OVER-WORKED AND WORKED OVER:

Casual Academics Bear the Costs of COVID-19.


Report by the Casuals Network at the University of Sydney.
The University of Sydney occupies land belonging to the Gadigal People of the Eora Nation. The USYD Casuals Network acknowledges the ongoing struggle facing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in the plight for self-determination. This report recognises that while cuts to casual labour affect everyone, it disproportionately harms our Blak brothers and sisters. Without economic justice there can be no social justice.

This report was produced by the University of Sydney (USyd) Casuals Network, June 2020. For media enquiries and further information please contact:
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The USYD Casuals Network is a group of casual academics and general staff at the University of Sydney working together to improve conditions for casuals.

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Main Facebook Page: https://www.facebook.com/usydcasualsnetwork
Casual Humans of Higher Education Facebook Page:
https://www.facebook.com/casualhumans/
University of Sydney Casuals Network

KEY FINDINGS

**PRECARIOUS EMPLOYMENT**

- **77%** are concerned about losing their job.

- **99%** of FASS casuals have work and employment concerns.

- “I feel devastated to know I will likely not get the chance to tutor again; I feel discarded by the University.”

- 33% of respondents lost work in Semester 1 2020, and 54% are concerned about losing their job or facing reduced hours in Semester 2 2020.

- “I feel that I will no longer have the opportunity to teach again, during my PhD.”

- 14% FASS casuals have already been told their work will not continue in Semester 2 2020.

**WORKPLACE EXPLOITATION**

- **82%** have reported doing extra unpaid work in Semester 1 2020.

- 75% of FASS casuals reported experiencing an increased workload in Semester 1 2020, with an average of 50 unpaid hours per worker.

- “I’ve earned about $8 per hour.”

- 85% of FASS casuals have incurred additional expenses in the move to online teaching.

- “Electricity bills are through the roof - more than double for the same period.”

**CAREER OBsolescence**

- **60%** are likely to leave academia.

- “My main concern is that I will have to abandon my academic career less than 1 year after completing my PhD.”

- 60% of FASS casuals feel they are either ‘very likely’ or ‘likely’ to leave academia permanently.

- “The cost cutting by the university and others in the sector has meant that jobs that I applied for at the start of the year were withdrawn as they introduced austerity measures.”

- 71% of respondents are ‘highly concerned’ that university austerity measures will have long-term negative impacts on their career development.
Contingent workers in universities have been highly exposed during the COVID-19 crisis due to a lack of work entitlements and job security, and the negligence of University management. This survey captures the impacts of the crisis on casualised workers in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Sydney.

The transition to online teaching and working from home imposed sudden and extra financial costs on casualised workers, including higher electricity and internet bills, the need for new internet provider plans and the purchasing of new office and technological equipment. This transition also increased workloads, as teachers were forced to redesign courses for online delivery. 98.7% of casuals have concerns and stresses about their work at the University, with 74.1% of respondents indicating that they are stressed about the amount of unpaid work they have been completing. Casualised workers did an average of 50.58 unpaid hours over the semester, one-third of the average number of hours a casual academic is contracted for per semester, providing evidence of systematic underpayment.

University cuts to course offerings for Semester 2 2020 and managerial dictates to cut casual staffing budgets are forcing casuals into unemployment. 76.7% of respondents were stressed or highly stressed about losing their employment. 59.7% said that they were likely to leave academia permanently, should they lose their job at the University.

Higher education workers have been forced to bear the costs of the COVID-19 crisis. Many casualised workers will be forced out of employment so as to reduce labour costs for universities. Workloads will be intensified for the remaining staff who pick up the slack.
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Over the past 30 years, Australian universities have dramatically expanded casual employment (Ryan, Burgess, Connell & Groen, 2013) to reduce the cost of labour (Harvey, 2007). The hiring of casual staff is employed as an economic strategy to reduce the ongoing cost of employing permanent staff (Ryan, Burgess, Connell & Groen, 2013). In 2017, a total of 23,205 casual staff were employed by Australian universities (Department of Education Skills and Employment, 2018). These casual staff perform crucial research, teaching and professional support functions, creating an underpaid workforce that has become indispensable to universities and their bottom lines.

Bredehoeft (2018) has noted that the gap between permanent and non-permanent staff in academia has widened immensely. Casual staff do not receive paid holiday or sick leave, their superannuation is greatly reduced, and there is no notice period or redundancy payment when employment is terminated. Similarly, Brown et al. (2010: 179) highlight the division of academic workers into distinct categories of secure and insecure workers, with casual staff falling under the latter category. The insecure nature of casual work contributes to experiences of poor job satisfaction, unstable income and alienation both “socially and intellectually” from their institutions.

These general trends amongst Australian universities can be observed in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (FASS) at the University of Sydney (USyd). The current Enterprise Bargaining Agreement (EBA) 2018–2021 establishes the terms of reference around casual workers’ rights and the University of Sydney’s obligations to them (The University of Sydney, 2018). Precarious casual employees in FASS make a substantial contribution to the University, filling roles in research, lecturing, tutoring, course coordination, and professional support. Casual staff also make significant indirect contributions to the University of Sydney’s research profile, by freeing up permanent staff to focus on research work. Where the University of Sydney situates itself as a high-ranking research institution, the performance of teaching work by casual staff is instrumental to supporting the university’s claims of research excellence and its presence in international rankings. The University of Sydney currently publicises that they are 1st in Australia and 14th in the world for Arts and Humanities, as well as 1st in Australia and 4th in the world for graduate employability (The University of Sydney, 2020).
2. BACKGROUND AND PURPOSE OF SURVEY

Background

Prior to the outbreak of severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (Sars-CoV-2 or COVID-19), Australian universities were already warned by experts about their heavy reliance on international students for revenue. The University of Sydney has recently refused to disclose the number of international students and the income they derive from them (Robinson, 2019). However, in 2017, the University of Sydney was estimated to receive $500 million AUD, or one fifth of its income, from Chinese international students alone (Robinson, 2019). This lack of diversification of income has caused Australian universities to experience the financial impact of COVID-19 much earlier in 2020 than other industries and sectors. From the beginning of Semester 1 2020, permanent and casual staff at the University of Sydney were asked to adapt courses for online learning. This change was to accommodate international students who were unable to enter Australia due to the travel ban enforced by the Australian Government on the 1st of February 2020 (Prime Minister of Australia, 2020a). In an attempt to reduce financial losses, Australian universities provided financial assistance to bring international students back into Australia in order to circumvent the Australian travel ban (Babones, 2020 & University of Sydney 2020a).

