

# Australian Higher Education Review

## Professional staff: the forgotten but critical enablers of Australia's higher education system

This submission addresses Q 38 in the Accord Discussion Paper:  
How can the Accord support higher education providers to  
adopt sector-leading employment practices?

Prepared by:

**Association for Tertiary Education Management (ATEM) Inc**

PO Box 6050

O'Connor ACT 2602

[www.atem.org.au](http://www.atem.org.au)

[info@atem.org.au](mailto:info@atem.org.au)



Association for Tertiary  
Education Management

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## PREFACE

The Australian Universities Accord provides the opportunity for an examination and rethink of many of the underlying assumptions and policies governing the Australian higher education system. In particular, to shine the light on the sector's workforce who are the engine for the sector and enable it to be a key contributor to Australia's economic, cultural and social future. Post pandemic, the sector can no longer rest on its laurels as an employer of choice. The sector has experienced a significant loss of expertise and knowledge through the rationalisation of its workforce during the pandemic, and now needs to proactively recruit and retain an engaged workforce that has the breadth and depth of skills and leadership to enable the sector to remain a key economic driver. As demand for skilled labour grows, the sector needs to adjust its approach to workforce management away from 'accidental' careers to a sustained focus on investing in and shaping career pathway. This can be achieved through greater understanding of the workforce and setting in place contemporary structures and frameworks that enable sector-leading employment practices.

It is clear that consideration of the current and future academic workforce has been embedded in the the Accord's considerations to date. We would therefore like to give voice to other key elements of the workforce and explore the current and future skills and capability of the higher education workforce. This submission will focus on two key cohorts:

- the significant contribution of professional staff, who ensure that their institution's teaching and research activities and support services are delivered effectively, and
- a key cohort of academic staff with considerable management accountability on top of their teaching and research commitments.

The view of the Association for Tertiary Education Management is that, given the scope of potential reforms, and indeed the challenges currently facing Australian higher education, early consideration needs to be given to developing the skills and capabilities of both of these cohorts. As a significant employer of women, there is greater need to embed flexible employment practices and ensure job security and regular incomes. Temporary employment worked as a shock absorber during the COVID pandemic but rolling short term or continued casual contracts do not provide the required stability and investment in careers that are needed to ensure a highly capable and engaged higher education workforce.

## **INTRODUCING THE ASSOCIATION FOR TERTIARY EDUCATION MANAGEMENT**

For more than 45 years ATEM has been a professional association working to advance excellence in tertiary education management across Australasia and Southeast Asia, and to support the development of individuals working in the profession (ATEM constitution). Post COVID, ATEM is positioned to help shape the future capability of the workforce.

Traditionally ATEM has focused on supporting professional staff. However, as the sector has evolved, so has our association. We now provide support and member services to all who work, or have an interest, in the tertiary education sector. A key focus is on developing the leadership and management capabilities of professional and academic staff, and in removing the divide between these cohorts.

Unlike other professional associations in the sector, we are not focused on one key cohort but see ourselves as the space to support and develop many communities of practice, creating linkages and awareness of professional practice. Our strength is in developing programs by the sector, for the sector, which enable the development of sustained and rewarding careers for sector leaders and specialists.

## **THE PROFESSIONAL STAFF COHORT**

Key to the success of Australian higher education is that professional staff engage and support the academic endeavour in teaching and research and at the same time ensure that universities are managed well and meet equity, legislative, compliance and financial obligations to all students, staff, governments in Australia and abroad, and the broader community. To condense all of the specialist skills and professional services into one cohort, belies the complexity and specialist skills and knowledge required to not only successfully manage institutions, but respond to shifting markets and demands.

Surveys show that professional staff are strongly committed to the mission of their university and support the academic endeavour.

*"I am strong believer in the value of education ... it is so important that we educate current generations to make a better world for all".*

But university operations are extremely complex; staff new to higher education often take an extended period to come to grips with their roles, and many leave after a short period. Currently, highly effective professional staff have high levels of expertise which can only be developed in the work place which, when coupled with a number of years experience, enable effective operation in a university culture. This may happen by chance, and such expertise is not easily replaceable.

Increasingly, the skills developed by professional staff are in high demand outside of the sector - to operate in complex environments, provide high levels of customer service and to be skilled in problem solving. This expertise is valued highly in the corporate sector and attracts higher levels of remuneration. This leaves employers in the sector at risk of higher levels of turnover and continued loss of knowledge and expertise.

