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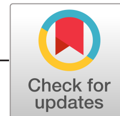

FEMINIST FRONTIERS

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Caring during COVID-19: A gendered analysis of Australian university responses to managing remote working and caring responsibilities

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COVID-19 is dramatically reconfiguring paid work and care. Emerging evidence in the global media suggests that academic women with caring responsibilities are being disproportionately impacted. This article fills a key knowledge gap by examining how Australian universities are supporting academics to manage remote work and caring during the COVID-19 pandemic. We conducted a desktop analysis of public information about remote working and care from 41 Australian universities and compared them to the world's top ten ranked universities. Findings suggest that during the pandemic, the Australian higher education sector positions decisions about caring leave and participation in the paid labour force as 'private' matters in which employees (mainly women) design their own 'solutions' when compared with international institutional counterparts. We argue that COVID-19 provides another context in which universities have evaded their responsibility to ensure women's full participation in the labour force.

KEYWORDS
care, COVID-19, higher education, neoliberalism, pandemic

1 | INTRODUCTION

In April 2020, Alessandra Minello, an Italian social demographer and mother of a toddler, attracted global attention with her essay entitled, 'The Pandemic and the Female Academic' (Minello, 2020). Minello documents the additional physical and emotional labour required to be productive as an academic mother working from home during the COVID-19 crisis: '… [w]hen I record lessons for my students to watch online, minimizing background noise is a must … night and dawn — when [my son] is asleep — are my only options for recording'. As she observes, working from

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home means that she has '… less time for writing scientific articles' as her focus is to merely 'make it through daily life' (Minello, 2020).

Trying to make it through daily life during COVID-19 is a narrative echoed by many women in academia. For instance, Kitchener (2020) highlights the story of US sociologist Whitney Pirtle who is up for tenure in 2020 but has been granted a one-year extension to finish her book whilst caring for her child at home in order to increase her chances of tenure success. Pirtle acknowledges that delaying her tenure confirmation because of COVID-19 is high risk because it could lead to her losing her job or having to find another job in an economic recession. Much like the 'baby penalty' that haunts women at every stage of their academic careers (Mason, Wolfinger, & Goulden, 2013), Pirtle's story illustrates that the 'short-term reorganisation of care and work time' during COVID-19 can have long-term effects on women's academic careers (Minello, 2020).

Indeed, during the pandemic, it appears that men are 'aiming for the stars' (Minello, 2020) while women's publication track records are suffering. Anecdotal evidence suggests that women are submitting fewer papers to peer-reviewed journals compared to men (Kitchener, 2020). In the field of astrophysics, some editors estimate a 50 per cent drop in submissions from women (Kitchener, 2020). In comparison, men's submissions to a politics journal increased by more than 50 per cent (Kitchener, 2020). These trends are also reflected in the number of publications being uploaded to pre-print servers for Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics and Medicine (STEMM) disciplines. According to Frederickson (2020), submissions from male authors between March and April 2020 increased by 6.4 per cent on *arXiv* whereas submissions from women increased by only 2.7 per cent compared to the same period last year. In a seemingly extraordinary academic feat, one male management professor wrote and published a book about the economics of the pandemic in a total of 19 days (Gans, 2020a). Professor Joshua Gans (2020b) notes the presence of teenage and college-age children in his home at the time of writing his book but the only mention of exhaustion in his narrative is that he had to occasionally 'retire to the couch' from thinking too much.

Even at the best of times, women with caring responsibilities rarely have the luxury of being overwhelmed with their own thoughts. For many decades, feminist scholars have drawn attention to the differences in time that women and men spend on domestic tasks such as housework and care (Craig & Mullan, 2009), particularly in countries where the 'male breadwinner' model ideologically predominates (Crompton, Lewis, & Lyonette, 2007; Pocock, 2003). While, the gender gap in both paid and unpaid work is narrowing slowly over time in Australia as in other parts of the industrialized world, women are still responsible for the majority of all unpaid and care work even when they earn more (Craig & Sawrikar, 2009). Caring is not just limited to children, it includes caring for the disabled, those with long-term health problems or elderly family members. In Australia alone, 2.7 million people contribute $60 billion to the economy through unpaid caring work (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016). Yet childcare, in particular, remains the main barrier to Australian women's labour force participation (Pocock, 2003). The lack of adequate social policy supports like free universal childcare combined with short school days means that Australian women are constantly juggling paid work and caring responsibilities. The global pandemic has magnified the effects of this as schools have closed and sources of formal and informal care became unavailable due to social distancing and shelter-in-place measures. The pandemic has thus demanded that families make decisions about how they manage unpaid caring labour (Price, 2020). Unsurprisingly, this extra domestic labour is falling to women, exacerbating existing gender inequality.

