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How much is this number worth? Representations of academic casualisation in Australian universities

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Abstract

Casualisation of the academic workforce in Australia has increasingly become a pointed issue of contestation between university managements and the union, the National Tertiary Education Union, during enterprise bargaining negotiations over the last decade. The Union has been concerned with the industrial injustice for long term insecurely employed academics, and its implications for the future academic workforce. Universities, on the other hand, had for a long time maintained that casualisation levels were not at a level detrimental to the sector and that casual employment brought benefits to both the incumbents and the university. However, by 2012, the rapid expansion of the sector, particularly in undergraduate enrolments, had meant the universities could no longer rely on expanding its casual academic workforce to meet its teaching needs. In the most recently completed rounds of enterprise bargaining around Australia, most university managements came to accept that something had to change in the composition of the teaching workforce of the university. The Union capitalised on this to negotiate a new entry level teaching focussed category of continuing academic positions in many of its branches. Ironically, throughout all these negotiations, a reliable estimate of the rate of casualisation of academic work was not available. This paper presents the authors' detective work in the pursuit of a reliable estimate of academic casualisation in the Australian university sector, and discusses the implications for policy.

Keywords: Higher education workforce; insecure work; quantification

Introduction

Employment of casual academic staff in Australian universities is not a new phenomenon. The industrial award for higher education staff has recognised this category of university staff in the sector. A contingent of casual teaching workforce has always been acknowledged by all parties - university management, the higher education labour union National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU), and academics - as a necessity, in order to meet unanticipated surge in student enrolments, give work opportunities for research students and bring current industry expertise

into the courses. What has become increasingly apparent, however, is that the growing reliance on casual academics has become difficult to defend. By 2012 when the last round of enterprise bargaining negotiations commenced in Australian universities, the NTEU decided to pursue a claim that would address the growing impatience among many of its precariously employed members about the lack of effective response to the growing casualisation of academic work and the growing number of well qualified, long term casual academics losing any hope of an academic career. Concurrently, in response to growing undergraduate enrolments, several universities started to contemplate the introduction of teaching-focussed career positions to reduce the degree of dependence on casual teaching academics. By the end of the previous round of enterprise bargaining (Round 6) universities had agreed to introduce a new category of academics that ranged from the model of Scholarly Teaching Fellows (STFs) proposed by the NTEU to other models of teaching-focussed positions that shared some similarities with the STFs.

The model of the STF position originally formulated by the NTEU, and wholly adopted by the University of Sydney is a teaching focussed position with a fulltime workload typically allowing for a minimum of 20% of time for research (The University of Sydney, 2013). Many of the universities that introduced STFs and STF-like positions have written into their enterprise agreements that the intent of introducing these new categories of academic positions is to reduce the reliance on casual academic staff. Thus one assessment of the impact of this initiative should be a measure of the reduction in the level of casualisation in these institutions. For the NTEU, there was the additional intention of creating genuine career path positions for long-term casual academics, an agenda of redressing industrial injustice (Broadbent et al., under reviewA).

The authors are members of a research project team investigating the STFs as a new category of academics, and in particular, how the introduction of STFs and STF-like positions are playing out in different campuses. The project, funded by the Office of Learning and Teaching contributes to discussions and debates about the future of the academic workforce in Australia, and seeks, among other aims, to

1. investigate the cost and benefits of STFs for various stakeholders, and how they compare with other models, including the 'integrated' 40 % teaching - 40 % research – 20 % service model of academic work, and the casual teaching-only model; and
2. explore the extent to which STFs enable universities to offer career pathways capable of attracting sufficient numbers of qualified entry-level academics into the sector, in the context of large sector-wide renewal pressures

These aims were determined on the assumption that there was a set of accurate base data about the problem that is being addressed through the introduction of the STFs, specifically the rate of casualisation of academic work in the sector and within each university, and the nature of the (real) work being undertaken by casual academics in the sector. In the NTEU's original proposal for the STF position, a 20% reduction in casual employment was sought over the term of each agreement based on official figures from the Department of Education for casual university staff in teaching, or combined teaching and research positions. As already mentioned, by the time the STF claim was being discussed at the enterprise bargaining table at the different campuses, there was an acknowledgement by all parties that the high level of academic casualisation was an issue that needed to be addressed. It was therefore surprising to the authors that an accurate measure of the rate of casualisation and a good estimate of the head count of casual academic staff were both so elusive.

