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Scholarly Teaching Fellows: Drivers and (Early) Outcomes

Kaye Broadbent
University of Technology Sydney, Sydney
FASS, UTS,
PO Box 123 Broadway, NSW 2007
kaye.broadbent@uts.edu.au

Tony Brown
University of Canberra, Canberra
Adult, Community & Higher Education, Canberra University,
University Dr, Bruce ACT 2617
tony.brown@canberra.edu.au

James Goodman
University of Technology Sydney, Sydney
FASS, UTS,
PO Box 123 Broadway, NSW 2007
james.goodman@uts.edu.au

Abstract

In Australian universities, the majority of teaching is now delivered by casual academics, engaged on short-term, hourly-paid contracts. Casual and continuing academic staff have worked actively through the national tertiary education union to limit casualization, defend the 'integrated' academic model of research and teaching, and to improve pay and conditions for casual staff. Since 2012 the union has moved to proactively define new continuing positions for casual staff, as 'Scholarly Teaching Fellows', designed to provide job security for casual teaching academics. This paper uses data from a selected range of Enterprise Bargaining Agreements (EBAs) to explore whether this relaxation of the union's traditional insistence on the teaching/research nexus is successfully reducing precarity while avoiding the further disaggregation of academic work and careers.

Key words: academic work, casualisation, job security

Introduction

In Australia, and internationally, universities have become key sites in the struggle against precarity. Australian workplace insecurity is extensive, and has been driven by neo-liberalised expansion of higher education. Between 1989 and 2013 there was a trebling of student numbers, from 441,000 to 1,400,000. This expansion was not matched by government funding: national direct grants to universities declined from 58% of their income in 1995 to 42% in 2013 (Department of Education and Training, 2015a). Work was intensified: while student numbers

tripled, academic staffing merely doubled, to 61,000 full-time equivalent (FTE). The number of full-time equivalent academic staff employed on a continuing basis increased by 57%, FTE fixed term research staff increased by 166% and FTE casual academic staff increased by 221% (Andrews et al., 2016). The proportion of FTE continuing academic staff fell from 54% to 44%, with (mainly research-only) fixed-term staff accounting for 35% and casual teaching staff 21% (Norton. 2016). This is the official count: the real rate of academic insecurity is substantially higher as the Department of Education and Training (DET) seriously overestimates the full-time load for a casual tutor (the DET assumes 25 hours of face-to-face tutoring is equivalent to a fulltime, 35-hour week).

On other measures casuals are found to perform most university teaching, particularly at undergraduate level: one estimate suggests that as much as 50% to 70% of all undergraduate teaching is undertaken by casuals (Coates and Goedegebuure 2010: 16-17). A simple head-count based on data held by UniSuper, the superannuation fund that accounts for 95% of university staff, found 67,000 academic casuals in 2010, outnumbering non-casual academics (May 2011). A more recent and accurate estimate, combining 2016 figures from reports to the DET and to the Workplace Gender Equality Agency, suggests that in rounded head-count terms there were 101,392 academic staff, of which 56,116 or 55% were casuals. Casual academics make up 77% of all teaching-only positions, 8% of all research-only positions and 2% of integrated teaching & research positions (see Table 1 below) (DET, 2016: Table 2.3; Andrews et al. 2016: 13). In this context the standard model of the teaching-research academic in continuous employment appears to have become something of a minority ideal-type in Australian universities. Regardless of what figures we use, there is no doubt that they show a remarkable and largely unplanned and unheralded structural transformation in the nature of academic work in Australia's public universities.

TABLE 1: Australian academic staff by category and head-count, 2016

FTE Academic by Function for 2016 DET	All Academic	Full-time and Fractional Full-Time Academic	Proportion Full-time and Fractional Full-time %	Casual Academic	Proportion Casual %
Teaching Only	15996	3696	23	12300	77
Research Only	15854	14617	92	1237	8
Teaching & Research	27455	26963	98	492	2
All Academic by Function by FTE	59305	45276	76	14029	24
Estimated Headcount from WGEA and DET for 2016	101,392	45276	45	56116	55

