Australian University census on Staff Wellbeing

Australian University Sector Report Overview*

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*This brief report should be read in conjunction with the technical report

Respondents: 11,477
Universities represented: 42
Universities with over 100 respondents: 36
Professional staff: 5 112
Academic staff: 6 138

Introduction

Australian universities are facing a serious and growing crisis in staff mental health. A five-year national study showed widespread psychosocial risks including constant restructuring, heavier workloads, digital stress, and long-term sector instability. Despite government reviews highlighting poor governance and student wellbeing, staff wellbeing has received limited direct attention. Yet under Australian WHS laws, universities are obligated to prevent and manage psychosocial risks. Evidence indicates this duty is not being met, underscoring the need for this sector census on PSC.

What Is Psychosocial Safety Climate (PSC)?

PSC refers to the organisational climate for worker psychological health and safety. It reflects the safety system:

- senior management commitment to stress prevention
- the priority placed on worker psychological health vs productivity
- communication about work stress and psychological safety
- participation and consultation with staff and stakeholders and all levels of the organisation

PSC is a system-level indicator – a leading predictor of future working conditions, job strain, worker mental health, burnout, and productivity. Research shows that PSC is the "cause of the causes" of work stress. When PSC is low, workers are more likely to face high job demands, bullying, low control, poor support, and organisational injustice.

What the Census Reveals

The PSC Global Observatory's 2025 data from 11,477 personnel shows the sector is performing very poorly when it comes to maintaining a mentally healthy workplace (See Fig 1, bottom line).

Data from the ARC University Digital Stress Project shows across the years (2020 to 2024) that risky PSC has steadily increased (red and orange), and good levels of PSC (green) decreased. The 2025 Census data shows a similar pattern to the 2023 and 2024 findings.

Compared to the national general population of workers (Australian Workplace Barometer (AWB) 2021 and SuperFriend 2023 data) and public sector data (Victoria Public Sector) the results are stark and show a picture of a workforce working in circumstances where staff psychological health and safety is a significant concern.

Across the sample, 76% of university staff reported risky PSC levels (high- and very high-risk) – more than double the proportion in the general workforce.

Highlighted Results

Psychosocial Safety Climate (PSC)

69% disagreed that 'Senior management considers employee psychological health to be as important as productivity.'

73% disagreed that risks to their psychological health are actively monitored.

Emotional Exhaustion

82% of participants ranked high or very high in emotional exhaustion.

Restructuring and Organisational Change

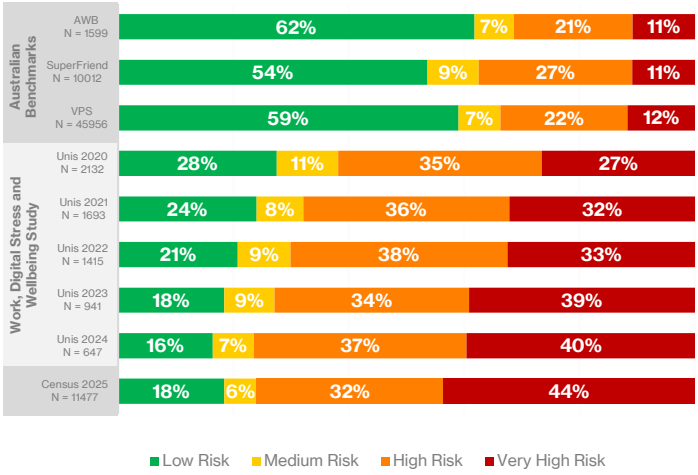
80% agreed that new policies and procedures designed to cut costs are constantly being introduced. Organisational change is significantly related to emotional exhaustion.

Working Hours

71% reported working more than their contracted or paid hours

31% are contracted or paid to work full-time hours are working 48hrs a week or more

Figure 1. PSC Risk Levels: Uni Sector vs Benchmarks



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The PSC Global Observatory's 2025 Census ranking of universities is based on universities with at least 100 responses (11,283 staff responses).

The top three performers on PSC are (see Fig. 2):

1. Charles Darwin University
2. University of New South Wales
3. University of Queensland

- 100% of universities recorded PSC levels in the high- or very high-risk categories.
- In terms of our data around 8,200 university personnel are reporting high to very high-risk PSC.
- Risk levels were consistently high across gender, role, employment level, and union member (yes/no).
- Only academic deans and senior professional managers reported lower risk levels, suggesting a disconnect between leadership experience and frontline reality.

Conclusion

Results indicate a sector-wide public health concern requiring urgent, coordinated action. Australian universities are at a crossroads. The evidence is clear: staff are working in environments that place their psychological health at significant risk. Without urgent action, the sector's ability to deliver high-quality education, world-class research, and positive student experiences will be compromised.

By prioritising PSC, universities can rebuild trust, strengthen performance, and create workplaces that support the wellbeing of the people who make higher education possible.

