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# Does the COVID-19 emergency create an opportunity to reform the Australian university workforce?

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## Summary

Universities in Australia and their staff have nimbly responded to the COVID 19 emergency. To ensure the workforce capacity to sustain that response in emerging and radically different circumstances, it is necessary to consider whether the underpinning human resource and industrial relations structures provide the leeway to do so. There are underlying structural problems within the higher education workforce, particularly around the organisation of work, the engagement and payment structure for academic casuals and their key role in delivering teaching. Organisational and cultural assumptions limit the contribution of many professional staff to academic and institutional endeavour. These problems have been known for many years. They limit flexible and creative responses to future challenges, but solutions are difficult and contested. The COVID-19 pandemic provides a rare opportunity for review and reform. As a basis for discussion, we suggest some practical ways forward.

## Introduction

Since the creation of the unified national system of higher education (HE) in Australia in 1989, the nature of employment and expectations of performance of staff in universities has changed greatly, as have public perception and government expectations of universities. An unsettled public policy debate and the absence of a national higher education strategy meant that before COVID-19, universities faced levels of policy and funding uncertainty which were intensified by the shock of the pandemic. As planning horizons shorten or disappear, student markets change or vanish, pedagogy is revolutionised and significant competitors emerge, Australia's universities and their staff must continue to innovate, be adaptive and have the flexibility to respond to emerging demands some of which are as yet unknown. How well universities respond will be critical to developments in the next decade.

## Australian University Workforce Challenges

Universities are complex organisations with a collegial form of management underpinned by strong traditions and values, which have ensured institutional longevity and leadership as centres of intellectual formation, knowledge creation and as developers of national intellectual and professional capacity. But, the acceptance of universities as centres of intellectual and educational leadership is increasingly under challenge from the digital revolution, ease of public access to knowledge, scepticism about science and critical enquiry, creeping populism which values feelings over logic, and the increasing numbers of more nimble commercial education providers offering higher education courses.

During 2020, Australia's public universities have demonstrated a capacity to rapidly adapt to changing circumstances. In the first part of 2020, like all teachers across the nation, university staff have responded to COVID-19 restrictions by moving teaching online and generating new educational materials, some of which are likely to remain part of the curriculum or as established educational practice. New ways of communication

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<sup>1</sup> The authors have worked many years in higher education at senior levels and draw on their experience and knowledge of the sector in writing this paper.

with students and staff have been developed. To meet unknown and emerging challenges we argue that the workforce of the future will require:

- Nimbleness, particularly to be in the vanguard of the digital and artificial intelligence (AI) transformation taking place in all organisations;
- Creativity and capacity to innovate;
- Advanced communication, translation and interpersonal skills to foster engagement with industry, government and the broader community;
- Adaptability and flexibility, self-awareness, self-confidence, and self-reliance;
- Understanding of students and willingness to adopt learner-centric approaches, and
- Ability to work in cross-disciplinary and functional teams or groups to achieve short and longer-term aims.

Many staff with these attributes currently work in universities. The challenge is to sustain the innovative capacity borne of crisis and to ensure that the workforce is best situated to respond flexibly to exploit opportunities into the future. Currently there are some cultural and structural limitations to achieving a flexible and adaptive workforce in higher education. This paper explores those barriers and suggests some strategies for change.

