

<b>Title</b>	Who's there? Analysis of absence trends in the public sector.
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## **Who's there? Analysis of absence trends in the public sector.**

### Abstract

Attendance and absence are receiving increasing attention, as organisations attempt to maximise productivity from all organisational resources. This paper considers whether the public sector differs from broader patterns of absence, through an analysis of existing data on several public services. One clear trend is that the rates of absence tend to be higher in public services, for a range of factors related to the nature and conditions of employment. In relation to economic and demographic variables, the trends are mixed, with similarities both within and across sectors, and at other times no discernible pattern.

## INTRODUCTION

Absent employees represent a cost to organisations. There are obvious direct costs, if organisations have to pay replacement staff. However, there may be a range of less obvious costs, through lost productivity or business, and when absence is a sign of deeper problems within an organisation. The issues are of “fundamental importance to industrialised society ... affecting those in industry as a cost of production, yet lost productivity also affects the whole economy and society directly and indirectly” (RACP 1999:6).

Most countries report staggering estimates of the cost of absence. A 1995 Australian study estimated that “2.4% of Australian workers will be absent from work for some reason not anticipated by their employer”, and that this may cost employers in excess of \$7 billion per annum (Riedel and Preston 1995: xv). In the US, research in 2001 and 2002 estimated that the average cost of unscheduled absence was around AUD\$1360 per employee, and that employers put aside an average of 4.2% of their budgets to finance absenteeism (ANAO 2003:26; CCH 53:880). A 2003 British study estimated that the incidence of absence had risen from 7 days per annum in 2002 to 7.8 days in 2003, with the average cost of absence at approximately AUD\$1400 (£588) per employee and a total cost of billions to the economy (Silcox 2004:19).

However, sickness absence can be a sensitive issue. A review of the non-academic and practitioner literature suggests a traditional reluctance to discuss it or attempt to address it in some organisations. Further, sickness absence tends to be treated differently to other forms of absence. For example, absence as a result of industrial disputes receives much media attention, even though it is relatively minor in scale and cost when compared to sickness absence (Preston 1995). However the competitive pressures in recent decades have led to absence issues receiving increasing attention, particularly from human resource practitioners seeking to contribute to maximising organisational performance.

This paper presents some preliminary findings from a broader and continuing project on absence in the Queensland public service. (Queensland is the third largest state in the Australian federal system of government.) The purpose of the paper is to consider whether the public sector differs from broader literature and theory, as well as consider the differences between certain public service jurisdictions. Private sector trends are largely drawn from a comprehensive meta-analysis by Preston in 1995, as there does not appear to have been any holistic analyses in more recent times. Public sector trends are drawn from published literature and data in a number of

jurisdictions, such as the British Civil Service, the Australian federal public service, and the Queensland and Western Australian state public services. While these cases have been chosen to some extent based on the availability and comparability of the data, these four public service studies provide a range of important comparisons: an international comparison (between Britain and Australian federal and state services); a comparison across levels of government (with two national level public services in Britain and Australia and two Australian state governments); and adequate data to make generalisations about public service trends in some instances.

The first section of the paper considers broad information regarding the differences between public and private sector absence, with reference to Britain and Australia. The second and major section considers specific data on patterns and correlations, drawn from central data available in a number of public services. It is acknowledged that this central data can disguise interesting and important differences between agencies with different functions and workforces (e.g. education and main roads). However, the data provides an important starting point in highlighting the issues that should be explored in a more detailed analysis at agency and sub-agency level. It is intended that future research will examine individual agency data, undertake specific studies with employees in relation to reasons for absence, and consider any appropriate comparators in the private sector.

## **PATTERNS OF THE OVERALL RATE OF PUBLIC SECTOR ABSENCE**

Attendance and absence issues are gaining prominence in public sectors. In recent decades, managerial reforms have led to an increased emphasis on performance and expenditure, and the introduction of private sector management practices. There has also been a significant convergence of the traditional public sector employment relations with private sector human resource practices. While this convergence is of questionable appropriateness, given the different environment, goals and constraints of the two sectors (Colley 2001), it has nonetheless led to public sector organisations seeking to measure themselves against private sector benchmarks.