Who We Are

The PSC Global Observatory team based at UniSA – ARC Laureate Prof Maureen Dollard, Prof Kurt Lushington, Dr Amy Zadow, and Daniel Neser – is dedicated to advancing research and interventions that promote a healthy and supportive work environment. This is an ARC Laureate funded project (FL200100025) supported by Transitioning Well, the National Tertiary Education Union, and SuperFriend and has Adelaide University (formerly University of South Australia) Human Ethics clearance (206950).

*A technical report accompanies this short report at stresscafe.net

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Figure 2. University PSC Scores and Ranking

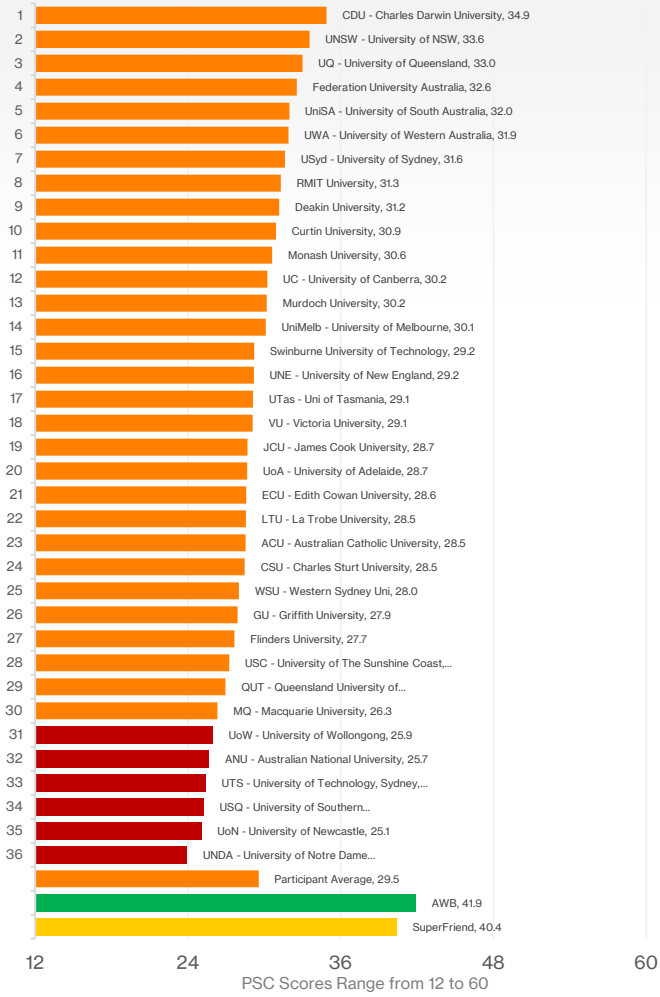
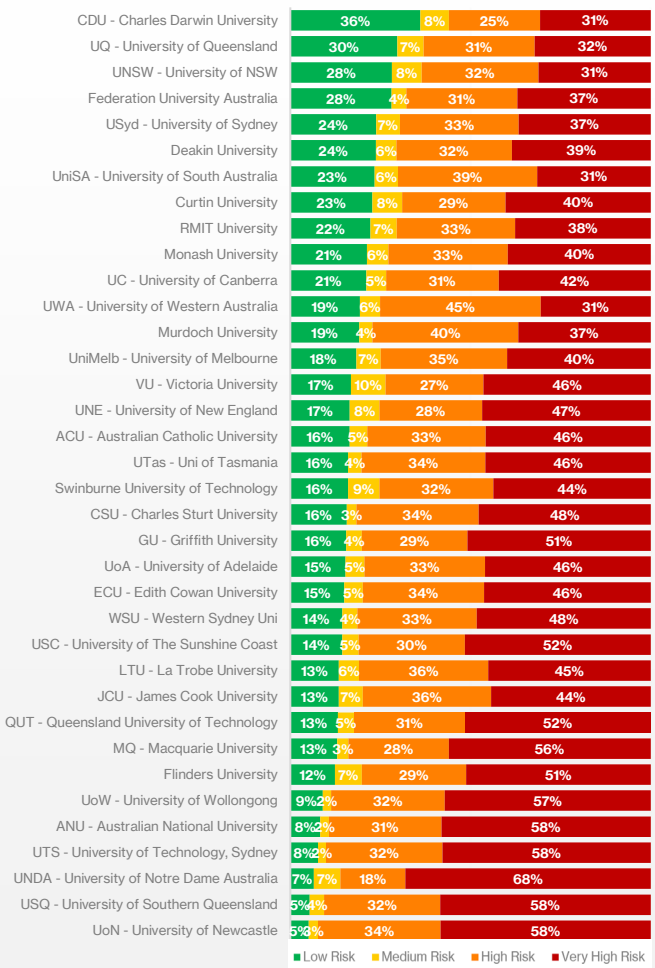
Figure 3. PSC Risk Levels by University