

## Research Month 2022

3 October - 4 November



## Feature Interview with Professor Angela Taft - Celebrating a life of high impact research

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This interview was conducted by Chloe Green, RIE Round Up Editor and reported in the internal La Trobe University communication RIE Round Up on the 7th of October 2022

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I recently had the pleasure of sitting down with Professor Angela Taft who after 21 years at La Trobe is retiring from full time research this week.

I asked Angela to tell me a little bit about her professional journey and the advice she would offer to those just starting out in their research careers.



### **Angela, did you always plan on becoming an academic?**

Not at all! My path was not a conventional one. My undergraduate studies were in Language and Literature, fine art and philosophy, and I had no idea of what to do next, so I decided to teach. Later, in London while teaching, I was starting to learn about feminist issues and read Germaine Greer's 'The Female Eunuch' and that sparked something in me. I wanted to learn more and started exploring feminist issues. I left teaching and began to make films about women's lives and their challenges and was an active campaigner on women's rights issues.

### **So, what was the lightbulb moment for you?**

After I had my own children, I was started teaching English as a foreign language to refugee women in the UK – I was living in London at the time – and I discovered how challenging life was for these women, especially when it came to reproductive rights and domestic violence. I wanted to learn more and understand how the health system responded to migrant and refugee women's needs and what could be done to improve services. I realised to do that I needed to study the system and gather evidence to affect policy change.

### **Have you had any significant mentors during your career?**

Yes, I've been lucky to have several significant mentors at critical moments throughout my career who have helped me to develop my ideas and take my work to the next level. Meeting Judith Lumley and Rhonda Small and starting my work at La Trobe was a pivotal moment. It was a meeting of minds and values, and we went on to do some incredible work together that continues today through the Judith Lumley Centre.

**What are some of the biggest barriers you've faced throughout your career and how have you overcome them?**

My work has often put me, our staff and our study participants in difficult situations, and I've had to learn to protect myself and my colleagues both professionally and emotionally. It's important to stay calm, keep safe and use other support services when required. Debriefing with a strong team is also very important and to put boundaries between yourself and your work.

**What advice would you give to early career researchers just starting out?**

If you have a question that you want answered or a topic you care deeply about then you will be successful. It won't be easy, and you will need to be persistent, but if it aligns with your values and you are tenacious, you can make real change happen.

The other secret is to surround yourself with a strong support network. This work is never easy, and you can't do it alone. All good research is a team effort. You need to collaborate to share ideas and encourage each other. I have taken great joy in taking on the role of mentor to many researchers and supporting their work, it's a privilege to work alongside inspiring colleagues.

**Finally, Angela, over such a long and successful career what are you most proud of?**

I'm very proud of our work in Timor-Leste that was supported by the World Health Organisation, and which is ongoing in training midwives, nurses and doctors how to help women who experience intimate partner violence. I am also proud that my first study MOSAIC of mentor mothers for abused women is now being replicated in multiple countries around the world including the Peru (137 districts) and in Michigan, USA.

I'm also incredibly proud of my former and current PhD students who are doing amazing work in the field. These issues are ongoing, and it is wonderful to know a new generation of researchers will continue to fight for the world's most vulnerable people.

**In closing I asked Angela's colleague and friend Jan Nicholson, current Director of La Trobe's Judith Lumley Research Centre to comment on Angela's career.**

Angela's research record speaks for itself, but most of all I would say Angela brings great compassion to difficult conversations and subjects, whilst underpinning everything with really strong scientific evidence. Her persistence and passion for her work has seen her push through many barriers and open dialogue about issues which were once highly stigmatised. Angela has given the most vulnerable members of our society a voice and changed policy for the better both at home and overseas. She leaves a remarkable legacy and will continue to offer her expertise to many causes in the future.