

Working from home during the pandemic¹

There has been lots of bold talk about how workers have reacted to forced working from home during the COVID-19 pandemic. But there hasn't been much information on what they really think, how they were affected, and what will happen from here.

We studied over 11,000 employees in seven Canadian and seven Australian universities through an online survey — the CHUSS (COVID-19 Homeworking for University Staff Survey). In both countries, most universities shifted most of their work online earlier this year. These are our first, **preliminary** results about employee experiences, from an incomplete sample (there were about 200 observations to be added at the time of the analysis). Some results may change very slightly when the full dataset is available. What we have provides a mixed picture, but it tells us that a lot of change is ahead and that workers should be part of the discussion about how their workplaces respond.

Universities are interesting because they are made up of a varied workforce. We mostly think of universities as staffed by academics, but more workers perform administrative and professional roles, similar to those in other organisations in the private and public sectors. We found that these two groups experienced forced working from home quite differently.

In general, academics were typically negative about forced working from home, while administrative and professional employees had more positive experiences (Figures 1-4).

Most general/professional staff did none of their work from home before the pandemic, and most academic staff did only a minority of their work from home (Figures 5-6). People varied a lot in how much they want to work from home. One thing was clear, though. Most people wanted to do some of their paid work from home, but few wanted to work at home all the time.

¹ Seminar presented by David Peetz to Centre for Work, Organisation and Wellbeing, Griffith University, Brisbane, 18 November 2020. Other researchers involved in the project are: Carolyn Troup (Griffith University); Glenda Strachan (Griffith University); Susan Ressia (Griffith University); Johanna Weststar (University of Western Ontario); Alison Preston (University of Western Australia); Amanda Coles (Deakin University); Barbara de la Harpe (University of Southern Queensland); Bernadette Lynch (University of Southern Queensland); Catherine Leighton (University of Western Australia); Ioana Ramia (University of New South Wales); Jason Foster (Athabasca University); Kelly Pike (York University); Kim Southey (University of Southern Queensland); March To (University of Western Australia); Marian Baird (University of Sydney); Mojan Naisani Samani (McMaster University); Natalie Galea (University of New South Wales); Rae Cooper (University of Sydney); Rupa Banarjee (Ryerson University); Sara Charlesworth (RMIT University); Scott Walsworth (University of Saskatchewan); Sean O'Brady (McMaster University); Shalene Werth (University of Southern Queensland); Shelagh Campbell (University of Regina); Tim Barkiw (Ryerson University). The text here is an edited version of an article first published in *The Conversation*, 'Working from home during COVID-19: What do employees really want?', on 5 November 2020.

For about a third of employees in both groups, a roughly 50/50 balance between working from the office and working from home would be ideal. Another two fifths would like to do a majority of their work at home. Another quarter would like to do only a minority of their work from home (Figures 7-8).

Administrative and professional staff in both countries wanted a bit more time working from home than academics. Both wanted to work from home more than they did before the pandemic, but administrative and professional staff wanted to increase their home-work by more (Figures 5 & 7).

Women wanted a bit more time working from home than men. And Canadians wanted a bit more time working at home than Australians, but not by much.

We haven't yet identified the reasons why some people were positive about their experience with home-working and some were negative. But, aside from the self-evident savings in travel time, we do know that a majority of people found they were interrupted less by others at work, as there were fewer people around (Figure 9).

And for big majorities (two-thirds to three-quarters) of people in our study: they had a space at home where they could work (Figure 10), and the equipment at home was suitable (Figure 11). By a smaller majority they felt they received adequate support from their university (Figure 12). For most, their home provided a pleasant environment (Figure 13). But not everyone was happy. There was still no shortage of negative comments for us to read about equipment and the set up at home.

A more widespread negative finding was in working hours. About three fifths ended up working more (Figures 14-15) and many felt more tired (Figures 16-17).

For academics, disaffection with working arrangements under the pandemic was worse when they had less experience with online teaching. But this was not the only factor. Even amongst those who were very experienced with online teaching, views were evenly split on whether the new work arrangements were a positive or negative experience (Figure 18). The finding that working hours had increased even amongst administrative and professional staff (Figures 14 & 15) suggested it was unlikely that the shift to online teaching was solely responsible for the increased working hours for academics.

Academic employees ended up spending more time meeting their teaching obligations (Figure 19), and also more time on administration or what universities call 'service' — especially female academics (Figure 20). Many academics had less time to spend on research (Figure 21), especially to collect data (Figure 22). Women, in particular, had less time to finish or submit research papers (Figure 23). This is consistent with claims from journal editors that women's submissions to journals have dropped off since the pandemic started.

Academics tended to be concerned about how their performance appraisals will be managed. But administrative and professional employees were much less bothered by this (Figure 24)

Most people had fewer connections with people they worked with (Figure 25). But there was less separation between work and home. About two fifths felt interference from work to home life increased, and about a third felt that interference the other way (from home life to work) had increased. The interference was clearly greater for academics than for administrative and professional staff. Less than one fifth felt that these forms of interference decreased (Figures 26-27). Nearly half of employees spent more time on domestic responsibilities (Figure 29), and slightly more felt that their work was more interrupted by non-work responsibilities (Figure 29). Very few spent less time on domestic responsibilities.

Stress went up (Figure 30). With all the redundancies happening in universities, especially in Australia, job security plummeted (Figure 31). Similarly, two fifths of academics felt their career prospects had fallen, only a small number felt they had increased. A majority of administrative and professional staff saw no change in career prospects, but those who felt they had deteriorated still outnumbered those who thought they had improved (Figure 32).

Job satisfaction declined, especially amongst academics. In net terms it went up slightly among administrative and professional staff (Figures 33 & 34).

This, and other patterns of difference between the two job types, could not be dismissed as a result of academics always being unhappier than administrative and professional staff due to some general difference in disposition or something related. A comparable, earlier study of Australian university staff had been conducted in 2011-12. If there were these inherent differences between academic and other staff, they would be as strong in this earlier survey as they were in the current survey. Yet the earlier survey found only small differences between the two groups in their perceptions of changes in job satisfaction, unlike the very large differences evident in this 2020 study (Figure 35). In the Work and Careers in Australian Universities (WCAU) survey of academics and general staff across 18 universities that we undertook in 2011-12, there was about a 4 percentage point difference between academic and professional staff in responses to a question about whether their job satisfaction had gone up or down. That compares with a much larger difference in the more recent CHUSS survey. The difference in experiences between academics and general/professional staff is real and not mainly a matter of different expectations.

Administrative and professional staff perceived themselves as being slightly happier than previously, academics were commonly unhappier (Figure 36).

Overall it was not a simple story. There were pluses and minuses. Working from home had a lot going for it, but it also had problems for a lot of people. Overall there was no consistent view amongst employees about what they wanted.

There was not even a single view about whether they wanted to work from home or the office. Most wanted some combination of the two. If you wanted to get the benefit of less travel time and cost and fewer interruptions, but also want to retain contact with co-workers and have a break from the kids, then a mixture of working from the office and home makes sense.

As it is, some of the problems weren't just because of home-working. Online teaching, for example, is a totally different process, it's not just doing the same work from a different place.

The bottom line is working from home is all too complex for simple managerial edicts to work. Without involving employees and their representatives in decisions, managers could come up with 'solutions' that may be worse than the problems they're trying to deal with. Some managers may have experienced this already if they imposed decisions onto their staff.

The Covid-19 crisis is going to transform work and how it is done, not just in universities. If managers think they unilaterally know how and what to do, they could turn disorder into chaos.

Figure 1: Associations with working arrangements under COVID-19 (first word), by gender and job type

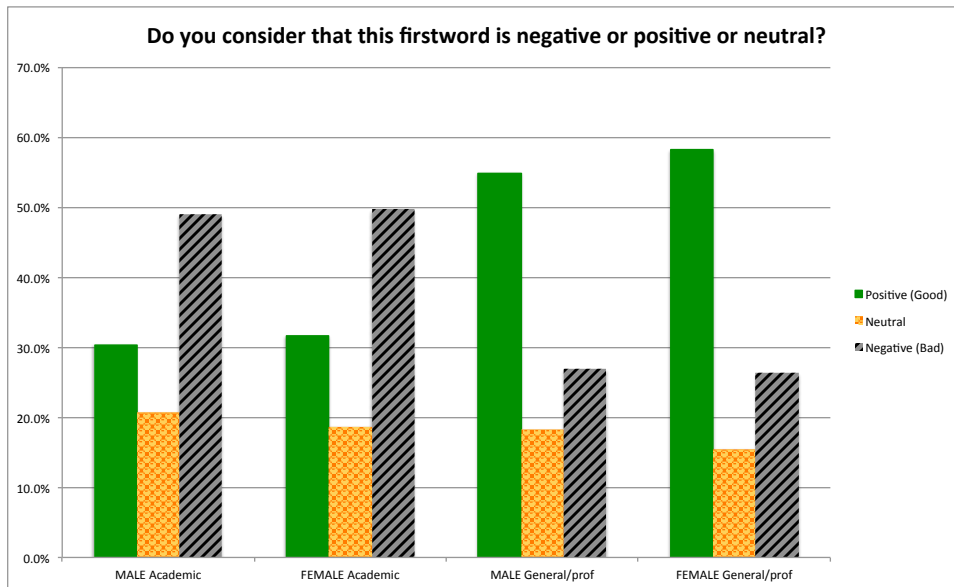


Figure 2: Associations with working arrangements under COVID-19 (first word), by country and job type