In this paper we critically analyse the different estimates that have been available about the level of casualisation in the sector, and outline and argue for the rationale of the method of our pursuit of both a reliable estimate of the rate of casualisation and the number of academic

casuals in the sector. We find that the state of data transparency (i.e. lack thereof) presents significant policy challenges for any public debate about the future of the academic workforce, and moreover, constructs a representation of casual academics and their work that is incongruous with who these workers are and what they do. As activist researchers who view the issue of casualisation and the position of academic casuals in the sector as a public issue as much about workforce planning for the sector as about industrial justice, our pursuit of reliable measures responds to Nikolas Rose's (1991) claim that "democratic power is calculated power, calculating power and requiring citizens who calculate about power" (p. 673).

In the next section, we discuss the need for a critical numeracy in policy research, and frame the objects of critique with concepts and ideas from the sociology of science and technology. We then critically examine how the numbers have 'travelled' to produce estimates related to the state of the academic workforce, and the problems with these estimates. This is followed by our own calculations to produce what we argue is a more accurate set of estimates about the rate of casualisation and the number of casual academics in the sector. The findings and implications are discussed in the final section.

Measures of casualisation and the representations of casual academics

Quantification as a key resource in contemporary education policy making has been the subject of increasing critique in the policy studies literature (see for example, Grek, 2009; Hamilton, Maddox, & Addey, 2015). The foci of many of these critiques have been linked to the use of numbers in the construction of international league tables, a phenomenon linked to the increasing role of transnational organisations such as the Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in local policy making (Rivzi, & Lingard, 2009; Walker, 2009). While the concern about numbers being used for international comparisons of student performances is not the concern of our work here, the critique about the "particular power that numbers hold over the public imagination" (Hamilton et al., 2015, p. xxi), in our case, about who is undertaking the core teaching activities in universities, and what we know about how these workers accomplish the work, is one that cuts across these different educational policy domains. We have argued in a separate paper (Dados et al., under review), that the impact of neoliberal governance of universities has made it easier for what the historian of statistics Theodore Porter (2012) calls the "funny numbers" of neoliberalism; the numbers that struggle to find public accountability. In this paper we focus more on redressing the problematic impact of the funny numbers of academic casualisation in Australia.

In Australian universities, the employment category of 'casual' has a meaning that is distinctive to its sector. Whereas in most industries casual employment typically implies irregular engagement on an hourly basis, in the Australian higher education sector casual employment takes the form of a semester long contract, where the number of hours and the days and times of work are stipulated for the entire semester. Thus, while casual employment is not guaranteed beyond the semester in which an academic is engaged, within that semester, the work is regular. What the university casual academic employees share with casual employees in other industries is the lack of job security once each contract is fulfilled, the lack of paid leave entitlements, and pay being determined by an hourly formula.

There are two main work activities within the academic casual employment category: *lecturing*; and *tutoring*. Within each of these categories, there are sub-categories for *specialised*, *developed*, *basic* and *repeat* lecturing; and *normal* and *repeat* tutoring. Three other categories of work come under *other academic activities*, encompassing a range of activities including demonstrations in practical classes, student consultations, student supervision, attendance at lectures of a subject in which the casual worker is tutoring; *marking* of assessment tasks; and *clinical nurse education* in hospitals. With this range of work undertaken by casually employed academics, it is not surprising that universities may struggle to produce an accurate count of

casual academic employment at the tip of their finger. The picture of casual academic work in universities is messy – in both its composition and its variation from semester to semester depending on numerous variables including student enrolment numbers, availability of continuing staff, availability of eligible casual academics and departmental budgets. However, it is recognised that a large proportion of the casual academic work that is undertaken, and which makes up the casual salary cost, is the lecturing (basic lecturing and repeat lecturing) and tutoring (basic and repeat tutoring). Moreover, universities are legally required to annually report to two public organisations about the composition of their workforce, including their casual workforce; these two organisations are the Commonwealth Department of Education and Training (DET) and the Workplace Gender Equity Agency (WGEA). So a count and a measure are produced, however difficult it may be to do so.

