

Australia's universities converting as little as 1% of casual staff to permanent despite labour law change

Six months after Fair Work Act amendments, union says the move to permanent roles remains 'abysmal across the sector'

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The National Tertiary Education Union says out of 11,300 staff at the University of Melbourne, just 112 have been offered permanent roles. Photograph: Luis Enrique Ascui/AAP

Australian universities have converted as few as 1% of their casual staff to permanent roles six months after the labour laws changed, leaving “shocking” levels of insecurity in an industry already hard hit by Covid-triggered job losses.

Earlier this week, staff at the University of Newcastle conducted a 12-hour digital “sit-in” to protest after having just five of 2,300 casual staff converted to full-time work.

The National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) described the conversion rate as “abysmal across the sector”.

In March, the federal government amended the Fair Work Act to mandate that casual staff who meet two criteria be offered full-time or permanent part-time positions. To be eligible, they must have been employed for at least 12 months and had worked a regular pattern of hours for at least the six previous of those months.

Since many university staff are on short-term rolling contracts with semester or summer breaks, few have been eligible to make the conversion from casual roles.

For instance, out of 11,300 staff at the University of Melbourne, just 112 have been offered permanent roles, according to the NTEU. Within the law school and the school of engineering, there were no conversions at all.

For Jessica Marian, a casual employee at the university and an NTEU delegate, the initial rejection was made worse because she was among dozens who received a form letter that omitted the reason for the refusal. It read:

“The university has assessed the hours that you have worked for us over the last 12 months and has determined that you meet the eligibility criteria for conversion, ... However <REASON> the university has determined that this is reasonable grounds (in accordance with the legislation) not to offer to convert your role to a permanent position.”

“I felt like just a loser,” said Marian, a part-time teacher of English literature and an administrator at the university. “It was just shocking, and I was upset.”

Four hours later, “the follow-up letter was just as heartless”, telling her she was not even eligible for conversion, she said: “It’s not just what’s legal – it’s about what’s conscionable about the treatment of casuals.”

According to Alison Barnes, NTEU national president, well over 50% of undergraduate teaching is done by people with no employment security, nor sick or holiday pay.

“Universities have really run on the backs of poorly paid, insecure workers for decades,” she said.

Details of the poor conversion rates come as eight university vice chancellors are scheduled to join a Commonwealth Economic Development of Australia (CEDA) panel on Thursday in Sydney.

“Australia’s higher education sector is vital to the nation’s future workforce needs and economic prosperity,” CEDA said. “There is not a sector, industry or business which is not impacted by, and dependent on, the success of universities.”

Stuart Andrews, executive director of Australian Higher Education Industrial Association representing 32 universities, including Melbourne university, said casual staff were “an integral and very important component of any university workforce”.

“Many have intermittent or short-term employment, they don’t have an ongoing regular pattern of hours, and don’t fit the profile for permanent jobs,” he said. “The vast majority of the university casual staff workforce therefore don’t qualify for conversion to permanency under the Fair Work Act.”

The issue, which Andrews described as “not surprising” given many teachers are PhD students who work while studying or have permanent jobs elsewhere, will be “further explored” during bargaining talks between unions and university across the country.

ACTU secretary Sally McManus said the low conversion rate demonstrates “the Morrison government’s proposed solution for rampant casualisation was laughable from the start”.

“The new casual conversion laws allow bosses almost limitless discretion in denying long-term casual workers the right to convert to permanent roles,” she said.

The ACTU is preparing details from its union members on conversion rates in other sectors of the economy.

The above was taken from the online article available here:

<https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2021/nov/18/australias-universities-converting-as-little-as-1-of-casual-staff-to-permanent-despite-labour-law-change>