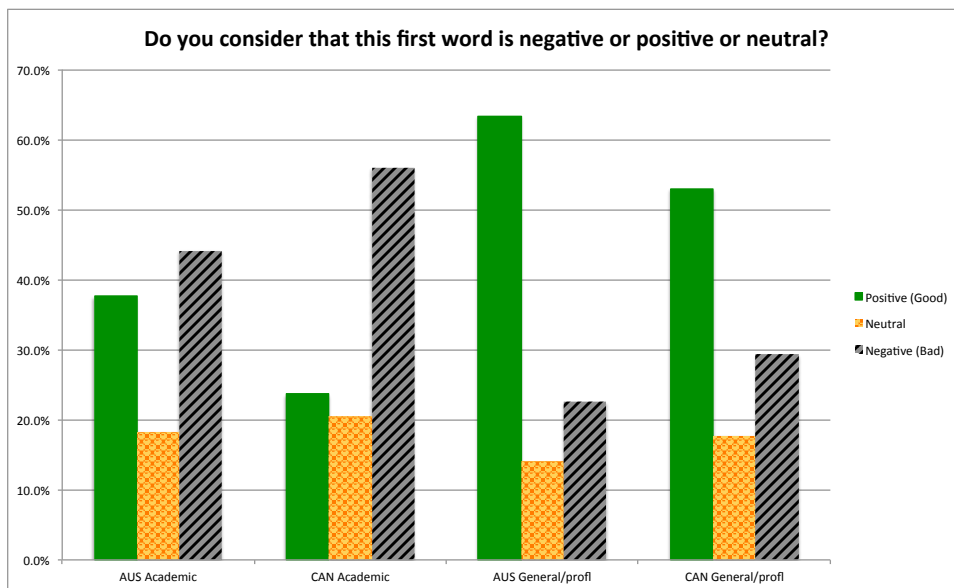


Figure 3: Associations with working arrangements under COVID-19 (second word), by country and job type

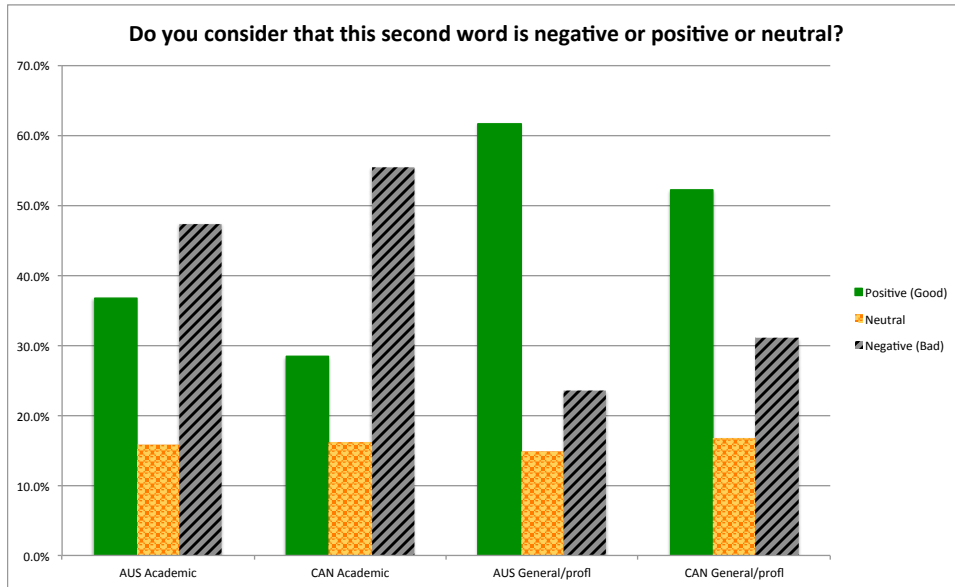


Figure 4: Associations with working arrangements under COVID-19 (third word), by country and job type

