

## AUSTRALIA'S CASUAL APPROACH TO ITS ACADEMIC TEACHING WORKFORCE

■ **Hamish Coates, Ian R Dobson, Leo Goedegebuure and Lynn Meek**

*Australian academics' response to the Changing Academic Profession (CAP) survey indicates that they are among the least satisfied academics in the world. This dissatisfaction has been expressed after two decades of rapid growth in the student body and structural changes in the academic workforce, particularly an expansion in the amount of teaching provided by casual staff. The growth in casual staff numbers is a factor which has simultaneously created a precariously employed but cheaper and more flexible workforce along with higher levels of stress among the full-time teachers responsible for managing and supervising casual teachers. The academic profession has an important role to play in creating a highly educated workforce for Australia and in generating export income by teaching international students. Careful attention needs to be paid to this situation especially in light of the need to replenish the ageing academic workforce.*

### INTRODUCTION: GROWTH AND THE CHANGING ACADEMIC WORKPLACE

The Australian university system has grown considerably over the last two decades. The so-called massification<sup>1</sup> of Australian higher education, the result of policies introduced by education minister John Dawkins in the 1980s, saw a large increase in the university student population. Between 1989 and 2007, the number of students enrolled in courses at Australian universities increased from 441,000 to over one million.

In the last couple of years, movement from a mass to a universal system<sup>2</sup> has been initiated following recent growth plans announced for Australia's higher education sector.<sup>3</sup> These reforms have set a target of 40 per cent of Australia's 25 to 34-year-old age group attaining a bachelor degree by 2025.

Yet staff numbers, and particularly teaching staff numbers, have failed to keep pace with growth in student enrolments. For the purposes of this paper, 'teaching staff' include staff in academic positions classified by their universities as either 'teaching only' or 'teaching and research' staff, and working in academic departments. 'Research only' academics and academics who work outside academic departments have not been counted as 'teaching staff'.

Figure 1 has been constructed from national higher education statistics.<sup>4</sup> It compares the increase in the number of equivalent full-time students and teaching staff, and the extent of the widening gap between student and staff numbers is plain. Numbers have been expressed as 'full-time equivalent' in order to control for students or staff who attend or work less than full-time, such as part-time students or casual staff. Between 1989 and 2007 there was an increase of about 376,000 full-time equivalent students (or 107 per cent), from about 350,000 to nearly 726,000 in 2007. Nearly half of this increase was in international students, numbers of which increased by 178,000 from 19,000 (or 5 per cent of the total) in 1989 to around 197,000 (or 27 per cent) in 2007.

In the same period teaching staff increased by about 8,400 from 25,060 full-time equivalent staff in 1989 to 33,496 in 2007, an increase of about 34 per cent. These figures include all teaching staff, including those employed under casual contracts. On top of the number of teaching academics, universities had about 9,850 non-teaching academic staff in 2007, including about 9,200 research only staff, and about 660 full-time equivalent academic staff working in support and central administration departments.

The lag in the increase in teaching staff numbers has led to an increase in the ratio of students to teaching staff from almost 14 per teacher to nearly 22, even when casual staff are included. Of course, this carries implications not just for students but also for the way in which academics experience their work environment and the way in which institutions are managed in a rapidly changing environment.

### THE ACADEMY'S CHANGING STRUCTURE

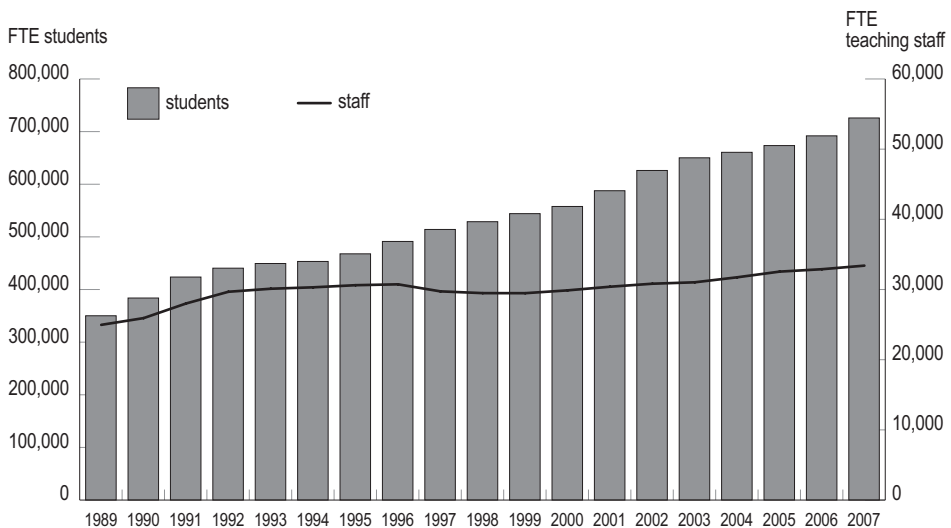
It is clear from Figure 1 that the somewhat flat growth in staff numbers has been far exceeded by the growth in the size of the student body. However, there has also been a change in the composition of the teaching body, particularly relating to its members' contractual arrangements with universities.