## **The Current Australian University Workforce**

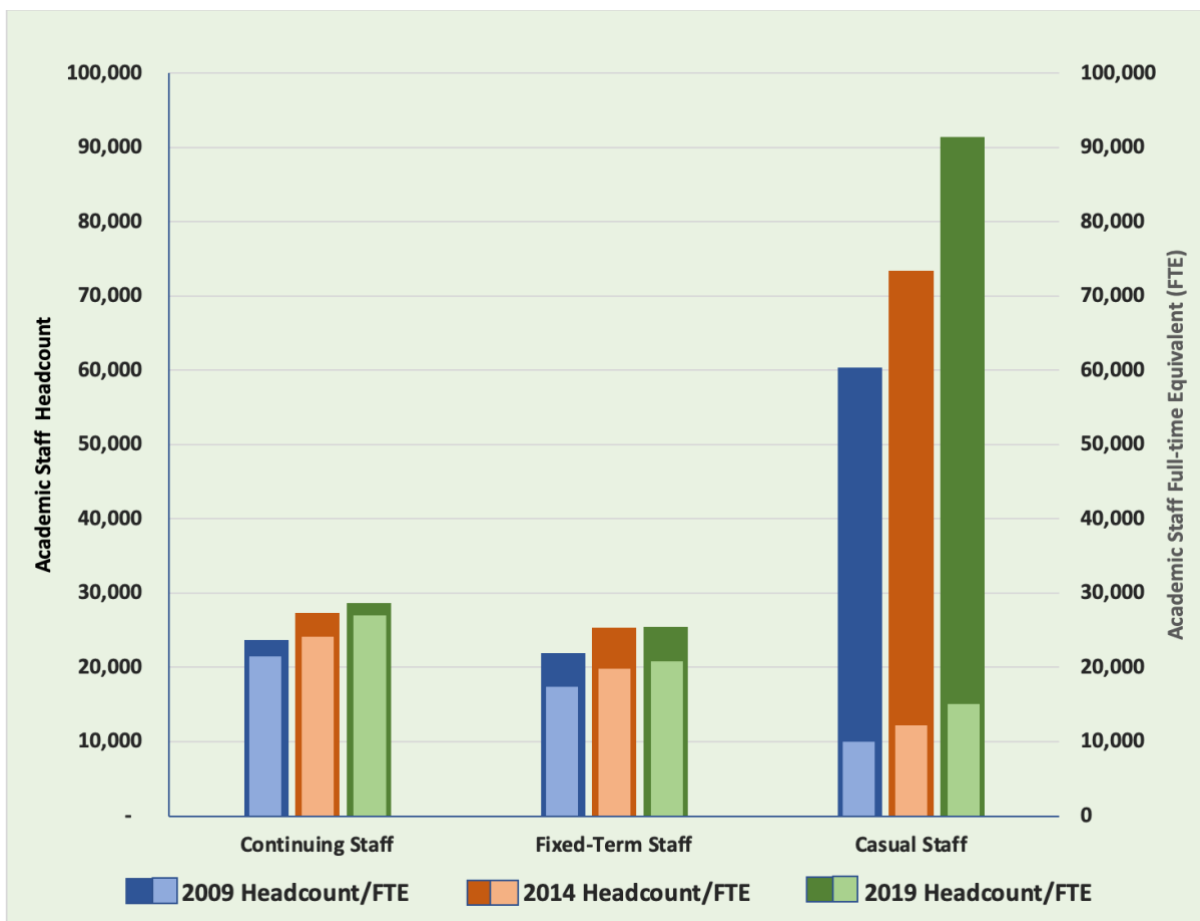
Australia's universities directly employ approximately 270,000<sup>2</sup> people, about half of whom are academic staff. Academic staff are employed under three different contractual arrangements - continuing, fixed-term and casual – and staff numbers are shown in **Figure 1** in these categories, both as full-time equivalent (FTE) and headcount<sup>3</sup>, in 2009, 2014 and 2019. Academic staff numbers have increased from 2009 to 2019 in FTE and headcount by 29% and 37% respectively. Over the same time frame, the total equivalent full-time student load (EFTSL) in Australian universities grew from 760,000 in 2009 to 1,036,000 in 2019, an increase of 36% (the increase in headcount was 42%).

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<sup>2</sup> The data in this report are derived from the Department of Education, Skills and Employment's Higher Education Statistics (HES) (uCube data and prepared reports) - <http://highereducationstatistics.education.gov.au/Default.aspx>, the [Department's Staff Time Series data](#) using Visual Analytics from Microsoft Power BI, university annual reports and publicly available data on line.

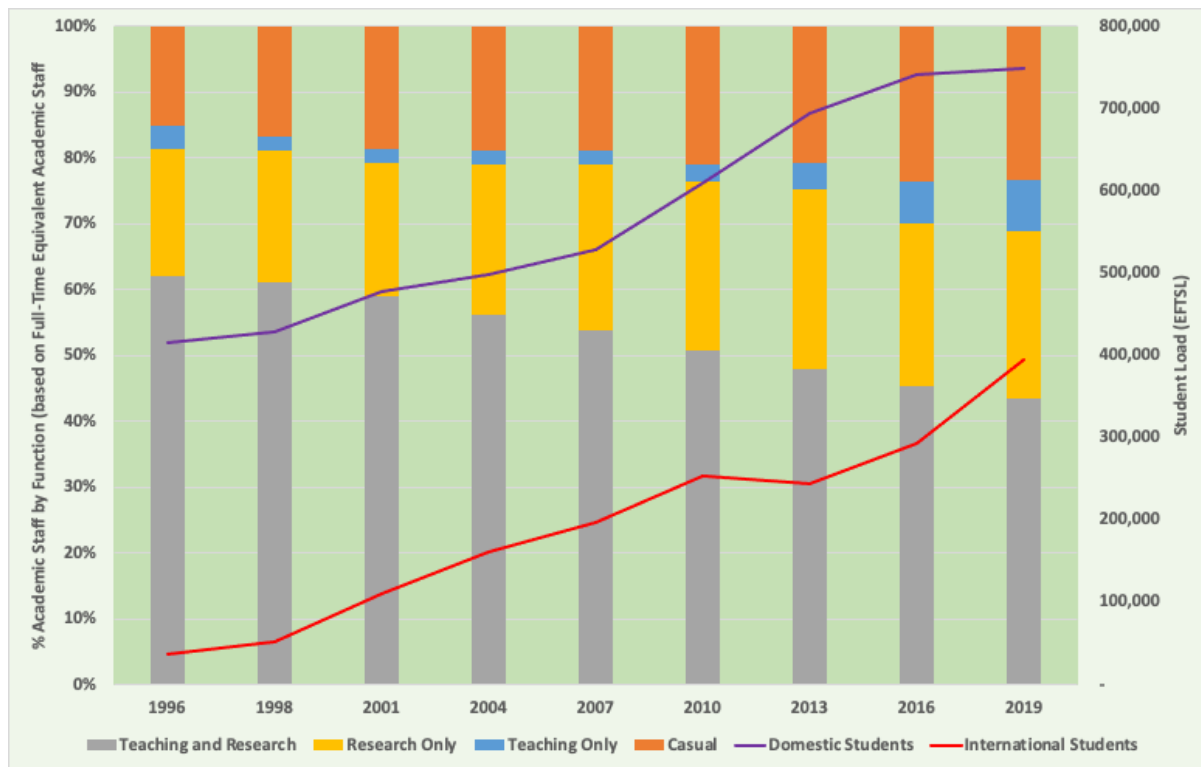
<sup>3</sup> The academic staff headcount calculation is based on reported headcount data for full and part time staff in Australian universities from HES data referred to in Footnote 2 and an estimate made of casual staff headcount as follows; casual staff are only reported in HES data as full-time equivalent (FTE) but as Victorian universities also report headcount in their Annual Reports, a conversion rate of 6:1 has been calculated for Victoria and used to estimate the number of casual staff across Australia assuming that the rate would be similar in other States.