As sociologists, we recognize that the gendered inequalities associated with caring and paid work are collective and structural, yet public discourse on this issue in academia has mainly focused on how women are individually managing the challenges raised by COVID-19 (e.g., Kitchener, 2020; Minello, 2020). This is a neoliberal framing of the issue which ultimately responsibilizes academic women with their own career success. While we acknowledge that men in academia do face pressures of combining care with paid work, we have not yet seen comparable media stories focused on fathers, for example. In general, there has been little public discussion in Australia or elsewhere of how universities are supporting academics to manage caring responsibilities whilst working from home.

This observation serves as the context and impetus for the present study. In the forthcoming sections, we review the relevant literature and discuss the findings of a desktop analysis of the first wave of responses to remote working and caring responsibilities from 41 Australian universities. In doing so, we highlight the different approaches taken in Australia compared to the world's top ten universities (in the United Kingdom and the United States). We argue that COVID-19 provides another context in which universities have evaded their responsibility to ensure women's full participation in the labour force via the introduction of 'family-friendly' flexible working policies which put the onus on families to make choices about how to do paid work and care for children.

2 | BACKGROUND

2.1 | Neoliberalism and academia

Neoliberalism has been routinely referred to as 'shorthand for an array of complex economic, political, and cultural dynamics' shaping social institutions in the contemporary west (Grzanka, Mann, & Elliott, 2016, p. 300). While most theorists situate neoliberalism as a political theory based on free market economics (e.g., Harvey, 2005), others argue that neoliberalism has broader social implications (e.g., Chen, 2013). Under neoliberalism, individuals are positioned as self-governing citizens responsible for their own choices, while state responsibility for social provision is withdrawn and privatized (see Hale, 2005; Rose, 1999). Accordingly, neoliberalism favours privatization of state-owned enterprises and reduction of government regulation to prioritize individual freedom and choice (Chen, 2013, p. 441). In this article, we define neoliberalism as the constellation of practices by which the state influences and evaluates individual behaviours through self-discipline and surveillance (Grzanka et al., 2016, p. 298).

In the contemporary neoliberal context, organizations and professions are broadly constructed as logical and rational (Morley, 2013). However, feminist scholars assert that organizations are gendered despite their gender-neutral façade (Kelan, 2009). Neoliberal organizations are also constructed as neutral in terms of class, race, sexuality and (dis)ability. Neoliberal ideologies of individualism and meritocracy naturalize inequality by denying structural privilege or disadvantage based on social identity (Rottenberg, 2014). Acker's (2006, p. 443) concept of 'inequality regimes' or the 'loosely interrelated practices, processes, actions, and meanings that result in and maintain class, gender, and racial inequalities within particular organizations' is especially pertinent. Yet the inequality regimes which advantage particular groups of workers — those that are straight, white, middle class, able-bodied and male (for exceptions, see Acker, 2006) — and disadvantage others are obscured (Kelan, 2009; Morley, 2013). All individuals, regardless of gender, class, race, sexuality or ability, are positioned as having equal opportunity to succeed (Blackmore, 2006). Within this framework, gendered (and other) inequalities are invisible and legitimated (Acker, 2006), or 'unspeakable' (Gill, 2014; Reilly, Jones, Vasquez, & Krisjanous, 2016), rendering inequality more difficult to articulate and address (Kelan, 2009; Sullivan & Delaney, 2016).

The effects of neoliberalism are wide ranging in academic research cultures where the 'ideal' worker is an unencumbered man whose private life does not impinge on his availability and commitment to the organization (Acker, 2006; Pullen, Rhodes, & Thanem, 2017). A primary concern for feminist scholars is that academic research cultures are constructed as meritocratic and employees are promised that 'talent, hard work and commitment will be identified and rewarded' (Morley, 2014, p. 124). This may produce affective attachments in academic research for women, in particular, that may be experienced as cruelly optimistic. Berlant (2011, p. 24) defines 'cruel optimism' as a 'relation of attachment to compromised conditions of possibility whose realization is discovered either to be impossible, sheer fantasy, or too possible and toxic'. Thus, women in academia are positioned as having equal opportunity to succeed within gendered inequality regimes, the existence of which is denied. As a result, women are globally underrepresented in senior academic leadership and more inclined to leak out of the academic pipeline and quit the profession, especially in male-dominated fields like STEMM (see Nash & Moore, 2019).