Figure 2 shows the size of the university teaching staff between 1989 and 2007 and the proportions with continuing appointments (including those on probation and those with confirmed appointments), those with time-limited appointments (reported

by universities according to the number of months of the contract term), and those who were casually (sometimes called 'sessionally') employed.

As can be seen, casual staff have provided the majority of the growth in teaching staff. All in all, since 1989, the number of university teachers increased by 8,435 FTE, of which more than half were casual staff. Casual staff numbers increased from 3,162 to 7,440, about 135 per cent. Further, as a proportion of all teaching staff, casual staff have increased from 12.6 per cent of the total in 1989 to 22.2 per cent in 2007. The 20 per cent threshold was crossed in 1999. By contrast, the proportion of continuing staff decreased from 63.6 per cent to 59.3 per cent, and the proportion of contract positions decreased from 23.8 per cent to 18.5 per cent. The shift from contract to continuing appointments from 1998 to around 2005 reflects the establishment and subsequent disestablishment of the Higher Education Conditions of Employment (HECE) Award. Notably, this did not reduce the expansion of FTE numbers of staff employed casually. In summary, between 1989 and 2007, student

**Figure 1: Full-time equivalent students and teaching staff 1989 to 2007**



numbers more than doubled during a period in which the number of teaching staff other than casuals increased by only 19 per cent, and the overall student to teacher ration blew out from 14:1 to 22:1.

### THE INFLUENCES OF CASUALISATION

The above analysis outlined how the teaching academic workforce has failed to keep up with growth in student numbers. To the extent that there has been growth in teaching staff numbers, the main response from institutions over the last decade has been through a consistent casualisation of the academic workforce. Discussions of casualisation generally focus on the casually-employed staff, and studies have examined issues from this perspective. However, casualisation itself is not the main focus of this paper, but rather the perceptions of academic staff about how changes in the academic profession have affected them.

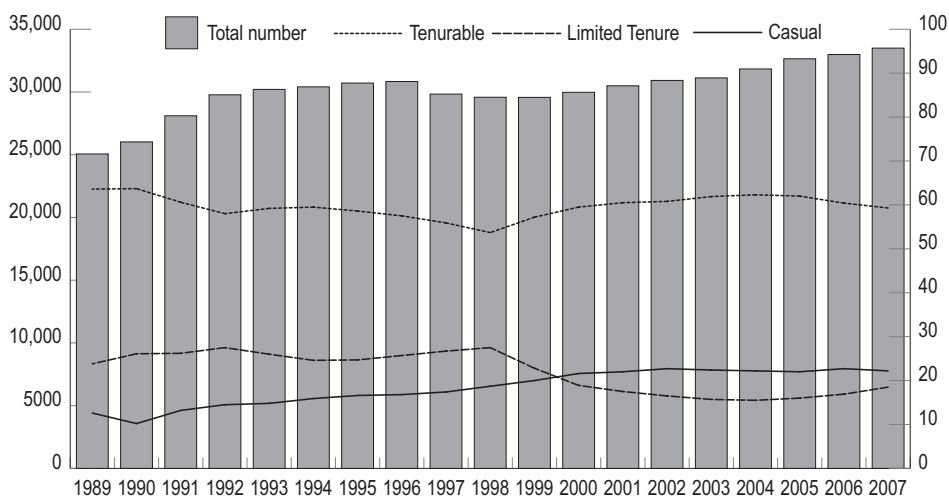
The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) in its 2009 report *Measures of Australia's Progress* shows that the casual staff issue in the university sector cannot be isolated from the broader trends in Australian

society.<sup>5</sup> The report provides an analysis of changes in work conditions over time, noting the strong growth in the number of casual employees over the last two decades. The ABS also notes that the pace of change has slowed in recent years and based on a comparison with higher education casual staff statistics, it would seem that the overall proportion of casual staff has levelled out earlier in the university sector than in the workplace overall.<sup>6</sup>

