

Australian Universities Accord. Interim Report.

These comments are directed to the section “Considerations for change” at section 3.2 of the Interim Report. (p.137) Specifically, points c., d. and e.

The Accord is to be congratulated on recognising the need consideration of higher education workforce issues outside of the current industrial relations framework.

The Interim Report and many submissions to the Accord outline a series of workforce problems which have bedevilled the higher education system for over 30 years. These include the extent of use of casuals to undertake academic work, problems with balancing teaching and research in academic careers, issues with job security and academic workloads, and the psychosocial and emotional impact of constant and significant change on staff. Sadly, the Report is less explicit on issues relating to professional staff, even though professional staff in 2020 and 2021 constituted 54% and 56.9 % the full and part time higher education workforce and are responsible for leading and managing large operational and administrative support functions, some of which come under criticism in the Interim Report. Of the total FTE professional staff workforce, 10% were employed on a casual basis in 2020, with the percentage of casual professional staff being greater in academic departments and schools. Press reporting and discussions with HR Directors indicate that many casual staff underpayments were to professional staff¹. That university leaders may have concerns over the capacity of professional staff is exemplified by the extensive use of consultants to support such as strategic planning, management and marketing; areas where current senior staff tend to be broadly experienced in the private sector and command market rate remuneration².

As stated, the workforce issues highlighted in the Interim Report (and its omissions relating to professional staff) are well known. That Report correctly highlights the need for change, which of itself is likely to be agreed by unions and the universities. There have been attempts at institutional level to seek mutually agreed solutions to both the problems of casualisation and fixed term contracts. Unfortunately, despite considerable innovation in a few universities, little progress has been made, given the broad approach adopted by the unions of seeking to address problems by increased and specific regulation on how and when staff should be employed, with employers seeking to retain flexibility because of funding concerns. There is no doubt there is a public perception of “unfair” treatment of casuals and fixed term staff in universities.

Implicitly accepting that the current contested industrial processes are unlikely to yield change, the Interim Report suggests a further accord process to look at policy settings, industrial instruments and workforce structures. However, such a process may yield suboptimal results unless there is a clear articulation of a vision for a national higher education workforce and a process for that accord. If left to the current processes and players, a once in a generation opportunity for improvement has the potential to be lost.

A broad vision might be easily agreed, for example “That Australia has a high functioning higher education workforce able to

- Successfully educate students to meet current and emerging challenges
- Conduct research to meet broad national needs
- Fairly and equitably manage large complex organisations.”

While the remit of the suggested workforce Accord is broad, it is important that it includes consideration of the current validity of long-standing employment arrangements and their capacity to be effective in the current and evolving academic environment and structures. In addition to gathering accurate data on employment, in particular the number and reasons for the use of fixed term and casual staff, issues might include but not be limited to:

¹ This was often failure to pay for the required minimum hours of engagement and overtime.

² In most States, universities are required to indicate the amount spent on consultancies in annual reports. In Victoria, they must also state the purpose of the consultancy.

- The extent to which structures of programs and associated timetabling issues require flexible staffing requirements. (In particular in degrees with large numbers of or where students may choose from a broad range of subjects to complete a qualification)
- The impact of academic reward policies on the organisation of academic work, in particular the focus on measurable outcomes in research.
- The development of career and reward structures for casual staff, in particular those essential for professional education
- Examination whether current payment structures for casual academic staff, based on the organisation of work before 1980, remain valid given current and future changes in pedagogy and delivery of programs.
- Consideration whether the current division of labour between academic and professional staff, in particular reward and recognition of “third space” professional is valid.
- The merits of national initiatives to build a high-capacity professional staff cohort able to operate strategically and effectively in a complex higher education environment.
- The dual role of PhD students as staff members and students of a university, in particular where those students’ research is alongside staff employed on the same grant.
- The relationship of employment conditions imposed by granting authorities and employment arrangements in universities.

As important as the content of any future accord is the process of reaching consensus. Ideally that should include experts who not only understand the academic workforce and its culture, but also the organisation of work and patterns of power and authority in universities. Although there have been few system wide changes to workforce structures in the last 50 years, the model used to implement the general staff award restructuring exercise 30 years ago bears exploration. It had a clear objective coupled with incentives for agreement, and involved the ACTU, government, unions and universities and most importantly, the staff of universities in reaching an agreed structure for remuneration and reward for professional staff work.

The Accord should not pass up the opportunity to ensure that universities are highly productive, good and fair employers and innovation is not hindered by industrial relations and human resource practices which are no longer fit for purpose.

Elizabeth Baré

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