Figure 1: Employment of Academic Staff in Australian Universities - 2009 to 2019



Based on Higher Education Statistics (HES) data and mandated reporting in Victoria (see Footnotes 2 and 3), we estimate the casual academic workforce in Australian universities comprises about 91,000 people. Every university engages casual academic staff for important tasks for which it is regarded as impractical or impossible to employ tenured staff, but a significant proportion of casual staff are essential to the delivery of teaching and work regularly on short-term, hours-based contracts alongside a shrinking percentage of tenured or continuing Teaching and Research (T&R) academic staff enjoying excellent conditions of employment and unique job security. This latter group of staff has not increased in line with increases in student numbers (**Figure 2**).

**Figure 2: Percentage of Academic Staff by Function (based on FTE) and Domestic and International Student Load (EFTSL)<sup>4</sup> - 1996 to 2019**



Professional staff comprise 54%<sup>5</sup> of staff in higher education and now play a significant role in management and innovation in the university compared with their roles towards the end of the last century. Nowhere is this better illustrated by the change since 1999 in classification levels and responsibilities of professional staff in a major metropolitan university (**Figure 3**) discussed in an earlier paper by Baré, Beard and Tjia (2020)<sup>6</sup>.

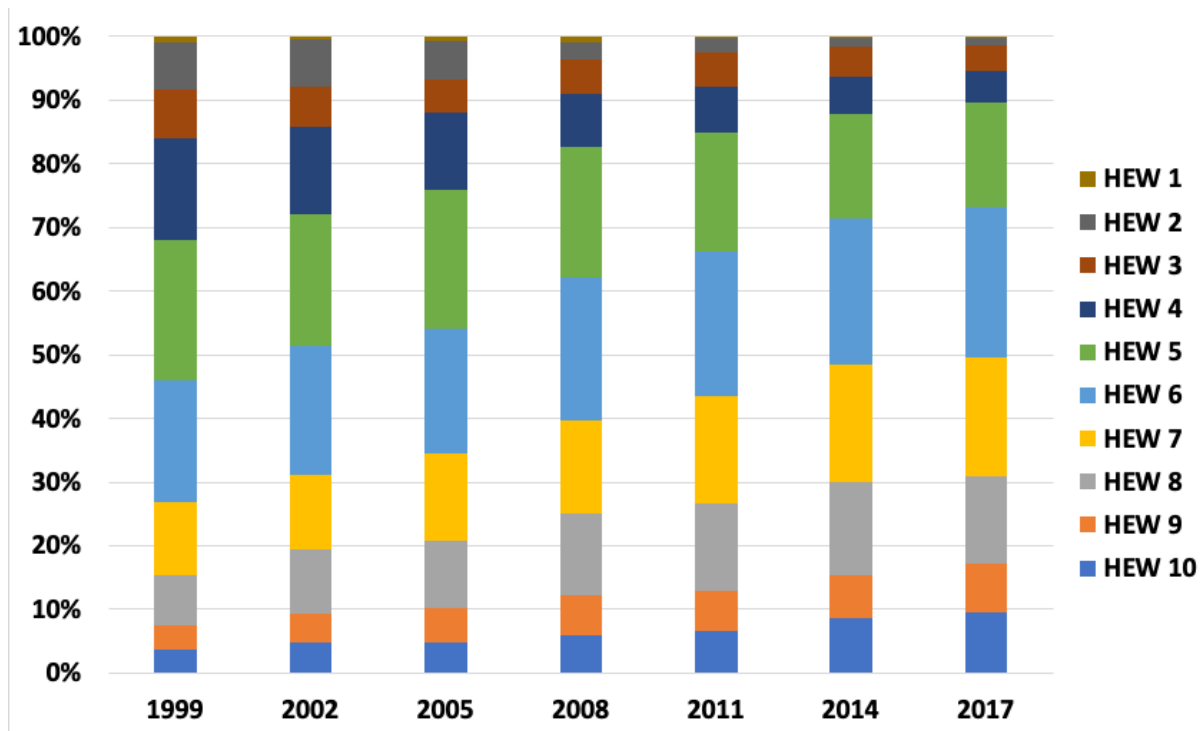
Professional staff are now crucial to the continued pedagogical and research activities of universities, as well as ensuring effective running of the universities, including management and administration, student services and support, IT, digital and physical infrastructure, human resources (HR) and staff support, finance, data and planning, technical services, grant and research management, engagement, marketing and student recruitment, governance compliance and risk management.