However, the structural changes in the academic workplace are important. Much of the teaching in the modern university is now provided by casual staff. Percy et al. have noted that ‘sessional teachers are the hidden part of the massification that has taken place in higher education in Australia over the last 30 years ... Between 40 and 50 per cent of teaching in Australian higher education is currently done by sessional staff’.<sup>7</sup>

Even though the ABS notes that the increase in casualisation is seen by many employers and employees as being a beneficial thing, this view does not match the debate on the subject within the university sector. According to the ABS report, some employees (women and the young in par-

**Figure 2: Teaching staff in academic departments by employment status 1989 to 2007**



ticular) welcome the flexibility brought by casual employment.<sup>8</sup> However, many casual staff could be placed in the category of aspiring academics and most desire full-time (preferably continuing) positions. In response to a direct question on the preference for casual appointments in her study on casual staff in universities, Junor found that only 28 per cent of casual academics said that this mode of employment was their first choice.<sup>9</sup>

Although casual employment means under-employment or precarious employment for many staff, this is not universally the case. Using the typology outlined by Gappa and Leslie, the casual academic workforce also includes people doing sessional teaching as an extension of their regular professional life, and retired full-time academics eager to keep their hand in and make a contribution.<sup>10</sup>

From the perspective of both continuing and contract staff and casual staff, Lazarsfeld-Jensen and Morgan offer a very pertinent comment:

Casualisation has a profound impact on tenured staff. They must recruit and manage teachers who in turn have no access to training or support, and whose role is constrained by a minimalist contract system. Last minute recruitment was often based on prior relationships, which casuals felt opened them up to excessive demands and bullying because of their financial vulnerability. There is insecurity on both sides with neither feeling able to create parameters for the relationship or the work. It is not unusual for a full time academic to work exclusively with casuals, and for casuals to have no relationships within the university beyond their immediate supervisor and the person who handles their pay.<sup>11</sup>

## **THE CAP SURVEY AND JOB SATISFACTION**

The essence of this paper is that Australian academics are less positive about their

profession than before. This information comes from the Changing Academic Profession (CAP) survey, an international survey conducted in 25 countries in 2007. CAP is the largest such research project conducted to date. CAP data provide the context for assessing the attractiveness of the academic profession in Australia as well as offering an international angle, which is important given the highly internationalised and mobile nature of academic work. The International Centre for Higher Education Research (INCHER) at the University of Kassel in Germany is coordinating the construction of the international database.

Using a common questionnaire, population definition and sampling approach, CAP sought the opinions of academics in each participating country. A total of 1,370 valid responses were received from full-time and fractional full-time academics at 20 Australian universities, that is from staff on both continuing and contract appointments but not from casuals.

According to the CAP survey, with the exception of academics from the United Kingdom, Australian academics are the least job-satisfied of all. This paper examines Australian responses relating to overall job satisfaction and compares them with responses from 18 of the 25 participating countries that had supplied data at the time of writing. The paper contends that in the Australian context, the additional burdens imposed by a much larger university sector, and increased workloads generated for permanent staff through casualisation is a major contributing factor.

Figure 3 provides mean scores of a composite scale consisting of items measuring satisfaction with academic work, relating to several questions on the CAP survey. These questions address respondents' sense of personal strain; whether they would become an academic if they had their time over again; their perception of whether now would be a good time for a

young person to enter academia; and their overall satisfaction with their current job. Respondents reported their perceptions on a five-point Likert scale, from 1 (very dissatisfied) to 5 (very satisfied). Australia sits in a group with Portugal and China on the low end of the satisfaction scale. Only UK academics reported lower levels of satisfaction. Australia is considerably below the overall mean for all countries. Academics from Mexico reported the highest levels of job satisfaction.