Source: DET 2016; Workplace Gender Equality Agency

The university workforce is increasingly divided between secure 'tenured' (continuing) research and teaching academics, and an expanding workforce of teaching-only casuals. Conversion of these staff into on-going teaching positions threatens the teaching-research nexus, and for some time was resisted by the tertiary education union in Australia, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU). Many members in continuing academic positions were concerned about the risks of disaggregating the professional identity of academics. Reflecting this, the initial strategy centred on raising the cost of employing casuals to create an incentive to employ continuing staff, sometimes linked with attempts to impose limits on university-level

casualisation. With casualisation continuing to grow, an increasingly active network of casual members argued strongly for the conversion of casually-employed teaching staff into secure employment. In 2012, following strenuous debate, the NTEU's peak representative body decided to take a new approach and seek the creation of a new category of on-going teaching only staff, 'Scholarly Teaching Fellows' (STFs), as a conversion mechanism for existing casual staff (O'Brien, 2015: 282-284; see NTEU 2012a, 2012b, 2016b).).

This paper, based on a nationally funded qualitative and quantitative research project, analyses the impacts of these new positions, outlining some of the dilemmas and possibilities that arise. The proposal for a new category of continuing teaching-only academics is a major departure. The NTEU emerged in1993 soon after the creation of a unified national university system. One of its first achievements was the definition of a unified national career structure for academics, and this centred on the link between teaching and research, reflecting the legislated mandate for universities as research and teaching institutions. Through the 1990s the national university system expanded rapidly within tight budget constraints, and pressures intensified for staffing and wage flexibility. In the late 1990s, the union successfully limited the spread of fixed-term contracts, with a new national award that led to the conversion of many fixed-term tutors into continuing positions. This had the side-effect of further flexibilising teaching delivery, with the rapid expansion in the use of short-term hourly-paid casual teachers. There are concerns today, that the new STF positions may also have unintended consequences. There are certainly important implications for the national career structure, and for the related intensification workloads across the sector.

This paper addresses the emerging implications of this new STF de-casualisation initiative, focusing on what has been achieved in the collective bargaining process, across the university sector, and is informed by international research into academic precarity and how it is contested (see Standing 1999, 2010). The paper surveys the ways in which the STF model has taken shape, identifying provisions that have been negotiated in university EBAs, as legally-enforceable documents. The conclusion considers the extent to which these union strategies for decasualisation are achieving their objectives.

Literature and Approach

There is a vast literature on precarity and the changing structure of work (see Standing, 1999, 2011). Conley identifies cost reduction as being 'at the heart' of public education casualisation, reflecting on competitive and contingent funding (2002: 727). Studies chart a dramatic collapse in secure employment for academics, for instance in the US from 58.8% in 1975 to 31.9% in 2005 (Hoeller 2007). Lopes and Dewan (2014), identify precarity, exploitation, lack of support and lack of career progression as key concerns for UK academics. In the US, Barker (1998) has documented an 'accumulated career deficit' based on growing stigmatisation for each year spent teaching outside the tenure track. Further, in the US context, Daniel (2016) cites a study at the University of California, Berkeley, indicating that in April 2015, one in four families of part-time adjunct staff were accessing public assistance programs.

In Australia, research into the impacts of academic precarity has highlighted immediate conditions, such as low and intermittent income, with a high incidence of unpaid work and workplace marginalization, including the lack of a secure work space and exclusion from decision-making; research has also exposed ongoing career impacts, due to the lack of access to professional development, the closing-off of research and publication opportunities, and low superannuation savings (May et al., 2013; Bexley et al., 2011; Brown et al., 2010). Contrary to university claims that casual teaching staff are established professionals with other sources of income, Australian research found that close to three-fifths are dependent on casual university income, and aspire to continuing status (Bexley et al., 2011). Many are discouraged, putting at some risk the sector's capacity to renew itself (Andrews et al., 2016).

The corollary of casualised teaching is the emergence of a separate category of insecure research academics, employed as fixed-term or casual staff for limited-term project-based grant-funded research. A study by Broadbent et al. (2013) found that a majority of contract research academics were reliant on a succession of short-term contracts, of one to three years in length. The primary problem was the uncertainty of research funding: reflecting this, UK research suggests that implementation of the 'Fixed-Term (prevention of less favourable treatment) Regulations 2002' has at best had a marginal impact on feminised and often part-time contract research work (Conley, 2008). The NTEU has secured the right to convert to continuing status for fixed term and casual researchers at many universities, whether as professional 'support' staff or as academics, but conversion is generally made contingent on continued funding, and hence rarely available. Reflecting this there has been an exponential growth in fixed term contract staff, mainly in research roles. Addressing this requires a more comprehensive policy approach, across the entire academic workforce, both to address uncertain research funding and re-bundle research with teaching roles.

