

No simple solution for problems experienced by casual staff

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A recent report by the Senate Select Committee on Job Security painted a grim picture of the casual workforce in universities and recommended a series of changes to decrease the level of casualisation. The majority report described casual work in universities in an almost entirely negative way and raised concerns around the growth in casual labour. The data used the Committee showed an increase from 16.2 per cent to 17.8 per cent of the university workforce over the last decade.

The report focuses on a group of staff who are mainly, but not exclusively, in academic roles and who wanted more secure employment. In particular, there is a group who undertake a substantial amount of casual teaching work year after year in the hope of obtaining an ongoing teaching and research position. A key area of focus for unions and the committee was therefore on creating more permanent roles to decrease the number of staff in casual employment.

It is important to remember, however, such staff constitute a relatively small percentage of the overall casual workforce for universities. Policy decisions with respect to casuals in universities need to take account of the needs of the many and not just those looking for permanent employment.

Casual workers at universities come from a number of categories. One important group is current students. PhD students take on some teaching or research work while they are completing their theses. Undergraduates help to cover the costs of study by taking shifts shelving library books, working on the reception in the gym or other work.

Creating employment opportunities for our students both assists them to cover the costs of their study and provides valuable work experience. We need to continue to create these opportunities and ensure that students can move through them over time. If one graduating group of PhDs got to turn their casual work into permanent work as a right that would limit the opportunities for the next cohorts.

Another key group working in universities as casual staff are the industry and professional experts who undertake some teaching. These might be lawyers, engineers, artists or business leaders who enjoy the opportunity to help train the next generation of people to work in their field. Such experiences are invaluable to students and help keep universities connected to employers. While they count as casual staff, most have a full-time role elsewhere and no interest in more permanent employment.

As with other employers, there is also a group of casuals who prefer the flexibility of working casually and the loadings that come with it. There are various stages of life at which this might be the best option for some people. Indeed, some staff who are offered conversion to more permanent arrangements reject it for these reasons.

In 2020, the Innovative Research Universities undertook an analysis of casual employment categories across its seven members. Of the approximately 22,000 casual staff employed last year by these universities, one fifth (20 per cent) earned less than \$1,000, almost half (48 per cent) earned less than \$4,000 and almost three quarters (72 per cent) earned less than \$10,000. Less than 2 per cent of casually employed staff were earning more than \$50,000. This suggests, in the overwhelming majority of cases, casual salaries were being used appropriately for limited amounts of work rather than as a substitute for ongoing employment.

None of this is to deny that some casual staff members at universities find themselves in a very difficult position having undertaken substantial amounts of work over a period of many years. It is time to have a thoughtful and serious conversation about what the sector can and should do for such workers.

So, what should universities be doing to support those long-term casual workers and how might employers and unions work together towards better outcomes?

The main solution that is often posed is to transfer workers into ongoing roles. In some cases, this is appropriate and beneficial for both parties. In the case of professional staff, for example, it will often be possible to create a role that is similar to the one being undertaken casually (eg ten hours a week working in accounting) but that ensures more certainty. Provisions around conversion in some existing enterprise agreements have been used for this purpose and they can be useful for these staff.

The situation for academic staff is more complex. Enterprise agreements in Australia tend to be rigid and narrow in the types of employment opportunities that they create. For academics, many enterprise agreements only allow academic employment in an ongoing teaching and research position or a fixed term research position like a post-doctorate.

Conversion into full-time academics might be appropriate in a limited number of cases but in many it will simply be too expensive and inflexible. Enterprise agreements that allowed for a wider range of academic position types might create more options for staff in this position. While a two year, teaching focused contract might not be as desirable for staff as a permanent teaching and research role, it might still be far more desirable than living from semester to semester as a casual teacher with no stability. More security for long-term casuals in part-time roles that reflect their current fractions would also work well for some. We need better discussions between employers and unions to create more flexible options that would be easier for universities to implement, particularly during these financially uncertain times.

Both universities and unions also owe casual staff some straight talking. Conversion is only ever going to deal with a tiny proportion of casual staff. There are opportunities to explore beyond this single issue, including career support for casuals moving into roles outside the sector, professional development and conditions of casual employment that have the potential to benefit the many rather than the few. It is time for a serious, multi-dimensional conversation about the role of casual staff in Australian universities and how to support them.

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