**Submission on the priority issues within key areas outlined in the Terms of Reference for the Review of Australia’s Higher Education System**

This is a targeted submission in relation to:

4. Governance, accountability and community

* Enhance regulatory and workplace relations settings to support universities to meet their obligations to both staff and students.

6. Quality and sustainability

- Examine the challenges faced by domestic and international students and staff due to the COVID-19

pandemic and the temporary and permanent impacts on the way the higher education sector works.

with a specific focus on the health and wellbeing of university staff and how it is adversely affected by work overload.

The health and wellbeing of university staff across Australia are currently in dire straits, primarily due to work overload. This is not just a problem in Australian universities, however, the findings from The Times Higher Education’s *Work-Life Balance Survey 2022* demonstrate that a number of work conditions and their adverse impacts on staff wellbeing are worse in Australasia than many other regions (see: <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/depth/work-life-balance-survey-2022>). Such findings are consistent with survey data collected on work conditions and staff wellbeing at my university, the University of New England (UNE), which were a contributing factor to SafeWork NSW issuing an Improvement Notice to UNE in September 2022.

The relevant survey data was collected through two surveys that were run through the UNE branch of the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU). Along with colleagues, I was involved in the development of these surveys as well as the data analysis, interpretation and reporting. The *Better Workplaces, Better UNE Survey* collected data between December 2021 and February 2022 relating to workplace conditions, including the personal impacts of workplace changes and workloads over the previous 12 months. This survey was completed by 165 UNE staff (approximately 12% of total UNE staff), with results indicating high levels of work overload, low staff morale, and concerning levels of reported adverse impacts on staff wellbeing. The *Staff Psychological Health & Wellbeing Survey* was launched in June 2022 in response to growing concerns about staff wellbeing at UNE, including the suicide of a staff member. It was completed by 286 UNE staff members (> 20% of total UNE staff) prior to the cessation of data collection in early August 2022 (before the departure of UNE’s then VC). This survey included clinically validated measures of mental health and physical health conditions. While such measures cannot be used to make clinical diagnoses, the scoring categories have been validated against diagnostic and/or other appropriate reference groups, meaning that we can have a relatively high level of certainty when interpreting the levels of symptomology reported by UNE staff as being indicative of them experiencing differing levels of severity of the conditions measured. Some of the key findings were reported by the ABC (see: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-08-19/university-new-england-staff-report-severe-mental-health-issues/101350432>).

The levels of mental and physical health symptomology reported by UNE staff in the *Staff Psychological*

*Health & Wellbeing Survey* are highly concerning, with a high proportion likely to meet diagnostic criteria

requiring significant professional support and lengthy, intensive treatment to recover. While it is not possible to state that the distress and ill health experienced by UNE staff is solely due to the impacts of workplace change, work overload, and other aspects of workplace culture, the information collected through the *Better Workplaces, Better UNE Survey* indicates that the working conditions at UNE play a large role. Specifically, comments made by participants express the adverse impacts work overload has had on their physical health, psychological wellbeing, and their lives more broadly (e.g., relationships, caring responsibilities). If desired, I can provide more information about these survey findings. I am also aware that NTEU branches at other universities have (or are planning to) run similar staff wellbeing surveys. Ideally, this sort of staff health and wellbeing survey data should be collected at a national level, with performance on such indicators being a KPI for all Australian universities.

While excessive workloads have been an issue for Australian university staff for many years, and particularly for academic staff members, this situation has been exacerbated in recent years. The longer trend for increased workloads is associated with the increases in student numbers over the past decade or so, which have not been matched by proportionate increases in staff numbers. This disparity is most evident when considering the in change over time in numbers of full-time equivalent (FTE) teaching only and balanced teaching and research academics in comparison to changes in effective full time student load (EFTSL; for relevant data see: <https://www.education.gov.au/higher-education-statistics>). The pre-existing level of overwork was exacerbated by job cuts at Australian universities during 2020/21 and associated hiring freezes. It is important to note here that, while senior management at Australian universities claimed that the job losses during the initial years of the COVID pandemic were financial necessities and related to loss of international students, analyses conducted by Professor Frank Larkins demonstrate that they cut many more staff positions than was warranted on such a basis (see: <https://franklarkins.wordpress.com/>). That is, it seems pretty clear that most (if not all) universities used the pandemic as the justification to cut positions, leave many vacated positions empty, and to not renewed fixed-term and casual contracts, creating a situation where the work required to be completed by remaining staff far exceeds their capacity. By making decisions such as these, which increase work overload, the senior management of Australian universities are failing in their duty of care to their staff and are in breach of SafeWork requirements for workplace health and safety.

