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The casual approach to university teaching; time for a re-think?

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The majority of undergraduate teaching at Australian universities is performed by casual, hourly paid, staff. This was not always the case. The casualisation of academic teaching that has occurred over the last two to three decades underscores a fundamental change in the nature of academic work and the structure of the academic labour market. At the same time, a sense of crisis is building around shortages for academic staff, with the majority of tenured academics aged over 50 and moving toward retirement. The traditional academic career path appears to be under reconstruction, and what might be thought of as the career entry point is concentrated with insecure employment. For those casual staff seeking an academic career it is unclear how time spent as a casual assists in that search, or whether working as a casual makes the transition to more secure employment more difficult. Women are entering academia in ever greater numbers and are often seen as the solution to the workforce renewal crisis, however they are also more likely to be employed on a casual basis with limited career prospects. The research forms part of a wider ARC project: *Gender and Employment Equity: Strategies for Advancement in Australian Universities*. Using new data from the universities superannuation fund Unisuper, obtained as part of this research project, a more thorough analysis of the casual teaching academic workforce is undertaken.

Keywords; casual employment, casualisation, university, gender, academic employment

Introduction

Recent estimates suggest that over half of all undergraduate teaching in Australian universities is performed by casual teaching staff (Percy et al. 2008), and, on a head-count basis, these staff comprise over 60 per cent of all academic staff (May 2011). In the period since 1990, the growth in employment of casual academic teaching staff has significantly outpaced that of ongoing academic staff, giving rise to what has been described as ‘a tenured core and the tenuous periphery’ (Kimber 2003:44). Casual teaching staff have no job security, few of the benefits associated with on-going university employment, and often only a very transient association with the university, faculty and discipline within which they work (Brown et al. 2010; Churchman 2005). The ramifications of this casualisation for workforce planning and recruitment, and for quality provision of teaching, are only beginning to be

raised by various agencies and quality bodies (AUQA 2008; Bradley 2008; Percy et al. 2008) and in the wider literature (Coates et al. 2009a).

The need for serious attention to the issues of recruitment of new academic staff and retention of current staff in the Australian university sector is widely acknowledged (Bradley 2008; Hugo 2005a; Hugo and Morriss 2010). This is occurring alongside a broader economy-wide discussion about the ageing of Australia's workforce and the issues arising from the imminent retirement of the baby boomer generation (Productivity Commission 2005). Hugo's (2005a, 2005b, 2008, Hugo and Morriss 2010) analysis of the age structure of the Australian academic workforce demonstrates that this workforce is older than most other professional groups, and, therefore, the issues are even more acute than in other industries. Some 56 per cent of academic staff fall in the 'baby boomer' category (those born between 1946 to 1966) in comparison to the workforce wide proportion of 42 per cent (Hugo and Morriss 2010). As a consequence, the university sector is likely to lose substantial numbers of academic staff to retirement over the coming decades.

This paper examines casualisation in Australian universities and argues that casual employment appears to have become embedded as an employment strategy in universities, providing in effect an alternative option for management in dealing with future workforce planning. Casuals are marginalised in universities and are excluded from the discussion around workforce renewal. The academic career path has changed dramatically over past decades and there appears to no longer be a defined career path, but rather a series of high end entry points available to only a minority, with potential entrants and others relegated to a casualised periphery. In particular, the gendered composition of the casual workforce raises issues for the universities' development of gender equity policies and practices. The focus of this research is on casual teaching staff whose primary motivation for working as a casual is to gain a more secure academic appointment, either on a part-time or full-time basis.

The paper first looks at the background and literature around changes in the composition of the academic workforce in Australia over the past decades. It then looks specifically at the work of Hugo and notions of a crisis in academic workforce renewal. It then discusses the characteristics of casual workers and develops a typology based on their career ambitions. Further evidence about the demographics of the casual teaching workforce is examined using previously unreleased data from the university superannuation fund, Unisuper. The paper looks at the changing academic career path and then references the UK, Canada, and US experiences as a way of identifying the possible implications for casual work in Australian universities. This paper enters the debate about how to fill the forthcoming skill shortages of academic staff, and calls for closer attention to the nature and extent of the casual teaching workforce.