Feminist scholars have also argued that 'female academics are disproportionately affected by … masculinist care-free norms of geographic mobility and the 24/7 availability of the "idea academic"' (Ivancheva, Lynch, & Keating, 2019, pp. 449–450). In other words, even though women remain the primary caregivers, they are continually judged in 'modalities of academic masculinity' in which research success is premised on a strong career drive and the prioritization of organizational commitments over relational ties to children, parents and other family members (Ivancheva et al., 2019, p. 450; see also O'Connor, O'Hagan, & Brannen, 2015). We argue that this brand of 'careerist masculinity' has become more visible during the pandemic when Australian universities instructed staff to work remotely (O'Connor et al., 2015). As feminist philosopher Fiona Jenkins (2020) argues, Australian universities '… [requisitioned] the home as a condition of continuing to work, and they have taken away the office as part of what was previously offered to enable people to work'. Thus, this move implicitly privileges the entrepreneurial [male] academic worker as 'home' is imagined in particular [gender-neutral] ways by neoliberal employers and governments — as a 'costless resources' and 'frictionless site of interpersonal relations' (Jenkins, 2020) where caring for children and other family members is invisible.

2.2 | Australian higher education and flexible work

Higher education is a major Australian industry with revenues approaching $37.9 billion in 2017 (Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency, 2018). Australia currently has 43 institutions of higher education including 40 full universities, one specialist university and two overseas universities (Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency, 2018). However, universities are in the minority — in addition, there are 170 higher education providers such as colleges, institutes and schools that offer higher education qualifications. The distinguishing feature of universities compared to the rest of the sector is the fact that universities are mostly public institutions which prioritize teaching and research (Collyer, 2013). Eight of Australia's leading research-intensive universities are in a coalition called 'The Group of Eight' (Go8) (for a listing, see Group of Eight Australia, 2020). These universities are highly ranked internationally and receive the bulk (73 per cent) of Australian competitive research funding (Go8 Australia, 2020). This grouping is similar to the Ivy League in the United States and the Russell Group in the UK.

The varied effects of neoliberal economics and political ideologies on Australian universities is exemplified in the gradual marketization and privatization of higher education (Raciti, 2010, p. 34). According to Dever (2004), under neoliberalism, Australian universities have replaced the value of education as a public investment in wider social good with individualized notions of graduate marketability. Similarly, increasing intervention from the Commonwealth Government and the push for economic rationality has encouraged corporatized university systems that are oriented toward international competitiveness and the production of 'large numbers of job-ready graduates cheaply in minimum time to serve the needs of industry' (Thornton, 2014, p. 1). Universities derive about 40 per cent of revenue from the Commonwealth Government — however, the government is providing a decreasing share of revenue than in the past (Norton, Cherastidtham, & Mackey, 2018). Therefore, universities are forced to look to external/private sources to fill their funding gaps. For example, profits from international student fees fund a substantial portion of research costs and are now the largest driver of growth in the sector (Norton et al., 2018).

Contemporary references to the 'higher education sector' reflect this 'focus on tertiary education as a marketable commodity and a decline in the public resourcing of research' (Collyer, 2013, p. 247). Given this context, in Australia, the neoliberalization of higher education has meant that for academic staff '… precariousness rather than security is one of the defining experiences of academic life — particularly, but not exclusively, for younger or "early career" staff …' (Gill, 2014, p. 18). For instance, it is estimated that 80 per cent of undergraduate courses at Australian universities are taught by casually employed academics (Klopper & Power, 2014, p. 102). Australian higher education is also highly feminized with almost 59 per cent of the workforce comprising women (Workplace Gender Equality Agency (WGEA), 2020). The feminization of the Australian higher education sector means that there is a

growing institutional recognition of the need for supports and strategies to advance institutional gender equality. For example, 83 per cent of all higher education employers have a gender equality policy or strategy compared with 75 per cent of all Australian industries (WGEA, 2020).