<sup>4</sup> Student load (EFTSL) for 1996 and 1998 was calculated from available HES headcount data using the ratio of 1.4 Headcount/EFTSL derived from subsequent years when both sets of data (headcount and EFTSL) are available.

<sup>5</sup> The calculation of 54% of higher education staff being professional staff is drawn from the HES data described in Footnote 2 for 2019 and is based on FTE staff.

<sup>6</sup> Baré, E., Beard, J. and Tjia T. (2020). Lessons to inform post COVID-19 university professional services. Fellow Voices, L.H. Martin Institute, Melbourne Centre for the Study of Higher Education. <https://melbourne-cshe.unimelb.edu.au/lh-martin-institute#fellow-voices>.

Figure 3: Distribution of Professional Staff by Classification Level at a Large Australian Metropolitan University - 1999 to 2017



## Opportunities for Change

Universities are adopting multiple strategies to respond to emerging challenges. To support those strategies, we describe below some opportunities for universities and unions to review and change their workforce and industrial relations strategies or practices. Universities might consider:

- Removing impediments to flexibility in employment arising from industrial relations reforms over the past 30 years;
- Taking a first step in improving employment for casual academic staff by improving security and aligning pay to current work requirements;
- Refining academic staff careers;
- Improving career paths for professional staff, and
- Recognising the increasing number of staff whose roles require both academic and professional expertise; “third space” professionals.

The next sections explore these possible opportunities in more detail.

### a. Removing impediments to flexibility in employment

Industrial relations changes during the period 1990 to 2010 were fashioned by the changes in the early 1990s to insert clauses into academic awards to enable management of performance and redundancy; through the creation of national awards for both academic and professional staff; and subsequent multiple rounds of enterprise bargaining. These rounds of activity shaped the HE people management framework as we know it today. Both unions and universities have used enterprise agreements to drive change, to establish enforceable HR policies and to seek efficiencies in order to offset pay increases. Agreements are often long and detailed, with complexity added over time as unions or universities have sought to lock-in comprehensive solutions to

specific problems. We believe that what were once solutions are now impediments to future responsiveness and hence need review.

**Explore aligning academic redundancy pay to community norms.** Currently, enterprise agreements contain generous redundancy provisions for continuing academic staff, a consequence of changes introduced into the Universities and Post Compulsory Academic Conditions Award 1995 in return for forgoing state-Act tenure provisions and accepting performance management processes. These were coupled with significant pay increases. Normally, retrenchment benefits for long standing academic staff range between 15 and 18 months salary<sup>7,8</sup>, which is beyond community norms and increases the attraction of engagement of casual staff who are paid only for time spent teaching and marking and whose employment can be severed at will. High levels of casualisation place additional duties on core T&R staff, now accountable for managing a casual workforce, engaging with students outside of the classroom and developing new courses, in addition to their own teaching and research.

**Remove prescriptive academic workload clauses from enterprise agreements.** Academic workload clauses were included in enterprise agreements as an occupational health and safety measure in the mid-1990s. Endless negotiations and accretions of process around legally enforceable models at institutional level have resulted in complex clauses in enterprise agreements which allocate the time of each academic staff member across a year based on a split of duties of 40% teaching, 40% research and 20% service, mirroring criteria in the academic promotions standards. The time split was based on a received wisdom that the average Australian academic spends his or her whole time in activities aligned to these proportions. While universities have negotiated variations to those time splits and developed different titles for staff aligned to those splits, for different reasons, neither the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) nor university managements consider complex workload models, with upper limits of hours and allocation of research time based on performance outcomes, satisfactory. While fair and equitable allocation of duties is important, prescriptive workload models limiting the type of work which can be allocated have proved time consuming to manage and contentious in a stable environment and, in a dynamic environment, will limit capacity to redeploy staff to undertake new roles, follow new areas of research, or be innovative.

**Allow fixed-term engagement for teaching duties.** The current Higher Education Industry (Academic Staff) Award<sup>9</sup> limits the use of fixed-term contracts in employment. It specifically excludes the use of fixed term contracts for roles whose primary function is teaching. A product of the time when student numbers were either stable or increasing, this provision can be linked to the increase in use of casual engagements for teaching (**Figure 2**). It also limits the capacity of universities to engage new teaching academic staff in times of uncertain student demand. Given more time-consuming merit-based recruitment processes, universities are likely to be reluctant to engage early career academic staff, when the “risk free” option of casual engagement exists. We suggest that varying the current award to allow universities to engage fixed-term staff for teaching duties would provide greater certainty for staff and a more consistent experience for students<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> Depending on age and years of service, the maximum severance pay for an academic staff member at the University of Sydney is 82 weeks salary. See <https://www.fwc.gov.au/document/agreement/AE428081>. The average public sector redundancy payments are capped at 52 weeks salary for long standing staff members.