In this study we are primarily concerned with this question of union strategy, and solidarity to overcome casualisation. As Quinlan stresses (2012), continuing staff increasingly see casualisation as a serious threat to their rights, and have sought ways to overcome it through strategies of inclusion. We argue this poses real dilemmas, uncertainties and potential trade-offs. The key focus, throughout, as Connell argues, has to be on the 'workforce as a whole': as she states, 'career structures need to offer, not spectacular rewards for a minority, but decent conditions and security for the workforce as a whole' (2016: 72).

Evaluating the new 'Scholarly Teaching Fellow' positions

The union's STF claim was the culmination of decades of activist campaigning and research into casualization (see Brown, T. et al 2006; May 2011). As an employment category designed around a job security and decasualisation agenda, it is an important illustration of one union's response to labour insecurity (De Ruyter and Burgess 2003; Standing 1999, 2011). The STF positions, conceived of as continuing teaching-focused positions, were explicitly designed to shift the balance away from increasing casualised academic employment by creating a new more secure category of employment and one that had a potential pathway into continuing employment. The claim was pursued through collective bargaining at university level and the outcomes reflect local bargaining conditions; a range of contrasting models for the STF positions as well as different expressions of commitment to job security emerged in different universities. These variations reflect the power of individual union branches and the campaigning of casual union members; they also reflect the differing perceived interests of university management, especially in terms of the broader university policies aimed at disaggregating academic work.

Universities creating the new positions were partly responding to union pressure, but they were also pursuing their own interests, which were shaped by different international, status and regional considerations. Universities were competing to attract talented staff, responding to the ageing of the continuing workforce, and the impact of effectively losing two generations of career academics. Universities were also feeling the effects of casualisation on sustained scholarship and program development, accentuated by the creation of new Federal 'Threshold Standards' for higher education in 2015, which require that teaching be embedded in 'continuing scholarship or research' (TEQSA (Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency) 2017). The legislative context, along with other pressures, suggested a new structural dynamic was emerging, forcing a new shared interest between unions and managers in 're-professionalising' academic teaching. From this perspective, the STF initiative opened-up possibilities, as well as posing risks.

To understand the impact of the NTEU STF clause, ten university-level Enterprise Agreements across a spectrum of the universities were analysed: the University of Sydney (USyd) and the University of NSW (UNSW) from the 'Group of Eight'; a coalition of research-intensive universities formed in 1999 as part of the industry-focused Australian Technology Network (ATN) - the University of Technology Sydney (UTS) and the University of South Australia (UNISA); Griffith University and Deakin University, which belong to the policy-focused Innovative Research Universities network; and the University of Canberra (UC), Western Sydney University (WSU), Swinburne University of Technology (SUT) and Victoria University (VU), which do not have a designated grouping. Across these universities there is considerable variation in rates of casualisation (see Table 2 below).

Table 2: Actual Casual Academic FTE as % of Total Academic FTE by Academic Classification for 1996-2015 at selected institutions

Institution	1996 %	2000 %	2004 %	2008 %	2012 %	2015 %
National average	16	19	20	19	21	23
University of New South Wales (UNSW)	12	13	15	12	15	15
University of Sydney (USyd)	16	24	23	17	18	24
University of Technology Sydney (UTS)	31	33	31	28	28	29
Western Sydney University (WSU)	24	25	29	31	29	33
Deakin University (Deakin)	21	19	24	27	22	23
Swinburne University of Technology (SUT)	18	8	24	26	32	45
Victoria University (VU)	17	39	29	25	22	27
Griffith University (Griffith)	19	23	24	22	24	25
University of South Australia (UNISA)	21	26	22	24	25	23
University of Canberra (UC)	15	21	18	18	25	20

Source: Department of Education and Training, Staff Data, Appendices 1.4 and 1.5.

