
Does the extent of casualisation of the Australian academic workforce provide flexibility to beat the COVID-19 hit?

Elizabeth Baré, Janet Beard and Teresa Tjia, May 2020

Since the declaration of the COVID-19 pandemic in early March 2020 and associated restrictions, Australian universities have acted quickly to manage their budgets and focus on the 'must-haves', including reducing casuals, hiring freezes, executive salary cuts and deferring infrastructure projects. Further, some universities are foreshadowing redundancies and cutting courses and subjects.

In addition to making cost savings in the post-COVID19 world, universities could also look to see if there are opportunities that present which could be capitalised upon. There is never a better time for universities to explore new ways to deliver courses, improve the student experience and undertake research, whilst systematically examining the underpinning management of resources, staffing structures and costs. In further papers we will canvass the challenges and possibilities for a better 'normal' in higher education as society and institutions recover and rebound, following the rapid response, disrupted delivery model that universities have adopted with the heightened financial and social isolation pressures. In the initial papers we will explore what opportunities could be adopted with the workforce to transition to a different but high quality, engaged, productive, creative and sustainable university workforce in the post-COVID-19 world, one which enables high quality educational outcomes, in both the short and longer term. Our focus in this paper is on casual academic staff and we will look at professional staff in our next paper.

To date, one of the most immediate and expedient budget mitigation strategies is to reduce casual staff (also known as sessional staff). Cutting academic casual teaching is not without risks with estimates that between 40 to 60% of current undergraduate teaching in Australian universities is delivered or marked by casual staff¹. Long term effectiveness of this measure will need to be accompanied with realigning workload allocation of permanent and fixed term staff, and review of academic programs on offer, as well as delivery modes.

Why so many academic casual staff?

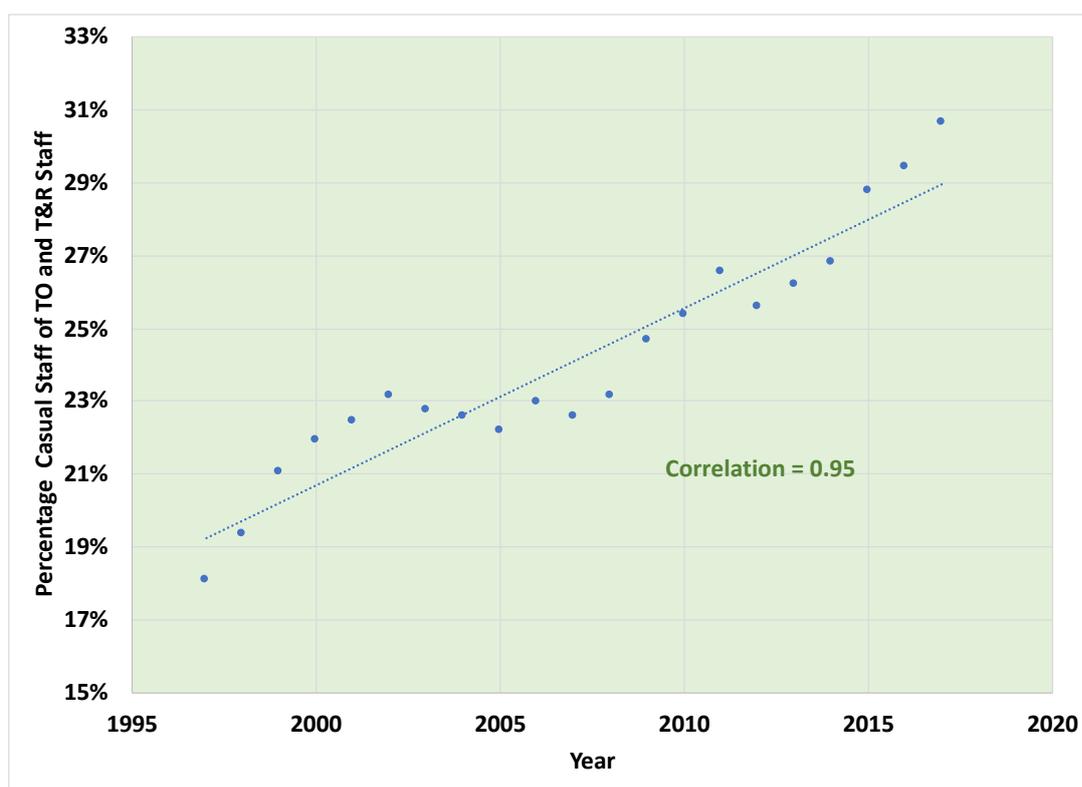
Casual staff have always been and will remain part of the Australian higher education workforce. The work undertaken encompasses a wide variety of tasks. Practice supervision by experts employed in industry is essential for professional accreditation in many disciplines. Duties of academic casual staff are varied and range through delivering lectures and tutorials, teaching of music, delivery of laboratory sessions, supervision of clinical practice for medical and allied health students, observing teaching in schools, marking and assessment, to coordination and delivery of whole courses or subjects. While much is known about the types of duties undertaken by academic casual staff, relatively little is known about the actual numbers of people undertaking each type of work. Despite the often pejorative view