As COVID-19 evolved into a pandemic, the Australian government acted swiftly—extending the travel ban on all non-citizens, implementing the lockdown of Australia and enforcing social distancing guidelines in order to prevent further spread of the disease (Prime Minister of Australia, 2020b & Department of Home Affairs, 2020). In response to this, the University of Sydney rushed all staff to place all teaching courses online over the weekend of the 14th–15th of March 2020 (University of Sydney 2020b). In doing so, the University placed the cost and the increased workload occasioned by the pandemic onto their already overburdened staff, especially casuals. This report details the experience of casualised workers in FASS at the University of Sydney during this period.
Purpose

The survey was designed in order to gather concrete data from FASS casuals to see the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on their job and financial insecurity, and to highlight the continued exploitation of casual academics as part of a long-standing pattern of exploitation by the University. As outlined in the background, casual academics have been working significant additional unpaid hours to meet just the basic requirements of their teaching roles, let alone the additional labour needed to maintain the University’s internationally competitive reputation—all of which continues to go unremunerated. The COVID-19 crisis necessitated that the higher education sector transition to online remote teaching, which increased the amount of unpaid labour well beyond its already untenable pre-COVID-19 levels.

Following discussions that have taken place within the University, the USyd Casuals Network has organised to combat the moves made against them. The first step was an open letter to the Vice-Chancellor and Dean of FASS for an open and public meeting, which took place on the 23rd of June 2020. In preparation for this meeting, the Casuals Network created a survey that was distributed to FASS casual staff to gain a better understanding of the precarity and job insecurity issues facing casuals, as well as to approximate the level of wage theft that casuals continue to be subjected to. The survey also aims to gain insight into the unique issues surrounding the additional exploitation brought on by the shift to online learning.
3. Survey Development, Design, Distribution, Timeline and Data Analysis

Survey Development and Design

The survey design was based on a survey recently conducted by casuals at the University of New South Wales (UNSW). Using this survey as a basis, members of the USyd Casuals Network refined and added questions in order to collect more specific data around unpaid working hours and additional expenses incurred during the transition to online teaching on behalf of the University. Research Electronic Data Capture (REDCap) was chosen as the platform for survey distribution given it is widely used in academic research and a preferred platform by the University’s Human Research Ethics Committee for conducting survey research.

Survey Distribution

The survey statement and REDCap URL link was distributed in a mass email to 350 FASS casual staff at the University of Sydney. They were encouraged to share the survey with their colleagues. Additionally, members of the USyd Casuals Network distributed the survey within their own schools and amongst departmental colleagues. The survey was set to close on Friday the 19th of June 2020 at 9pm AEST. The day the survey was set to close, a final reminder email was sent out to the original email recipients to complete the survey.

Survey Timeline

The survey was developed between the 12th and 14th of June 2020. It was first distributed on the 15th of June and closed on the 19th of June 2020. Data analysis and report writing was completed from the 20th to 22nd of June 2020.

Data Analysis

The data presented below was cleaned, with all responses that did not provide any answers beyond the demographic information removed. Qualitative comments provided by the participants were analysed, any data that could potentially identify the participant was also removed in order to maintain anonymity.
### 4. SUMMARY OF RESPONDENTS (DEMOGRAPHIC DATA)

Table 1. | Summary of demographic data gathered from survey.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Groups</th>
<th>n</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total number of responses after data cleaning</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) Members</td>
<td>106  (66.7%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Casual representation of roles at the University of Sydney</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tutors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecturers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Course Covenor or Unit Coordinator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Assistants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Fellow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PhD or Masters of Research Candidate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other employment roles at the University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed in other Faculties and Centre for Continuing Education, as well as FASS</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Length of time employed as a casual at the University of Sydney</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0-2 Years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-5 Years</td>
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<tr>
<td>6-10 Years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Years+</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Length of time employed as a casual in the Tertiary Education Sector</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0-2 Years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-5 Years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-10 Years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Years+</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Respondents were able to select multiple roles that were applicable to them.
a) Loss of critical teaching staff

Casual staff provide a wide range of work products and teaching services to the University of Sydney. The casuals in FASS represent a significant portion of the teaching workforce at the University. From the participants of the survey, casuals served not only as tutors (91.2%), but lecturers and unit coordinators (67.9%), who are essential in maintaining the high standards of teaching and overall ranking status of the University. The multiple roles selected by survey respondents is also reflective of the fact that casuals hold a number of positions at the University at any one time. This further exemplifies the essential contribution of the casual workforce to the day-to-day running of both research and teaching at the University of Sydney. If the University continues with its plan to significantly reduce the number of casuals and fixed-term staff, permanent staff will be forced to fill a multitude of roles, particularly in teaching. This will further increase already extensive workloads for these permanent workers at the University of Sydney. Increased teaching burden will detrimentally impact permanent staff, who like their casual colleagues are already struggling with the added workload caused by COVID-19. This will impact the ability of permanent staff to meet and in some cases maintain the high research output demanded by the University.

b) Mass casualisation of academics and long-term employment of casual staff

The make-up of casual academics in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences highlights a widespread reliance on casual workers. This is a symptom of the mass casualisation that has taken place across the higher education sector, instigated as a cost-saving measure by university management (Ryan, Burgess, Connell & Groen, 2013).

66% (n=105) of casuals surveyed said that they have been employed at the University for three or more years. This figure reflects the likelihood that many higher degree research students engage in casual work to support themselves while studying, since 45.3% (n=72) of respondents identified themselves as a research candidate. This figure also reflects that for many casuals their employment is ongoing. A further 27% (n=43) of casuals surveyed said that they have been employed at the University between six and over ten years, with 75.5% (n=120) of casuals indicating that they have been casually employed in the higher education sector for three or more years. This highlights the precarious nature of the higher education sector, whereby qualified individuals despite acquiring years of experience in higher education—predominantly in teaching work—are unable to convert a casual contract to a permanent one.