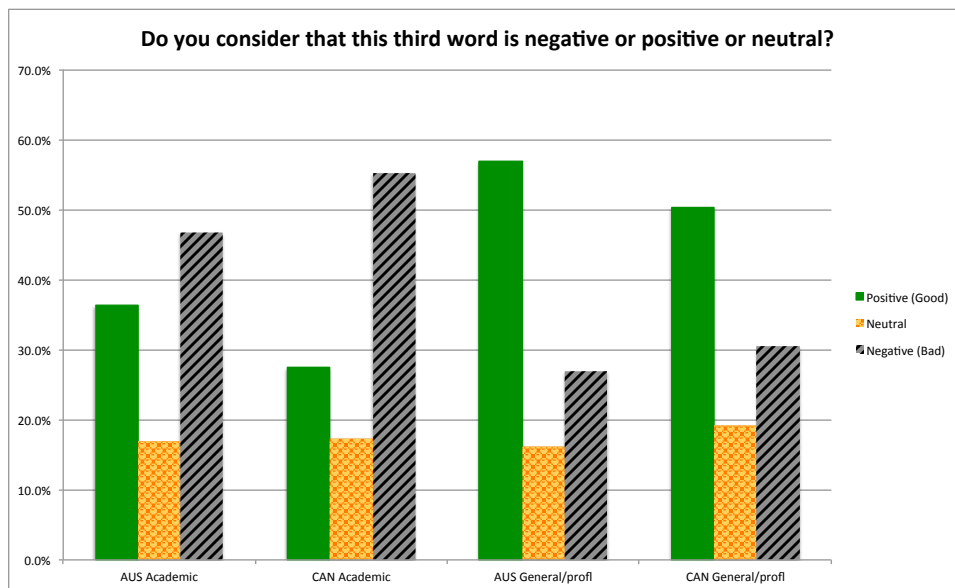


Figure 5: Homeworking before the pandemic, by country and job type

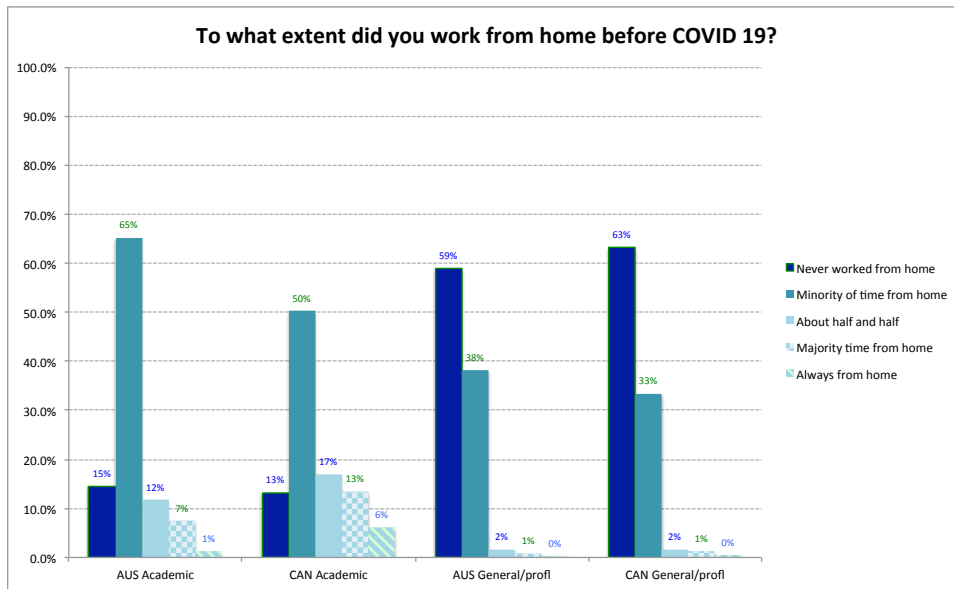


Figure 6: Homeworking during the pandemic, by country and job type

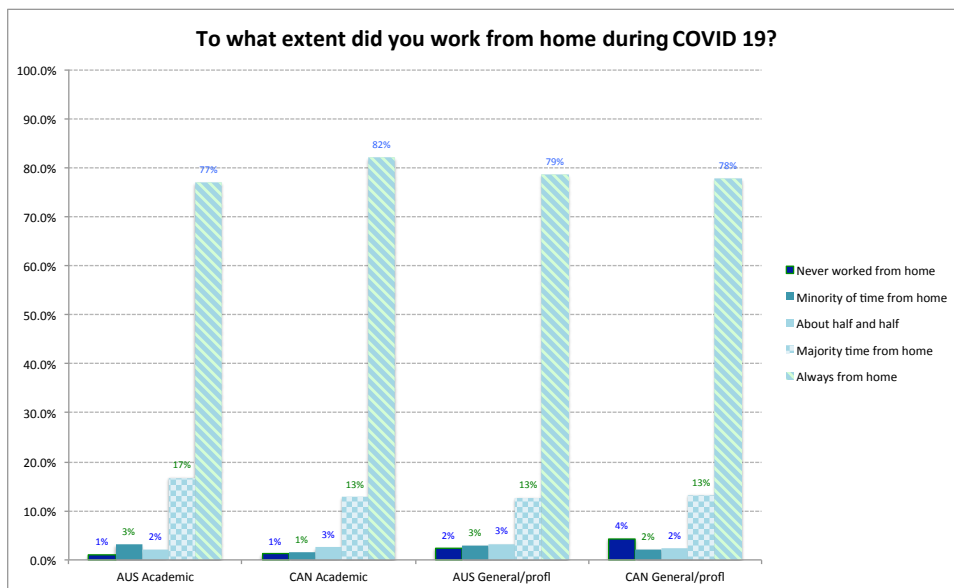


Figure 7: Preferred homeworking arrangements, by country and job type

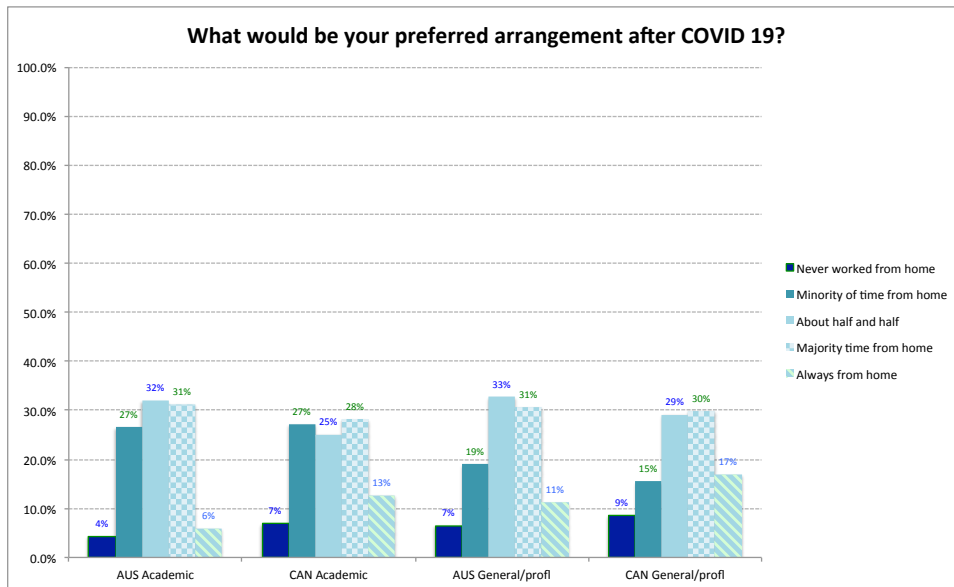


Figure 8: Preferred homeworking arrangements, by gender and job type

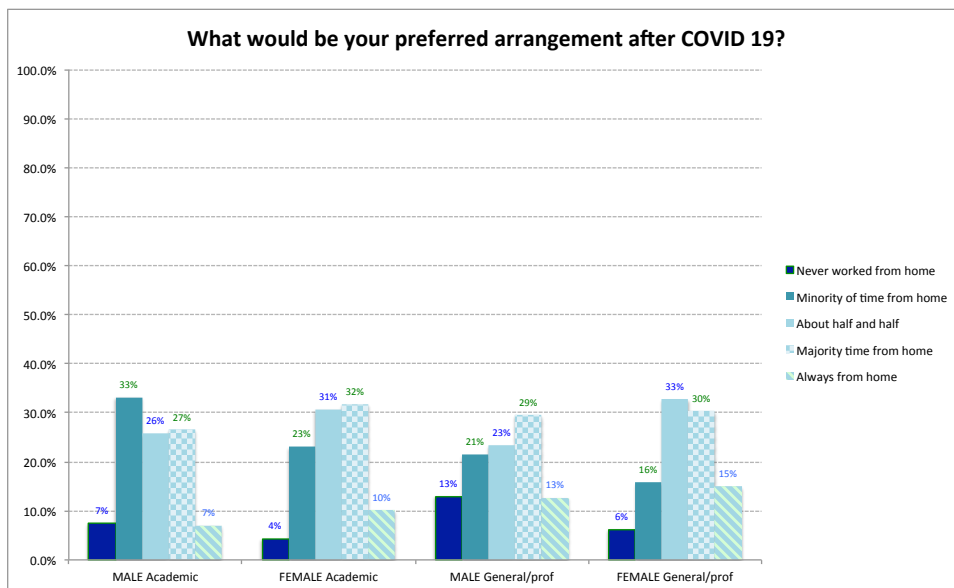


Figure 9: Change in disruption by other people, by gender and job type

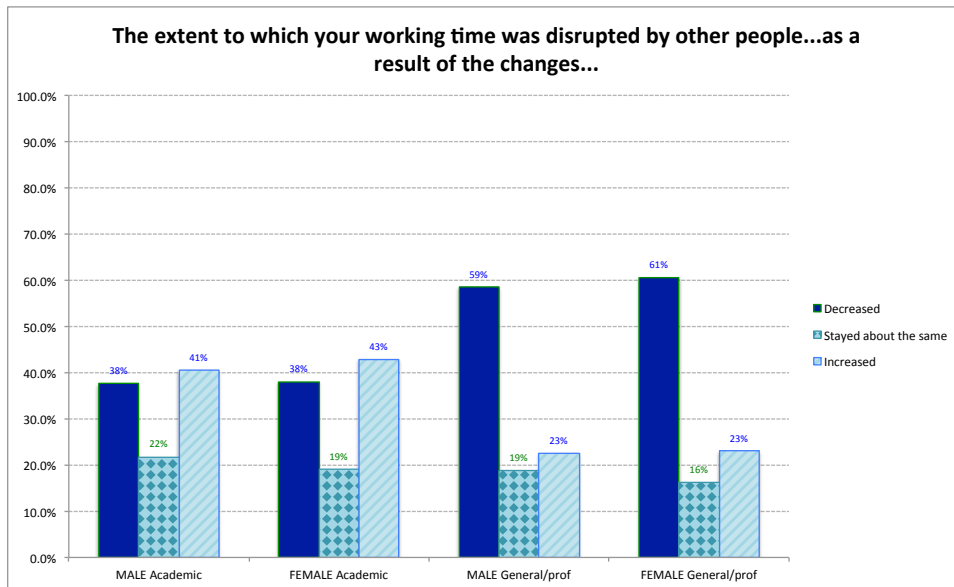


