64.5%) indicated that they *often* or *always* came home too tired to do the chores that needed to be done. Over one-quarter (27.6%) of staff with a mental illness suggested that they had *no understanding at all* as to who to approach for support in relation to their wellbeing or mental health, higher than both the proportion of the total sample (20%) and staff who reported no mental illness (17.1%).

Figure 20. *How often participants with a mental illness felt that their workload was unsustainable since the beginning of 2021.*

Discrimination, Bullying, and Harassment

One third of survey participants (33.7%) had personally experienced discrimination, bullying, harassment, or otherwise felt unsafe in their workplace (see Table 4 in Appendix B). Women (36.3%); those over the age of 50 (46.5%); Māori (42.9%), Pasifika (50%), and 'Other' ethnicities (47.6%); people who were deaf or disabled (47.3%); and currently enrolled students (30.4%) were overrepresented in this cohort.

Two-fifths (42.3%) of Pasifika, one-quarter (26.2%) of Māori, and one-fifth of Asian (19.1%) and 'Other' ethnicities (20.6%) reported experiences of racism. In this survey, the

greatest differences between statistically expected and actual rates of experiencing racism were among Pasifika and Māori, which supports previous research that has highlighted the impact of racism in universities on Māori and Pasifika academics[39–41]. Experiences also differed by citizenship status, whereby the proportion of participants who were not New Zealand citizens or permanent residents (17.1%) that encountered racism was higher than those who were (9%).

Over one-quarter (27.5%) of gender diverse, and nearly one-fifth (18.9%) of LGBTQIA+ participants generally had experienced some form of queerphobia in the workplace. About one-quarter (24.3%) of LGBTQIA+ staff surveyed also reported experiences of sexism, and just under one-fifth (17.2%) indicated that they had experienced 'other' forms of discrimination, bullying, and harassment (compared with 16.5% and 10.9% of non-LGBTQIA+ participants, respectively) One-tenth (11.2%) of LGBTQIA+ staff surveyed identified experiences of ableism, compared with 4.9% of non-LGBTQIA+ participants.

One-third (36.3%) of participants suggested they had 'other' experiences. Most (86.1%) of the participants who had 'other' experiences used the text field to elaborate[x]. Nearly half (45%) of these entries were *professional* (e.g., work-related threats, intimidation, and denigration), and almost two-fifths (37.5%) were coded as *general bullying*. One-tenth (11.3%) of these participants indicated that they had experienced violence or sexual harassment in the workplace.

Of the 256 participants who had personally experienced discrimination, bullying, harassment, or otherwise felt unsafe in their workplace, 58.2% ($n = 149$) identified supervisors and/or senior managers as the source, and the same number identified their colleagues. Almost half (46.9%) indicated it had come from students, visiting scholars, or professional staff. More than half (53.9%) of those affected did not know where to go to seek support and assistance. Proportionally more participants who were not New Zealand citizens or permanent residents (72.5%) reported not knowing where to seek support than those who were (50%). Most (80.1%) of the participants affected indicated that the fear of repercussions

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[x] Some people used this text field to provide details about their experiences (e.g., experiencing transphobia).

(i.e., being excluded from future work) stopped them from speaking out about their experiences of discrimination, bullying, harassment, or otherwise feeling unsafe in their workplaces at least some of the time.

COVID-19

> 🎓 **52.4% of participants had increased living costs as a result of working from home**
>
> 🎓 **30.1% of participants had their employment disrupted due to COVID-19**
>
> 🎓 **66.3% of participants lacked confidence that their employer would adequately support them in the event of a future crisis**

The survey included a short section about the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on participants. Most (72.2%) survey participants reported experiencing at least one of the eight listed impacts[xi]. Over half (52.4%) reported increased living costs (i.e., internet and electricity bills), due to working from home, and 30.1% experienced some form of disruption to their employment or anticipated employment. Over one-third (37.5%) of participants who had worked as a *Primary Instructor* in the last 12 months feared that they might lose their intellectual property as a result of the transition to remote learning (e.g., the reuse of a participant's teaching materials without compensation).