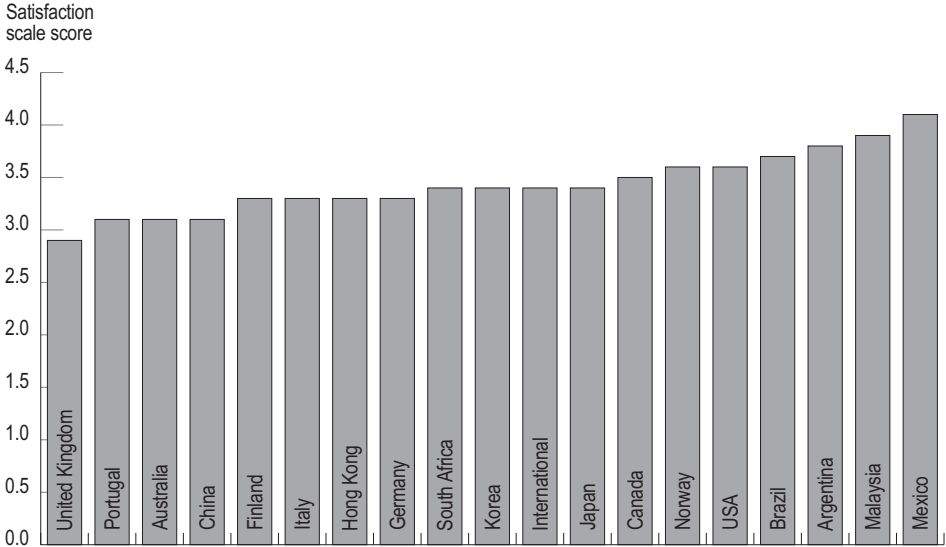
Perhaps another telling perception of Australian academics was that they believed that things had got worse. In response to a question about changes in working conditions, 64 per cent of Australian respondents believed that things had deteriorated or very much deteriorated.<sup>12</sup> This response was topped only by academics from the UK, of whom 68 per cent thought that their situation had deteriorated.<sup>13</sup> Other high-scoring nations on this question were Japan and Italy, where 63 and 56 per cent of academics, respectively, reported that there had been a deterioration in working conditions.<sup>14</sup> At

the other of the scale, only nine per cent of Australian academics thought that working conditions had improved or very much improved. This was the lowest result of any nation in the CAP survey. Even 15 per cent of British academics thought that working conditions had improved since they'd started their career.<sup>15</sup>

The literature summarised by Long<sup>16</sup> suggests that job satisfaction is critical to an individual's overall wellbeing, and it also has important implications for organisational productivity and performance. A positive experience of work is important from both the individual's and organisation's perspectives.

Studies have also indicated a U-shaped relationship between job satisfaction and age. Younger and older groups in the academic workforce perceive their work more positively than do the groups in between and there is a negative relationship between higher levels of education and satisfaction with work. This relationship, however, essentially disappears if the level of education is in line with the knowledge and skills

**Figure 3: CAP Survey: Satisfaction with academic work**



required for the job, that is, if people are not over-educated for their job.

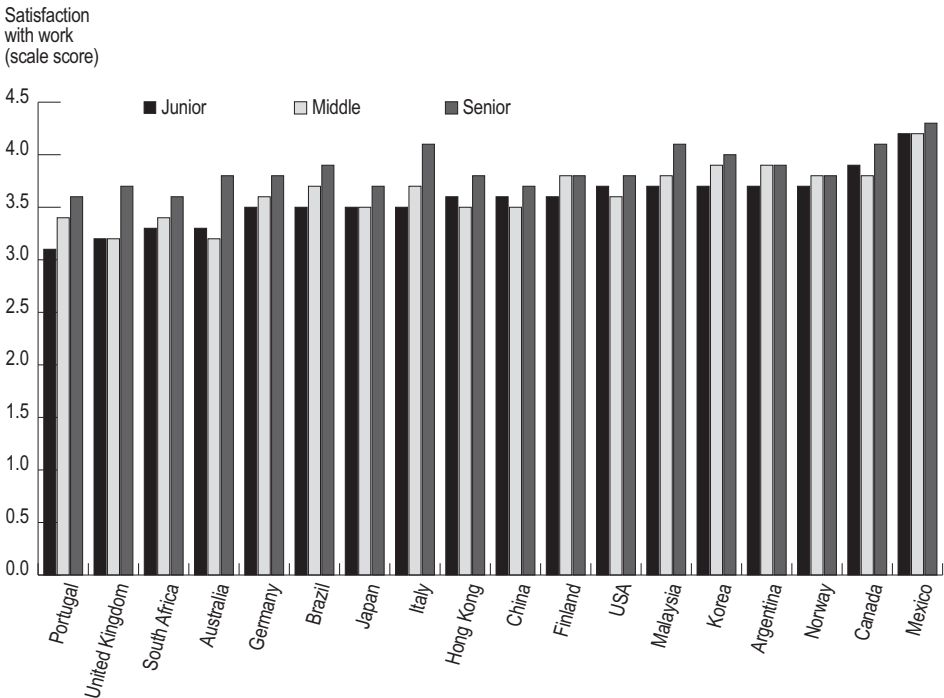
Crucially, dissatisfaction has been articulated by the new generation as shown in Figure 4, assuming that junior ranks provide a reasonable proxy for age. Academics in lower ranks (that is, assistant lecturers and lecturers) and middle ranks (senior lecturers) report lower satisfaction than those in the upper ranks (associate professors and professors).