STFs – a Vehicle for Decasualisation?

Almost no university created positions equivalent to the union's target of 20% of their casual teaching staff, and few adopted the numerical cap, though most did link the positions to reduced casual employment, even where the positions were fixed term. Of the ten agreements we analysed, only four named a new category of employment the 'Scholarly Teaching Fellow' - USyd, UTS, Deakin, and Griffith. These positions included important features of the original claim - they were to be filled by former casuals and to undertake work that had previously been undertaken by casuals (FWC 2013:14; FWC 2014a: 6-7; FWC 2014c: 25-26; FWC 2014d: 28-29). Two other universities created 'STF-like' positions –UniSA's 'Teaching Academic' and VU's 'Academic Teaching Scholar'. These were to be filled by former casuals, but only VU stated they would replace casual labour (FWC 2014b, p.14; FWC 2014e: 42-43).

WSU and the UC built some elements of the STF claim into pre-existing 'teaching-focused' roles. Neither linked the positions to work previously undertaken by casuals (FWC 2015c: 15; FWC 2016: 6). Importantly, the WSU agreement includes a continuing employment provision

through conversion for employees on existing fixed-term Teaching-Focused Roles (FWC 2015c: 11-15). After a legal battle that went all the way to the Federal Court, the NTEU won fifty casual conversion positions for 'Academic Tutors' and commitments to limit casualization at SUT (FWC 2015a: 9-10; NTEU 2016a). The UNSW agreement creates 30 new positions to undertake work that would otherwise have been done by casuals, but few other details are given (FWC 2015b: 10).

Commitments to not exceeding casual employment rates and to job security appear in most of the Agreements, but these are usually couched in aspirational terms, and are not enforceable. Of those, only Griffith and WSU have a stated intention to reduce overall reliance on casual academics, though a figure was not given (FWC, 2014a: 11-12; FWC, 2015c: 14). USyd includes a Faculty-level casual threshold of 5% (FWC, 2014c: 24). The UniSA agreement includes a numerical cap on casual employment of no more than 25% of the total workforce (FWC, 2014b: 53). In 2014, when the agreement was signed, the proportion of all casual staff at UniSA, both academic and non-academic, was at 14%, well below the ceiling, although casual academic FTE was already at 25%.

From Insecurity to Promotion?

The STF and STF-like positions certainly reduce job insecurity for casual academics (Burgess and Campbell, 1998a; Standing, 2010). A fixed-term teaching intensive role is more secure than a casual position, though a continuing role is preferable to both. The progressive salary scale of the new positions also provides recognition of a staff member's experience over time, as opposed to the flat pay scale for casuals that does not factor in achievements or experience (Junor, 2004; Broadbent, Strachan and May 2017, 49).

Beyond job security, the majority of casual academics also aspire to a career with prospects for promotion. A salary scale within the teaching-only profile can provide opportunities for career advancement, though academic casuals also greatly value the right to seek promotion into a teaching-and-research role (NTEU, 2012a). Of the agreements discussed, only USyd, Griffith and Deakin created continuing positions with access to promotion into an integrated teaching-and-research position after 3 years (FWC, 2013: 14: 24-25; FWC, 2014a: 7; FWC, 2014c: 23). UTS created continuing positions with a right only to apply for promotion into an integrated role, meaning appointees could be locked into a teaching-intensive career path indefinitely (FWC, 2013d: 28-29).

Other teaching-intensive positions are offered as fixed-term appointments (WSU, VU), some without the option of a continuing role (UniSA), and others with a contingent pathway into a continuing role (UC) (FWC, 2014e: 42-43; FWC, 2015c: 16; FWC, 2016: 28). The 'contingent continuing' path for teaching-focused appointees at UC is particularly onerous, with seven years of performance reviews (FWC, 2016: 6).

Workload - Heavier Teaching

STFs have a high teaching workload, in most cases around 70% of their total load. The teaching workload for these positions was debated among casuals during the bargaining round, with casual members stressing their preference was for an integrated full-time teaching and research position (NTEU, 2012a: 6-7). In practice the STF model strikes a compromise between the university pressure for teaching-intensive positions and the union's desire to reduce job insecurity.