Numerous sources suggest that the public sector has higher sickness absence rates than the private sector. Australian Bureau of Statistics surveys indicate that, while sick leave rates are generally falling, the rates for Australian public sector employees “increased from being 33 per cent higher than the private sector in 1995, to being 50 per cent higher in 2000” (ABS in ANAO 2003:25). A 1994 Australian study found that public sector employees were 1.6 times more

likely than private sector employees to be absent from work at least once in the course of a year (Vandenheuval 1994 in MPCWA 2001:5). The Australian Public Service (APS) in 2001/2002 noted that the average unscheduled absence was 11.9 days per full time equivalent (FTE) employee, with sick leave comprising an average of 8.7 days of this - the estimated direct cost was \$295 million or three per cent of salary costs, but maybe up to \$900 million if other costs were included. The APS rate was higher than estimates of median absence rates in the private sector of around 6.8 days per annum, and believed to be higher than many other Australian public sector jurisdictions (ANAO 2003:10,20,36).

Similar patterns are evident in Britain. One study showed that public sector workers averaged an additional 1.7 days of absence per year compared to the private sector (CBI Survey in Dibben et al 2001:3). The UK Cabinet Office became interested in the cost of absence, and in 1998 it set a goal to reduce public sector absence by 30 per cent by 2003, to be achieved through more aggressive management of the issue (UK Cabinet Office 1999). This focused attention resulted in an initial reduction of absence rates but failed to make any lasting difference. In 2003, the British Civil Service still had an average absence rate in excess of 10 days per annum, at an estimated annual cost of over £375million per annum (UK Cabinet Office 2004:1). This was consistently higher than private sector rates for the same period of an average of 7.8 days per annum (Silcox 2004:18). A Taskforce set up to review absence suggested that the poor result may have been a lack of top management support, and a lack of tools for line managers (UK Cabinet Office 2004:1,5). The Taskforce Report noted:

The public sector has higher recorded long term absence than the private sector and long-term absence (particularly stress related) appears to have deteriorated in recent years: the percentage of individual [sic] experiencing spells of long term (21+day) absence has increased from 5% in 2001 to 5.7% in 2003 - 44% of all days lost. By contrast, recorded short term absence is lower in the public sector, though the very low civil service statistics may reflect significant under-recording. (UK Cabinet Office 2004:2).

However, the Report noted that such broad inter-sector comparisons did not compare like with like, and suggested that that the civil service rates of absence were “broadly typical of large private sector firms”, albeit different from small businesses (UK Cabinet Office 2004:7). The UK had comparatively low rates of absence within the European Union (EU), although most countries demonstrated similar overall patterns, including “higher absence in the public sector, high absence in the health sectors, low in education” (UK Cabinet Office 2004:8). Another study

of current management practices in the UK concluded that public sector absence management arrangements were already more sophisticated than the bulk of the private sector, and that reform of systems was unlikely to reduce absence levels.

The broad consensus in the literature is that any increased absence in the public sector is not due to it being a hazardous industry, but due to other factors, including:

- (a) Greater job security;
- (b) Lesser competitive pressures and performance standards;
- (c) Managerial policies and attitudes; and
- (d) Relatively low job satisfaction.

It is also possible that sick leave entitlements are more generous in the public sector than under some private sector awards. For example, British public servants were traditionally allowed lengthy periods of absence (up to 7 days) before requiring a medical certificate, and had access to more generous long term sick leave than the private sector (North et al 1996:332; UK Cabinet Office 2004:24). Similarly, most Australian Public Service employees can access at least 15 days paid sick leave (ANAO 2003:9), compared to the Australian standard of 8 or 10 days in many other industries and jurisdictions. The Australian National Audit Office (ANAO 2003:33) cites research indicating a correlation between lower sick leave entitlements and lower sick leave rates. It suggests that one conclusion that might be drawn from this pattern is that “sick leave expands to fill the entitlement available” and “not all sick leave taken is genuine”.