Literature and background

Academic work has changed considerably since the 1960s and 1970s, and without clear boundaries to define the profession it is likely to continue to be reshaped in accordance with the rapidly changing environment within which it is located. Marginson (2000:32) has referred to this as 'tendencies to the deconstruction of the academic profession'. He argues that the 'traditional practices of the Australian academic profession are in crisis' (2000:23) as a result of a number of factors including the growth in casual work, the growth in teaching practices separate from disciplines, and the growth in the number and status of administrative staff and managers. This final point is backed up by Dobson (2010) whose analysis of the

staffing composition of universities over the period 1989-2007 reveals that the numbers of administrative and support staff has expanded much more than the numbers of teaching staff, even though student numbers have doubled since 1989 (2010:32).

Changes to academic work have occurred in the context of massive upheaval in the sector. In the late 1980s a series of major reforms to the university sector, widely known as the 'Dawkins' reforms', were introduced. As well as the re-introduction of tuition fees through the Higher Education Contribution Scheme, the reforms pledged to double university enrolments by the year 2000 (Bessant 2002). These changes opened university participation to a much wider population, the so called massification of Australian higher education (Marginson 2000). At the same time universities adopted private sector management practices (Kimber 2003), characterised by Marginson (2009) as 'new public management', in part to deal with reduced government funding particularly during the period of the Howard Liberal coalition government, 1996-2007. During the period 1995-2004 federal government expenditure on universities as a share of GDP fell by 4 per cent, while student numbers increased by 45 per cent (NTEU 2007). One of the consequences was a significant rise in the staff student ratio from 1:12 in 1990 to approximately 1:20 in 2008 (UA 2009). By 2007 the state was a minority funder of universities with only 45 per cent of university funding from government sources (state and federal), compared to 87 per cent in 1986 (Marginson 2009).

The impact of this period of radical change on academic staffing has been examined by Hugo (Hugo 2005a; Hugo 2005b). His 2005 papers were the first to draw attention to the problem of 'age heaping' in the academic workforce, which had occurred as a consequence of academic workforce growth in the 1960s and 1970s and the failure to hire during the 1990s and decades since. The papers raised the notion of a looming 'crisis' in recruitment and retention of academic staff which resonated in the sector and was discussed in the 2008 Review of Higher Education (Bradley 2008:24). The extent of this 'crisis', Hugo argued, meant that 'Australian universities over the next decade will be faced by their largest recruitment task for three decades' (Hugo 2005:341). Hugo's observations about the uneven hiring patterns of ongoing staff led him to describe a 'lost generation' of academics (Hugo 2005b:340).

Hugo and Morris (2010) pursue the discussion of the ageing academic workforce further, looking at supply of and demand for academic staff within disciplines, noting that some disciplines are 'ageing' at a faster rate than others. The 'stock-take' analysis offers a diagrammatic supply pipeline for academics in professional disciplines (Hugo and Morriss 2010:6) reproduced below in Figure 1. The diagram acknowledges the existence of casual/sessional teachers although they sit above the pipeline, unconnected from any notion of career or profession. They note the growth in casual employment, concluding that 'casualisation of the academic teaching workforce and impact on teaching standards' is an issue of concern for the future (2010:81).