<sup>8</sup> A few universities have recently negotiated lesser severance benefits in their enterprise agreements.

<sup>9</sup> A continuation of the Higher Education Contract of Employment Award 1998 and applies to all public universities.

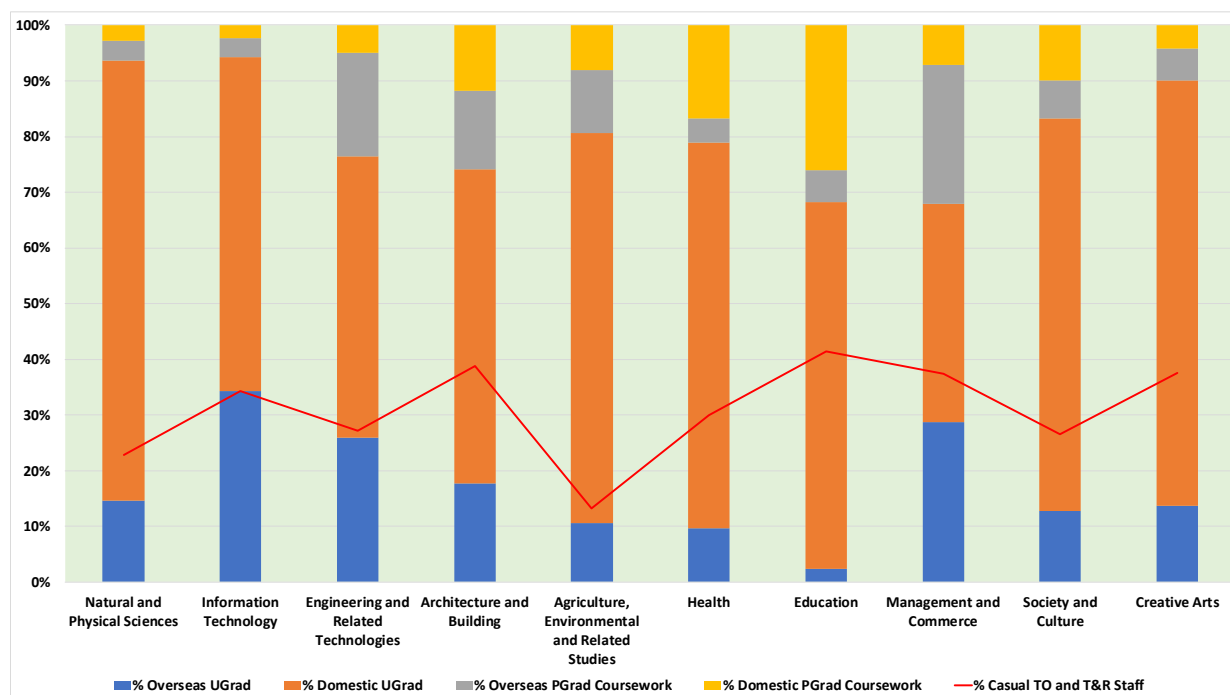
<sup>10</sup> This could be similar to arrangement for research staff on fixed-term contracts. The nature of the fixed term contract might be adjusted to reflect actual teaching commitments over the academic year.

## b. Improving employment for casual academic staff

Among other things, casual academic staff deliver occasional lectures and tutorials, teach music, run laboratory sessions, observe teaching in schools, mark and assess student work, supervise clinical practice sessions in medicine, health sciences and education, and are sometimes used to deliver complete subjects or courses. Many people who work as casual academic staff are retired academics, otherwise employed professionals or research higher degree students, but an unknown number are “gig” economy casuals relying on this work at several institutions as a major source of income similar to other forms of casual employment in the community<sup>11</sup>. More than half of casual academic staff are female (55%)<sup>12</sup>. Risks associated with reliance on casual staff for teaching, and the precarious nature of employment of such staff starkly highlighted by the pandemic, have been recognised as a significant problem by TEQSA<sup>13</sup> and higher education leaders.

**Create new employment structures for teachers regularly employed as casuals.** Despite reduced student numbers because of the pandemic, there will still be a requirement for casual staff to make a substantial teaching contribution to teaching in many Australian undergraduate and postgraduate courses. **Figure 4** is drawn from an earlier paper by Baré, Beard and Tjia (2020)<sup>14</sup> and illustrates the extent to which casual staff are used in different disciplines in Australian universities to teach domestic and overseas students enrolled in undergraduate and postgraduate coursework programs.

**Figure 4: Percentages of Overseas and Domestic Undergraduate (UGrad) and Postgraduate (PGrad) Coursework Students and Percentage of Teaching Only (TO) and Teaching and Research (T&R) Staff who are Casual Staff in Australian Universities by Discipline - 2017**



<sup>11</sup> Attempts at institutional level to identify the number of casual staff whose primary occupation is teaching have failed because this data is not recorded.