## THE ACADEMIC STAFF COHORT

A second cohort which warrants consideration are the current and future academic leaders. Increasingly, more junior academic staff have been drawn into management roles, particularly Teaching and Research academic staff at levels B and C who, as subject coordinators, are managing cohorts of casual staff at a time in their careers when they should be developing a research or teaching profile.

Whilst the development of an academic career takes many years, the focus is on building and shaping knowledge with staff developing their skills and capabilities in learning and teaching, and research. For the majority, the development of their leadership and management skills is not a consideration or area of focus. We have consulted many academic leaders as part of our recent strategic considerations:

*“I learnt by watching others and trying to copy what they did ... I just had a go, made many mistakes and learnt from them”.*

*“I fell into leadership ... every year I gained more responsibilities and progressed to being a Head of School and then to a Deputy Vice Chancellor role; I didn't enter my academic career to be an academic leader; it was almost by accident”.*

Many of the academic leaders we consulted did not undertake formalised leadership development until they had advanced to more senior leadership roles by which time many of their leadership practices were deeply embedded and took much time to reshape.

## ACCIDENTAL CAREERS

For both of these cohorts, there is a theme of accidental careers. For many professional staff, they were not aware of the breadth of opportunities available in the sector – many have started out in junior roles and it has taken time to understand how to build and navigate their career.

*“I started working at the University whilst studying here. Over the years I moved through different roles in student services but it wasn't until many years later that I realised that I had actually build a depth of expertise and a strong career”.*

*“I joined the University in a finance management role. At the time I just thought it would be a good job for a couple of years, I wasn't aware that I would be able to take up many opportunities to build my career”.*

For many academic leaders, they also ‘fell into’ their new career path, having entered employment with universities focused on the development of knowledge and learning.

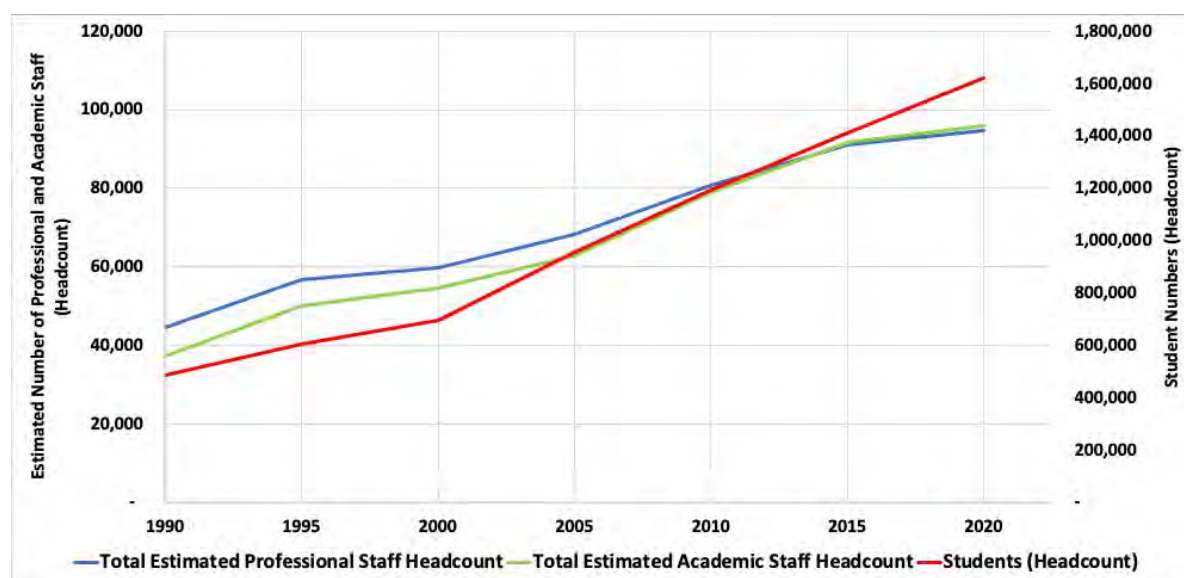
## THE DEMOGRAPHICS OF THE PROFESSIONAL STAFF WORKFORCE

Despite its criticality to the success of higher education in Australia, higher education management is not recognised as a profession or a career. It should be noted that in the Higher Education Statistics (HES) data collections<sup>1</sup>, just under half of professional staff in higher education are categorised as belonging to General Institution Services and Institution Overhead Services Organisational Units (OUs), which significantly hides the complexity of their roles and the contribution they make. Further, professional staff are described as ‘non academic staff’ which also downplays their role. Despite extensive changes in universities, the categories of data collected on professional staff have not changed since some time in the 1990s.