One in six (16.6%) participants indicated they experienced 'other' impacts, and most (88.1%) used the text field to elaborate. In the text field, participants reported an increase in workload due to COVID-19; impacts on wellbeing (e.g., decline in mental health, increase in stress, and an increase in emotional labour); problems with conducting research (e.g., access to equipment, ability to secure future funding); and other unforeseen financial losses (e.g., having to purchase their own equipment to work from home, loss of/changes to future anticipated work, loss of external employment, or loss of an anticipated pay rise).

Participants rated how easy they thought it would be for them to work from home in the event of a future crisis from 1 (very easy) to 5 (impossible). Over one-third (35.1%) of

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[xi] For a fuller picture of these responses, see Table 5 in Appendix B.

participants said that they would experience at least some difficulty in working remotely in the future. One in six (16.8%) said it would be *very difficult* or *impossible*.

Lastly, participants rated their confidence in receiving adequate support from their employer in the event of a future crisis from 1 (not confident at all) to 4 (completely confident). Two-thirds (66.3%) of participants said that they had either *no confidence at all* (28.3%) or *limited confidence* (38%). Only 3.8% of participants were *completely confident*.

Our Recommendations
Eight things universities should do now

1 Almost two-thirds of survey participants had been precariously employed two years or more. **Increase job security.** Many precariously employed academics repeatedly work at the same institution, year after year. Increase their job security by migrating casually employed people to fixed-term agreements and fixed-term employees to permanent.

2 Over one-third of survey participants were expected to begin working before receiving their employment agreements, and two-fifths experienced delays in their employment agreements being processed. **Facilitate robust recruitment.** Invest in people and systems to streamline and enhance recruitment processes ensuring that precarious workers receive their offers of employment before commencing work and are paid on time.

3 Almost three-quarters of precarious primary instructors reported working more hours than they were paid for.
Match the FTE. Precarious workers teaching for permanently employed staff should be paid equivalent to the FTE salary of a Teaching Fellow (including preparation time), not on an hourly-paid agreement.

4 Over one-third of Māori participants were required to perform duties outside of their job description. **End the cultural double-shift.** Acknowledge the cultural roles and responsibilities taken up by precariously employed Māori staff. Create specific cultural advisor roles that are resourced to assist with these tasks.

Eight things universities should do now

5 International students are more likely to be employed on the least secure agreement types as their highest paying role. Post study they are also more likely to take on precarious work to maintain their university affiliation. **Support international students during and after study.** International students deserve fair accreditation for overseas study and experience, giving them equal access to employment opportunities on arrival. Universities should also offer basic access to services such as the library over a post-study period and the ability to conduct research.

6 Around half of Māori and Pasifika participants reported having no access to any forms of professional development listed in the survey. **Support and retain Māori and Pasifika early career academics.** Address the broken pipeline by identifying those who wish to establish a career in academia early and supporting their progression into permanent work.

7 Around two-thirds of PhD students (irrespective of stipend status) worked three or more employment agreements in the last 12 months. **Increase stipends.** Reduce the pressure on PhD students to take on extra work to the detriment of their studies in order to survive by lifting stipends to at least minimum wage.

8 At present, precarious staff are not distinguished from permanent staff in officially reported statistics. **Collect and report the data.** Universities need to centrally report the total number of casual and fixed-term staff they employ by headcount and as a proportion of FTE.
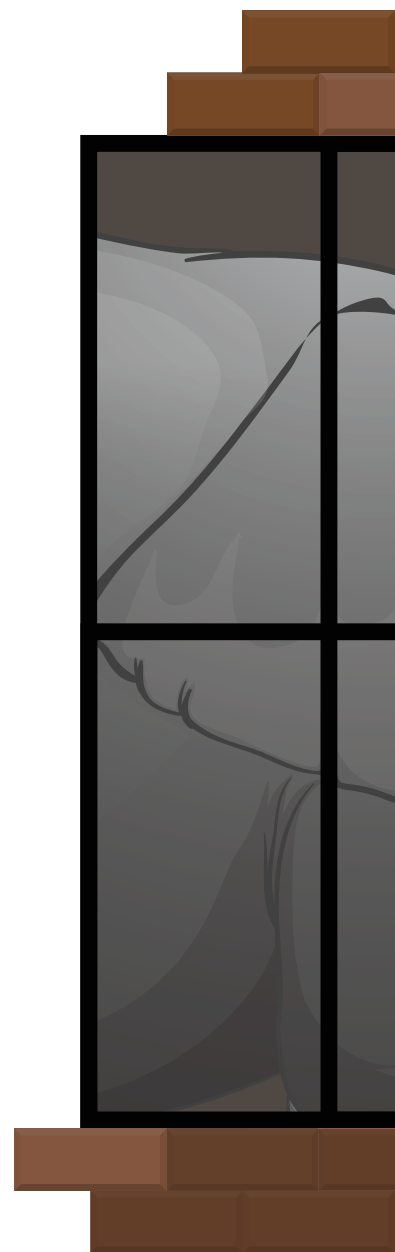
Eight priorities for a responsive government