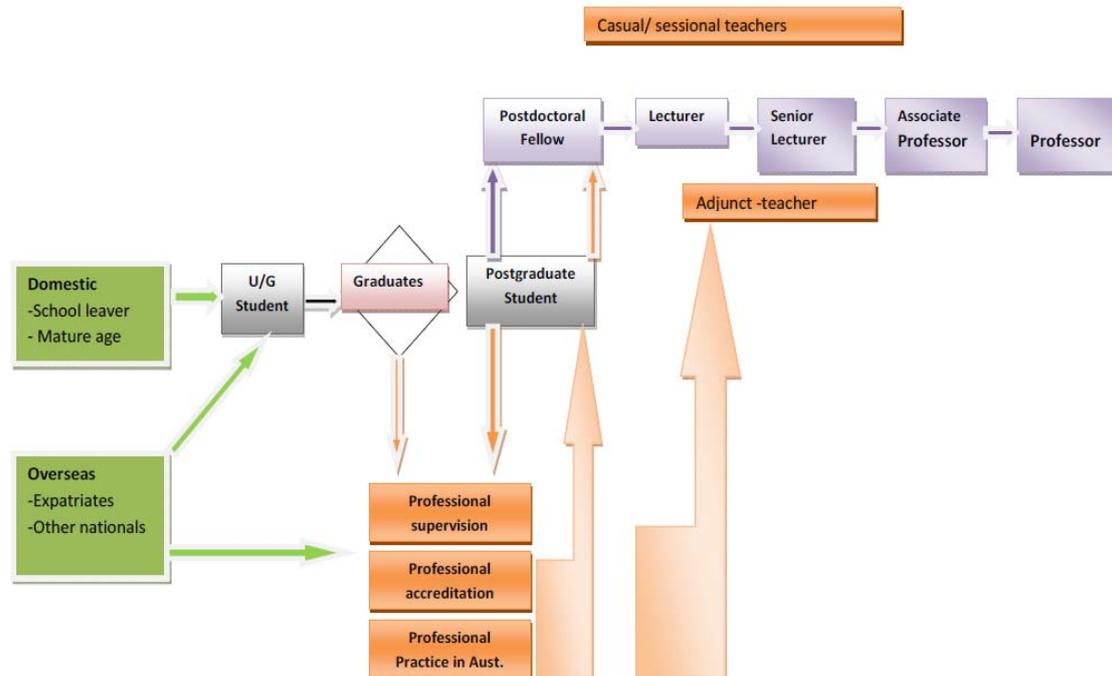


Figure 1: Supply Chain for Academics in Professional Disciplines

Source: Hugo and Morris 2010:6

While some discussion continued about the ageing of the academic workforce, a rapid casualisation of academic teaching was taking place. During the period 1990-2008 casual academic staff numbers, on a full-time equivalent basis, grew by 180 per cent, compared with a 41 per cent growth in non-casual academic staff numbers during the same period. So significant is the shift in the make-up of the academic workforce that the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) concluded in a 2008 report commissioned into 'sessional' teaching that 'the full-time, permanent, centrally-located teaching/research academic is no longer the norm around which policy and practice can be formed' (Percy et al 2008:7). The report noted that data collection and knowledge about this workforce, at both the workplace and sector level, is poor, and in particular 'most universities are unable to report comprehensive and accurate data on the number of sessional teachers and their conditions of employment' (Percy et al 2008:7).

While taking different employment forms than Australia, temporary and insecure employment in the academic labour forces of the UK, Canada and the USA is entrenched and well documented (Bryson and Blackwell 2006; Gappa and Leslie 1993; Rajagopal and Lin 1996). Over half the academic staff employed in the UK are employed on temporary contracts (Bryson and Blackwell 2006) and similar proportions are employed part-time in Canada (Rajagopal and Lin 1996). In the USA approximately half of all faculty work part-time and the majority of academic staff are not on 'tenure track' (Curtis and Jacobe 2006; Slaughter and Rhoades 2004). The trend in the USA has been described by Schuster and Finkelstein (2006:5) as 'the ongoing transformation of the profession into a majority of contingent [temporary] employees', leading Bosquet (2008:23) to describe the holder of the doctorate as the 'waste product of graduate education'. He charts how, despite a 1990s forecast shortage of academic labour, tenured academic appointments are increasingly scarce in the US. Instead of secure positions being created in the face of predicted shortages, graduate students are churned through contingent positions and disposed of when they are

qualified. Bosquet (2008:21) concludes that ‘for many graduate employees the receipt of the PhD signifies the end and not the beginning of a long teaching career’.