In 2010, the right to request flexible work (e.g., change to hours, location or patterns of work) was embedded as one of the ten National Employment Standards of the Australian Fair Work Act, 2009 (see FairWork Ombudsman, 2020). Flexible working arrangements were originally designed to enable workers (especially women) to remain attached to the labour market. Ninety per cent of all Australian higher education employers offer flexible working arrangements compared to 72 per cent of all industries (WGEA, 2020). This is, in part, due to the fact that knowledge work is more amenable to flexible and remote work. However, while there are minimum standards and procedures for flexible work to which all employers must adhere, universities can decide whether to grant additional benefits to employees through an individual bargaining process between the university and the bargaining units representing employees.

However, the higher education sector is relatively uneven in terms of the generosity of its work–life balance policies. Research from the UK shows that universities with more generous parental leave provisions, for instance, tend to have more women in higher academic positions (e.g., at Professor level) and of childbearing age (Epifanio & Troeger, 2018). Similarly, research intensity is another factor that may determine how well universities accommodate employee caring responsibilities — research-intensive universities want to recruit and retain high calibre (women) researchers with generous work–life balance policies (Epifanio & Troeger, 2018). Highly ranked universities also constantly benchmark their policies against 'peer' institutions (e.g., the Go8 in Australia or the Russell Group in the UK) and therefore, tend to offer more in order to uphold the shared values of the group and remain internationally competitive (Epifanio & Troeger, 2018).

Feminist scholars argue that 'flexible work' is a neoliberal strategy to deflect attention away from the federal government in solving the unpaid care impasse (e.g., Gill, 2014). In order to access flexible work, most Australian universities direct employees to first go to a line manager to individually negotiate flexible working arrangements. Here, the emphasis is on free individual 'choice' and is positioned as a gender-neutral strategy whereby working flexibly to accommodate caring arrangements is akin to wanting more time for leisure activities like travel or sport (Todd & Binns, 2013). As Todd and Binns (2013) observe, this is problematic because:

… It disguises the reality that a request to reorganize work time due to care commitments is often not a matter of individual choice in the same way that a similar request to participate in sporting activities may be. The notion of individual choice in WLB [work–life balance] may well be applicable to many activities but if it is applied to care then it absolves organizations and society from any responsibility to address the difficulties associated with birth rates, quality childcare and care for aged people. (p. 221)

Moreover, research shows that although Australian workers have the procedural 'right to request' flexible working arrangements, it is not a guarantee of approval (Cooper & Baird, 2015). As Cooper and Baird (2015) show, Australian managers' personal experiences and commitment to flexible working arrangements play a significant role in whether flexibility is granted. Managers often lack a clear understanding of organizational policies and application procedures to facilitate flexible working (Cooper & Baird, 2015). Therefore, managers can be less accommodating when the requested flexible work arrangements are more disruptive to traditional working arrangements (Todd & Binns, 2013).

This neoliberal and individualist institutional approach to flexible work means that academics with caring responsibilities (mainly women) are deemed responsible for their own families because they are located in the 'private' sphere and separate from 'work'. When caring responsibilities are positioned as private matters, women often feel guilty for accessing work–life balance policies (Weststar, 2012). As a result, the social value of caring is not recognized organizationally. The long-term effect of this is that households and care regimes in Australia remain gendered and constituted around heterosexed norms and nuclear family formations where women are twice as likely to use flexible work arrangements compared to men (Coffman & Hogey, 2010). Research shows that Australian fathers still rarely reduce their working hours to accommodate caring responsibilities (Baxter, 2019) and only 2.3 per cent of all Australian men take parental leave (WGEA, 2020).

3 | METHODS

This study emerged as the Australian higher education sector was responding to the evolving landscape of COVID-19 on multiple fronts. The first COVID-19 case in Australia was reported on 25 January 2020 and on 20 March, the Australian government closed its borders to all non-Australian residents and rolled out social distancing measures on 21 March. Around this time, Australian states and territories closed 'non-essential' services including restaurants, cafés and small businesses. Several universities reported cases of infected students and staff on campus. During March and April 2020, most Australian universities shifted all activities online. Non-essential staff were directed to work remotely from home. Given this context, this study explores two research questions:

- How are Australian universities supporting academic staff with caring responsibilities during COVID-19?
- How do Australian institutional responses to remote work and caring responsibilities compare internationally?