When analysing the length of time casuals have been employed in the higher education sector, one in three casuals surveyed (35.2%) said that they have been casually employed for six to over ten years in the higher education sector. Similarly, the UNSW casuals survey also found equivalent results amongst its casual cohort, with almost one in three respondents (31.4%) employed in the higher education sector for five or more years (UNSW Casuals Network, 2020). This is indicative of a much greater issue not just for the University of Sydney, but for the Australian higher education sector as a whole, reflecting a lack of opportunities to transition from casual to permanent work.
c) Research student financial precarity

Of the casual employees in FASS who responded to the survey, nearly half (45.3%) identified themselves as Higher Degree by Research candidates (HDRs), who are PhD or Masters of Research candidates. A survey conducted by the HDR Liaison Committee at the University of Sydney, indicated a substantial correlation between HDR candidature and teaching at the University of Sydney. Their report found that 43.6% (n=449) of their HDR respondents engaged in teaching work (Johnson, Lee, Hallsworth & Spencer, 2020). When taking into account the results of this survey and the HDR survey, it highlights that cuts to availability of casual work will have a substantial impact on the employment opportunities and overall income of currently enrolled HDRs.
5. QUANTITATIVE AND QUALITATIVE FINDINGS

a) Work, employment, and career development concerns due to COVID-19

The survey sought to investigate to what extent casual work, employment and career developments were being affected by COVID-19. The survey asked respondents the following question: “How have you been feeling about the impacts of the current COVID-19 crisis on your work?”:

![Impact of COVID-19 on casual work-related stress and concerns](image)

**Figure 2.** Impact of COVID-19 on casual work-related stress and concerns.

Breakdown of respondents: 54 (34%) selected “Highly stressed and concerned.”, 68 (42.8%) selected “Stressed and concerned.”, 31 (19.5%) selected “Not stressed but a little concerned.”, 3 (1.9%) selected “Not stressed or concerned.” and 3 (1.9%) selected “I prefer not to say.”.

A total of **76.7% (n=122)** of respondents selected that they were stressed or concerned to some degree. This figure is reflective of the extensive impact felt by casual workers in the university sector, who are bearing the brunt of austerity measures implemented sector-wide.
In order to identify the causes of the stress and concern widely experienced by FASS Casuals, the survey then asked “What are your main employment and work concerns about COVID-19 crisis?”:

![Work and employment concerns of FASS Casuals due to University COVID-19 cost-cutting measures](image)

Figure 3. Work and employment concerns of FASS Casuals due to University COVID-19 cost-cutting measures.

157 (98.7%) respondents selected one or more concerns. Breakdown of work and employment concerns: Losing my job or contract (n=136), doing extra unpaid work (n=117), the university owning intellectual property that I create through my employment at the University (n=47), the University re-using online content in the future instead of hiring staff (n=100), marking turn-around times (n=53), other (n=28) and I do not have any concerns (n=1).

All FASS Casuals surveyed (98.7%, n=157)—with the exception of one respondent who selected “I do not have any concerns” and another that did not select any answers—selected one or more concerns listed in the survey (Figure 3). These concerns are supported by the fact that 33.9% (n=54) of survey respondents indicated that they had experienced some sort of job loss, contract loss or hour reduction during Semester 1 2020 as a result of the COVID-19 crisis. Responses also indicated that the University of Sydney’s cutting of FASS Casuals has already begun. In response to the question “Are you concerned that you will lose your job or one of your contracts, or have your hours reduced some time this year?”, 54.2% (n=83) Casuals selected “I am highly concerned.”. Unfortunately, these concerns are well-founded considering that 13.8% (n=22) of FASS Casuals surveyed selected “I have already been advised that I will no longer be employed or have a contract for Semester 2 2020.”.
Job insecurity will consequently have critical effects on the career development of FASS casualties. Our survey captured these expected career-stunting effects. 71.1% (n=109) of FASS casualties indicated that they are highly concerned that the COVID-19 austerity measures implemented by the University will have a long-lasting negative impact on their career development. Consequently, when asked, “If you lose your job at the University of Sydney, how likely is it that you will be forced to permanently leave academia?” 59.7% (n=95) indicated that they are “very likely” or “likely” to be forced to do this.

**Qualitative comments**

A substantial number of responses referenced a perceived loss of future career opportunities in academia. Many respondents alluded to the significant possibility of their being forced to leave the sector entirely in future, within either the short-term or the long-term. Most respondents indicated major concern about the impact of COVID-19-induced austerity measures upon the higher education sector, particularly in terms of lost jobs and lost opportunities to gain teaching experience.

One respondent alluded to the further precarity of having their casual contract tied to their residency status, leading to the possibility that they might have to leave the country. This may demonstrate that other international students and academics on temporary visas face similar difficulties. A common theme in this section was changing attitudes towards academia as a result of the COVID-19 crisis.

“**I will not only lose my job, but I will also lose my career and residency status and have to leave the country.**”

“**If I’m not offered any work at all at USyd for the next semester or more it could be a real career killer.**”

“**I’m thinking more and more that academia won’t be a viable career option.**”

Some respondents indicated that they already feel forced to transition out of the higher education industry. Those respondents emphasised the role of COVID-19 in contributing to such a decision, since the crisis had exacerbated existing issues surrounding unpaid work, lack of time for research, and lack of recognition for their contributions as casual staff.

“**I have given up on bothering to seek employment in the tertiary sector. I have a strong publication record, and have coordinated and tutored numerous subjects, but I think COVID-19 is the final nail in the coffin for the sector, and so I will [be] transitioning out of the industry.**”

“**It’s been depressing to work in higher education as a casual for a long time, but this is probably it for me.**”

Many current HDRs and early career academics expressed concern about the possibility of an enforced exit from the sector due to a loss of long-term career opportunities. Some respondents highlighted the importance of casual work in providing financial support while PhD graduates are on the academic job market.
“My main concern is that I will have to abandon my academic career less than 1 year after completing my PhD.”