Amongst the ten agreements surveyed here (see Table 3), STF positions at Griffith have a 75% teaching workload with 25% scholarship and service (FWC, 2014a: 6); at Deakin STFs

have 70% teaching with the remaining 30% in teaching-related service and scholarship (FWC, 2013: 14: 46). At UTS, STFs have a 70% teaching workload with 20% scholarship and research and 10% service (FWC, 2014d: 28-29). USyd allocates a minimum of 20% scholarship and research to appointees (FWC, 2014c: 26). The UniSA positions have an 80% allocation for teaching and 20% for scholarship while Victoria Uni caps teaching at 70% (FWC, 2014b: 56).

A teaching-intensive workload is usually capped at 18 contact hours per week: at UC the standard is 17 face-to-face hours per week (FWC, 2016: 30); at WSU 16-17 hours (FWC, 2015c: 29); but at VU 18 hours per week is the minimum (FWC, 2014e: 38: 42). Given this heavy teaching load there has been some pressure for non-STF pathways for casual academics. At USyd, for example, where casuals had significant input into the campaign and the bargaining process and raised concerns about being locked into teaching-only careers, other pathways like the Early Career Development Fellowships were included in the Agreement, as were security provisions for existing casuals without a commitment to a teaching-focused career (FWC, 2014c: 26-27: 21-25).

TABLE 3: Proportion of STF workload allocations

University	Teaching %	Service %	Scholarship / Research %
Griffith	75	<_25_>	
Deakin	70	30 (incl min 10 research)	
UTS	70	10	20*
USyd			20 minimum
Uni Sth Australia	80		20
VU	70 (min 18 contact hrs)		20
Uni Canberra	17 hrs		To be negotiated at Faculty Level
WSU	16-17 hrs		To be negotiated with supervisor, but no allocation for research
UNSW	Not stated in the EBA		
SUT	Not stated in the EBA		

1. = includes research

From research to scholarship?

The STF positions subtly shift academic teaching from a research-teaching nexus into a scholarship-teaching nexus. Where research is assumed to be concerned with the creation of new knowledge, scholarship relates to knowledge about the existing field. The original union claim emphasised the value of teaching, and presented scholarship (as against research) as a relevant activity for teaching staff. Across the ten agreements the career path for teaching-focused positions generally has no allocated research time. This limits the possibility that staff may transition into a research and teaching role.

Only two of the agreements (USyd and UTS) include a workload allocation for research, at 20%, albeit combined with scholarship (FWC, 2014c: 26; FWC, 2014d: 28-29). At Deakin, STFs have a 10% scholarship allocation while at Griffith there is a 25% allocation for scholarship and service (FWC, 2013: 14; FWC, 2014a: 6). Teaching-focused positions at UniSA and VU have a 20% scholarship allocation (FWC, 2014b: 56; FWC, 2014e: 56). None

of these agreements provide a dedicated research allocation for teaching-focused staff; others do not appear to have a scholarship allocation.

There is significant unevenness in how individual Agreements define scholarship, partly reflecting the lack of defined research and scholarship activities in the Higher Education Industry Academic Staff Award. At Griffith, VU, UniSA, UC, SUT and UNSW, scholarship and research are treated as two separate categories of work. The distinction is much less clear at USyd and UTS where STFs are allocated a combined workload for both, and at WSU where scholarship is defined as teaching, including the development of teaching materials and maintaining discipline knowledge (FWC, 2015c: 31-32). At Deakin, scholarship and research are not clearly defined except that STFs only have a scholarship allocation and cannot access the university's staff research support programme (FWC, 2013: 44-46).

There is also confusion about the link between scholarship and teaching, and whether it entails scholarship 'in' teaching (disciplinary knowledge), or more generic scholarship 'of' teaching (pedagogy). Where it is the latter, STF academics can find their scholarship activity confined to improving curriculum and pedagogical designs rather than strengthening and renewing the disciplinary knowledge base of their curriculum.

New fractures and forms of insecurity?

Labour market status, employment, and income may be relatively stable for many of these STF and 'STF-like' positions. Yet the high teaching workloads, overly-constrained career paths, low promotion prospects, and excessive expectations may produce or exacerbate other forms of insecurity around work and representation (Standing 2010). Indeed, over time a gulf may open up between the relatively disadvantaged class of STF appointees, and the more autonomous 'integrated' teaching and research academics, creating resentment and loss of workplace agency.