Regardless of whether the public and private sectors can be measured against each other, or one is worse than the other, there is no question that there is scope for greater analysis of each sector’s performance. There also seems to be some agreement in the literature that absence is a localised issue, and organisations should avoid simplistic holistic comparisons and undertake a more detailed analysis which may reveal trends and even broader organisational problems.

## **PATTERNS IN SPECIFIC ECONOMIC AND DEMOGRAPHIC VARIABLES**

This section provides a more detailed analysis of the overall patterns discussed above. A number of economic and demographic variables have been selected, primarily based on the availability of data. Within each selected variable, the analysis considers:

- (a) Evidence from the literature; primarily from Preston's (1995) review of the literature and theory;
- (b) Published data from other public services (as available), including a British Civil Service study in 2004, an Australian Public Service (APS) study in 2001/2002, and a Western Australian (W.A.) Public Service study in 2000; and
- (c) Data from the Queensland Public Service Minimum Obligatory Human Resource Information (MOHRI) data system for 2003/2004.

The analysis considers the comparability of these public services to each other, and to the broader literature. It is acknowledged that aggregate data disguises interesting and important differences between agencies. For example, it limits the ability to explore agency-specific variables (such as job satisfaction), which have important relationships to absence, or to identify other interesting trends (such as patterns of sick leave on Mondays or Fridays). These issues will be considered in future research.

### **Classification level/Salary**

The literature suggests mixed results regarding the relationship between absence and salary/classification level, with trends appearing to vary from firm to firm or industry to industry. Some studies suggest a negative relationship between hourly earnings and absence, with higher earnings being a significant predictor of lower absence. Other studies suggest that employees with higher incomes can better afford non-paid absences. Overall, Preston concluded that wage rate was an important predictor. However, salary could not be isolated from environmental factors (e.g. the state of the labour market) and organisational factors (e.g. discipline or lack of promotion penalties for excess sick leave) (Preston 1995:18-25).

The British, APS and WA public services found a negative relationship, with absence decreasing as salary/classification increased – quite simply, lower paid employees had more recorded absences. In Britain, the clerical grade “averaged three times the average absence rate per head of those at or above” managerial grade (UK Cabinet Office 2004:8). The APS noted similarly significant differences between the lowest and highest classifications as outlined in Table 1.

**Table 1. Average unscheduled absence by classification level, APS, 2001-2002**

<b>Classification</b>	<b>Rate %</b>
APS levels 1-4	15.96
APS levels 5-6	11.96
Executive 1-2	9.78
Senior Executive Service	5.68

Source ANAO 2003:42

The WA public service found a similar trend, with an additional \$10,000 in base salary reducing the odds of clearing paid sick leave by 0.8 (MPCWA 2001:14). However they urged caution, as it was acknowledged that at least part of this finding may have been due to higher reporting rates in junior levels, and more leniency in requiring senior managers to formally record their absences (ANAO 2003:12; MCPWA 2001:14).

The Queensland data demonstrated similar trends to other public services, with a negative relationship between salary and absence. Absence is low in the lowest salary brackets (up to \$30,000), which generally represent part-time work, but in other salary brackets the trend is a consistently negative relationship, with the lowest grades taking around twice the sick leave of executive grades.

**Table 2. Annual Absence Rate and Salary, QPS, June 2004**

<b>Salary bracket</b>	<b>Sick Leave %</b>
\$19,999 and less	1.97
\$20,000 – 29,999	2.41
\$30,000 - \$39,999	3.50
\$40,000 - \$49,999	3.41
\$50,000 - \$59,999	3.30
\$60,000 - \$69,999	2.81
\$70,000 - \$79,999	2.70
\$80,000 - \$89,999	2.74
\$90,000 - \$99,000	1.88
100,000 and over	1.75
Total	3.23

### **Firm Size**

Preston (1995:24) cites several studies which suggest a positive relationship between work unit/group size and absence - increasing firm size is correlated to increasing levels of absence. One study suggested that firm size was less relevant than the size of workgroups within that firm. Wooden and Drago (1995:88) note several factors that might explain this correlation: first, the absence of one employee in a large firm has less effect; second, large organisations tend

to have more hierarchical structures and impersonal procedural rules; and third, work in large organisations may be less satisfying due to lower standards of communication, group cohesion or job autonomy.