<sup>12</sup> HES data from 2019. <http://highereducationstatistics.education.gov.au/Default.aspx>.

<sup>13</sup> Higher Education Standards Framework, Domain 3. Teaching. <https://www.teqsa.gov.au/hesf-domain-3>.

<sup>14</sup> Baré, E., Beard J. and Tjia T. (2020). Does the extent of casualisation of the Australian academic workforce provide flexibility to beat the COVID-19 hit? Fellow Voices, L.H. Martin Institute, Melbourne Centre for the Study of Higher Education. <https://melbourne-cshe.unimelb.edu.au/lh-martin-institute/fellow-voices>.

While limitations on fixed-term employment for teaching have resulted in expanded numbers of casual teachers, the simple removal of the restraint is unlikely to change employment patterns, as casual teaching tends to be concentrated in particular periods of the year. A fixed-term contract which allows for engagement and payment across a year but with work more concentrated in specific periods of year will not only provide greater security of tenure, but also enable a broader range of tasks to be undertaken including student consultation, and provide the staff member access to personal and professional benefits, such as academic promotion.

**Shift the casual academic pay structure from the 1980s to the 2020s.** The casual staff remuneration structure is based on the requirement to deliver hour long lectures and tutorials (with the hourly rate multiplied by predetermined numbers of hours of preparation required for different categories of lecture or tutorials) and separate hourly rates for marking, music accompaniment, nursing clinical supervision and other academic duties. All hourly rates attract a 25% loading to compensate for loss of annual and sick leave. The casual rate structure, aligned to then equivalent of academic Level A and Level B rates in the full-time salary structure, was codified in 1980 by the Academic Salaries Tribunal (AST) when the consensus was that it broadly reflected existing custom and practice in New South Wales. No independent study to determine the work that is required to perform these roles was undertaken at the time, or since. While the hour long lecture/tutorial structure remains a core part of university teaching, the advent of team teaching (where staff collaborate on delivery), the flipped classroom model (students absorb the lecture and reading materials online at home and discuss this or work on live problem-solving during classes), the use of workshops and other experiential processes, and in particular online teaching where staff must be responsive to student work, means that the current rate structure does not easily reflect the breadth of work that is required. It is possible that some of the recently reported underpayments to casual staff in universities<sup>15</sup> result not from a deliberate decision to defraud but from the difficulty of aligning outdated payment rates to the work that is required in the contemporary university.

**Create a reward/career structure for casual teaching staff.** The submission by the Federation of Australian University Staff Associations (FAUSA) to the AST in 1980 argued that part time academic staff (casual staff) were less knowledgeable and skilled than continuing academic staff and hence the rate should be fixed to the base of the then equivalent ranks of the then equivalents of Level A and Level B. That argument was not accepted at the time, and it is now clear that many casual teaching staff are both expert in their field as well as being excellent teachers<sup>16</sup>. Some universities have developed promotion systems for honorary staff, especially where an academic title is important to professional standing. Such processes might be adapted to enable casual teachers to be appointed or promoted to an academic rank based on merit and receive commensurate remuneration, albeit as a casual employee.

### c. Refining academic career structures

**Revisit “The Real Academic Revolution”<sup>17</sup>.** While universities recruit professional staff from a broad range of backgrounds, the typical academic career path is narrowly focussed on gaining a PhD and further experience

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<sup>15</sup> Campus Morning Mail (28 September 2020). [Unis must always, always, pay casuals the right-rate for the job.](https://campusmorningmail.com.au/news/unis-must-always-always-pay-casuals-the-right-rate-for-the-job/)  
<https://campusmorningmail.com.au/news/unis-must-always-always-pay-casuals-the-right-rate-for-the-job/>.

<sup>16</sup> This is reflected in the QILT data where there appears to be no relationship between overall student assessment of the learning experience and high levels of casual staffing.

<sup>17</sup> Coates, H. and Goedegebuure, L. (2010). The real academic revolution: why we need to reconceptualise Australia's future workforce, and eight possible strategies for how to go about this. [https://melbourne-cshe.unimelb.edu.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0007/2565070/Why-we-need-to-reconceptualise-Australias-future-academic-workforce.pdf](https://melbourne-cshe.unimelb.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0007/2565070/Why-we-need-to-reconceptualise-Australias-future-academic-workforce.pdf).



in a local or overseas university, prior to gaining a scarce tenured T&R academic position in a university somewhere. A study of academic job vacancies in 2017 indicated that completion of a PhD and a track record in research were mandatory requirements<sup>18</sup>. Few required industry experience, but when they did, a research track record remained an essential criterion. This narrow experience focus may limit capacity to understand the broader world of work and evolving developments in commerce, industry and the public and not for profit sectors.

A quick look at the interaction between education, research and practice in Australia's health system shows overlapping employment in industry and academia with complementary reward systems. Having evolved over 100 years, this partnership is critical to Australia's success in medical research and practice. Such partnerships are not easily replicated but they provide a possible model of engagement which could be used in other disciplines in higher education.