Workloads, particularly contact teaching hours, are contingent on the decisions of individual faculties and deans. Here the working-time insecurity of multiple casual contracts (Burgess and Campbell, 1998a: 15) may be exchanged for workload inflexibility. At the same time, minimal access to research workload and funding create new forms of representation insecurity (Junor, 2004).

Ripple effects on 'Research-and-Teaching' roles

Finally, the STF positions can undermine integrated teaching-and-research positions as they institutionalise and legitimise high teaching workloads, replace teaching informed by research with teaching informed by scholarship, and gradually redefine research as a specialisation separated from teaching.
At Deakin a staff member with no research allocation can be given a teaching allocation of up to 70%, effectively turning an integrated position into a teaching-intensive one. While the Deakin agreement also limits the total number of staff on a 70% teaching allocation to 20% of continuing staff, it places no such limit on fixed-term staff with a 70% teaching allocation (FWC 2013: 44-48). Similar provisions exist in other agreements. At USyd, an integrated teaching and research role can become teaching intensive if this is agreed between the staff member and supervisor (FWC, 2015c: 45-48).

Of a total of approximately 850 STF-like positions won by the NTEU in the current round of bargaining, which commenced in 2016, 690 (81%) had been appointed as at February 2018. As yet, the STF initiative has not substantially reduced casualisation: nationally casualisation rose between 2014 and 2015, although there has been a small reduction at Griffith, UniSA and

UC (See Table 1). At SUT, where the university appointed 50 casuals to continuing employment through a conversion process, the casualisation rate also rose significantly.

The STF and other modes of teaching-focused work have the potential to address several types of precarity experienced by casual academic workers, providing the certainty of a permanent job with a stable salary. This outcome has to be carefully weighed against other impacts in terms of workload disaggregation and intensification, which can have the effect of creating new forms of labour insecurity.

Conclusions

Recent NTEU efforts to reduce casualisation in the university sector demonstrate the dilemmas of addressing precarity for a white-collar union in a 'professional' field. The union has been faced with the choice between defending the existing professional identity of academic work, and campaigning for the conversion of casual teaching academic positions into continuing teaching-only roles. The union has moved from the defensive position of simply opposing casualization in the name of continuing 'integrated' academic positions, to a more proactive approach of creating continuing 'teaching-only' roles for causal workers in the system, while seeking a 'pathway' from teaching-only to research-and-teaching positions.

This shift has coincided with a structural movement towards role specialisation, which is threatening to fragment the traditional 'integrated' academic role, through a rapid growth in contract research-only work and casual teaching-only positions, and potentially into task specific specialisations in for example assessment/grading, curriculum design, flexible learning design and so on. In this context universities have moved to intensify the teaching load for 'integrated' teaching and research academics, and have created an 'education-focused' career track for staff deemed not sufficiently research-active. With the proportion of academics in teaching and research positions falling to a minority of FTE academics in the sector, the union has shifted into new territory with its campaign to create STF positions, as teaching-only continuing roles designed to reduce teaching casualisation.

The outcomes from this effort to shift the workforce profile, as discussed, are mixed. Enterprise agreements will potentially deliver about 850 STF-type positions, many of which are not continuing, are highly teaching-intensive, and see staff locked into teaching-only roles with no room for promotion into a teaching and research role. Nonetheless, while these positions are an improvement on casual teaching roles, a further concern is that some universities have substituted positions that would otherwise have been advertised as teaching-and-research roles). There are risks that the new positions have raised the maximum teaching load, to 70% of workload for continuing staff across the sector, undermining the balance between teaching and research roles.

In this way, with the creation of the STF positions, the dilemmas and risks of re-professionalising academic teaching into a re-bundled continuing teaching-only position are no longer theoretical. They have emerged as practical questions of implementation, in contested negotiations over how these positions are defined and developed. As it is the union that has proposed and pursued the creation of these positions through enterprise bargaining, these practical concerns are directly reflected in the clauses of university Enterprise Agreements. They raise questions however about whether this strategy will adequately address academic precarity.

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