This perception has been matched in other studies. For example, interviews with postgraduate research students and early career researchers in the field of science and mathematics undertaken by Edwards and Smith also found perceptions of an increasingly unmanageable workload being absorbed by academics at all levels.<sup>17</sup> With the increasing need to juggle teaching, research and administrative duties (see

also Lazarsfeld-Jensen and Morgan),<sup>18</sup> the desirability of the academic profession is waning at a time when the need to attract young people to this work has never been more acute.

Other research has found that academics increasingly find themselves on a ‘post-doc treadmill’, perhaps an indication that the post-doctoral pathway no longer represents a stepping stone into continuing academic positions to the extent that it once did. The relative decline in the number of continuing positions in universities is a prime reason for this situation. Views of this type are supported by research in Australia<sup>19</sup> and elsewhere in the world<sup>20</sup> especially in relation to the sciences. According to this literature, if the increase in short-term academic positions continues, it is likely that many young researchers will be discouraged from following an academic career.

**Figure 4: CAP Survey: Satisfaction with academic work by rank**



## DISCUSSION

Academia in Australia, it appears, is not the most satisfying workplace when compared to higher education systems elsewhere. While links between job satisfaction and other facets of people's work are complex, the results set out above do not bode well for the academic profession in Australia, or for universities themselves.

This presents a two-sided problem. On the one hand, if casual staff are providing up to half of university teaching,<sup>21</sup> a potential quality issue arises. If the universities' main business is handled by its least-connected workforce segment, a lot could be at stake. Consistency is more difficult to achieve if teaching in individual subjects is split between several individuals, many of whom might not be present in the teaching department other than at class time. On the other hand, the coordination required by this model increases the pressure on the permanent academic staff member responsible for subject management and casual staff supervision.

Fees (predominantly tuition fees) paid by both domestic and overseas students provided universities with more than one-third of total university revenue in 2007 (including HECS-Help and Fee-Help loans).<sup>22</sup> Yet, to what extent do students get value for money in terms of access to Australia's core and leading academics? Overall, student evaluations such as through the Course Experience Questionnaire do not suggest an imminent problem, although international benchmarking through the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement<sup>23</sup> exposes several key areas of apparent risk. But there might well be a problem looming. Hugo has calculated that universities are likely to lose between a fifth and a third of their staff in the next decade or so.<sup>24</sup> Extrapolating from Hugo's figures, some 50 per cent of our senior academics will retire over the next decade. Australia is not unique in this respect, as most developed economies will

see a comparable exodus from their academic workforce. This alone will increase the global competition for the best and the brightest. And as argued above, based on the results of the CAP survey, Australia is not in an enviable position compared to most of our direct competitor systems if one subscribes to the notion that job satisfaction is an important indicator of the attractiveness of a system. All of this leaves aside the challenges that the government's ambitious goals for increases in participation pose: who will be teaching all these new students?

To date, the principal response from university managements has been to appoint more casual staff, thereby increasing the squeeze on continuing staff. This may be understandable in the face of the harsh financial climate that universities continue to face. But it is not a response that can be sustained over time. The retirement projections can be seen as a problem if the academic profession is being perceived as relatively unattractive by the next generation. They can also be seen as a massive opportunity to reshape career trajectories and reinvigorate the profession if a more proactive stance is taken by universities. Crucial ingredients in this are increased flexibility in employment arrangements to facilitate female participation in the academic workforce, a further expansion of post-doctoral positions, and a stronger focus on the teaching function itself through enhanced training and support for those at the coalface.

All the indications are that academic work is now perceived as being less likely to lead to a real career than in the past. That this is happening at the same time as student numbers are growing and as academics on continuing appointments age presents a serious problem.

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