Figure 10: Homeworking space, by country and job type

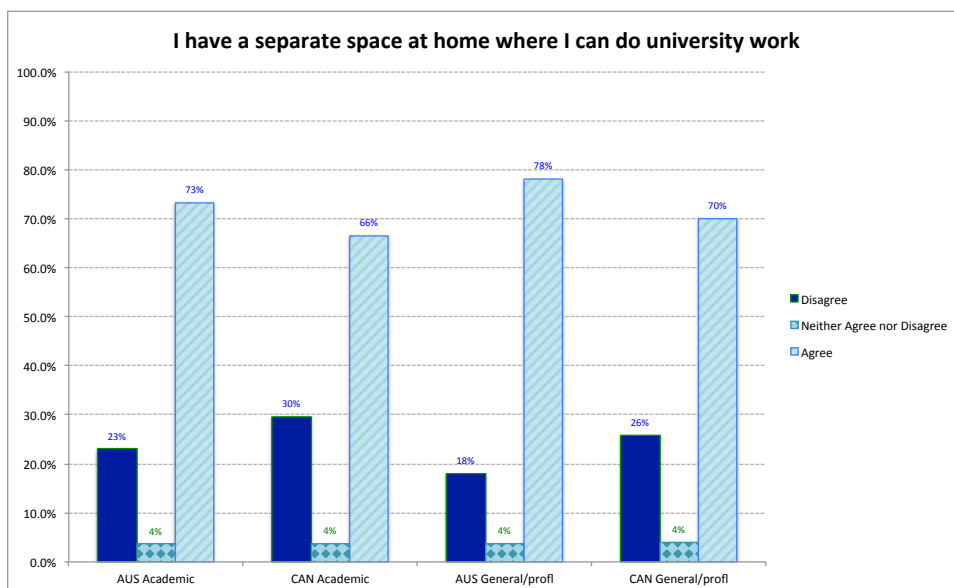


Figure 11: Homeworking equipment, by country and job type

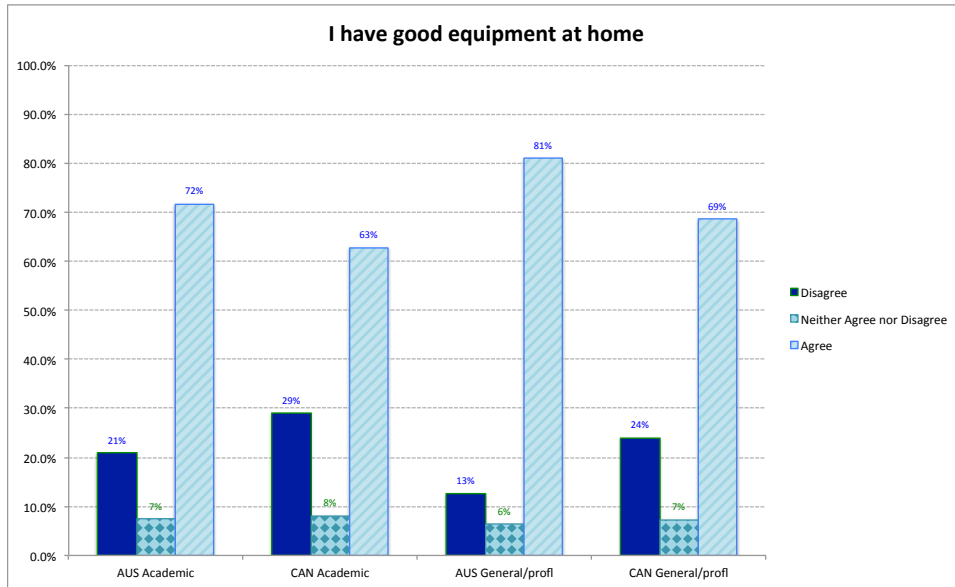


Figure 12: Homeworking support, by country and job type

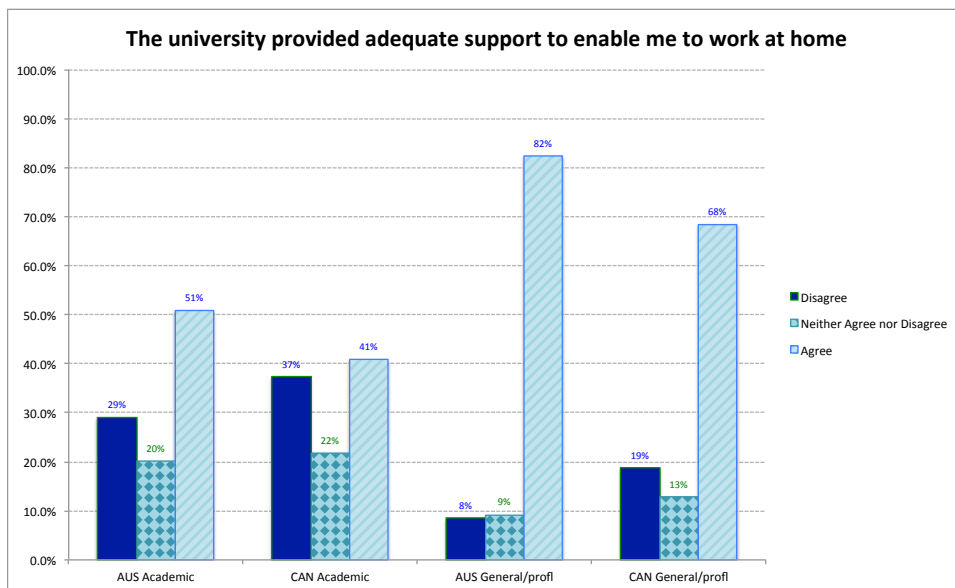


Figure 13: Home environment, by country and job type

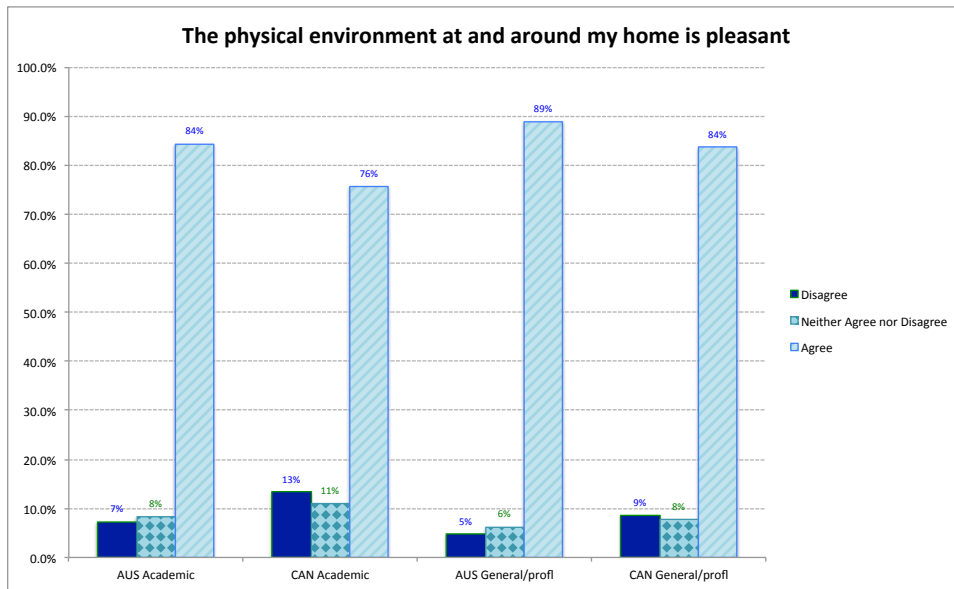


Figure 14: Changes in working hours, by gender and job type

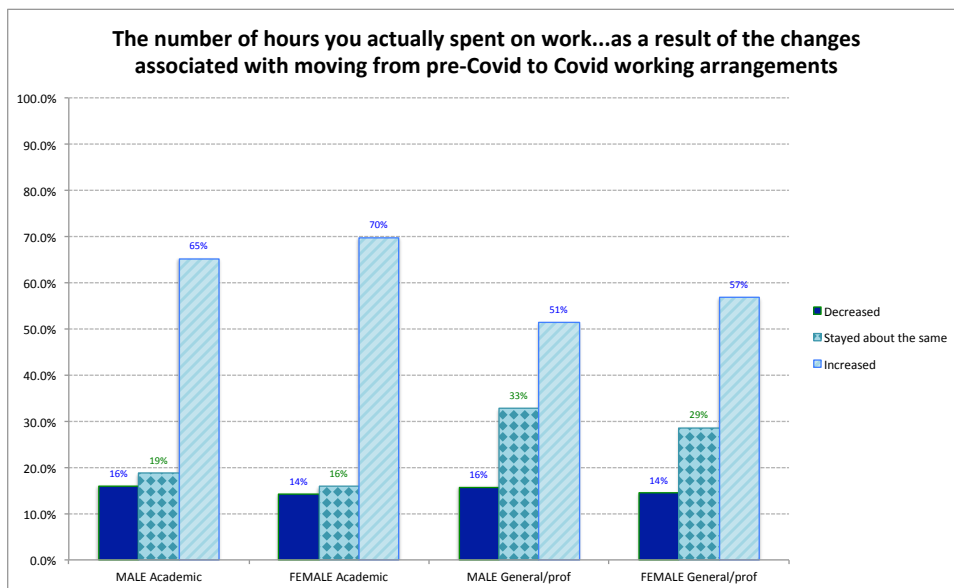


Figure 15: Changes in working hours, by country and job type