In Australia there is a growing body of literature pointing to the difficulties faced by casual staff in their employment. These include isolation, limited professional development, lack of engagement in collegial activities, insecurity and poor conditions, lack of resources and vulnerability in hiring (Brown et al. 2010; Gottschalk and McEachern 2010; Junor 2004). A 1991 survey of casual academic staff at University of New South Wales concluded that, for many, casual employment was ‘characterized by uncertainty and insecurity’ (Fine et al 1992:51). Two decades later casual academic staff comprise a much greater proportion of the academic workforce but in respect of their experience of work it appears little has changed (Brown et al. 2010).

Who are the casual teaching staff in our universities?

Many studies have identified the heterogeneous nature of the academic casual labour force (Anderson et al. 2002; Junor 2004; Kimber 2003). Junor’s (2004:286) major survey of casual staff across five different universities identified nine different categories of casual academic staff, with some overlap between categories. The majority of Junor’s sample was in categories that were either seeking an academic career in the present or future and/or were wholly or partly dependent on their casual position/s for income. Casual employment was the preference of a minority, with 28 per cent preferring casual employment (Junor 2004:284). Other typologies have been developed including that proposed by Gappa and Leslie (1993) for the USA; Husbands and Davies (2000) for the UK; and Gottschalk and McEachern (2007), whose study at the University of Ballarat focussed on motivations for casual work in the context of achieving work/life balance.

A typology of casual teaching staff has been developed (see Table 1) building on the work of Junor (2004) and Gottschalk and McEachern (2007), with motivation, career preference and employment mode preference the defining variables. The typology suggests that those whose motivation for working as a casual are to seek entrance to the internal academic labour market come from a number of groups with a variety of external characteristics, and that these may overlap. For instance, an industry expert may be motivated by the experience of teaching casually to become a post-graduate student in order to seek an academic career. An ‘academic aspirant’ may be someone who has completed their PhD and has been unable to find an ongoing academic position. The ‘casual by “choice” ’ category may comprise those whose personal circumstances have led them to seek more flexibility and control of workload.

Table 1: Casual teaching staff typology

Description	Characteristics	Motivation	Career intentions	Employment mode preference
1. Post graduate student – academic orientation	Younger female	Income and academic job	Academic job	Full time academic position
2. Post graduate student – industry orientation	Younger female	Income	Seeking career outside academia	
3. Industry expert – industry orientation	Main source of income is industry job, Includes many in nursing, education, business	Want to teach	Focus on external career	Prefers casual work
4. Industry expert – academic orientation	Main source of income is industry job, (applies to both genders?)	Seeking possible career change	Academic career	Full or part time work
5. Academic aspirant	Main source of income is casual job, younger female, qualified academic	Income and seeks an academic career	Academic career	Full or part time work
6. Casual by 'choice'	Main source of income is casual job, but maybe other family sources, female	Casual work 'chosen' to suit life circumstances	Seeking academic career at some point in the future	Full or part time work
7. Retiree	Casual work to supplement pension, retired male	Wants to teach and wants to work	Continue as is	Happy with casual work but may prefer part time

What do we know about casual teaching staff?

Many commentators have noted the difficulty in fully documenting the size and scale of the casual academic labour force, and the indifferent and variable quality of data provided by universities to DEEWR (Castleman et al. 1995; Percy et al. 2008; Probert et al. 1998). The problematic nature of the full-time equivalent (FTE) basis for calculation of casual staffing is discussed by Percy et al (2008) although no alternatives are offered. It is reasonable to conclude that there has been no full account of the nature, scope and size of the casual academic labour force within the university sector as it exists today. On an FTE basis DEEWR figures show 9968 casual academic staff in 2009, which represented 20 per cent of the total academic staff (FTE) for 2009 (DEEWR 2010).

A more accurate and detailed picture of the casual academic teaching workforce can be documented using data from a superannuation fund which has not previously been released for research purposes. Through the ARC Linkage project to which this research is attached, access has been obtained to aggregate data held by the university staff superannuation fund Unisuper, to which over 95 per cent of eligible staff belong. Data has been extracted from the fund's records for casual staff who gain a nine per cent employer superannuation payment (once they earn more than \$450 per month as per the Superannuation Guarantee legislation) as compared to the employer contribution of 17 per cent for on-going staff. This differential employer payment means that casual staff are readily identifiable in Unisuper records as their payments are made into a separate Unisuper account known as the Accumulation 1 Account. Casual employees who do an occasional lecture and therefore do not meet the \$450 per month threshold are excluded. The \$450 per month threshold means that a casual academic

would need to be working at least one hour a week if tutoring, or at least one hour a fortnight if lecturing, in order to be in receipt of a superannuation payment.