¹ Klopper, C. J., and Power, B. M. (2014). The Casual Approach to Teacher Education: What Effect Does Casualisation Have for Australian University Teaching? *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 39(4).

of casual employment, our analysis of the QILT² data suggests that there is no relationship between the level of casualisation in a university and student perceptions of the quality of their teaching and their overall student experience. However, student perceptions may not be the whole story. The quality of the programs and use of casuals have the potential to expose institutions to greater risk in program delivery, quality of teaching, and learning outcomes (a risk indicator used by TEQSA)³.

Practices around casual employment differ between universities, but the proportion of academic staff in casual employment has grown in recent times (Figure 1). In 2017, 31% of the total teaching academic workforce⁴ were casual staff and of these, 55% were female. Figure 1 traces the growth of the casual teaching workforce between 1997 and 2017. Significantly, despite an approximate doubling of student numbers in Australia's public universities over that period, the number of full and part time Teaching and Research academic staff (typically tenured) has only increased from approximately 24,000 to 27,000 full time equivalent (FTE) staff (13% growth). Full and part time Teaching Only positions have quadrupled but from a much lower base of approximately 1,000 FTE in 1997⁵.

Figure 1: Percentage of Teaching Only (TO) and Teaching and Research (T&R) Academic Staff who are Casual Employees in Australian Universities 1997 to 2017⁶



² Quality Indicators of Learning and Teaching: <https://www.qilt.edu.au/>

³ Greg Simmons (2017). TEQSA and Demystifying Risk Based Regulation. [Tertiary Education and Quality Standards Agency Presentation to Council of Private Higher Education.](#)

⁴ Teaching Only, Teaching and Research categories

⁵ The cited increases in teaching excludes casual staff; casual staff almost trebled in FTE terms over the same time frame. 70% of T&R staff were tenured in 2017. Department of Higher Education, Skills and Employment. <http://highereducationstatistics.education.gov.au/Default.aspx>

⁶ Data source as per Footnote 5.

Drivers for the employment of casual staff include:

- **Flexibility** - Casualisation is designed to enable universities to scale their workforce aligned to student demand. Provisions in enterprise agreements mean it is costly to make tenured or continuing academic staff redundant.
- **Ease of engagement** - Casual staff are usually sourced at a discipline or school level and engaged through simpler and streamlined recruitment processes.
- **Cost savings** - Direct and indirect costs of employment for casual staff are lower than for full and part time staff.
- **Risk avoidance** – Risk avoidance measures are adopted particularly when student demand may be unknown, for example if a university wishes to launch a new niche course.
- **Research productivity** – Customary workload allocation practice in Australian universities, reinforced in enterprise agreements and workforce management plans, is that a Teaching and Research academic should spend 40% of their time undertaking research⁷. While the proportion of academic staff whose main focus is teaching (Teaching Only staff) has increased from 17 to 28% of the total academic workforce (including Research Only staff) between 1997 and 2017⁸, there are industrial limits on the numbers or proportion of such staff, and these staff carry generous retrenchment benefits compared to casual staff. The use of casual and Teaching Only staff to undertake teaching, supports Teaching and Research staff in their research efforts.
- **Professional accreditation** – Courses leading to professional accreditation require the involvement of working professionals outside universities to undertake activities such as: supervision of teaching, clinical, practical and placement-based learning.