To address these research questions, in the early weeks of April 2020, we conducted a desktop analysis of 41 Australian university websites with a focus on COVID-19-related webpages that provided specific guidance to staff on remote working and caring responsibilities. We excluded Australia's two overseas universities from the sample. This data was supplemented by the websites of the world's top ten universities in the *Times Higher Education* World Rankings (2020) to provide a basis for international comparison. Given that the world's top ten universities are located in the United States and UK, the international comparative data is limited to countries in the Anglosphere and to universities that are recognized as the wealthiest and most prestigious in the world (e.g., Harvard, Oxford). This sample is relevant for our purposes, however, because Australian institutions are intensely competitive and position their market power in relation to the United States and UK via these world rankings (see Collyer, 2013). A summary of the 51 sources used in this study is provided in Table 1.

4 | FINDINGS

4.1 | Australian institutional approaches

Of the 41 Australian institutions reviewed, 39 per cent (n = 16) provided publicly available information about remote working arrangements for staff during COVID-19 (see Table 2). Twenty-six of the Australian universities in our sample put COVID-19-related information behind password-protected portals only accessible by university staff. The 16 Australian institutional websites that we could access provided employees with information about remote working in a variety of formats including fact sheets, FAQs and links to external resources. Nine of the 16 institutions (56 per cent) provided guidance to employees about managing caring responsibilities while working remotely during the pandemic. Five of the nine institutions (55 per cent) with this available information were part of the Go8 of Australia's leading universities (e.g., Australian National University (ANU), University of Western Australia, Monash University, University of Queensland, University of New South Wales).

The nine Australian universities that provided guidance to staff about managing caring responsibilities with paid work consistently communicated that staff had three options:

TABLE 1 Sources used for findings

Source	Example	*n*	%
Australian university website	University of Sydney website	41	76
International university website	Harvard University (USA)	10	18

TABLE 2 COVID-19 information across higher education institutions and related bodies in Australia and internationally

Institution	Info on working remotely publicly available	Mention of caring in relation to remote working
Australian universities		
Australian Catholic University	Yes	Yes
Australian National University	Yes	Yes
Bond University	No	No
Central Queensland University	No	No
Charles Darwin University	Yes	No
Charles Sturt University	No	No
Curtin University	Yes	Yes
Deakin University	No	No
Edith Cowan University	Yes	Yes
Federation University	Yes	Yes
Flinders University	Yes	No
Griffith University	No	No
James Cook University	No	No
La Trobe University	No	No
Macquarie University	Yes	Yes
Monash University	Yes	Yes
Murdoch University	No	No
Queensland University of Technology	No	No
RMIT University	No	No
Southern Cross University	No	No
Swinburne University of Technology	No	No
Torrens University	No	No
University of Adelaide	No	No
University of Canberra	No	No
University of Divinity	No	No
University of Melbourne	No	No
University of New England	No	No
University of New South Wales	Yes	Yes
University of Newcastle	No	No
University of Notre Dame	Yes	No
University of Queensland	Yes	Yes
University of South Australia	Yes	No
University of Southern Queensland	No	No
University of Sydney	No	No
University of Tasmania	No	No
University of Technology Sydney	No	No
University of the Sunshine Coast	No	No
University of Western Australia	Yes	No

(Continues)

TABLE 2 (Continued)

Institution	Info on working remotely publicly available	Mention of caring in relation to remote working
University of Wollongong	Yes	No
Victoria University	No	No
Western Sydney	Yes	No
International universities		
University of Oxford, UK	Yes	Yes
California Institute of Technology, USA	Yes	No
University of Cambridge, UK	Yes	Yes
Stanford University, USA	Yes	Yes
Massachusetts Institute of Technology, USA	Yes	Yes
Princeton University, USA	Yes	Yes
Harvard University, USA	Yes	Yes
Yale University, USA	Yes	Yes
University of Chicago, USA	Yes	Yes
Imperial College London, UK	No	No

1. Take leave (e.g., annual, carer's leave or a special form of 'COVID-19' leave) (n = 5; 56 per cent)
2. Discuss flexible working arrangements with a line manager or supervisor (n = 2; 22 per cent)
3. Or both (n = 2; 22 per cent)