A proxy for a casual teaching academic of an employment period of 9 months or less over the calendar year was established in order to make an estimate of the headcount of casual teaching staff within the Accumulation 1 Account. The proxy approximates a casual teaching academic's semester based employment of March to October and is the most accurate way of estimating the casual teaching workforce.

The total pool of active Accumulation 1 Account members, that is those who had received a superannuation payment in the last 100 days and who have held an account for longer than 12 months, is approximately 110,000 staff. It is estimated, using the proxy described above, that as at 30 June 2010 there were approximately 67,000 casual academic staff. Of this estimate, 57 per cent are women. Figure 2 presents the gender and age composition of the casual workforce. The age profile of casual teaching staff is considerably younger than the ongoing academic staff, with 52 per cent of the casual academic cohort aged 35 years or younger. Of note also is the gender breakdown in each of the age categories: women form almost two-thirds of casual academic staff aged between 25-35 and 35-45 (Unisuper 2010). These age categories correspond with prime child bearing and child rearing ages, but also correspond with the age categories described as the 'lost generation' from the ongoing academic staff cohort (see Hugo 2005). When compared to the most recent DEEWR full-time equivalent (FTE) figures of 9968 casual academic staff in 2009, it suggests that one FTE equates to approximately six or seven actual casual staff members (DEEWR 2010).

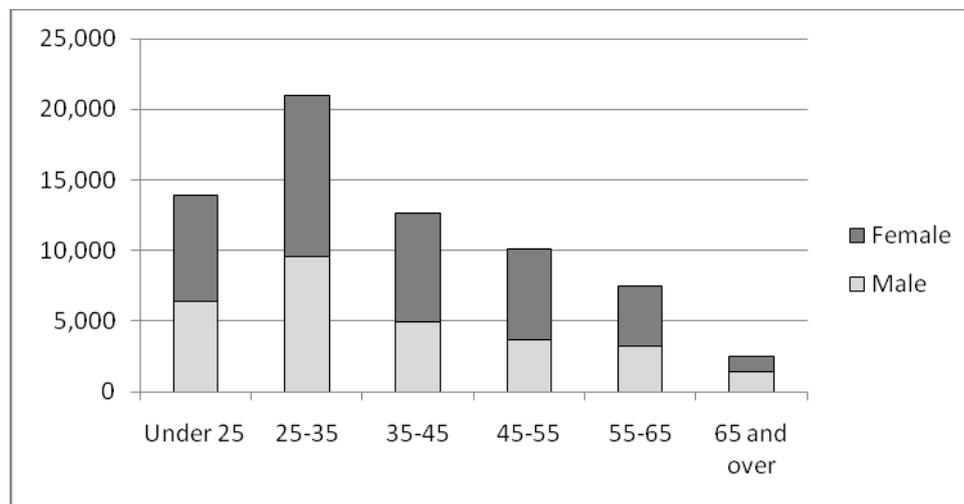


Figure 2: Unisuper data June 2010 casual teaching staff headcount by age, and gender

Source: Unisuper, 2010, unpublished aggregated data

Changing academic career paths

In examining the DEEWR staff statistics there is evidence to suggest that the traditional linear model academic career path is under major reconstruction. Academic work in Australia is classified according to a five level structure, beginning at Level A (Assistant lecturer), Level B (Lecturer) rising to Level E (Professor). Of all Level A positions calculated as FTE, 50 per cent are casual (DEEWR 2010), and of the remainder evidence suggests that up to 86 per cent are fixed term positions with high turnover (Trounson 2010). Level A is on

the face of it the entry point for recent PhD graduates seeking an ongoing academic position, yet it appears to be only a revolving door of fixed term and casual employment.