This positive relationship was generally evident in the APS, with an average of 9.1 days absence for agencies with less than 500 FTE employees, and an average of 12.2 days for agencies with more than 500 FTE employees. Anecdotally, it was suggested that this may be due to the greater proportion of lower level staff in larger agencies (ANAO 2003:11), which is consistent with one of the factors listed by Wooden and Drago.

In Queensland, there are mixed results and an ambiguous relationship. Higher than average absence rates occurred in large, medium and small agencies.

### **Overtime**

There are mixed views regarding correlations between absence and overtime worked. Theory would tend to indicate a positive relationship between overtime and absence, with greater overtime being related to greater absence (Preston 1995:18). In practice, the results are mixed. A 1989 study found a negative relationship between overtime and absence, with absence decreasing as overtime increased (Kenyon and Dawkins 1989 in Preston 1995:18). However a study of nurses confirmed that overtime was generally correlated to higher levels of absence (Preston 1995:18).

This information has generally not been examined in public sector studies. The WA study supported that employees being paid overtime were more likely to take sick leave (MPCWA 2001:14). No central data was available for the Queensland public service, but the rate of absence was higher in those departments where absences must be covered to ensure critical service delivery (such as health, prisons etc).

### **Age**

Age is often suggested to have a correlation to absence, although Preston notes divergent views about that relationship. Some studies suggest a negative linear relationship, where increases in age result in decreases in absence, due to the perceived lower commitment of young people to work or organisation. Other studies suggest a curvilinear or u-shaped relationship, where absence is high among younger employees, decreases as age increases up to a point, but

increases as employees get older and their health deteriorates (Preston 1995:12, 21). Wooden and Drago (1995:112) noted that this was particularly true for males, although there was no obvious pattern for females who have a different work/life cycle. Other studies suggest that employees have fewer absences as they become older, but the absences were of a longer duration. Generally, age could not be separated from other factors such as skill, status and organisation culture.

The British, APS and WA studies each showed different patterns. The WA study found a negative linear relationship between absence and age, with the older the employee the less likely they were to clear sick leave. Other factors being equal, the odds of taking sick leave reduced by 0.94 with every 10 years of age. The study considered that this might be due to issues such as “intergenerational differences, life stage demands and job satisfaction issues”. It also suggested that the current workforce might stay at work longer, given their improved health and the removal of compulsory retirement ages, and that this might see an increase in sickness absence amongst older age groups in the future (MPCWA 2001:14,16). The Australian Public Service noted a curvilinear pattern, where the youngest and oldest employees were the most likely to take sick leave: employees aged 60 years and over took three times the average rate of sick leave; and employees aged under 25 years took double the amount of sick leave taken by other groups (ANAO 2003:17). In contrast, the British civil service demonstrated a positive linear relationship, as demonstrated in Table 3, with increases in age being matched by increases in absence.

**Table 3. Annual Sick Leave Absence Rate and Age Group, UK, 2004**

<b>Age</b>	<b>Absence Rate %</b>
16-24	8.6
25-34	9.7
35-44	9.9
45-54	10.1
55-65	10.9

Source: UK Cabinet Office 2004:9

The Queensland data also indicated a generally positive linear relationship between age and absence as outlined in Table 4. Absence increased with age, albeit there was little change between the ages of 30 to 49. This trend is particularly true for male employees.