In 2010, Coates and Goedegebuure<sup>19</sup> argued that the time had come to reform Australia's academic workforce advocating, *inter alia*, recognition of the breadth of work now required of academic staff, resulting in designing a more flexible academic career and reward structure allowing for periods of research, teaching and working in industry, refreshing and broadening the PhD qualification to include experience outside of higher education; recruiting more T&R academic staff and emphasising the importance of softer skills designed to support engagement with students and the substantial leadership and management roles now required of academic staff. In particular, they identified a range of issues arising from growing casualisation of the academic workforce including the need for better data on the nature of work undertaken; lack of professional development for this significant core of teaching staff with consequent quality implications, and the impact on continuing academic staff of supervision of a large number of casual staff.

Sadly, while containing several recommendations for change which were well received at the time, little has changed since 2010. The study remains valid, and we recommend revisiting it to stimulate broader discussion around the recommendations.

**Consider revisiting Minimum Standards for Academic Levels (MSALs).** The MSALs resulted from an industrial dispute over a union bid to insert position classification standards into the academic salaries award as a guide to remuneration setting for each academic level. Previously, and as is the case now, appointment or promotion to a particular level was based on peer review of the merits of performance. A compromise, the MSAL descriptors broadly describe academic work as it was in 2000, being narrowly focussed on teaching and research and not reflecting the current and future requirements of academic staff in an increasing digital world and broader community and industry collaboration. The MSALs were incorporated into the Higher Education Academic Salaries Award (2002) and in subsequent replacement awards and in most enterprise agreements. While it is likely they have little day to day influence over what an academic staff member does, they have the potential to restrict and overlook the breadth and nature of work required of academic staff.

**Consider formal accreditation for academic staff.** Academia has many of the elements of a profession; strong peer review of performance resulting in promotion to a rank, an underpinning set of values and ethics and a commonly accepted standard for entry to the profession. However, these values are assumed and not codified. There is no mandated qualification required for a key activity, teaching, or for regular professional development, other than the performance standards demanded by the institution. Given the difficulty of

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<sup>18</sup> Baré, E and Bexley, E. (2017). Redesigning the Higher Education Workforce, a new architecture, in James, R, French, S and Kelly, P. Visions for Australian Higher Education, Melbourne, CSHE 2017.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid* 21.

managing challenges to areas such as academic integrity and academic freedom, and the limited value placed on science and enquiry, a new professional body with clearly articulated standards may garner respect and be able to advocate for the value of the profession in a way that a university leader or a trade union appears unable to do. Professional standing may also offer a pathway for enhanced status and recognition beyond the walls of higher education<sup>20</sup>.

#### **d. Creating professional staff<sup>21</sup> career paths**

Counted in the HES data as “non-academic staff”, in 2019 there were over 120,000 people (headcount) working as professional staff in Australian universities. The HES definition implies a second-class citizen status, an attitude which remains in some universities despite the significant professional staff contribution to teaching, research and student endeavours.

**Identify university administration as a professional career path.** **Figure 3** indicates the significant change at one university in the numbers of senior professional staff over time, a change which would be mirrored across the sector as a whole. These changes can in part be attributed to elimination of lower-level roles through automation and/or outsourcing, but the percentage and number of staff in more senior management, professional or policy roles has increased, at least in part due to the increased complexity and scale of universities as corporate entities.

When it was introduced in 1993, the designers of the current Higher Education Worker (HEW) classification structure envisaged “...a realistic career structure for general staff where there are incentives for individual performance and clearly marked career goals...a commitment to the provision of training, staff and career development, and a commitment to a process which allows qualified and competent staff in the University to move to more senior positions”<sup>22</sup>. While some of these aspirations have been realised, the development of a career cohort of university administrators similar to what has evolved for health administrators has not eventuated. This failure has deprived institutions of important cultural and leadership capabilities and limited several generations of competent professional staff from achieving their full potential.

Many professional staff roles and duties appear similar to other workplaces but working in a university requires developing a detailed knowledge of the business and a willingness to be receptive to the HE culture. Experienced professionals who move from other industries to universities sometimes fail to thrive. Now is the time when universities individually or collectively might explore the development of structured career programs designed to build internal capacity, thereby strengthening understanding of the business and the ability to build cross functional teams which are able to flexibly respond to emerging circumstances. Such programs might include:

- Developing a multi-institution graduate recruitment program for future university leaders<sup>23</sup>.
- Creating a broad skills, qualifications and competency matrix relevant to higher education to be used as a basis for recruitment to all professional staff jobs and to underpin development programs.
- Introducing, either at institutional or cross institutional level, trainee or similar career development programs which expose staff early in their career to a range of university operations.

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<sup>20</sup> It is worth noting that the Higher Education Academy has developed a professional standards framework for teaching academic staff. <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/guidance/teaching-and-learning/ukpsf>.

<sup>21</sup> Professional staff are identified as “general staff” in industrial awards. In the HES data, professional staff are defined as non-academic staff.

<sup>22</sup> University of Melbourne General Staff Enterprise Agreement, 1993.