1 Almost half of participants suggested that an unsustainable workload often or always negatively impacted their health and wellbeing. **Investigate workloads.** The workloads of precarious academic staff encroach significantly on their lives. The extent of this sector-wide problem of overworking needs to be independently and transparently investigated.

2 Half of students said that financial need was a very important factor as to why they engaged in precarious work. **Reinstate the postgraduate student allowance.** All postgraduate students should have access to a universal student allowance for the durations of their studies.

3 Most participants who experienced discrimination, bullying, harassment, in their workplaces indicated that a fear of repercussions stopped them from speaking out at least some of the time. **Establish an independent conduct board.** Academic staff should be registered through an independent body, who can investigate and mediate matters of bullying, harassment, or workplace professionalism.

4 Māori and Pasifika were underrepresented in the post-PhD landscape and are still underrepresented among permanent staff in a variety of disciplines. **Tackle structural racism in universities.** Take seriously the long-term and growing evidence of embedded racism through a properly resourced investigation.

Eight priorities for a responsive government

5 Over a quarter of participants borrowed more on their student loans, on top of working precariously. **Create pathways out of student debt.** The student loan system has further indebted the precarious academic workforce. Highly skilled graduates remaining in Aotearoa should be entitled to greater debt relief post-study.

6 Over one-third of staff worked despite being sick because they were not entitled to sick leave at least some of the time. **Enhance protections for precarious staff.** Legislate to ensure that all staff have equal access to various forms of leave, including sick leave and support mechanisms for mental health and wellbeing.

7 As a result of the pandemic, more than half of participants experienced increased living costs, and over a third experienced disruptions to their employment. **Tailor a plan for precarious academic workers facing hardship.** The absence of a wage subsidy during the pandemic coupled with university cost-cutting measures left many precarious academic workers unable to support themselves. A future government response should be immediate and not one that burdens the students and early career researchers with further debt.

8 The various findings in this report underline how business-orientated universities have diminished the welfare, prospects, and status of postgraduates and early-career researchers. **Return to Public Institutions.** Precarious academic work is siloed and itemised, creating distance between precarious workers and the university ecosystem, and keeping them vulnerable. Legislate to minimise the use of casual employment agreements in universities, providing greater protections to the financial wellbeing of these academics.

Conclusion

Precarious work has become normalised in universities across Aotearoa[1]. Although it is not the only reason, the increasing pressure for universities to operate like private businesses has significantly contributed to normalising this behaviour[2,3,25]. Within a business model, precarious workers are a source of cheap and expendable labour that universities can utilise to reduce operating costs[2,3]. For those navigating postgraduate study, doctoral programs, and the early-career work environment, this precarity often equates to years of financial insecurity[12,13]. For some people, these constraints force them to abandon their academic careers in order to sustain themselves and their families[42]. While the COVID-19 pandemic has undoubtedly contributed to the pressure precarious workers experience, the length of time many people have spent precariously employed in academia indicates the COVID-19 pandemic has only exacerbated existing problems within the sector[23,43].