**Table 4. Annual Absence Rate and Age Group, QPS, June 2004**

Age	Sick Leave %		
	Female	Male	Total
<b>19 and less</b>	2.30	2.23	2.28
<b>20-24</b>	2.66	2.50	2.61
<b>25-29</b>	3.13	2.45	2.88
<b>30-34</b>	3.45	2.72	3.14
<b>35-39</b>	3.33	2.80	3.10
<b>40-44</b>	3.30	2.83	3.11
<b>45-49</b>	3.28	2.96	3.15
<b>50-54</b>	3.55	3.36	3.47
<b>55-59</b>	3.93	4.02	3.97
<b>60-64</b>	4.28	4.36	4.32
<b>65 and over</b>	5.23	4.91	5.07
<b>Total</b>	3.37	3.04	3.23

## **Sex**

Sex is often credited as a factor in absence, with general agreement that females are more likely to be absent than males. This is due to more ill-health factors as well as greater responsibility for family-related duties. Some studies also suggest that this may be a result of women's lower commitment to work. This is less likely as women increasingly expect career paths and progression in many fields, although it may be a factor in lower pay/responsibility industries where absenteeism is a greater problem (Preston 1995:12, 20).

The four public service studies all confirmed that female employees were more likely to be absent than male employees. In Britain, the average male absence was 8.5 days per annum compared to average female absence of 11.3 days per annum. This was considered to be due to their lower grades and their societal roles (UK Cabinet Office 2004:9). The APS found that female employees took 16 per cent more sick leave than male employees (ANAO 2003:17). The WA study indicated a similar trend, with females 1.2 times more likely to take sick leave than males. This was not seen as a lack of work commitment, but rather reflected women's dual role and the probability that they accessed their sick leave for caring purposes (MPCWA 2001:14,15). The Queensland data supported this trend, with the average annual absence rate being 3.37 per cent for females and 3.04 per cent for males. The previous section demonstrated that this varies according to age and type of absence.

## **Appointment type/tenure**

There are divergent views on the impact of appointment type or tenure. One theory suggests “increased tenure is generally thought to contribute to lower absence as a result of the increased organisational commitment that is engendered in employees” (Preston 1995:13). A contrasting theory is that tenure may reduce the pressure to attend, if an organisation is reluctant to dismiss long-term employees in whom they have invested training and development. However, Preston suggested that where studies found a correlation between tenure and absence, it was generally a negative relationship, possibly due to the difference between tenure in an organisation and tenure in a particular job (Preston 1995:19). This is discussed further in the following section (length of service).

The WA study found that permanent employment was the most significant factor in predicting sick leave absence (MPCWA 2001:14). Permanent employees were “almost three times more likely to take sick leave than other employees”. Additionally, permanent females were roughly twice as likely as permanent males to take paid sick leave. This was not seen as a reason to reduce tenure, because undermining job security could reduce job satisfaction and lead to more stress and absence (MPCWA 2001:14,15).

The Queensland data also demonstrated a positive relationship between tenure and absence. Permanent employees were more likely to be absent due to sick leave, as demonstrated in Table 5.

**Table 5. Annual Absence Rate by appointment type, QPS, June 2004**

<b>Appointment</b>	<b>Sick Leave %</b>
Permanent	3.42
Temporary	2.20
Contract	1.33
Total average	3.23

### **Length of service**

The literature suggests an ambiguous relationship between length of service and absence. Preston (1995:19) noted that employees with longer service “may feel less threatened by the prospect of job loss and thus engage in more absence”. However she cited various studies that differentiate between length of service in a job and length of service in an organisation: long service in one job with few promotions might result in de-motivation and increased absences, while several different jobs within an organisation may indicate organisational commitment and

motivation to attend. Some studies found that past absenteeism tended to be a reliable predictor of future behaviour, meaning that the behaviour was consistent over time.

Public service studies suggested a positive correlation between length of service and absence. The WA study found that length of service was a statistically significant predictor of absence, although its impact was negligible (MPCWA 2001:14). The Queensland data demonstrated a significant positive linear relationship between absence and length of service, as outlined in Table 6. Each cohort with more than five years service exceeded the average sick leave of 3.23% per annum.