The global scope of excessive workloads in universities is captured by the Times Higher Education’s *Work-Life Balance Survey 2022*, whichfound that 80% of academics and 60% of professional staff work more than 8 hours on average per weekday. Concerningly, participants from Australasia reported the second highest amount of daily overwork (after Asia). In addition, 87% of academics and 50% of professional staff globally reported having to work on weekends, with 44% of the Australasian participants reporting that they work more hours on the weekend now than they did in 2019. These findings are consistent with data from the *Better Workplaces, Better UNE Survey*, which similarly found that 87% of academic staff and 47% of professional staff regularly work more than their contracted hours. Specifically, UNE academics reported working an additional 14.3 hours per week, while professional staff reported working an additional 8.7 hours per week, on average. These findings for academics are consistent with data reported by Associate Professor John Kenny and Associate Professor Andrew Fluck from the University of Tasmania, being that Australian academics essentially do almost one hour of overtime for each two hours of paid work (see: <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/overworked-academics-give-away-one-third-their-time>).

Ignoring the wage theft indicated by such high levels of overwork, as noted above, this overwork has a highly negative impact on staff health and wellbeing. Specifically, UNE data demonstrates that workloads allocated to many staff members are unmanageable and unreasonable, often necessitating working at night and/or weekends just to stay on top of things. Many staff members are experiencing work-related stress and psychological distress, including severe levels of depression and anxiety symptomology, and burnout is rife. The fact that SafeWork has issued UNE with an Improvement Notice in relation to these working conditions further demonstrates the serious and critical nature of staff wellbeing at UNE. This situation is widespread across Australian universities, with the Times Higher Education reporting that 82% of Australasian participants reported that their job worsens their mental health. This situation is not reasonable, nor is it sustainable. In fact, excessive workload is cited as a key reason that many university staff surveyed by the Times Higher Educationare considering leaving the sector, with 47% of academics and 37% of professional staff globally reporting this, and it being reported by 55% of the Australasian participants overall.

So, why is it that senior management at Australian universities do not ensure that staff workloads are reasonable and manageable? Well, this seems to come down to financial considerations, specifically what senior management are willing to pay versus what it actually costs to cover the work required to run a university. This is something I have learnt well since becoming a member of the UNE Academic Workloads Committee in August 2020. The committee was tasked with developing a new hours-based academic workload framework and model for the university, which included examining the academic workload models in place at many Australian and international universities, and related literature (including the excellent series of articles on Australian academic workloads by John Kenny and Andrew Fluck). Hence, despite the overriding principles being relevant to all staff workloads, the following discussion is specifically framed in relation to academic workloads.

It is usual for an hours-based academic workload model to be designed from the perspective of how much time the university is willing to ‘contract’ or ‘pay’ academic staff to complete the work tasks that make up an academic’s workload. This is a budgeting approach, where the overall quantum of academic work required at the university each year has to match the amount of academics’ time that management is willing to allocate money for within their budget. When there is a mismatch, where the *requirements* (quantum of academic workload) are greater than the available *resources* (academics’ contracted time), the imbalance can be met by either reducing the requirements or increasing the resources. However, what is apparent is that academic workload models at Australian universities typically bridge the gap between the resources and requirements by allocating less time than is actually required to complete the work tasks that make up an academic’s workload, thus ostensibly spreading the resources further. For example, if the workload model allocates 1 hour for a task that actually takes 2 hours to complete, on paper this frees up 1 hour of resources that can be ‘spent’ elsewhere. In reality, of course, the academic is then left to ‘choose’ between overwork (i.e., doing the extra hour in their own time, unpaid), or to do substandard work (i.e., cutting corners, leaving tasks incomplete, etc.). This is a major issue in the Australian university sector, with vast discrepancies commonly evident between the hours allocated to tasks within a university’s workload model and the actual amount of time that it takes academics to complete them. And, as per the evidence on work overload presented above, it is clear that most Australian academics, in the absence of any real choice, are doing the hours of work that are required to complete their work tasks, rather than the number of hours they are allocated for this work in their annual workload calculation. While the specifics may differ, academic and professional staff across Australian universities are commonly forced to make these decisions every day - ‘choosing’ between overwork and substandard work. This is unreasonable, unsustainable, and has been going on for far too long.