It is important to note that provisions for the special form of 'COVID-19 leave' were variable and did not directly address the generalized need for employees to negotiate multiple impacts of the pandemic. For example, four institutions offered a form of COVID-19 leave (ranging from 5 to 14 days) which could only be accessed for specific circumstances once personal leave was exhausted (e.g., self-isolation or diagnosis of COVID-19; caring for someone self-isolating or sick with COVID-19). Federation University was the only employer to offer five days of paid working leave for employees to use for any circumstance related to COVID-19. In the case that an employee exhausted all forms of paid leave, all universities in the sample encouraged staff to take unpaid leave. Only ANU acknowledged the collective nature of caring responsibilities in its description of pandemic workloads, noting that 'staff members will continue to be paid their full-time hours if they can work at least 70% of their work hours from home' (ANU, 2020).

4.2 | International institutional approaches

Ninety per cent of the top ten international universities (n = 9) according to the 2020 *Times Higher Education* World Rankings had public information about remote working arrangements for staff during COVID-19. Of those institutions with publicly available information, eight institutions mentioned caring while working from home/remote working. Notably, seven of the institutions in the international list are members of prestigious university groupings including the Ivy League in the United States (Harvard, Princeton, Yale) and the Russell Group in the UK (Oxford, Cambridge, Imperial College).

As with Australian institutions, the international institutional websites we reviewed emphasized personal leave as a primary way of responding to caring responsibilities in the context of COVID-19. Similarly, half of all international institutions reviewed had dedicated types of 'COVID-19 leave'. For example, Princeton University (2020)

offered employees 'COVID-19 days' 'to assist employees who are unable to work, either on campus or remotely, because of hardships related to the coronavirus'. However, the difference here is that the use of this leave is not dependent on the exhaustion of other forms of personal leave. This approach was mirrored at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) (2020) where staff were told in a website FAQ that they were not expected to use personal/annual leave to care for children or other family members whilst working remotely.

Whereas Australian universities had strict provisions surrounding the use of different types of leave, the international universities had more flexible approaches. For example, Harvard University (2020) did not have special 'COVID-19' leave but advised staff to use dependent sick leave or carer's leave flexibly as a way to look after immediate family and household members who 'are not ill but need care due to any COVID-19 related disruptions in schools, childcare or elder care'. This is a unique reinterpretation of 'leave' seeing as Harvard University (2020) ordinarily 'prohibit[s] remote work, while caring for dependent family members'. Like ANU, MIT (2020) and Oxford University (2020) advise staff that they will be paid normally even if they cannot work a full-time load due to caring responsibilities.

Most (80 per cent) of the US institutions provided staff with information about emergency care arrangements that were not present in any of the Australian institutional sample. This was often described as 'backup care' or 'crisis care'. 'Backup care' or 'crisis care' was provided for children and adults/elderly for academic staff who are unable to use their regular care provider or rely on their regular care arrangements during COVID-19. These services are often outsourced, but Princeton, for example, had their own childcare services in addition. Further, these care arrangements are available to use flexibly meaning that staff could work at home with a paid carer present. However, the amount of backup care differed across some institutions: backup or crisis care was limited to 10 days or 100 hours (Princeton University, 2020).

Some (20 per cent) international institutions went beyond childcare and leave provisions by providing access to specific services. In this category of special supports, Yale led by example with a variety of services for staff that are designed to facilitate their working lives during shelter-in-place orders. For example, Yale University staff were given access to a homework service to help parents manage home-schooling. There were additional resources for helping children experiencing learning issues, behavioural issues and developmental disabilities. Staff were also directed to another service to help with appointments and meal deliveries during shelter-in-place (Yale University, 2020).

5 | DISCUSSION

In this article, we reviewed publicly available information from 41 Australian universities to assess how these institutions were communicating with staff about working remotely during the pandemic and how negotiating caring responsibilities featured in these responses. To further contextualize our findings, we included the world's top ten universities in the *Times Higher Education* World Rankings (2020) in the analysis. We undertook this study because the uptake of flexible working is highly gendered as is the higher education sector globally. As a result of this, higher education institutions excel at offering flexible working options, however, anecdotal evidence and personal accounts suggest that academic women with caring responsibilities are facing significant challenges in negotiating paid work and care during the pandemic with little available support from universities (Kitchener, 2020; Minello, 2020).