**Table 6. Annual Absence Rate and Length of Service, QPS, June 2004**

<b>Length of service</b>	<b>Sick Leave %</b>
<b>Less than 1 year</b>	1.21
<b>1 to less than 3 years</b>	2.90
<b>3 to less than 5 years</b>	3.18
<b>5 to less than 10 years</b>	3.47
<b>10 to less than 20 years</b>	3.51
<b>20 years +</b>	3.82
<b>Total</b>	3.23

### **Employment status/fraction and hours worked**

Preston cited various Australian studies that demonstrate a positive relationship between hours worked and absence, with a higher number of working hours being related to higher levels of absence. This was consistent with labour/leisure choice models, where there is a “diminishing marginal utility associated with working longer hours” (Preston 1995:17,25).

The WA study was consistent with the general trend, with full-time employees more likely to take sick leave and employment status being an “important predictor” of absence. Interestingly, full-time males were 1.3 times more likely to take sick leave than full-time females. The study report observed that it was no surprise that the longer a person was at work, the more time they were likely to take off to attend to other life requirements (MCPWA 2001:14, 15).

The Queensland data contradicted this general trend. Table 7 indicates higher absence rates for both male and female part-time employees.

**Table 7. Annual Absence Rate by employment status, QPS, June 2004**

Status	Sick Leave %		
	Fem	Male	Total
Full time	3.25	3.03	3.15
Part time	3.7	3.26	3.66
Casual	n/a	n/a	n/a
Total	3.37	3.04	3.23

### **Shiftwork**

Preston (1995:18) cites various studies that associate shiftwork with higher absence, possibly due to the scheduling of work in the “more desirable leisure periods” of evenings and weekends. This trend may also reflect the detrimental effect that shiftwork can have on health. The British study was consistent with this general trend, as certain shift work occupations (such as health, police and corrections services) had higher absence rates than the broader civil service (UK Cabinet Office 2004:8). The Queensland data also confirmed comparatively high rates of absence in those agencies with shiftwork occupations (such as nursing, ambulance officers, fire-fighters, police officers, and corrections officers).

### **Occupational status**

Occupation was expected to be negatively related to absence. Higher level occupations (such as managerial, professional or even white collar work) were expected to be associated with less absence due to assumptions of greater job or organisational commitment, responsibility and satisfaction. Another factor was that such jobs often provide more autonomy and flexibility in hours than technical, trade or labouring positions, and provided safer and more pleasant working conditions. Absence rates were higher in those occupations where conditions were unhealthy or dangerous (Preston 1995:13, 23).

The British study was consistent with these findings, with absence rates being higher in occupations such as police and prisons (UK Cabinet Office 2004:8).

The Queensland data showed mixed results, as outlined in Table 8. There were generally higher rates for blue collar jobs, such as labourers, cleaners and tradespersons, and the lowest rates were for managers and advanced clerical workers. The overall absence rate for professional groups was about average, although this disguised some higher and lower rates for different occupations groups within the category.

**Table 8. Annual Absence Rate and Occupation, QPS, June 2004**

<b>Occupation</b>	<b>Sick Leave %</b>
Labourers and Related Workers	3.68
Intermediate Production and Transport Workers	3.49
Elementary Clerical, Sales and Service Workers	3.54
Associate Professionals	3.48
Tradespersons and Related Workers	3.36
Intermediate Clerical, Sales and Service Workers	3.23
Professionals	3.17
Advanced Clerical and Service Workers	2.90
Managers and Administrators	2.35
Occupational	<b>3.23</b>

### **Accrued Annual leave**

The question of correlations between accruals of annual leave and absence are not canvassed in most studies, and is not available from the Queensland central data. However the WA study raised interesting questions for organisations such as public services where employees can often accumulate excessive annual leave balances. That study found that that “allowing employees to accrue more than 4 weeks annual leave contributes to sick leave absence. An employee having more than four weeks annual leave accrued is 1.4 times more likely of clearing some sick leave in a six month period”. There was no direct linear relationship between the amount of accrued annual leave and the amount of sick leave taken (MPCWA 2001:13).