This report represents one of the first meaningful attempts to itemise the pressures faced by precarious workers in universities. The findings highlight what appears to be the routine underpayment of these workers, evident in their need to accept additional work that jeopardises their own studies, and the overall reliance on friends, whānau, and personal savings. These findings lead to obvious questions regarding equity, particularly for already marginalised groups. While there was some evidence in our report that precariously employed Māori or Pasifika workers faced acute disadvantages and might be less likely to pursue an academic career, of equal concern is their comparative absence in the post-PhD landscape. As a sector that reportedly centres equity, tertiary education must do more to address the failure to convert a higher number of Māori or Pasifika students from undergraduate to postgraduate study and thence into the academic workforce.

The recommendations are a challenge to do better. We appeal to both universities and the government to consider not just less exploitative employment arrangements, but the downstream consequences of academic precarity for our communities. Universities are essential for building a cohesive society[44]. Consequently, we must consider how market-driven funding arrangements have made our universities seem less like public institutions[2,25].

To uphold the public model, many of our recommendations were low cost or cost-neutral, especially in comparison with recent announcements on new capital expenditure. However, it is the New Zealand Government who must play a central role in safeguarding against precarious academic work if we are to truly minimise the potential for exploitation. As our report highlights, the current system encourages precarity that is both unfair and unsustainable. There is much to be gained by doing things differently.

Appendix A - Method

Recruitment

Participants were recruited via advertisements shared on social media (Facebook and Twitter) and non-institutional mailing lists (e.g. union and advocacy networks). Participants who were over the age of 18 and had been employed by any of the eight universities in Aotearoa in the last 12 months were eligible. The survey was open for four weeks from September 2021 to October 2021.

Design and Materials

The survey asked a variety of open and closed ended questions relating to precarious academic work. We also added three open-ended questions about what universities, governments, and unions / advocacy groups could do to improve equality, autonomy and respect. Broadly, we asked participants about their demographics; employment agreements; employment and workplace conditions; views on academia; health and wellbeing; and the impact of COVID-19. After the main survey was submitted, we asked participants to indicate which universities they had worked for in the last 12 months. These answers were collected separately and were not linked to their main survey responses. This was done to protect the anonymity of staff and to ensure sector-wide sampling.

In designing the questions in the main survey instrument, we drew questions from the TEU's annual *State of the Sector* member survey[38] and used standardised demographic categories developed by Statistics New Zealand for comparison. The remainder of the questions were purposefully developed for the survey by researchers in collaboration with acknowledged stakeholders. The survey was conducted using the anonymous online platform Qualtrics.

Data Analysis

We analysed the data in IBM SPSS Statistics v. 27. First, we removed participants who did not progress through the entire survey (n = 51). In this report we include descriptive statistics and used the chi squared test (χ^2) to examine relationships between demographic

characteristics and responses to survey questions. In addition, we used one-way ANOVA and t-tests to examine the association between demographic variables and stress ratings.

Ethnicity

Participants could select multiple ethnicities, but we used a prioritisation system to select one ethnicity for the purpose of analysis[45]. The table below details the proportion of participants by prioritised and actual reported ethnicity.

Ethnicity of Participants

Ethnicity	Prioritised		Actual	
	n	%	n	%
Māori	84	11.1	84	11.1
Pacific Peoples	26	3.4	30	3.9
Asian	94	12.4	95	12.5
Middle Eastern/Latin American/African	17	2.2	17	2.2
Other	46	6.1	49	6.4
New Zealand European/Pākehā	493	64.9	584	76.8

For the chi-squared tests, we further simplified the ethnicity variable by combining Middle Eastern/Latin American/African and the other category due to the Middle Eastern/Latin American/African group's small size.

Age

Participants could select from five age categories, but few participants were aged 20 years and under or 65+ (see Table 1). For the chi-squared tests, we simplified the age variable into three categories: people under 35 years, people aged between 35-49, and people aged above 50.

Academic Status

There were six different options for academic status (see Table 2). As highlighted in previous research, there is evidence that a significant amount of precarious academic work is taken up by enrolled students and PhD students[7,16]. Thus, for the chi-squared tests, we simplified academic status to a dichotomous variable: currently studying (e.g., participants who indicated that they were currently enrolled in undergraduate, honours, masters or PhD

degrees) versus not currently studying (e.g., participants who indicated that they were not currently enrolled, or who had otherwise completed their PhD degrees).