The data that universities report to the DET and the WGEA are publicly available on their respective websites. Thus, it is not our claim that universities or the organisations they are reporting to are suppressing the information about the state of the higher education workforce. There is, in fact, a lot of information on the websites, with numbers arranged in different categories over many pages and multiple spreadsheets. By transforming the messiness of a phenomenon using the language of numbers, a semblance of order and objectivity is achieved, because

quantification is a technology of distance, [which] minimizes the need for intimate knowledge and personal trust. Quantification is well suited for communication that goes beyond the boundaries of locality and community. A highly disciplined discourse helps to produce knowledge independent of the particular people who make it. (Porter, 1996, p. ix)

However, in order to bring order to the messiness, certain assumptions must be made, and certain judgments about what detail is important and what is less so must be made. The publication of the numbers and the reuse of their underlying assumptions and judgments bring representations of casualisation into circulation as what Latour calls, ‘immutable mobiles’ (1986); they travel from the website where they appear into secondary research and other applications, leading to still more numbers that are calculated from them. They are largely immutable because they carry the aura of objectivity, being ‘official’ numbers of public organisations. However, as Latour (1987) stresses in his sociology of science and technology, numbers and formulae have inscribed into them assumptions and the interests of their creators, and increasingly the ‘centres of calculation’ that create the numbers and the formulae can be very remote from where the phenomenon that these numbers are describing are occurring, so much so, as we shall show below, that the tools for what they are purported to be used for is of doubtful validity.

We illustrate the problem with the way numbers are reported to the DET. Although headcounts are reported for fulltime continuing and fixed-term contract academics, academic casual numbers are reported in terms of ‘fulltime equivalence’ (FTE). That is, rather than reporting the number of actual people employed on casual academic contracts – some who may be teaching as little as one hour per week to others who may be teaching eight hours or more, the casual academic staff numbers are reported in terms of how many fulltime academics are equivalent to the work that is undertaken by the academic casuals. Were this FTE calculation to be straightforward and incontrovertible, the FTE figure for each institution would provide a measure of the proportion of academic work that is being undertaken by casually employed academics. However, what the FTE means is highly contestable because in Australia, as in other contexts such as the United Kingdom, consensus about a standard academic workload model for fulltime academics does not exist (see for example, Hornibrook, 2012; Kenny & Fluck, 2014; Papadopoulos, 2017).

The DET website explains the calculation of the FTE for casual academic marking, tutoring and lecturing as follows:

If the work performed is marking (as a single activity), research or other work, then:

- determine the total number of "paid" hours for the person or persons during the full year;
- divide that number by 35 to give an equivalent number of weeks worked; and
- divide the equivalent number of weeks worked by 52. (DET, n.d.)

This formulation is straightforward given that the number of hours per week that a fulltime academic gets paid is between 35 and 37.5 hours. Thus, a hypothetical person who undertakes marking for 35 hours per week for 52 weeks of the year would be equivalent to one fulltime academic, in terms of paid hours of work.

Where the formulation becomes more complex is in the calculation of the FTE for tutorial work:

If the work performed is supervising or conducting demonstrations, tutorials or workshops, then:

- determine the total number of "contact" hours (excluding associated hours spent in preparation and marking) for the person or persons during the full year;
- divide that number by 25 to give an equivalent number of weeks worked; and
- divide the equivalent number of weeks worked by N, where N is the number of teaching weeks in a full year excluding any summer school period. (DET, n.d.)

According to this formulation, a person would need to teach 25 hours of tutorials each week in both semesters in order for their work to be equated to that of a full-time academic. However, in the pay structure for casual tutoring, university enterprise agreements allow for each hour of tutorial delivery, another two hours of 'associated non-contact duties' if the tutorials are not repeat tutorials, and one hour of 'associated non-contact duties' if it is a repeat. Thus 25 hours of tutorials per week translate to between 50 and 75 hours of actual labour, far-exceeding the nominal hours of paid work per week for a full-time academic.

The picture then takes a twist when casual lecturing work is considered:

If the work performed is lecturing, then:

- determine the total number of "contact" hours (excluding associated hours spent in preparation and marking) for the person or persons during the full year;
- divide that number by 9 to give an equivalent number of weeks worked; and
- divide the equivalent number of weeks worked by N, where N is the number of teaching weeks in a full year. (DET, n.d.)