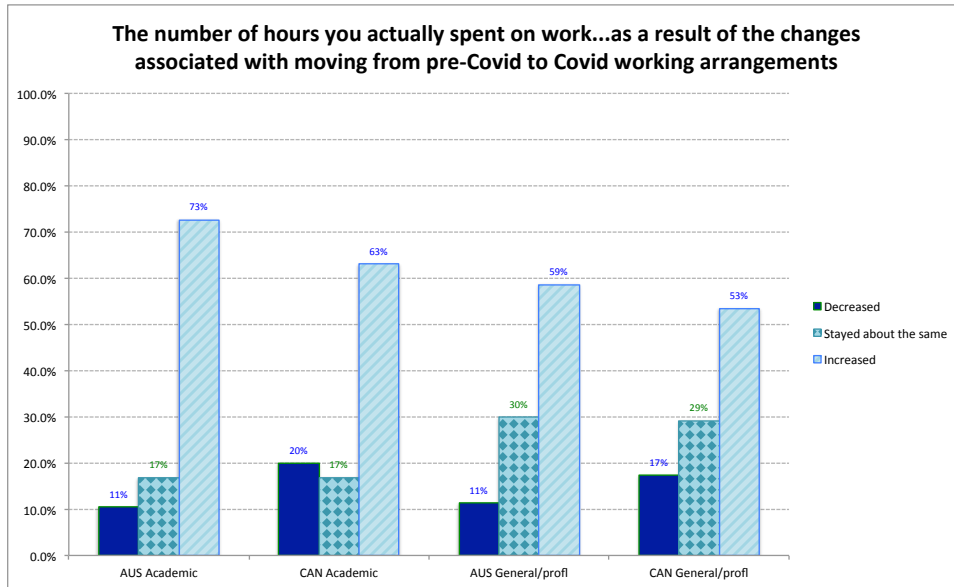


Figure 16: Changes in tiredness, by gender and job type

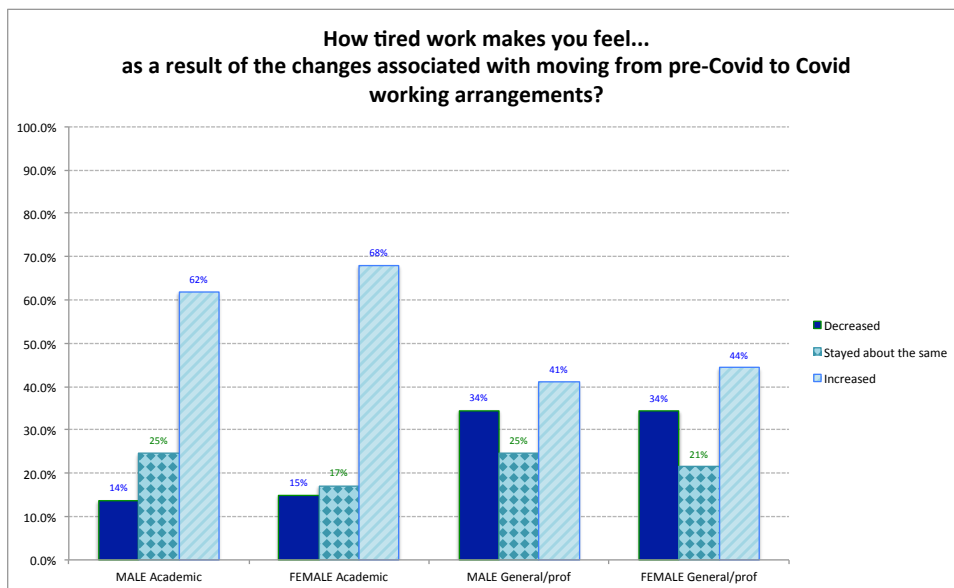


Figure 17: Changes in tiredness, by country and job type

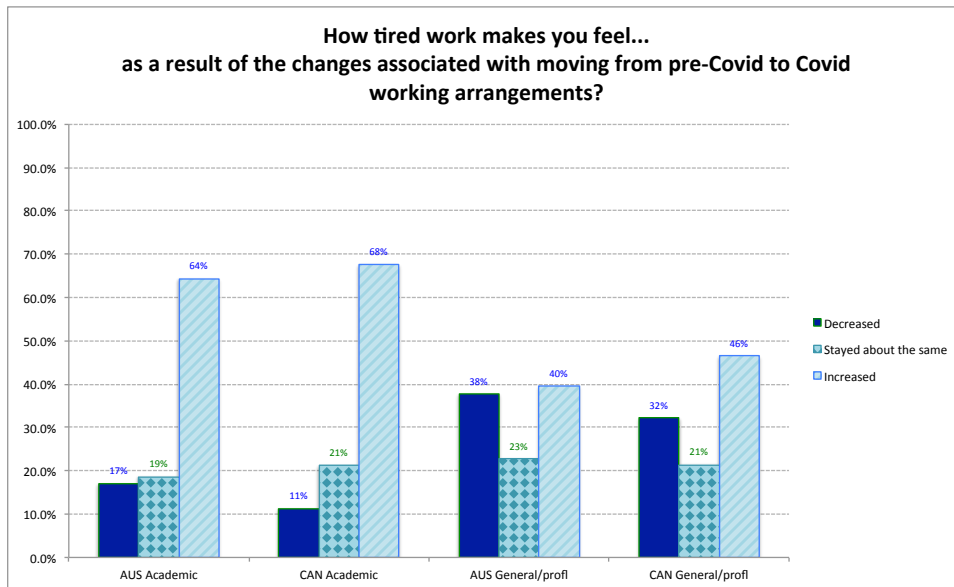


Figure 18: Associations with working arrangements under COVID-19 (first word), by prior experience with on line teaching

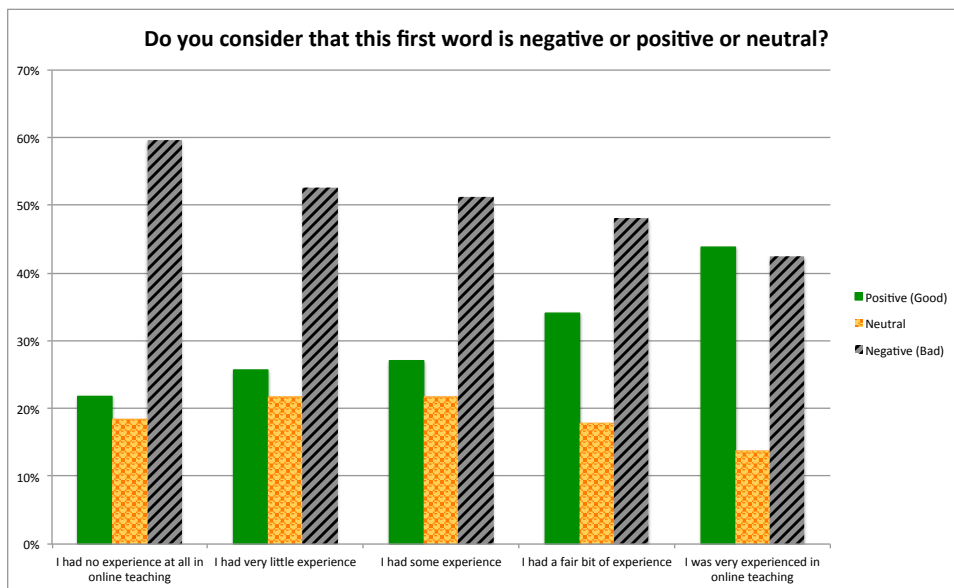


Figure 19: Changes in time spent on teaching, by gender and country

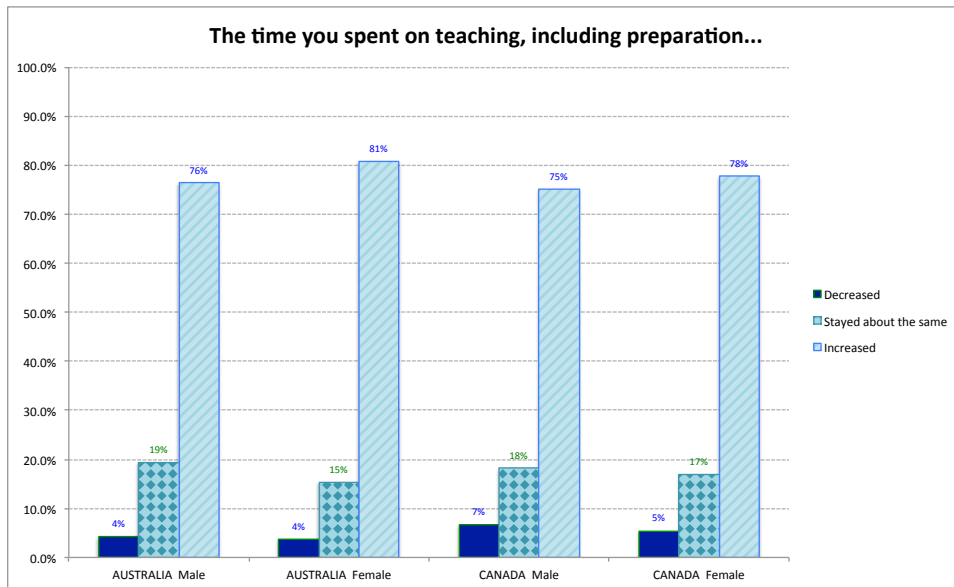


Figure 20: Changes in time spent on administration and service, by gender and country