“So for me the biggest impact of the cost-cutting measures is that it has heightened my uncertainty in this crucial point of my career (less than 1 year post PhD). Many of us completed PhDs at Sydney uni under the assumption that we could pick up bits of casual work in the 1-2 years post PhD as we applied for other positions. With that option now potentially gone we will be forced to leave academia without having had the chance to publish or properly search for jobs.”

“I fear that I will no longer have the opportunity to teach again, during my PhD. I am considering leaving the University. I am concerned that I won’t be able to build up a good enough portfolio that will allow me to gain an academic position after I finish my degree, despite the University wanting me to stay due to my research.”

“The cost cutting by the university and others in the sector has meant that jobs that I applied for at the start of the year were withdrawn as they introduced austerity measures, the additional workload that has not been recognised has meant that I have not been able to work on research publications that will impact me when I am able to apply for jobs.”

Some respondents expressed concern about the impacts of lost casual employment upon academic research, since their access to university research resources is dependent upon maintaining casual employment at the University.

“Many of us are only able to maintain our research through the resources we have access to as casuals, ie the library. Without access to these resources it will be impossible for us to undertake research - research that then gets credited back to USYD.”

The uncertainty surrounding future career prospects was associated with mental health impacts by some respondents.

“University management’s actions have caused a lot of additional stress in my life, contributing to a very poor period of mental health for me.”

“There is incredible uncertainty about my future employment, which leaves me worried and not particularly productive.”

Many respondents expressed a general sense that their contributions remained unrecognised by the University. Some indicated feeling that they had been abandoned, unappreciated or betrayed by the University of Sydney due to their experiences. The responses also indicate the lack of support provided to casual workers during the pandemic by the University.

“It is frankly disgusting that, after carrying the University through a difficult Semester 1, 2020 and providing course design and teaching through a period of rapid change, usually to rave reviews from students, casuals are now consigned to the trash heap, while management refuses to take any sort of a pay cut. The contempt with which we are treated is staggering.”

“As a casual I feel under-supported, under-appreciated and expendable--despite the fact that--like most casuals I know!--I am someone who takes teaching very seriously and I put so much of my heart and soul into it.”
“This was my first semester teaching and I completely fell in love with it and gave it everything I had. I feel devastated to know I will likely not get the chance to tutor again; I feel discarded by the University. I am also unspeakably anxious about becoming unemployed during a recession.”

Some respondents indicated concerns for the future of the higher education sector. Respondents cited concerns about lost expertise (for instance, due to the loss of HDRs and ECRs forced to leave the industry), as well as an overall decline in quality of education provided to students.

“This will all contribute to the loss of a generation of early career researchers and PhD students who have worked tirelessly for institutions that have failed to recognise their contribution. This has left me questioning my choice of career and the waste of years to get to this point which appears to be fruitless.”

“This is emotionally and professionally gutting, dangerous to our financial (and therefore physical and mental) health, and will result in a devastating loss of skill and talent across the sector.”

“I feel sorry for my students who are going to have a much worse educational experience next semester. Their tutors are a big part of making them feel welcome at the university, translating difficult content and giving them another point of contact and community in this often sterile and cold institution. The teaching staff who remain will be overworked too, only worsening the situation.”

“I am deeply concerned that the teaching quality at USYD will be impacted if hours are cut or casual staff are faced with tutorial groups larger than 30 students.”

Words such as “concerned”, “worried” and “stressed” recurred in this open comment section.

Figure 4. | Word Cloud generation from open questions asking about other work concerns and stories of job loss or hour reduction.
b) Additional expenses of online teaching and working remotely due to COVID-19

The University’s rapid move into online teaching has placed unforeseen financial stress on casual workers. The survey attempted to gain clarity on what type of additional expenses were being incurred and the financial cost to casuals. The survey asked, “If you have incurred additional costs from the change to working online and remote teaching, could you please let us know which of the following are applicable to you?”:

![Graph showing additional expenses incurred by casuals from online teaching](image)

**Figure 5.** Additional expenses incurred by casuals from online teaching.

*Break down of the expenses: Internet and Data (n= 95), electricity (n= 101), office equipment (n=55), technological equipment (n=74), teaching applications and aids (n=16) and other (n=16).*

The results demonstrate that the move to online teaching caused FASS casuals to incur additional costs that have not been acknowledged or reimbursed by the University. Of the casuals surveyed, 84.9% (n=135) indicated that they had incurred additional expenses from moving teaching online for the University of Sydney. The top three expenses include; electricity 63.9% (n=101), internet and data 60.1% (n=95) and purchasing of technological equipment 46.8% (n=74). The impact of casuals uniquely bearing the costs of these expenses contributes to a significant reduction of their overall paycheck. This therefore increases the overall financial precarity of casuals.
Qualitative comments

The qualitative comments provided by casuals in the survey demonstrates that a number of expenses were incurred as the university transitioned to online learning. Most respondents indicated substantial out-of-pocket costs, reflecting the need to create a home office environment from scratch. Some respondents specified that, due to multiple additional costs, their expenses were in the thousands of dollars.

“During COVID-19, when it was unclear when we could return to university safely, I needed to move house to be able to work from home. I only had a laptop, and needed to set up a similar arrangement to university to work conveniently/safely. Desk (height adjustable): $600  Monitor: $200  Monitor riser: $50  Display Port to HDMI cable: $20  Mouse and keyboard: $50  Desk chair: $200  Rug to prevent desk chair scratching rental property floor: $50  Headphones, so I minimise disruption to my partner while working in shared accommodation: $200.”

“Update laptop and home office spaces, in excess of $2k.”

The most common purchases mentioned were office furniture such as desks and office chairs, alongside expensive technological equipment, including headphones, laptops, webcams, keyboards, mice, external monitors, and other ergonomic accessories. Some respondents indicated that ergonomic considerations made the purchase of expensive equipment such as office chairs necessary.

“I have needed to purchase an expensive ergonomic chair ($400).”

“New ergonomic office chair $1000 plus.”

Having a personal laptop or computer with adequate hardware to run Zoom effectively was of significant concern to a number of respondents. Some indicated that their additional expenses included a new laptop.

“New laptop (with hardware to run Zoom effectively) - 1,500.”