Citizenship Status

There were numerous options for citizenship status, and for the chi-squared tests, we simplified citizenship to a dichotomous variable: New Zealand citizen or permanent resident versus non-New Zealand citizen or permanent resident.

Coding Text Responses

Textbox responses were anonymised (e.g. roles, institutions, fields of study and other identifying information).'Other' textboxes were duplicated so that they could be (re)coded for quantitative analysis, and thematically analysed separately. Open text boxes were thematically coded (full analysis of open-ended questions is beyond the scope of this report given the volume of data).

Appendix B - Tables

Table 1 *Descriptive Statistics for Participants in the Sample (N = 760)*

Variable	n	%
Age		
Under 20	16	2.1
21-34	458	60.3
35-49	205	27.0
50-64	62	8.2
65+	9	1.2
Gender		
Male	187	24.6
Female	523	68.8
Gender diverse	40	5.3
Ethnicity		
Māori	84	11.1
Pacific Peoples	26	3.4
Asian	94	12.4
Middle Eastern/Latin American/African	17	2.2
Other	46	6.1
New Zealand European/Pākehā	493	64.9
LGBTQIA+	206	27.1
Citizenship		
New Zealand Citizen or Permanent Resident	646	85.0
Resident Visa	31	4.1
Post-Study Work Visa	20	2.6
Student Visa	49	6.4
Other	5	0.7
Diagnosed mental illness	228	30.0
Deaf or disabled	93	12.2
Housing situation		
Own home	234	30.8
Renting alone or with partner/children	181	23.8
Share house/flatting	236	31.1
Hotel/hostel/student accommodation/boarding house	13	1.7
With parents or other family	88	11.6
Household income		
No income	3	0.4
$38,000 or less	249	32.8
$38,001-$67,000	136	17.9
$67,001-$102,000	143	18.8
$102,001-$149,000	115	15.1

Table 1 *Descriptive Statistics for Participants in the Sample (N = 760) cont.*		
Household income *cont*.		
$149,001-$196,000	55	7.2
$196,001 and over	38	5.0
Union member	320	42.1

Note. Percentages do not add to 100% because some participants chose not to answer some questions. [a]Participants could select multiple responses to this question.

Table 2 *Descriptive Statistics for Participants in the Sample Continued (N = 760)*

Variable	n	%
Field of study [ab]		
Natural and Physical Sciences	160	21.1
Information Technology	34	4.5
Engineering and Related Technologies	39	5.1
Architecture and Building	6	0.8
Agriculture, Environmental and Related Studies	39	5.1
Health	199	26.2
Education	81	10.7
Management and Commerce	32	4.2
Society and Culture	312	41.1
Creative Arts	58	7.6
Other	87	11.4
Academic status		
Undergraduate/Honours/Masters	207	27.2
PhD Candidate	188	24.7
Awarded PhD in the last 3 years	90	11.8
Awarded PhD 3+ years ago	125	16.4
Not currently enrolled nor completed a PhD	110	14.5
Submitted PhD or awaiting conferment	31	4.1
Scholarship with annual stipend	126	16.6
Number of years employed on casual and/or fixed-term employment agreements at universities		
Less than 1 year	148	19.5
1-2 years	128	16.8
2-5 years	258	33.9
More than 5 years	220	28.9
Number of employment agreements in the last 12 months		
One	230	30.3
Two	160	21.1
Three	160	21.1
Four	92	12.1
Five or more	111	14.6
Roles in the last 12 months [a]		
Teaching Support	464	61.1
Primary Instructor	176	23.2
Research Support	333	43.8
Researcher	154	20.3
Equity Support	63	8.3
Other university role	129	17.0
Not currently employed	42	5.5
Highest paying employment agreement in the last 12 months		
Casual appointment	190	25.0
Short-term fixed-term	262	34.5
Medium-term fixed-term	133	17.5
Long-term fixed-term	167	22.0

Note. Percentages do not add to 100% because some participants chose not to answer some questions. [a]Participants could select multiple responses to this question. [b]Fields of Study definitions are available from the New Zealand Standard Classification of Education.