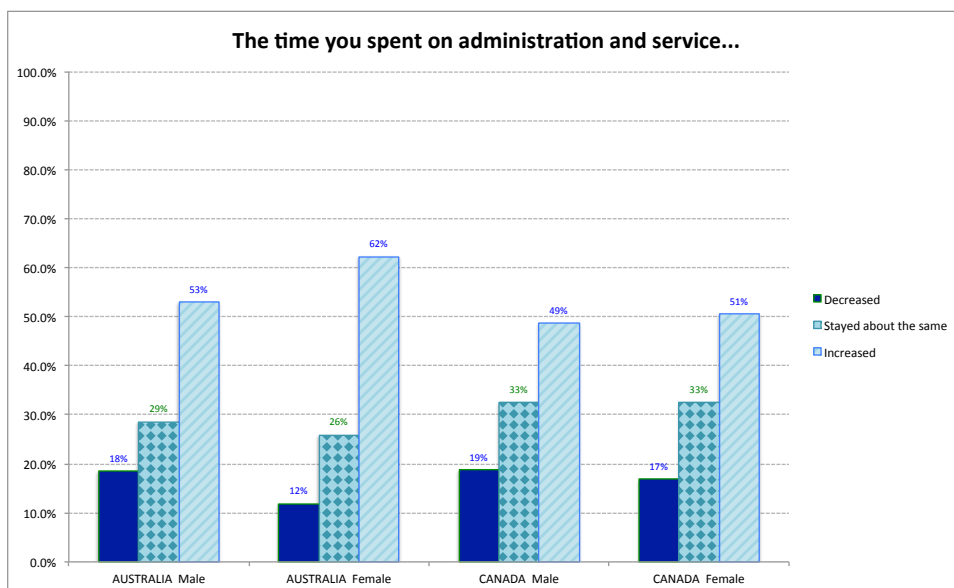


Figure 21: Changes in time spent on research, by gender and country

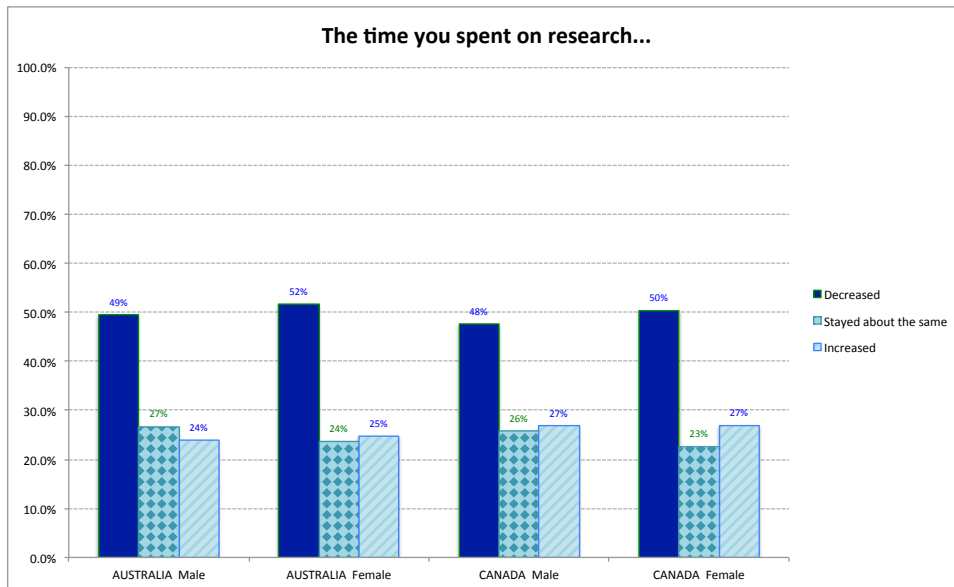


Figure 22: Changes in ability to collect research data, by gender and country

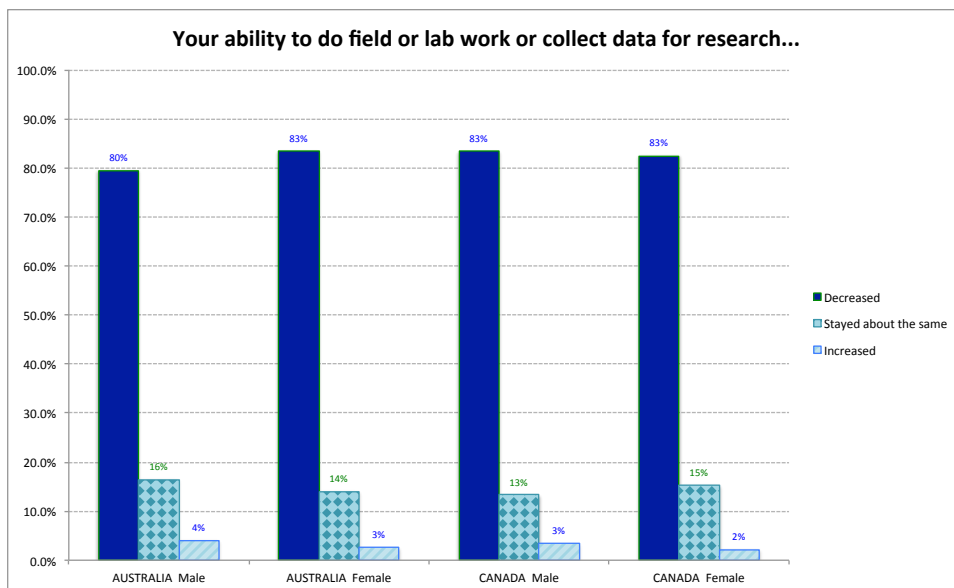


Figure 23: Changes in ability to submit research papers, by gender and country

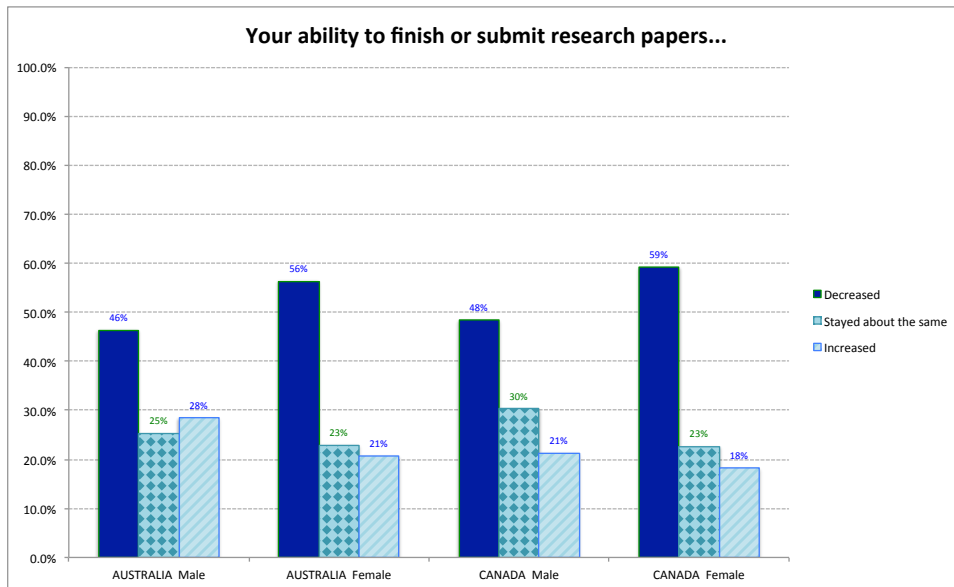


Figure 24: Concern about performance appraisal, by gender and job type

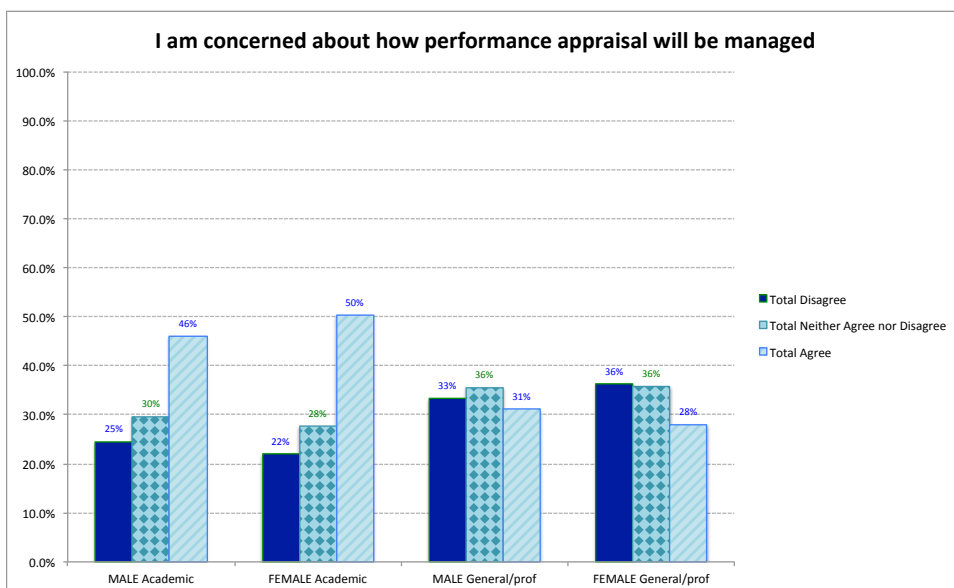