Use of casuals as a risk mitigation strategy

Responding to a potential significant loss of international students and income, most if not all universities are taking the first step by reducing “non-essential” casual employment in an effort to reduce costs. This is the first test as to whether the reliance on casual employment as a means of managing risk is effective.

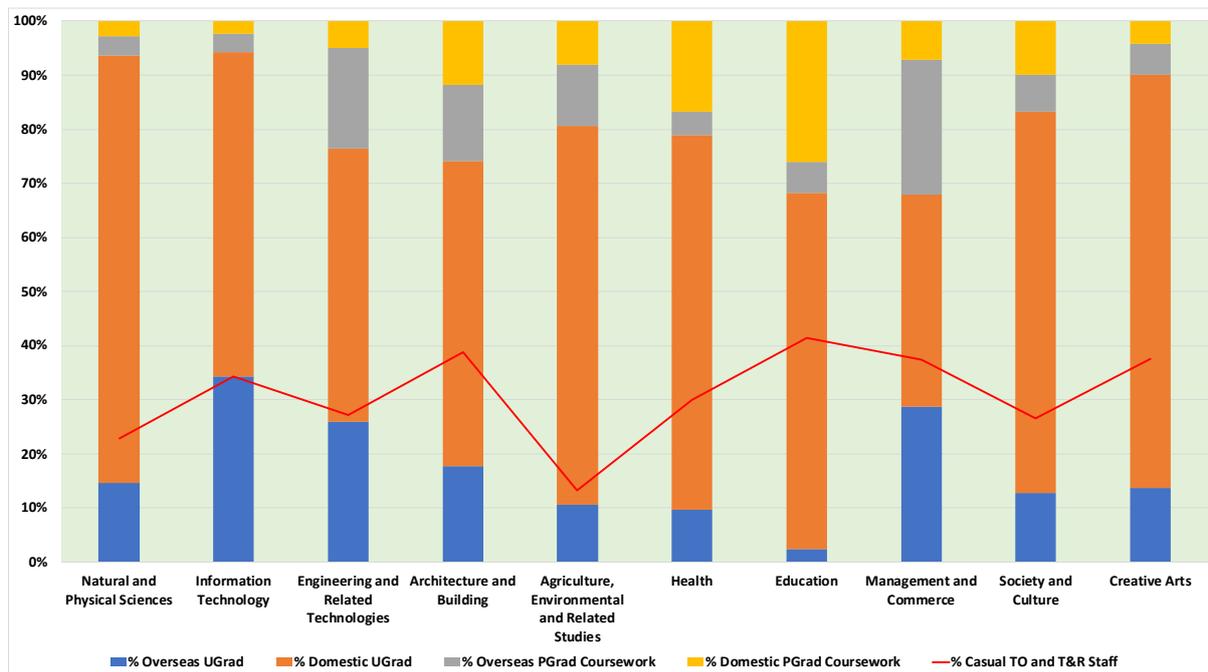
Early analysis suggests that it may not be (Figure 2). We suggest that a simple reductionist approach across the board may result in significant problems. Figure 2 identifies on a discipline basis the percentage of teaching staff (TO and T&R) who are casual and the relative percentages amongst the overseas and domestic undergraduate and postgraduate coursework student load in 2017⁹.

⁷ Miller, J. (1919). Where Does the Time Go? An Academic Workload Case Study at an Australian University. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, Vol 41(6).

⁸ The recent expansion of numbers in the Teaching Only category may be partially driven by ERA requirements.

⁹ Data source as per Footnote 5.

Figure 2: 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



While the case will be different between and within universities, we suggest that based on the national data:

- Reductionist strategies may be effective in those disciplines where a large number of international students is broadly aligned to a high level of casualisation. As an example, Management and Commerce, where casualisation of the workforce broadly allows a reduction in casual staff numbers in line with an international student number decline.
- There is the potential for a negative educational impact on domestic students, for example Society and Culture and Education where the current course delivery relies heavily on casuals, and reduction in the casual workforce may see class sizes increase and possibly see courses cease. Education would also be significantly impacted with the loss of the assessment of student teacher practice.
- Market forces in areas where there are new national priorities, for example, Information Technology and Agriculture, Environmental and Related Studies, may see existing casual staff seek and gain more secure positions.

