

Questions raised on impact of increased use of casual academics

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Academic casual positions are believed to have risen by 221 per cent between 1989 and 2013.

An increasingly heavy reliance on casual academic staff has prompted universities to question whether staffing patterns are undermining the education experience of students.

“The question remains whether a continuation of the trend to use an increasing proportion of contingent employment is sustainable and whether it benefits higher education in Australia,” says a working paper jointly written by the Australian Higher Education Industrial Association and the LH Martin Institute.

The paper says casual positions increased by 221 per cent between 1989 and 2013. This compares with a growth of 144 per cent for fixed-term staff and 43 per cent for continuing staff.

When broken down into role, the paper found that 82 per cent of teaching-only staff were employed on a casual basis, whereas only 2 per cent of research-only and 1 per cent of teaching and research staff were casuals. By contrast, 85 per cent of research-only staff were on fixed-term contracts while three-quarters of teaching and -research staff were employed on a continuing basis.

AHEIA executive director Stuart Andrews said the paper did not push a pro-employer stance but sought to understand the complex issues and impact of widespread casualisation of teaching and research. “If we focus on casualisation in terms of systemic issues, there are flow-on effects,” Mr Andrews said.

“The reality is the academic workforce over the next 10 or 20 years is going to have ongoing high levels of casualisation. But that brings with it a disenfranchisement and disconnection between individuals and their departments or schools. There is a need for universities to be more inclusive.”

The paper acknowledges attempts by the National Tertiary Education Union to have measures introduced that transfer casual positions into continuing jobs, but says none have yet made a significant impact.

“Attempts by the NTEU over many years to place caps on the use of casual employment have been relatively unsuccessful, as have been provisions in enterprise agreements to convert casuals to more secure forms of employment,” the paper says.

It says the high-risk, high-cost conversion of jobs has acted as a deterrent to continuing jobs if fixed-term appointments are possible. “While the use of fixed-term employment for staff on research grants is prudent risk management, given limited funding and low success rates for grant applications, it is also recognised that contingent employment has a major downside in terms of attraction and retention of quality staff and that insecurity of employment can detract from productivity,” the paper says.

“It is therefore not surprising that universities have engaged with the NTEU in looking at various measures to provide increased security of employment for casual staff.”

The paper, which will be discussed in detail at a seminar in Melbourne next week, says there is little evidence that the quality of teaching has deteriorated because of growing rates of casualisation, with student satisfaction surveys continuing to trend upwards.

“However, the lack of individual level data means that it is not possible to examine whether there was any difference between casual and non-casual academic staff on any given measure.”

The paper says that from 1989 to 2014, full-time student numbers nearly tripled from 350,000 to 940,000. But across the same period full-time equivalent staff only doubled from 28,000 to 53,000.

“Our research confirmed what we already knew; there is an escalating trend in the number and percentage of academic staff with continuing appointments who undertake both teaching and research,” the paper says.

Online article: <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/higher-education/questions-raised-on-impact-of-increased-use-of-casual-academics/news-story/a23f354e6adc6f5a814c4030503633e3?login=1#>