Figure 25: Change in connection with colleagues, by gender and job type

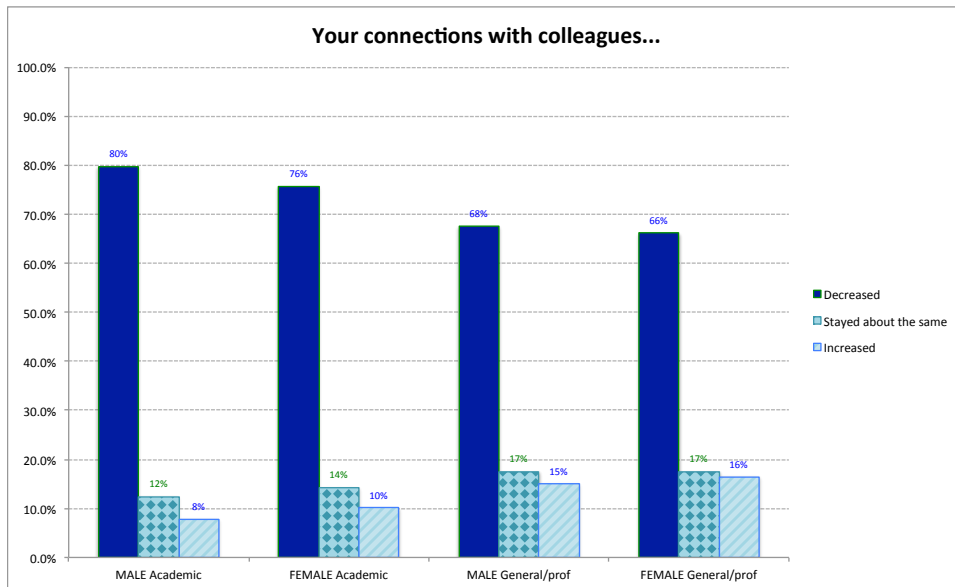


Figure 26: Change in work interference in personal life, by gender and job type

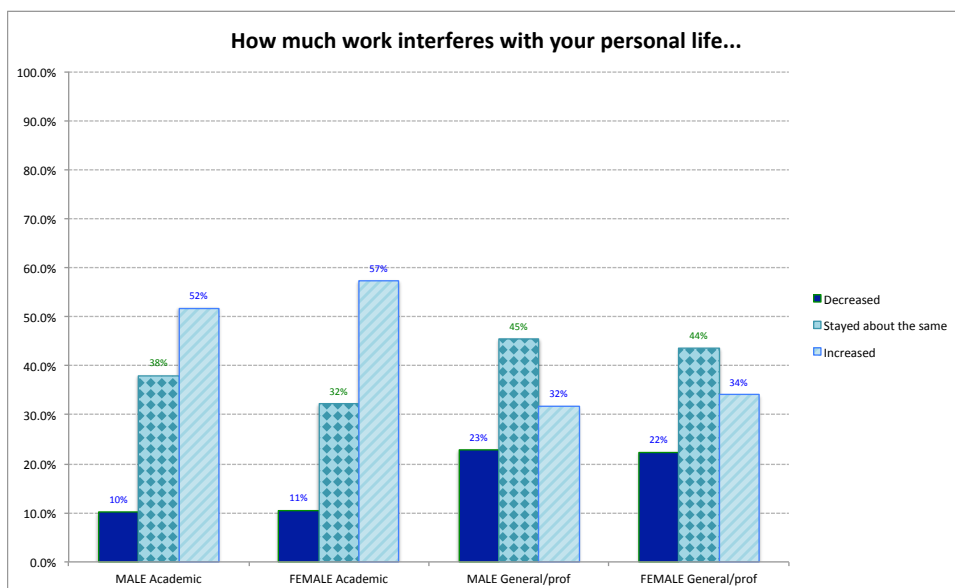


Figure 27: Change in personal life interference in work, by gender and job type

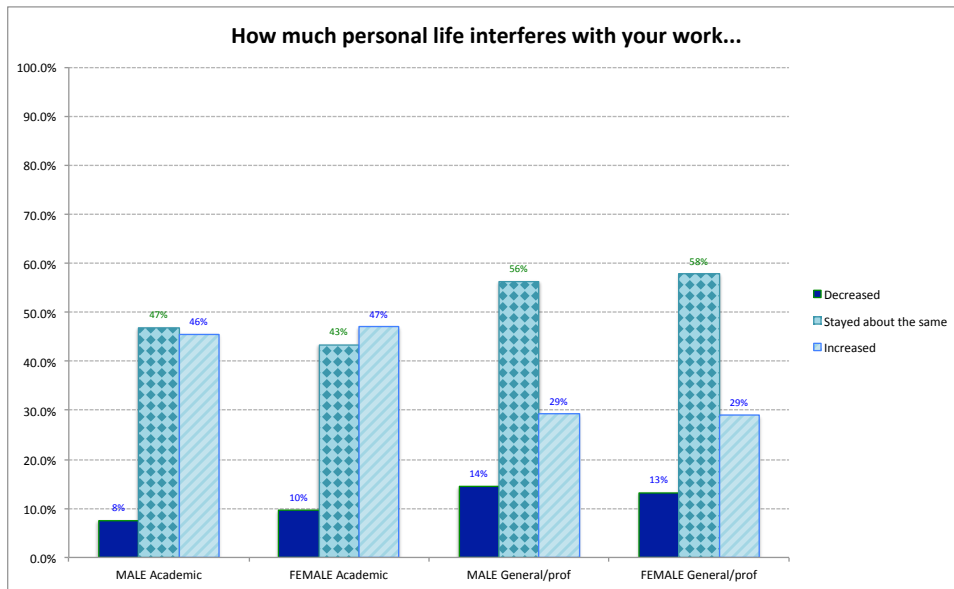


Figure 28: Change in time spent on domestic responsibilities, by gender and job type

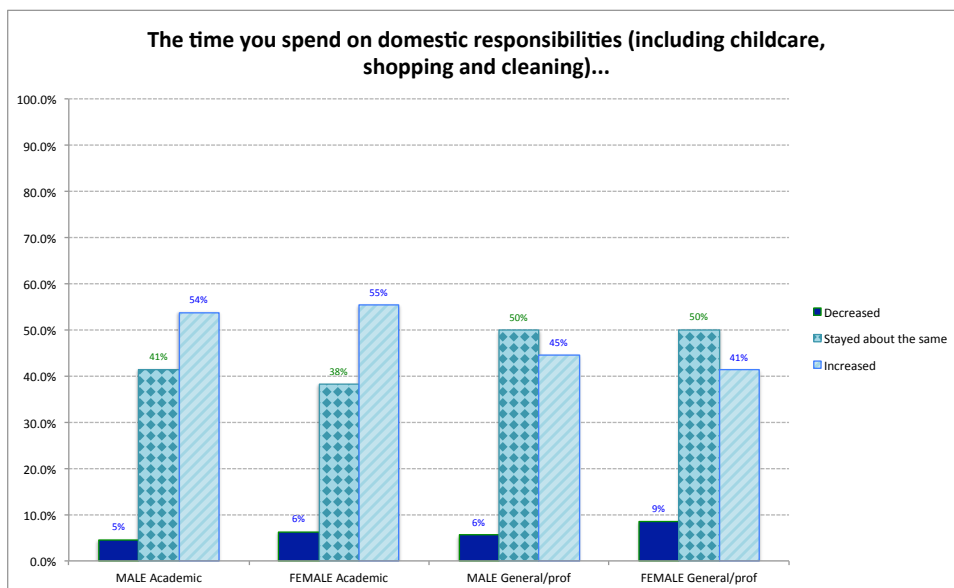


Figure 29: Change in disruption by non-work responsibilities, by gender and job type