“I probably needed a new laptop anyway, but could have waited a few months otherwise - as it was I incurred about $2000 of expenses at a bad time.”

Another recurring purchase was headphones, headsets and microphones for the effective facilitation of Zoom tutorials and other online learning.

“Microphone/headset with good microphone quality (for Zoom classes) - 150.”

“New headphones as my old ones weren't good enough for tutorial use.”
Another category of expenses highlighted by respondents was household utilities. Some respondents indicated they had experienced an increase to internet bills, and many mentioned increases to electricity bills whilst working from home. One respondent indicated that their electricity bills had “more than doubled” as a result of working from home.

“Working from home in rental housing has entailed significant heating costs. While I have not yet been billed for this quarter, I am expecting the extra heating cost alone to be between $300-$500 AUD.”

“Electricity bills are through the roof - more than double for the same period.”

“My electricity and internet bills have soared as result of working from home - especially with the bandwidth required for Zoom.”

“Upgraded to a higher bandwidth and data allowance internet service - extra $40/month”

Some respondents mentioned unforeseen expenses, such as additional paper and printing costs, as they could no longer access printing facilities at the University.

“I have spent about $500 in additional printing and electricity costs over the past 2 months.”

“I would always go to the university to print my essays and other complex documents that I needed in print. I have therefore incurred paper and ink costs, electricity costs.”

Words such as “electricity”, “extra” and “internet” recurred in this open comment section.

Figure 6. Word Cloud generation from open question asking about the details of costs and extent of incurred additional expenses from delivering online teaching on behalf of the University, during COVID-19.
c) Exacerbation of extra unpaid work during COVID-19

Due to the multiple roles undertaken by FASS casuals in order to develop their careers (Table 1.), the vast majority have been forced to complete additional unpaid work in order to ensure high-quality teaching, with an excellent teaching reputation being critical to obtaining a coveted tenured position at a university. Prior to the COVID-19 crisis, casuals were already completing a significant number of unpaid hours. The survey asked, “If you have engaged in unpaid work during past semesters (pre-2020), on average how many hours of unpaid work would you estimate that you used to complete per week?“:

![Figure 7. Average number of unpaid work hours per week during pre-COVID-19 semesters.](image)

- 125 respondents selected that they had completed unpaid work hours during their employment in past semesters. From this, respondents selected the average number of unpaid work hours they would complete in past semesters. 40.5% (n=51) selected “0–3 hours”, 36.5% (n=46) selected “4–7 hours”, 11.1% (n=14) selected “7–10 hours”, 6.3% (n=8) selected “11–14 hours”, 1.6% (n=2) selected “15–18 hours”, 1.6% (n=2) selected “19–21 hours” and 2.4% (n=3) selected “22+ hours”.

Figure 7 demonstrates that FASS casuals have historically been subjected to unpaid work hours per week, even prior to the COVID-19 crisis.
131 respondents selected that they had completed unpaid work hours during their employment in past semesters. From this, respondents selected the average number of unpaid work hours they would complete in past semesters. 18.3% (n=24) selected “0–3 hours”, 31.3% (n=41) selected “4–7 hours”, 24.5% (n=32) selected “7–10 hours”, 10.7% (n=14) selected “11–14 hours”, 6.1% (n=8) selected “15–18 hours”, 4.6% (n=6) selected “19–21 hours” and 4.6% (n=6) selected “22+ hours”.

A total of 78.6% (n=125) of respondents said that they had completed unpaid work in past semesters (Figure 7.). From these respondents, 45.9% (n=73) indicated that they have experienced a significant increase, with an additional 28.9% (n=46) indicating a small increase to their workload in Semester 1 2020. The figures demonstrate an increase in the number of respondents experiencing unpaid labour, from 125 respondents (Figure 7.) to 131 respondents (Figure 8). The top two answers for the average number of unpaid working hours completed in previous semesters was “0–3 hours” and “4–7 hours” (Figure 7.). When the question was repeated for Semester 1 2020, the top two answers were recorded as “4–7 hours” and “7–10 hours” (Figure 8.). These results reflect that the rapid move to online teaching has forced casuals to accumulate a vast amount of unpaid labour, higher than what they would usually expect to complete during a normal semester. Additionally, 52.8% (n=84) indicated that they recorded the total number of hours they worked at the University.
These results are comparative to the UNSW results. The UNSW survey recorded that 42.9% of their respondents completed 4–10 hours of unpaid work per week during their first trimester (UNSW Casuals Network, 2020). When combined with the number of respondents of the USYD FASS casual survey that indicated that they completed “4–7 hours” or “7–10 hours”, this equates to an alarming 56.8%. Additionally, the USyd HDR report on the impact of COVID-19 on research candidates found that, out of the HDR candidates that were teaching at the University this semester, 59% (n=266) reported engaging in unpaid work to deliver online teaching (Johnson, Lee, Hallsworth & Spencer, 2020). This potentially points towards a deeper issue of wage theft from casualised workers in the Australian tertiary sector.

The survey also analysed the total number of unpaid work hours that FASS casuals had accumulated over the course of Semester 1 2020. The average number of hours a FASS casual was contracted to work in Semester 1 2020 was 12.0 hours per week, which amounts to a total of 156 hours for the 13 week semester. When looking at the number of additional unpaid working hours FASS casuals expect to have completed by the end of Semester 1 2020, the average number of unpaid hours cited in total was 50.58 hours, which is nearly one-third of the actual contracted hours. This demonstrates the severity of the unpaid work endured by FASS casuals to keep the University running during COVID-19, and the fact that this was widely experienced.

**Qualitative comments**

The qualitative comments afforded a more detailed understanding of the nature of unpaid work amongst casual staff. The main categories associated with such unpaid work were email correspondence, online meetings, administration, preparation work, asynchronous online learning (including maintenance of discussion boards), and self-training in online learning pedagogy. Overall, most comments indicated a substantial amount of unpaid work, in many cases across multiple categories. The responses also provided some indication of how increased unpaid work hours impacted hourly pay.

“*The transition to online learning has meant that I have had to put in significantly more time and effort, without compensation.*”

“I’ve earned about $8 per hour.”