In this case, nine hours of lecture delivery, which together with the hours of 'associated non-contact duties' translate to between 18 hours and 27 hours of work per week, thus well below the 35 or 37.5 hours of a full-time academics' working week. (For the small minority of casual academics being paid at specialized or developed lecturing rate, nine hours translate to 45 hours or 36 hours of paid work.)

Thus the first problem of unreliable counts emerges because universities report their workforce data to the government department according to models that defy reality for the largest number of casual academics, those performing tutoring duties, and the significant number performing basic lecturing duties. The data grossly underestimate the actual number of casual academics undertaking tutoring work on the one hand, and overestimates the number who are undertaking lecturing on the other. How these overestimates and underestimates are combined to calculate the FTE is unknown, and therefore what is lost in that process is also unknown. Against such a backdrop, the possibility of making a sector wide or even an institution wide assessment of the impact of the introduction of STFs and STF-like academics to address problems associated with casualisation becomes dubious.

The second problem that emerges from the way that the DET measures casualisation is in its representations of casual academics as workers. In reality, no academic marks assessment tasks 35 hours per week for 52 weeks. No fulltime academic teaches 25 tutorials per week during any semester. While the nine hours of lecturing may not be uncommon for a fulltime academic's semester teaching load, these nine hours would amount to approximately 20% of their annual workload; they would lecture another eight or nine hours in the following semester, spend another 40% of their time undertaking research, and another 20% undertaking service to the university and their professional community. Moreover, these formulae do not reflect any of the findings from a number of research studies about casual academics in Australian universities (Junor, 2004; Brown, Goodman & Yasukawa, 2010; May, Peez, & Strachan, 2013) that have found the large amount of unpaid labour undertaken by casual teaching academics as tutors and lecturers. The DET model that suggests a casual tutor could be delivering 25 hours of tutorials a week is based on a very modest assumption that casual academics spend no more than the two hours of 'associated non-contact hours' to maintain the discipline currency in the field they are teaching, respond to student queries and undertake the practical preparations for teaching; the research literature and our own qualitative research findings shows that in most cases this assumption is wrong.

As part of our research into the STF initiative, we conducted several interviews with casual academics who had been working on casual and fixed term contracts for between 5 to 10 years. One casual academic who was co-ordinating a course with over 300 students explained she had to begin working as soon it was indicated that she would be given the course, even if she did not have a contract. It was sometimes well over a month before a contract arrived and there was no way that the unpaid hours she had put in could be compensated under the casual contract arrangement (Casual Academic, New University). Another academic who had taken unpaid maternity after more than 10 years on casual and fixed-term contracts, explained that she was working upwards of 40 hours a week, while her contractual arrangements for contact and associated hours covered her for only half of those hours. Another explained that the inadequacy of the 'associated non-contact hours' casuals are given per contact hour for preparation, as well as the volume of student inquiries, contribute substantially to the unpaid labour that casuals do:

Answering student emails is one, talking to students outside class, like incidental discussions around the classroom is another one that can easily, depending on how many classes you have, build up to an hour in one day. Another is preparation. (Casual Academic, Sandstones & Redbricks).

Not only do the assumptions about 'associated non-contact hours' in the DET model lead to poor metrics whose inaccuracies can get amplified as they are used to estimate other aspects of the workforce or the work that casual academics undertake, they diminish the professionalism of casual academic tutors by representing them purely as providers of lessons that require minimal intellectual input on their part, and little emotional investment in their interaction with students and colleagues.

In pursuit of a reliable estimate

While the DET provides the most comprehensive data on academic staff in universities, the challenge of counting the size of the casual academic workforce through the FTE measure has led researchers to pursue other methods. As early as 2000, it was noted that casualisation at universities was much higher than that reported by DET. A conservative estimate of 40% was given (Buckell 2003, Junor 2004). In the following two decades, a number of attempts have been made to measure the true size of the casual academic workforce. The NTEU has played an important role in this, as has University of Griffith researcher Robyn May through her novel use of superannuation statistics (May, 2014). In recent years, the WGEA has publicly reported headcount employment data for all universities with a detailed breakdown by employment category. What follows is an overview of interventions and methods, and a summary of our findings.

NTEU estimates

As part of their overall strategy to combat insecure work and growing casualisation in the higher education sector, the NTEU have combined campaigning and organising with interventions into the legislative framework. The NTEU's STF initiative was itself developed in direct response to the casual rate as an attempt to provide secure job pathways for long-term casuals. From our own small qualitative research sample comprising interviews with STFs and casuals, we have found that close to 80% of our interviewees had worked in contract teaching and research arrangements upwards of five years, with one quarter of our sample working as casuals for longer than 20 years.