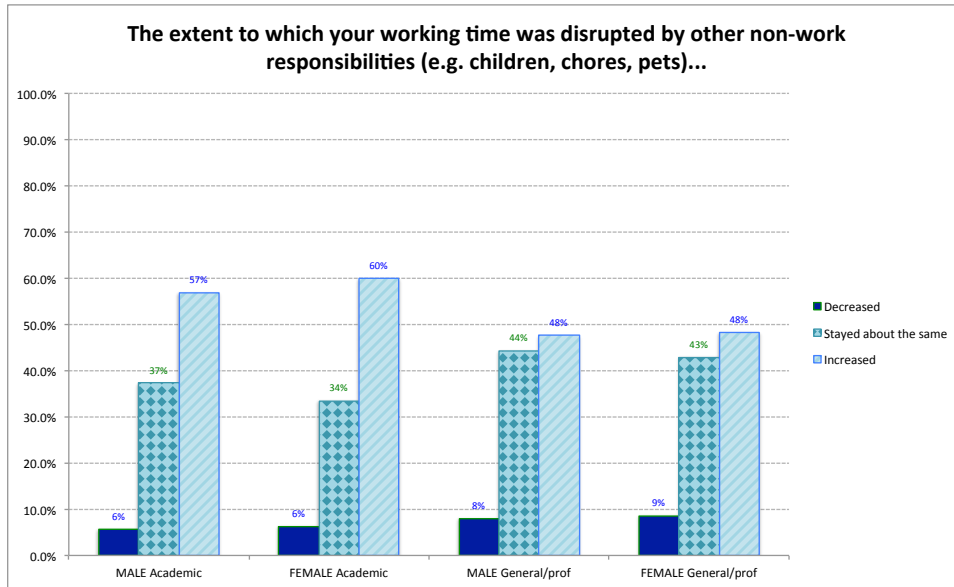


Figure 30: Change in stress, by gender and job type

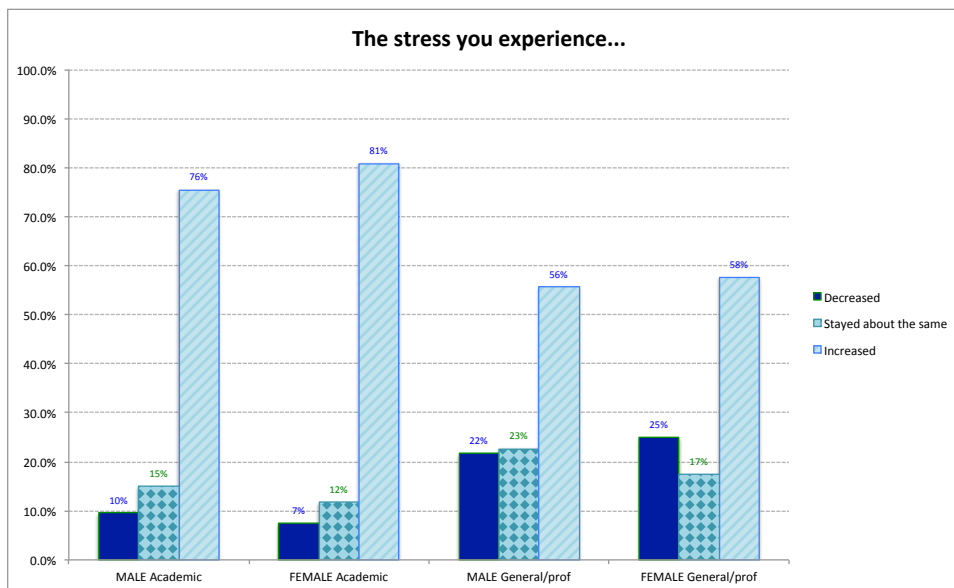


Figure 31: Change in job security, by country and job type

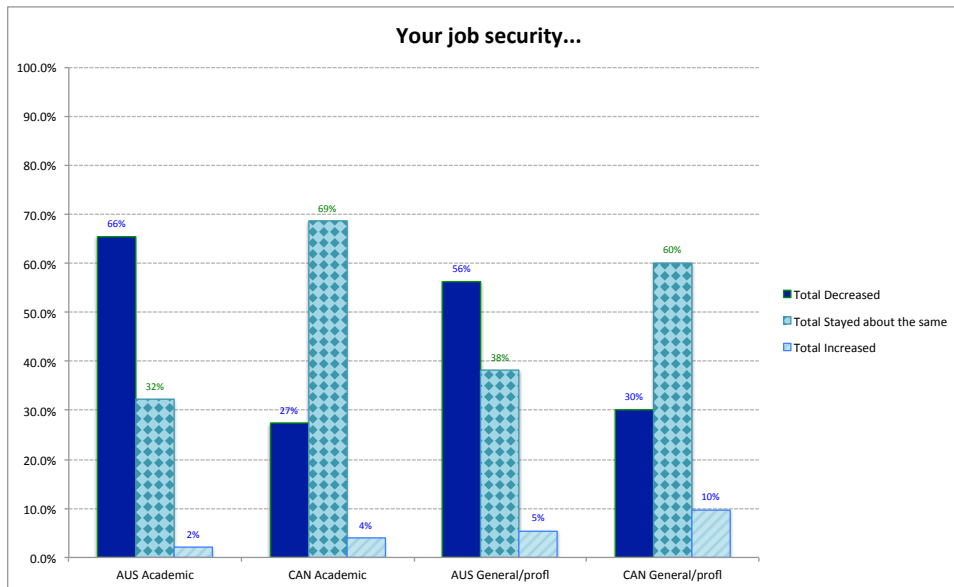


Figure 32: Change in perceived career prospects, by gender and job type

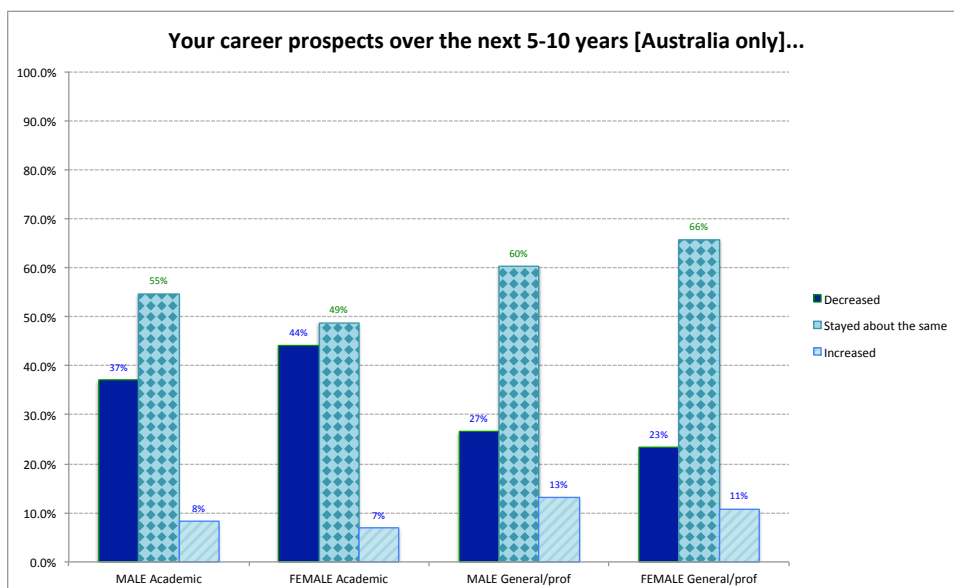


Figure 33: Change in job satisfaction, by gender and job type

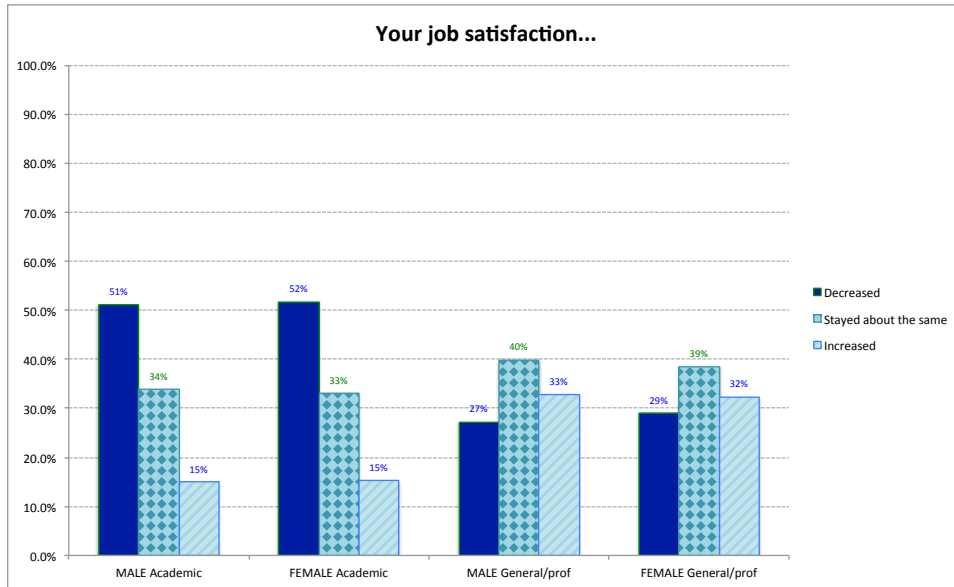


Figure 34: Change in job satisfaction, by country and job type

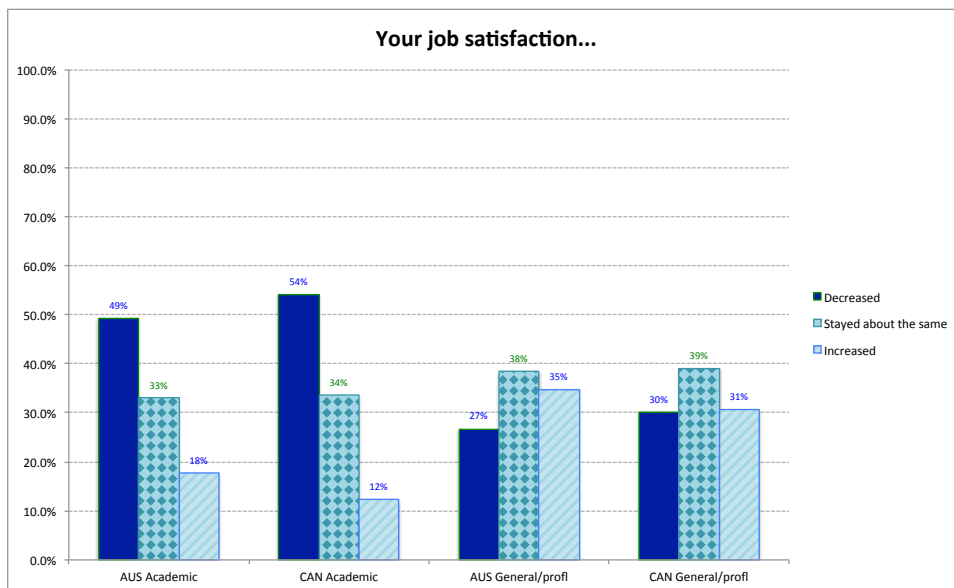


Figure 35: Change in job satisfaction, by job type and year

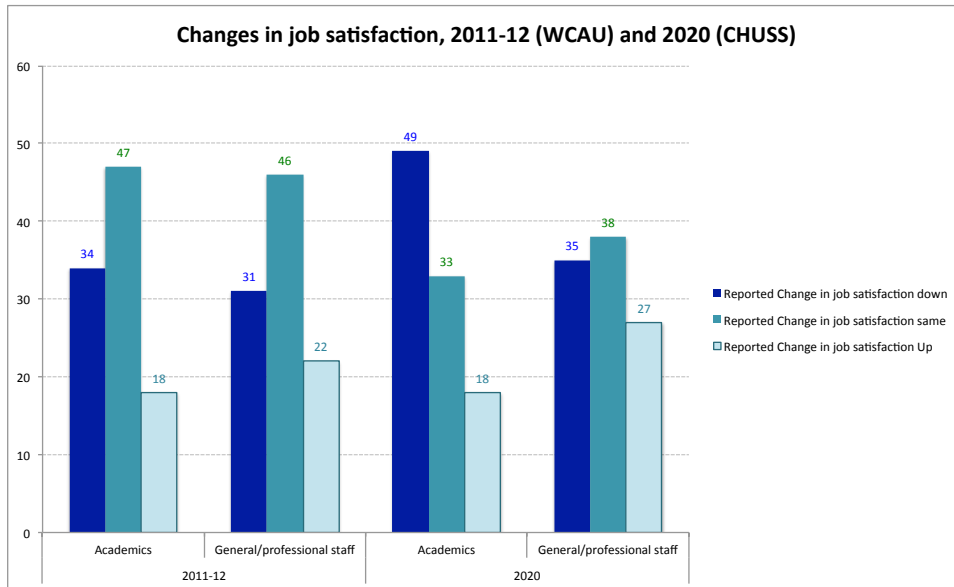


Figure 36: Change happiness, by country and job type