The most frequently cited causal contributors to unpaid work came under the broad category of administration and communication, and particularly communication with students. Many respondents indicated that communication with students had increased dramatically, through a combination of email correspondence, consultations over Zoom, and responses to online discussion boards.

“*the change [to online learning] requires of us more individual feedback, individual communication with students. Therefore it doubles or triples our workload.*”

“*Increased time spent communicating with students and ensuring their wellbeing, making alternative arrangements for them (unpaid). Increased admin load.*”
Within the category of administration and communication, most respondents indicated that email correspondence with students was a significant contributor to unpaid work.

“I’ve had to reply to significantly more emails (I had, for example, one very anxious student this semester email me on average seven times a week - every single day) because students felt so much more overwhelmed, and unsupported, because they were at home in isolation.”

“The spike in my workload has been in answering emails from students, as usually these discussions would be had around class times in person.”

“The biggest add on of unpaid work has been managing emails from students. Many students have been anxious, requesting extensions, many more emails than usual had to be sent out about their lack of engagement in the unit.”

“my administration hours have increased. This is primarily due to the added pastoral care required to support students through this - the amount of emails/communications I receive from students has increased SIGNIFICANTLY.”

Another significant contributor to unpaid work was increased time spent in Zoom meetings and consultations with students outside of regular classes.

“I have also needed to arrange additional zoom sessions gratis so that stressed and anxious students could have more substantial help understanding what was required of them in assessment tasks.”

“I had significantly more zoom consults with students too, outside of our tutorial hours, because I think students just wanted a more human connection when talking about things like writing essays.”

“I’ve had a lot more one-to-one Zoom sessions with students who were nervous about clarifying matters bad seeking help with assessment progress because we just didn’t have the chance in Zoom tutorials to have a quick chat at the end of class, especially if they were self-conscious about others hearing their questions/concerns.”

The reasons behind such increased communication with students were commonly identified as arising from students’ difficulties in acclimatising to online learning, thus contributing to increased work hours dedicated to communication.

“Lots of extra student emails and management of their expectations. Also, helping students work out how to learn online-guiding them step by step in some cases.”

“The burden was felt especially in the time spent addressing the students’ confusion with the shifting format of the course, while continuing to prepare and deliver course material.”

Collectively, the respondent comments indicated a substantial role for casual staff in providing unpaid pastoral care to students. Casual staff assisted students with managing the transition to online learning, as well as with broader issues arising as a result of COVID-19. This work was performed outside of contracted work hours.
“There is a significant increase in time spent over email and zoom to do “pastoral care” type activities (extensions, special con and assignment help) compared to teaching in previous years.”

“In trying to support student wellbeing and communication, I have had to email more, take my own time to individually Zoom students to follow up work and check on mental health.”

“I have had to email and meet with students in distress far more.”

“some students have just needed more time to have a quick decompress/chat immediately before or after Zoom sessions as so many of them have anxiety around moving online and the social isolation that can come with digital teaching.”

As well as additional meetings with students, a number of respondents mentioned an increase in unpaid work in the form of Zoom meetings with colleagues. Some respondents indicated that increased communication with staff also contributed to unpaid work hours.

“I was on zoom several more hours a day than expected due to meetings in addition to high teaching load.”

“Things that are usually resolvable in a quick office chat or an after class chat are now longer and require more planning and time. Zoom meetings for these to deal especially with online teaching are also new unpaid work hours.”

“I have had to meet more with my course coordinators and fellow tutors.”

“Weekly staff meeting (1 hour) Weekly unit coordination meeting (2 hours) Subsequent coordination meetings (30mins).”

Many respondents also indicated a substantial increase in preparation time due to the shift to online learning, resulting in unpaid work.

“I am doing approximately double the amount of preparation hours as we move online.”

“the time to prepare almost doubled to adjust to online teaching and class management.”

“There was a lot of extra preparation for online teaching (for lectures and online discussions).”

Some respondents noted that online learning presented unique pedagogical challenges. Casual staff attempted to overcome these challenges in order to ensure student engagement—for instance, increased effort to make online content engaging and accessible to students. This contributed significantly in the accumulation of unpaid labour of casual workers throughout the Semester.

“Moving online actually means a lot more admin, prep time to ensure that 1) teaching is actually interesting and 2) everything records and uploads smoothly or, when live, that everyone can be understood and that each student has time to contribute.”
“Preparing online content is far more time-consuming if it is to be effective.”

Several respondents indicated that they were expected to provide both synchronous and asynchronous learning options to students, the latter to provide alternatives for students who couldn’t viably engage in face-to-face online learning over Zoom. Online discussion boards were routinely associated with such unpaid asynchronous work, providing an alternative for students who were unable to participate in face-to-face Zoom tutorials, for instance due to time-zone differences or poor internet connection.

“asynchronous discussion boards led to a tripling of the workload for each of my seven tutorials”

“I have had to respond to 120+ students a week in discussion boards as well as Zoom tutorials, often in individual responses.”

“extra time reading and responding to discussion forums when students don’t participate in Zoom tutorials due to time zone differences.”

“Asynchronous learning’ checking up on student’s tutorial activities, canvas/piazza discussions. Ensuring that there are alternatives available for students who couldn’t use Zoom (poor internet, great firewall of china etc) to not miss out.”

The transition to online learning forced casual academics to change the structure of assessments, resulting in increased unpaid work hours. Some respondents also mentioned increases to marking hours as a result of the transition to online learning.

“marking hours have increased due to some assignments now being completed individually and the greater need for moderation and benchmarking of those assignments.”

“marking load for teaching has increased.”

“Extra time spent marking due to lower quality/incorrect work.”

“Marking was the big problem—it just blew out extremely.”

“I spent longer marking in order to be able to give students the feedback they needed given the lack of face to face time.”

In addition, many responses referenced substantial unpaid time spent on self-training to adapt to online teaching. No respondents mentioned having received paid training in online learning pedagogy.

“I have had to adapt to teaching via Zoom, requiring vast hours of self-training, attending zoom trainings and supporting students as they adapted to online learning.”
Some respondents indicated a lack of support from supervisors and coordinators in managing the transition to online learning.