Table 3 *Responses to Questions about Employment Agreements and Remuneration*

Question	n	%
Do you have access to any of the following forms of professional development? [a]		
Performance review	200	26.3
Peer review/mentoring	163	21.4
Formal role-specific upskilling	95	12.5
Opportunities to attend and/or present at conferences/workshops/talks	283	37.2
Equity training	126	16.6
None of the above	341	44.9
In the last 12 months, do you feel that your employment agreement(s) accurately accounted for the hours you worked?		
Always	86	11.3
Usually	260	34.2
Occasionally	211	27.8
Never	182	23.9
Don't know	14	1.8
How was your work not accurately accounted for? [a]		
Worked more than the hours listed in employment agreement	396	52.1
Worked on a public holiday	90	11.8
Worked outside business hours	303	39.9
Worked faster and sacrifice quality	231	30.4
Performed tasks unrelated to job description	183	24.1
Instructed to fill in timesheet incorrectly	74	9.7
Other	118	15.5
How confident are you that you will have sufficient ongoing work at a university in the next 12 months?		
Very confident	88	11.6
Somewhat confident	191	25.1
Somewhat unconfident	174	22.9
Very unconfident	226	29.7
Not sure	67	8.8
What strategies have you used to ensure you are able to support yourself or your family? [a]		
Delayed claiming hours to cover future short-falls	122	16.1
Accepted extra work even when it risks jeopardising my other responsibilities	450	59.2
Relied on financial assistance from family/whānau/friends	311	40.9
Relied on credit cards, overdrafts or bank loans	163	21.4
Relied on savings	424	55.8
Worked outside the university to supplement income	330	43.4
Borrowed more on student loan	201	26.4

Table 3 *Responses to Questions about Employment Agreements and Remuneration cont*.

What strategies have you used to ensure you are able to support yourself or your family? *cont*.		
Other	42	5.5
Not required/none of the above	94	12.4

Note. Percentages do not add to 100% because some participants chose not to answer some questions. [a]Participants could select multiple responses to this question.

Table 4 *Table Showing Responses to Questions Related to Discrimination, Bullying, and Harassment, by Participants Who Indicated They Had Personally Experienced Discrimination, Bullying, Harassment, or Otherwise Felt Unsafe in Their Workplace (n = 256).*

Question	n	%[b]
On what basis did you experience discrimination, bullying, harassment, or otherwise feel unsafe in your workplace? [a]		
Racism	76	29.7
Sexism	139	52.3
Ableism	51	19.9
Queerphobia	41	16.0
Ageism	76	29.7
Other	93	36.3
By whom were you discriminated against, bullied, harassed, or made to feel unsafe? [a]		
Colleagues	149	58.2
Supervisors or senior managers	149	58.2
Students, visiting scholars, or professional staff	120	46.9
Do you know where to go to seek support and assistance for discrimination, bullying, harassment, or if you have felt unsafe in your workplace?	118	46.1

Note. Percentages do not add to 100% because some participants chose not to answer some questions.

[a] Participants could select multiple responses to this question.

[b] Percentage out of the 256 participants had personally experienced discrimination, bullying, harassment, or otherwise felt unsafe in their workplace.

Table 5 *Responses to Question About Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic*

Question	n	%
Have you experienced any of the following due to the COVID-19 pandemic?[a]		
Lost income due to the cancellation of the employment agreement(s) that I had begun work on	56	7.4
Lost income due to the cancellation of employment agreement(s) that I was yet to begin	68	8.9
Lost income due to having my agreed upon hours reduced	117	15.4
Lost anticipated overseas employment (e.g., foreign employment agreement was terminated)	35	4.6
Experienced a deferral in my employment to a casual or fixed-term role (my start date was delayed)	56	7.4
Experienced increased living costs due to working from home (e.g., increased internet/electricity bills)	398	52.4
Fear that the shift to online learning has meant that my university employer can now access and make use of my intellectual property	140	18.4
Other	126	16.6
None of the above	189	24.9

Note. Percentages do not add to 100% because some participants chose not to answer some questions. [a] Participants could select multiple responses to this question.

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