NTEU researchers have contributed briefing papers, submissions to inquiries, and other publications on the issue of measuring the rate of casualisation at universities. Their two most recent submissions (to the *Independent Inquiry into Insecure Work* (2011) and the *Victorian Inquiry into the Labour Hire Industry and Insecure Work* (2014)), provided a discussion of the problem of the FTE figure accompanied by an attempt at an accurate estimate. The submissions make use of additional research, including the work of Robyn May, and WGEA data, to argue that the casual rate based on FTE - at last count 23.3% of academic staff (DET 2017) – underestimates casual academic headcount by a ratio of at least 1:4 (NTEU 2016).

Headcount estimates using UniSuper data

Using UniSuper data for 2010 obtained through an Australian Research Council (ARC) Linkage Project, Robyn May and others (2014; 2011; May et.al 2011) were able to extract a headcount figure for casual academic staff. UniSuper is the nominated super fund for 95% of university staff. Through the use of the aggregate data obtained from UniSuper, May was able to separate casual staff from continuing and fixed-term staff through their 9% super contribution (as opposed to the 17% of continuing staff) (2014; 2011; May et.al. 2011). This contribution is paid into the separate Accumulation 1 account.

The analysis of the total pool of active Accumulation 1 Account members (those who had received super payments in 100 days prior and had held an account for longer than 12 months) showed there were approximately 110,000 staff. To this figure, the researchers applied a proxy measure to determine the number of academic staff by counting those employed for 9 months of the year or less, a timeframe that roughly equates with university teaching periods from March to October (May et.al 2011, p.194). Using these proxy counts, May (May et.al.2011; May et.al. 2014) estimated that at 30 June 2010, there were approximately 67,000 casual academic staff, of which 57 per cent were women.

This figure of 67,000 for the casual academic headcount obtained from the UniSuper data was compared to the figure of 10691 casual FTE published by DET for 2010 (DET 2011; May 2014, p.48). The researchers concluded that this comparison showed “that one FTE equates to approximately six or seven actual casual staff members” (May et.al. 2011, p. 194). This would suggest at least 60% of academics employed in the sector are employed casually.

WGEA headcount data for universities

As part of our own investigation into the casual rate for academic university staff, we made a special data request to the WGEA. Through this, we were able to extract and analyse data for all 42 public universities. Based on this data, we calculated that the total university workforce for 2015-2016 was 205,727. Given that the entire ‘Tertiary Education’ workforce (all 91 organisations including non-university higher education providers) was 226,885 employees in 2016, this means that university employees made up 91% of this sector.

Of the 205,727 university employees, 17,101 or 8.3% of the workforce, were in managerial roles (including chief executive officers). 91.7% of the workforce, or 188,626 employees, were in non-managerial occupational categories. The headcount casualisation rate at universities is 43% for the entire workforce – this is roughly the same as for the ‘Tertiary Education’ sector as a whole. Women make up almost three-fifths (59%) of casual employees. When casual and contract staff are counted together, we found that 66% of all employees were in some form of insecure work. As with casual employment, women make up 58% of employees in insecure work.

However, when the data was analysed in more detail for the non-managerial categories, the headcount casualisation rate was 47%. This suggests that managers – 8.31% of the workforce but with a casual rate of 0%, mask the higher casualisation rate for non-managerial employees when included in the calculation.

Within the non-managerial categories, ‘professionals’ made up three-fifths of the workforce (59.7%). This is the category that most closely corresponds to the academic workforce, though it also captures small sections of the workforce that may not be strictly speaking in academic roles. The casual rate for professionals was among the highest at 45%.

Conclusions

Our analysis of the statistical data combined with our qualitative findings demonstrate a significant lack of transparency about the number of casuals in the sector and the work they do. While the DET (2017) figures suggest that the casualisation rate has been around the 20% mark for the last decade, investigative statistical work suggests that the rate could be upward of 60%. This presents significant policy challenges for academic workforce planning and presents problems for the assessment of risks to individual institutions and the sector as a whole. As activist researchers, our view is that a reliable estimate of casual academics is as much an industrial justice issue as it is a question of public trust in a public education system.

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