Even where the simple reduction of the number of casuals is possible, there are a number of inflexibilities in current university practices or policies which may limit capacity to easily reallocate or reorganise teaching work to tenured and contract staff. These include:

- Mandated application of workload management processes which allocate a fixed percentage of time to research and thus limit the reallocation of working time to teaching.
- Reward systems which are generally aligned to research performance, which limits the willingness of some staff to undertake additional teaching.

- Current contractual obligations to teach existing courses, either face to face or online, and complete research projects.
- New and different work resulting from translating face-to-face teaching to online, the development of new types of assessment tasks, supporting students in the online environment, in particular monitoring for participation, and moderation of group discussions.

The future

The casualisation of the academic workforce has been a festering and unresolved staff engagement and industrial relations issue in higher education since 1998, when the Higher Education Contract of Employment Award¹⁰ limited the incidence of fixed term employment for teaching roles resulting in expansion of casual employment. Negative perceptions of casual employment in Australia have resulted in universities and the NTEU both concentrating on addressing concerns for that group of academic staff for whom casual work is the only means of working in their academic profession¹¹. Despite efforts, the existence of a substantial workforce which has been portrayed as marginalised, insecure and exploited remains a significant employee relations issue. The current response to COVID-19 further reinforces the view of casual academics as expendable, though they are now and will remain essential to teaching and student experience.

A question is, does planning for a post-COVID-19 environment present the opportunity for opening-up conversations with a strategic shift in thinking about the configuration, composition and organisation of the academic labour force to be sustainable, flexible and innovative. This is an open question for all aspects of the academic workforce but in this paper we are focusing particularly on casual staff.

Given the importance of the casual academic workforce and the difficulty of sustaining their employment as exemplified in the current COVID-19 world, now could be the time to consider opportunities structuring the casual component of the academic workforce differently¹². Options, none of which are easy, that could be explored include:

- Continue and expand the current arrangements with casualisation and rely on high quality casual staff to deliver programs and focus the efforts of existing on-going staff on the development of programs and course materials, including for on-line learning, and research time for Teaching and Research staff.
- Recognise the on-going contribution of staff who are currently employed as casual teachers and develop a new job classification and salary structure designed to cater for the broad duties currently undertaken by casual staff, which coupled with fixed term or on-going employment, allowing a broader range of duties to be allocated to people in these roles (for example, student engagement, preparation of materials for on-line learning).

¹⁰ The limitation on use of fixed term contracts for teaching roles remains in most university enterprise agreements.

¹¹ The NTEU has concentrated on improvements in conditions, superannuation, rights of conversion to full or part time work and agreement to a limited number of fixed term positions targeted specifically at existing casuals. Universities have concentrated on professional development and the evolution of new forms of engagement which allow longer term engagement and accrual of entitlements with pay averaged over an extended period (eg annualised hours contracts).

¹² Universities are not able to access current Government COVID-19 response schemes such as JobKeeper.

- Coupled with a substantial standardisation and reduction of course offerings, reduce casual staff employment and actively seek to expand the number of fixed term Teaching Only and Teaching and Research staff employed with the length of fixed term contracts possibly aligned to projections of student demand.

In the post COVID-19 world, there will be many changes and impacts on universities, including shifts in student and revenue bases with an immediate decrease in international students, greater utilisation of on-line for all learning and teaching, increased working from home practices, conducting research with travel restrictions, and ongoing risk management. As outlined in the paper, there is an opportunity to reimagine the engagement of casual teaching and learning staff.

In further papers, we will explore other opportunities and risks in a post COVID-19 world, and in the next paper, will focus on impacts on the professional staff workforce and service delivery.

About the Authors

Liz Baré, Janet Beard and Teresa Tjia have worked in several universities in Australia in senior professional and executive roles over many years. They have undertaken many consultancies and reviews individually and in partnership in universities in South East Asia, the Pacific, New Zealand and in both public and private universities in Australia. Liz Baré and Janet Beard are Honorary Senior Fellows with the LH Martin Institute at the University of Melbourne.