The Academic Workload Committee at UNE has (ironically) spent a vast number of hours developing an evidence-based model that accurately reflects the amount of time it takes to complete the work. This work commenced after the following clause was agreed to by UNE management and the NTEU in the UNE Academic and English Language Teaching Staff Enterprise Agreement 2020 – 2022:

The allocation of work will: (a) be consistent with a workload model that is evidence based and accurately reflects the time taken to complete the work; (b) be calculated using an hours based model of annual hours of work of 1710 hours for a full-time academic based on 37.5 hours a week (pro rata for part-time Employees); (c) take into account the components of academic work, such as teaching, research, scholarship, and service as defined in Schedule E; and the Employee's academic work role (clause 14.20); (d) occur by way of a transparent, equitable and fair allocation process that provides for consultation with the academic employee; (e) enable workload and output monitoring; (f) support the University's commitment to health and safety of academic employees and consider individual circumstances such as family responsibilities.

In developing our model, we collected data on the tasks that form academic workloads at UNE and the amount of time it takes to complete them. There were multiple rounds of consultation with academic staff from across the university, a pilot and a trial, culminating in a model that was recommended to the Vice Chancellor in November 2021. Since then, there has been much negotiating with senior management (including Fair Work Commission disputes and mediation), and only today, as I write this submission, have we finally reached in principle agreement with senior management on our academic workload model, for implementation in 2023. This is not the final step, and the model is not perfect, requiring further evaluation and undoubtably some tweaking, but we are almost there. It is, however, important to note that there has not been a similar process investigating and addressing professional staff workloads at UNE – this is, evidently, a necessary next step.

I do not believe that all Australian universities should need to follow a similar, lengthy, path to the one we have travelled at UNE to develop an accurate academic workload model. The clause in our Enterprise Agreement presented above was essential to us starting on this path and to our ability to protect the integrity of the process – particularly, part (a) of the clause: …*a workload model that is evidence based and accurately reflects the time taken to complete the work*. As such, I believe that the same (or similar) clause should be included in Enterprise Agreements for all Australian universities, with the clause being modified as appropriate for professional staff agreements. Further, rather than following UNE’s path, John Kenny and Andrew Fluck have developed an evidence-based academic workload model (*Life at the academic coalface: validation of a holistic academic workload estimation tool* (Higher Education, August 2022; <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10734-022-00912-x>), which is very similar to the UNE model, and which could be introduced at any Australian university with little need for individualised modification. Such workload models should not be considered in any way unreasonable or extreme – no one should be expected to do more work than they are paid to do and, really, senior management at Australian universities should be embarrassed that they are currently expecting their staff to do so.

Very briefly, I would also like to note here that the enterprise bargaining negotiations that are carried out within the Australian university sector, with a few notable exceptions (e.g. the latest rounds at WSU and ACU), commonly demonstrate a senior management that are seeking to restrict and/or remove workplace and leave conditions that are important for the health and wellbeing of their employees. This is another workplace relations matter that requires considerable attention within the Review of Australia’s Higher Education System.

While it will cost universities more money to employ enough staff for enough hours to ensure all work is completed to the appropriate standard without overwork, this is necessary. The daily functioning and future sustainability of Australia’s universities is contingent on the health and wellbeing of university staff – if we are exhausted, burnt-out, distressed, and overloaded, we cannot possibly perform at our best, or anywhere near it. To be clear, staff overload adversely impacts the quality of teaching, supervision and support provided to our students, the creativity, innovation and overall quality of the research we conduct, and the daily functioning of university administration and associated services provided for the betterment of the Australian public. It is, therefore, critical to the future of the Australian university sector that staff workloads are reasonable and manageable, and that they no longer drive dysfunction or cause harm.

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