“There has been little to no help from my coordinators, who seem overly stressed and short of time.”

“In some UoS there wasn’t a lot of guidance from the coordinators which was hard.”

“Prior to COVID-19, the unit coordinator and lecturer did not connect with the students, and I already received complaints about them from the students in the unit in week 2. This forced me to act as a lecturer and tutor from the start of semester. When COVID-19 hit, the department replaced the unit coordinator/lecturer, however by that point the students already viewed me as the main person handling the unit.”

Figure 9. | Word Cloud generation from open question asking about the changes in workload casuals have experienced as a result of COVID-19.
Mass casualisation and the critical role of casual staff at the University of Sydney

The University of Sydney openly promotes itself as ranking 1st in Australia and 14th in the world for Arts and Humanities (University of Sydney, 2020c). This extremely high ranking is undoubtedly due to the ongoing contributions of casual staff, who according to the demographic results constitute a large proportion of teaching staff within FASS. The survey results suggest that casual staff disproportionately assume the bulk of the teaching load in FASS, while receiving inadequate compensation.

The survey results highlight that casual staff fill a number of critical teaching roles within the University of Sydney, including lecturing (40.9%), tutoring (91.2%), and course coordination (27%). In addition, the results demonstrate that some casual staff have worked at the University for an extended period of time. For instance, one third of respondents had worked at the University of Sydney for more than six years. This suggests limited possibilities for casual contracts to be made permanent.

Whilst the University of Sydney EBA 2018–2021 allows for conversion of casuals to fixed-term continuing employment (EA Clauses 67–69), the experience of casuals who have sought conversion across the life of the current EBA has not been a positive one. According to organisers from the NTEU Sydney University branch, management have systematically rejected conversion applications, with very few being successful. As a tool for helping casuals who for all intents and purposes work as ongoing staff, the conversion clauses in the EBA have therefore demonstrably failed.

As the economy recovers post-COVID-19 and universities take on more students to relieve their revenue shortfalls, there will inevitably be a lack of highly experienced casual workers the University of Sydney will require to take on the teaching load. The contribution of casual workers is instrumental to sustaining the University’s presence on Australian university rankings, and the high quality of research and teaching it advertises. The transferring of this teaching load to permanent staff risks their being overworked and overwhelmed. Quite apart from limiting the research output of permanent staff, this risks negative implications for staff morale and wellbeing. The cumulative impacts will be detrimental to the student experience for years to come.
Any drop in quality of teaching will undoubtedly reduce the appeal of Australian universities to international students. With the education of international students ranked as Australia’s third largest export, reduction in high-quality teaching at universities places Australia’s international education sector—worth $33 billion AUD in 2018—at risk (Universities Australia, 2019). This will have wider implications for the Australian economy as we continue through the current COVID-19-induced recession.

**Research candidate financial precarity**

The survey results indicated that 45.3% of respondents were HDR candidates. Previous surveys outlined that 45% of research students expected to discontinue their studies due to the financial insecurity created by the COVID-19 crisis (Johnson, Lee, Hallsworth & Spencer, 2020). These results demonstrate the ramifications of the Australian government’s failure to include the university sector in the current JobKeeper arrangements. Such an omission has greatly exacerbated the precarious financial position of casual academics, among them HDRs, resulting in significant stress and concern for study respondents. Financial difficulties are particularly amplified for HDR candidates, as anyone who is currently enrolled as a PhD or Masters by Research candidate is ineligible for any government support in the form of Youth Allowance, Austudy or Rent Assistance (Johnson, Lee, Hallsworth & Spencer, 2020). A significant reduction in HDR candidates will effectively result in the loss of a generation of highly-trained researchers. As these researchers contribute essential skilled expertise to the Australian higher education sector, and more broadly to Australian society, their loss will have acute long-term impacts.

**Work, employment and career development concerns COVID-19**

The survey results suggest that austerity measures imposed by the University of Sydney risk a lost generation of academics. The majority of FASS casuals (71.1%, n=109) indicated that they were highly concerned that COVID-19-induced austerity measures would have a negative impact on their career development. More than half of survey respondents (59.7%, n=95) indicated that they were “very likely” to “likely” to be forced to permanently leave academia on losing their casual job at the University of Sydney.

The qualitative comments reflect a high level of concern about the impact of COVID-19-induced austerity measures upon long-term career development. Current HDRs and early career academics expressed particular concern about the loss of crucial opportunities to gain teaching experience, which is essential to success on the academic job market. The qualitative analysis also highlights the important role of casual work in providing financial support to recent PhD graduates while on the academic job market. The perceived loss of such casual work opportunities has impacted current HDR candidates’ and early career academics’ attitudes towards remaining in the higher education sector.

The qualitative analysis also reflects a general sense amongst casual staff that their contributions were undervalued by the University of Sydney. Some respondents mentioned feeling “under-appreciated”, “expendable” or that they were being “discarded” by the University. If the survey
results are replicated across Australian universities, the Australian higher education sector faces a widespread exodus of academics who fill crucial teaching roles. Australia’s future research capacity risks being severely incapacitated by such an exodus, given the well-established dependence of Australian universities upon their casualised workforces.

**Additional expenses of online teaching and working remotely due to COVID-19**

The survey results indicate that the University of Sydney has failed to comprehensively address, let alone predict, the costs incurred by casuals during the University’s transition to online learning. The qualitative analysis indicates that such costs have included the purchase of office furniture, computers, headphones and microphones, and other material essential to online teaching. Additional costs associated with working from home were in the form of electricity, gas and internet. Several respondents mentioned substantial increases to electricity bills as a result of working from home.

For casual staff working from home, there has been no direct reimbursement for these additional costs associated with running the university from home. Absorbing these costs further dilutes casual pay, leading to one respondent recording an $8.00 per hour wage—less than half the current minimum wage in Australia of $19.49 per hour (Fair Work Ombudsman, 2020).