Findings revealed that Australian institutional responses to COVID-19 and remote working are premised on neoliberal assumptions including the public–private divide and gendered division of labour. Overall, the results of our desktop analysis highlight the continuing challenges of combining work and care for Australian women in academia and that a lack of institutional policy supports during the pandemic reinscribes and privileges a male 'ideal' worker. However, our results also show Australian institutions can look to their international counterparts in supporting academic staff to reconcile work and family challenges during the pandemic.

Overall, it was very difficult to access the relevant Australian institutional information for our analysis. A relatively small number of Australian universities provided public details about their COVID-19-related work–life balance

policies. While it is possible that the university websites that we were not able to access do provide more specific guidance or details about working remotely or with children during COVID-19, anecdotal evidence suggests that this is unlikely. We argue that the lack of transparency around this issue perhaps is another example of how neoliberal universities obscure the ways in which they disadvantage particular groups.

Of the institutional websites that we did review, we were particularly surprised to find that there seemed to be no agreed 'standard' or consistent pattern in the guidelines across institutions on how academic employees are supposed to do their paid work and manage caring responsibilities in their private homes during COVID-19. This is despite the fact that the majority of the higher education workforce in Australia is female (WGEA, 2020) and that there remains a deep-seated idea in Australian culture and social policy that women are primary caregivers (Pocock, 2003). In this way, the absence of substantive references to care and caring responsibilities might be read as the maintenance of a 'gender-neutral façade' during the pandemic which prioritizes a childless, male 'ideal worker' who is able to work from home remotely (Acker, 2006; Jenkins, 2020). Furthermore, it suggests that institutions assume that work and home are separate domains and that employees can easily remain productive and demarcate their varied roles at home even though the spheres of paid and unpaid work are co-located. However, for most women the home represents yet another workplace — one where they are expected to take on a 'second shift' of caregiving and domestic labour (Hochschild, 1989).

Most of the publicly available guidance from Australian universities about caring responsibilities whilst working remotely was limited to discussing the situation with a supervisor or line manager or taking a period of leave. We argue that the direction to discuss work and caring arrangements with a line manager implies that individual circumstances will be reviewed on a case-by-case basis. This is problematic because it suggests that caring responsibilities are 'exceptional' circumstances, rather than what are more far-reaching circumstances affecting all academic workers. This directly illustrates how neoliberal universities make gender inequalities like caring during COVID-19 invisible and thus difficult to solve (Acker, 2006).

Many of the university directives that we examined, seemed to rely on the empathy and goodwill of the line managers to accommodate employee requests. This is despite Australian research that shows that managers are often ill-equipped to facilitate flexible working (Cooper & Baird, 2015). This point is especially pertinent to COVID-19 as it is highly likely that many academic women have considerably disrupted working lives and therefore, are requesting altered workloads or periods of leave which may challenge the organization's operational goals. Moreover, considering that flexible working is gendered and so deeply entwined with women/mothers, manager bias may make it difficult for fathers to request flexibility under COVID-19. This is likely given that men are reluctant to take up parental leave and worry about workplace stigma in general (Walsh, 2019). The supervisory meeting also relies on the employee leveraging their occupational capital to access flexible working — a problem for the precariously employed (Weststar, 2012).

The overreliance on 'leave' — paid, unpaid, special, crisis — as a solution to work and care during COVID-19 is problematic because leave in this context is only temporary but the fact remains that care permanently disrupts dominant constructions and experiences of time. Findings show that Australian employees are being asked to use their annual/personal leave, carer's leave and then to go to a special type of COVID-19 leave or unpaid leave if required. A period of leave is generally defined as a temporary absence from paid work. In general, there is much anxiety around paying employees to undertake caring work (as per the stringent requirements for employees to qualify for parental leave). The same expectations do not fall on staff taking annual or personal leave where there is no expectation that the employee is engaged in paid work at this time (Hargita, 2017).

The reliance on carer's leave is particularly problematic during the pandemic because it is implicitly a short-term type of leave that does not accommodate children being out of school or childcare for months at a time. As Hargita (2017, p. 518) argues, 'this "take all [leave] at once" approach does not allow for disruptive temporalities, nor does it allow for other unexpected transformative experiences and temporalities of care'. Rather, in this arrangement, those employees who are able to minimize their caring and spend their time 'productively' in paid labour will receive paid leave whereas those who allow their waged labour to be disrupted by caring responsibilities do not receive paid

leave. This directive implies that not working due to caring responsibilities is a 'choice' and it also similarly assumes that employees have the capital to take unpaid leave if necessary. Precariously employed university staff, for instance, do not have leave entitlements and therefore are unprotected should they need to manage caring with paid work.