In 1996 the share of all academic positions at Level D and above (FTE excluding casual) was 19 per cent. In 2008 that figure had risen to 25 per cent. This increase has occurred at the expense of a hollowing out of level B positions, which dropped from a 36 per cent share in 1996, to 32 percent in 2008 (DEEWR 2010). Of the total growth in non casual academic staff numbers during 1996-2008, Level D and above claimed 54 per cent, as against seven per cent at Level B (DEEWR 2010). This change in the structure of the academic labour market, which is connected to issues of workforce ageing and impact of promotion, can be seen as universities employing greater numbers at the professoriate level, and a hollowing out at the career entry points of Level A and B. Level B, and sometimes Level C, has become the career entry point, and these are available to a different (and more experienced) pool of applicants to those who would enter at Level A. These changes have particular and as yet largely unexplored implications for gender equity: women form 53 per cent of Level A positions and 41 per cent of all academic positions (DEEWR, 2009).

Examination of Junor's (2004:291) survey of casual teaching staff shows that 40 per cent of the group labelled as qualified academic jobseekers had been employed casually at their university for over three years. The rates of pay for casual academic staff do not vary for experience or provide for promotion, although those holding a PhD receive a higher rate. Hence the longer a casual is employed the cheaper and more attractive they become as a casual, as their experience does not come at a higher cost (Junor, 2004). At the same time the suitability of this cohort of staff for permanent employment is increasingly under question. This is both because teaching expertise or experience appears less valued than research output, and working as a casual academic does not allow time for building up a much needed research profile. Coates et al (2009b:30) note that 'it remains unclear, for instance whether the current pool of casual staff would be sufficiently well prepared to take on a mainstream academic role', citing the lack of professional learning opportunities and peripheral involvement in the academic community as significant barriers.

Conclusion

In summary, much closer attention needs to be paid to the casual academic workforce and to the strategy of casualisation before claims of forthcoming shortages for academic staff can be given any veracity. The work of Hugo (2005a, 2005b), upon which notions of a looming crisis were founded, appeared to be blind to the reality of the large casual teaching workforce currently employed in Australian universities. In later work that acknowledges the existence of casual academic staff, Hugo reflects the ambivalence of university management to this issue, noting that 'casualisation can allow individuals and organisations more flexibility in managing their lives on one hand, and the demand for programs on the other' (Hugo and Morriss 2010:74). Yet in the age of quality audits this can present problems as 'there is limited information on the capability and quality of these teachers' (2010:74). Further, the gender implications of the casualisation of academic work are glossed over by Hugo and others (see for example Bradley 2008) who base their predictions of skills shortages on linear career models, when women's experiences are manifestly different.

While the diversity of the casual academic workforce, and the fact that not all casuals are seeking an academic career, is acknowledged, important questions are raised by the new data from Unisuper. This data indicates that the casual workforce is highly gendered which has

implications for universities developing gender equity policies and practices. It also shows that the 'lost generation' of qualified academics were not necessarily lost to academia. Instead many were consigned to casual, insecure teaching roles. With the changing structures of academic work, this experience as casual academic teachers may potentially, and unknowingly, sabotage their hopes of obtaining an on-going academic position. Detailed analysis of the emerging academic career path, or career paths, in the face of rapid changes to the profession is needed to assess these questions. The university sector is aware of the challenges ahead in workforce renewal, recruitment and retention of high quality academic staff which is said to be 'the single biggest issue confronting the sector over the next decade' (Bradley 2008:24). At the same time, however, it appears that a large cohort of staff who could be part of the solution is excluded from consideration, let alone participation.

The situation for academic staff in universities in the USA, where tenure is the minority status for staff, provides a stark vision of what may be the future for Australia. Australian Universities appear poised at a crossroads where the sector can further entrench and embed casualisation of teaching, patching over quality concerns with induction programs and performance management measures. Alternatively a sector wide approach to workforce planning with a commitment to secure employment could be pursued. It is not yet clear how the sector in Australia will develop, whether casuals with PhDs will become the 'refuse' or whether they can provide a valuable and skilled future workforce. Whichever direction Australia takes will have serious implications for women.

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