<sup>23</sup> The Ambitious Futures multi-institutional model in the United Kingdom is an excellent exemplar. Unfortunately, it has closed because of COVID-19.

- Supporting professional and educational development in the area of higher education.
- Fostering mobility between universities and across industry not only to enhance the skill base, but also to develop a broader understanding of national skill and research needs.

**Recognition and accreditation.** A key step in the development of a professional cohort of university administrators is professional recognition outside the employing institution. University HR Directors and the Association of Tertiary Education Managers (ATEM) might explore an accreditation process which includes professional qualifications offered Australia-wide and internationally, such as eLAMP<sup>24</sup> or the Master of Tertiary Education Management provided by the LH Martin Institute at the University of Melbourne, as well as experience and contribution to the profession. This would align with similar models operating overseas, such as by the Association of University Administrators (AUA) in the United Kingdom<sup>25</sup>.

**Review the professional staff classification structure.** The HEW classification descriptors have broadly stood the test of time. Some universities have grouped HEW levels to create a simpler career structure but retained the overall 10-level structure. However, it is clear from **Figure 3**, that little or no work is now undertaken in universities at HEW levels 1 to 3, there is a grouping of jobs at Levels 7 and 8 which in practice are often difficult to differentiate between. The job equivalents used in the descriptors reflect the skill base required in the 1990s which has changed significantly since then. Consideration might be given to exploring the reduction in the number of levels and aligning skill descriptors to today's work requirements. Fewer levels will enable staff to be tasked with a broader range of duties, reduce time-consuming reclassification processes, and enable staff members to 'grow' in skills and competence.

#### e. **Recognising the role of third space professionals**

The past 10 years have seen the emergence of a group of staff who work flexibly across academic and professional staff boundaries<sup>26</sup>. In the context of the pandemic, the most publicly visible group has been educational designers, but staff who work in this way include researchers, librarians, student learning support staff and staff involved in developing academic partnerships or commercialising research. Normally employed as professional staff, this group of staff is increasingly key to realising institutional outcomes, particularly in emerging areas of activity. Unlike academic staff, professional staff face terms of employment that provide limited scope to formally reward them for innovation and creativity. Consideration could be given to whether a separate classification structure, career stream and a peer reviewed reward process for 'third space' professionals is warranted, or whether the current HEW structure is sufficient. A possible structure is shown in **Figure 5**.

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<sup>24</sup> Emerging Leaders and Managers Program (eLAMP). <https://melbourne-cshe.unimelb.edu.au/lh-martin-institute/study/all-courses/leadership-programs/elamp>.

<sup>25</sup> Association of University Administrators (AUA). <https://aua.ac.uk/professional-development/accreditation/>.

<sup>26</sup> Whitchurch C. (2008). Shifting Identities and Blurring Boundaries: the Emergence of *Third Space* Professionals in UK Higher Education. Volume 62. Issue 4. Higher Education Quarterly. Wiley Online Library. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1468-2273.2008.00387.x>

**Figure 5: Possible Third Space Professional Classification Structure**

Level 1	Level 2	Level 3
Higher degree research (HDR) in relevant discipline	HDR in relevant discipline and outstanding performance at Level 1	HDR in relevant discipline and outstanding performance at Level 2
Undertake work which requires innovation or creativity either individually or part of a team	Work on complex problems requiring innovative or creative solutions	Lead team working on complex problems requiring innovative or creative solutions
Develop new products, write papers and reports	Achieve innovative outcomes as recognised by peers	Achieve unique and ground-breaking outcomes as recognised by peers
Collaborate with academic and professional staff to achieve outcomes	Supervise teams or lead projects involving academic, third space and professional staff	Manage projects and programs

## Conclusion

Australian universities will continue to evolve and adapt to external circumstances. Given the strength of custom, tradition and practice, the lack of a unified approach to higher education industrial relations and the difficulty of overcoming inertia, many of the recommendations we make here would be difficult to effect in normal times. However, our view is that many of the perceived constraints on nimbleness and flexibility have not been imposed on the sector but have been created or accepted as immutable by people within the sector. The shock and impact of the COVID-19 pandemic provides a unique circuit-breaker for Australian universities, both individually and more generally as a sector.

Because the pandemic provides an opportunity to reset and rethink, we have taken the opportunity to offer solutions to some entrenched current and emerging higher education workforce problems. Our aim is to provoke discussion of the issues as well as to offer solutions.

How the sector and each university adapt to these issues will depend on a range of variables. Some, including funding, government policy, international relations, global conditions and student choice, are largely exogenous. Others are attributable more to the culture, leadership and appetite for change within individual institutions.

The global pandemic has greatly sharpened the focus of the Australian university sector on its staff and its HR policies, structures and strategies. Universities that most successfully emerge from the impacts of COVID-19 are likely to have recognised the importance of HR leadership within its overall strategy in developing and achieving a shared vision with staff and students, implementing people strategies aligned to that vision, ensuring capacity to operationalise those strategies in policy and industrial instruments, and gaining commitment to their achievement by staff.