**Exacerbation of unpaid work during COVID-19**

The survey results highlight that, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, unpaid work was already of concern to casual staff at the University of Sydney. The pandemic led to a rapid transition to online learning, and university management has been negligent in assuming that this extra workload would be shouldered by casual staff. This sudden change resulted in increased workloads and additional unpaid work for casual staff at the University. The qualitative comments indicate that much of this unpaid work falls under the categories of administration and communication. In particular, many respondents cite increased time on email correspondence and consultations with students outside of regular classes. The qualitative analysis also reflects a substantial role for casual staff in providing unpaid pastoral care and support to students during this time. This demonstrates the diligence with which casual staff have worked to ensure the wellbeing of their students.

Months later there has been no discussion either at a departmental, school or faculty level about adequately reimbursing casuals for their unpaid work hours. 52.8% of casuals surveyed kept independent records of their hours, both paid and unpaid, meaning that their records could be used as evidence as part of an underpayment claim.
7. RECOMMENDATIONS

Reimbursement of additional costs of online and remote teaching

The survey finds that casual staff have incurred significant costs due to the rapid move to online teaching in response to COVID-19. To remedy this, a system is proposed whereby casual staff at the University of Sydney can claim the costs of essential items and resources such as electricity, internet data, teaching software and online tools, office equipment and technological hardware. Such a system would assist in significantly reducing the additional costs for which casuals have been left out of pocket.

The University to reverse all projected unit of study and casual jobs cuts

Casual staff provide significant value to the University and have repeatedly demonstrated their skills and loyalty to the University of Sydney. Casual staff have struggled through a semester of unprecedented difficulty while making outstanding contributions to student learning. They have successfully delivered high-quality online teaching to students, putting at risk their own financial and mental wellbeing in the process. This report strongly recommends that the University of Sydney review its position on the hiring freeze against casual and fixed-term academics and workload re-allocation to permanent staff. Further to this, the University needs to reassess the planned resting of units of study in Semester 2 as part of the FASS offering—a move which in all likelihood will result in permanent cuts to such units of study—because any cuts to units will result in cuts to casuals being hired. The decline in teaching expertise and diversity of course offerings, combined with an increase in workloads for permanent staff, risks a decline in student satisfaction, leading to a potential exodus of students from the University and a further decline in its revenue.

Payment of unpaid working hours for Semester 1 2020 and an independent investigation into unpaid working hours of casuals

The data collected from the survey indicates that underpayment is structurally established in the conditions of casual employment at the University of Sydney. Beyond recent occurrences of wage theft, the survey data suggests a longstanding systemic issue in urgent need of remedy. The number of respondents who undertook extensive hours of extra unpaid work has evidently increased in Semester 1 2020 with the COVID-19 pandemic. Any further instances of wage theft and underpayment in Semester 2 would have serious implications for the University of Sydney’s reputation as an employer in the higher education sector. The University needs to urgently investigate the circumstances surrounding unpaid hours and work with casual staff to resolve this matter. First, the University should commit itself to back-pay workers for unpaid hours accrued
this semester. Second, the University should interrogate how casual workloads are calculated so as to ensure that this precarious group receives full payment for the hours worked. This could be achieved by establishing a working group to investigate the average number of hours worked by casual staff, with the aim of ensuring that future contracts reflect more equitable averages moving forward.

**Review the process for conversion to fixed and permanent contracts for casual workers at the University**

The survey demonstrates that Australian universities rely heavily on long-term employment of casual workers, with 75.5% of USyd casuals surveyed indicating they have been employed at universities for three or more years. Casual workers have consistently contributed to the teaching and learning space over an extended period of time—and over multiple contracts—supplying the University with a diverse workforce of educational expertise. Most importantly, the long-term casualisation of workers points towards the reluctance of the University in its review process to offer stable, permanent positions to highly qualified long-term casuals. The current EBA limits the University’s capacity to convert casuals to permanent staff when they have been originally contracted as a HDR candidate. Given that the process for obtaining work in the university sector generally commences when an individual begins their HDR candidature, it makes financial sense for the University to reconsider this review process in the future, to allow more casual staff to obtain permanent contracts, considering the extensive time and money invested in these individuals. The University of Sydney’s failure to support and further the careers of its own HDR candidates and casual staff reflects poorly on the institution, as it implies a disregard for casualised workers.

**Review the pay and conditions of the University’s highest paid staff**

In recent discussions, Vice-Chancellor Michael Spence indicated that 320 executive staff (both professional and academic) earn over a quarter of a million dollars each per annum. In 2018, the Vice-Chancellor himself was reported to earn over $1.5 million AUD as part of his annual salary (Ross, 2019) and has so far failed to lead by example in refusing to commit to a salary reduction. In comparison, 28 out of 41 (68.2%) Australian Vice-Chancellors have already committed to salary reductions, with 17 committing to a 20% or more salary cut (Ross, 2020).

Despite management’s lack of self-reflection, casual staff have been repeatedly informed that they must bear the burden of financial losses caused by the COVID-19 crisis and the University’s over-reliance on international students as a business model. The University needs to offer transparency about its budgetary constraints as it pertains to casual workers. Benefits and burdens need to be more equitably distributed if the University wishes to claim that they are not a corporation but a public not-for-profit institution. As it stands, the management of university finances reflects a corporate structure. The smallest number of workers receive the bulk of the benefits, while the majority of workers bear its burdens. This is a question of which ethical values the University of Sydney chooses to endorse, and of what the University should represent.
8. CONCLUSION

This survey communicates the very real and ongoing issues that FASS casuals have faced systemically, and in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. The University has not adequately dealt with—let alone acknowledged—the stresses and insecurity endured by casuals during the rapid transition to online teaching, nor casuals’ working conditions more generally. When comparing the survey results to survey results of UNSW casuals, it reflects an issue of systemic wage theft and the likelihood that wage theft is widespread across the sector. This report indicates a need for an industry-wide investigation into the current university model that pits different classes of university staff against one another to the benefit of the elite managerial class. It is expected that similar findings would be found in the case of professional staff employed on a casual basis within the tertiary sector. Further research and independent investigation should be conducted in full dialogue with casual and permanent staff, the National Tertiary Education Union and University management before any more decisions are made that may cause irreparable reputational and financial harm to both the sector and the University’s ability to rebound from this unprecedented crisis.
Authors and Acknowledgements

All co-authors are members of the University of Sydney Casuals Network and are FASS casuals at the University of Sydney.

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