These findings suggest that decisions about caring leave and participation in the paid labour force are still seen as an essentially 'private' matter in which employees design their own 'solutions'. The only Australian institution to acknowledge the collective nature of caring responsibilities was ANU in their institution-wide designation that a full-time workload during COVID-19 is equivalent to working 25 hours of a 35-hour workweek. This progressive move likely reflects ANU's ranking as the second-best university on the *Times Higher Education* World Rankings of all Australian universities but also its determination to be a national leader on family-friendly/flexible workplace policies for its workforce (ANU, 2016). However, as feminist sociologists have argued for several decades, 'flexibility' inherently disadvantages women in general because they remain tethered to caring and the domestic sphere in ways that men still are not (Pocock, 2003).

The findings from our international review of the top ten international higher education institutions provides important insight into how the problems of work and care in the time of COVID-19 and beyond might be positively addressed in the Australian higher education sector. Indeed, some of the provisions provided by the world's top universities offer a roadmap for higher education institutions and others in reconciling work and care for employees. The international institutions in our sample, for the most part, made information about policies related to remote working and caring during COVID-19 transparent and publicly available unlike the majority of Australian institutions. However, it is important to note that our sample of international institutions is less diverse than our sample of Australian institutions, which includes universities outside of the Go8. Most of our international sample comprised Ivy League and Russell Group institutions which are wealthy and well-endowed and have shared values around attracting and retaining academic talent. We included these institutions as a point of comparison because Australian institutions not only aspire to reach the top of international rankings but are heavily influenced by higher education policy from the United States and UK (Epifanio & Troeger, 2018).

Like Australian institutions, taking leave from work was a primary means by which employees were encouraged to manage their caring and paid work in the international institutions. However, most of the international institutions in the sample did not individualize the issue of caring by exclusively directing staff to discuss flexible working with a line manager or supervisor. Rather, the institutions transparently communicated all flexible working options for staff with care responsibilities during COVID-19. The starkest difference between Australian and international institutions was the provision of childcare or access to 'crisis' services mediated through the institutions. Almost all of the international institutions we reviewed offered some kind of emergency or crisis care that most staff could access. There were some differences across international institutions in terms of how much access employees were entitled to, but access to care providers for children and other family members during COVID-19 appeared to be *de rigueur*. Yale stood above the rest of the international sample in its provision of caring and other services to help with home-schooling and meal delivery during shelter-in-place orders.

This is unique given that the international institutions are based in what are deemed 'liberal' welfare states (Lewis, 2009) like Australia where the organization of childcare or care in general is largely left to the individual to manage. However, these arrangements, in part, reflect the privilege and status of these international institutions — all of them well-endowed, top-performing research-intensive universities that can afford to provide these services to retain (female) staff (Epifanio & Troeger, 2018). Nevertheless, it also shows the way forward for Australian institutions if they too are to compete internationally. While half of the Australian Go8 made some mention of caring in the context of remote work, there is a still a large gap between the Go8 universities and their international counterparts in the Ivy League and Russell Group in terms of supports. To illustrate, at the time writing this article, the University of New South Wales, a Go8 university, announced it would mitigate financial losses from the pandemic by cutting all of its on-campus childcare services and various equity and diversity measures including a Career Advancement Fund to support women following a period of parental leave (Mason, 2020). Further, these

findings highlight how organizations might overcome the deficiencies of the welfare state in helping to reconcile work and family challenges by providing more generous work–life balance supports.

5.1 | Limitations and directions for future research

A key study limitation was our inability to access many Australian institutional websites due to the information being locked being staff portals. It is possible that Australian institutions reviewed here have more detail around work and caring arrangements during COVID-19. Our international sample was biased towards top-performing international institutions. Further analyses might include a more diverse international sample outside of elite, research-intensive institutional groupings to make comparisons with non-Go8 universities in Australia. However, we note that most of the non-Go8 universities in our sample did not discuss care in their publicly available information. Future researchers might also qualitatively examine the individual experiences of academics within the different institutional types both in Australia and internationally to compare the impact of these policies on productivity and wellbeing.

DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTERESTS

We are not aware of any conflict of interest involved in submitting, reviewing or publishing this article.

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