### **Location**

The literature does not address the question of location in relation to absence, but this is also an interesting question for public sector agencies, which often have dispersed workforces. The WA study found that location had a significant relationship to absence, with metropolitan employees being 1.6 times more likely to take sick leave than their regional colleagues (MPCWA 2001:14). Anecdotally, the MPCWA Report suggested that this might be due to work context, such as more cooperative and cohesive work groups in regional areas, or more flexibility in time off during the day to attend to their personal affairs without recording sick leave (MPCWA 2001:16).

The Queensland data indicated a similar correlation as outlined in Table 9. The highest rates of absence occurred in metropolitan areas (Brisbane and Moreton Districts), and the lowest rates occurred in the remotest areas.

**Table 9. Annual Absence Rate by Statistical Division, QPS, June 2004**

District	Sick Leave%
Moreton	3.27
Brisbane	3.38
Darling Downs	3.21
Wide Bay-Burnett	3.16
Northern	3.10
Fitzroy	3.02
South West	2.67
Far North	2.91
Mackay	2.75
North West	2.56
Central West	2.50
Queensland	<b>3.24</b>

A summary of this discussion of statistical relationships is contained in the following table.

**Table 10. Summary of Relationships between absence and variables**

Variable	Findings from Literature and Theory	Other Public Service Studies	Queensland
Salary	Mixed – but often negative relationship	Negative relationship	Negative relationship
Firm size	Positive relationship	APS – positive relationship	Ambiguous relationship
Overtime	Mixed, but often positive relationship	WA – positive relationship	n/a
Age	Negative or curvilinear	UK - positive relationship APS – curvilinear relationship WA – negative relationship	Positive relationship
Gender	Higher rate of absence for females	Higher rate for females	Higher rate for females
Appointment type	Mixed – but tenure often negatively related to absence	WA – tenure positively related to absence	Tenure positively related to absence
Length of service	Mixed	WA – marginally positive relationship	Positive relationship
Employment status – fraction	Positive relationship	WA – positive relationship between full-time work and higher absence	Part-time work related to higher absence
Occupational status	Lower absence amongst managerial, professional and		Lower absence amongst managerial workers

	white collar workers.		Higher absence amongst certain professional groups
	Higher absence amongst blue collar, front line, and employees in dangerous occupations.	UK – higher in hazardous occupations	Higher absence amongst blue collar workers and hazardous occupations
<b>Shiftwork</b>	Positive relationship	UK – positive relationship	Positive relationship
<b>Location</b>	n/a	Higher absence amongst metropolitan employees	Higher absence amongst metropolitan employees

## CONCLUSION

This paper has considered absence trends in public services. As noted initially, it was not within the scope of the study to consider the data over a time-period, nor to undertake an analysis of the causes of absences. However, the study is useful in that it compares public sector organisations with the general literature and with each other.

The review of overall patterns suggested that there were higher levels of absence in the public sector than the private sector. This was due to a range of factors, including greater job security, lesser competitive pressures and performance standards, managerial policies and attitudes, and relatively low job satisfaction. A further possibility was the more generous sick leave entitlements in the public sector.

The review of variables was inconclusive. There were often mixed findings within the general studies, which made it difficult to make any definitive findings regarding public sector differences. Where there was sufficient data to compare the three groups, the Queensland public service was:

- (a) consistent with both the other public service studies and the broader literature, on four variables (of salary, gender, occupational status insofar as blue collar or hazardous occupations, and shiftwork);
- (b) consistent with the other public service studies, but not with the broader literature on two variables (of appointment type, and length of service);
- (c) out of step with both the other public service studies and the broader literature on four variables of firm size, age, employment status, and occupational status insofar as certain professional groups.

The data suggests that the Queensland public service has more in common with other public services than the private sector, but also that it is quite often out of step with all other comparators. It is beyond the scope of this paper to make any supported conclusions about this pattern. This will become evident in future research, which will drill down and examine the variables in greater depth at agency level, and endeavour to ascertain the causes of absence in various contexts.

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