### Size and structure of the professional staff workforce

Over the past 30 years, academic and professional staff numbers in Australian universities have broadly increased in line with increased student enrolments (**Diagram 1**). Specifically, the professional staff cohort has more than doubled aligned with a more than triple increase in student numbers. It is significant that in more recent years the gap between the numbers of professional and academic staff has diminished, largely in line with increased efficiencies driven by major IT systems, or the outsourcing of university services.

**Diagram 1:** Number of students and estimated<sup>2</sup> number of academic and professional staff (headcount) in Australian higher education 1990 - 2020

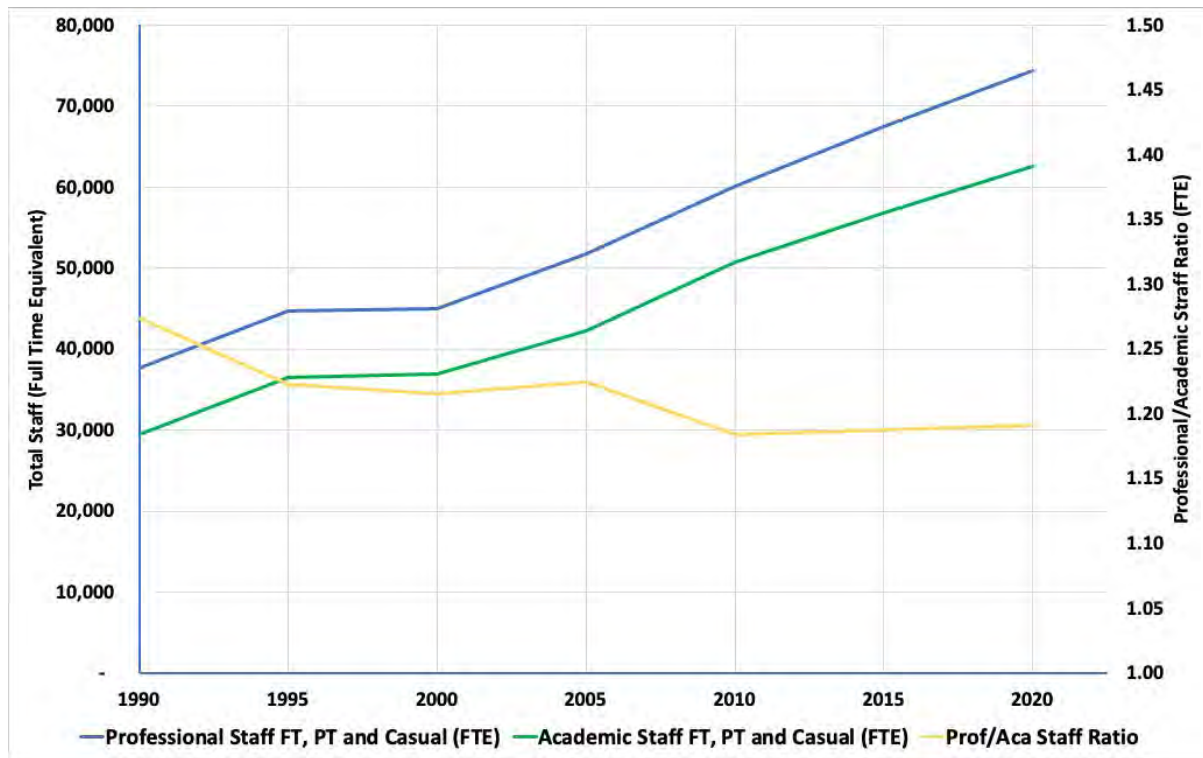


<sup>1</sup> Data has been drawn from the Department of Education, Skills and Employment’s Higher Education Statistics (HES). Data from the total sector (public and private) has been used. <https://www.education.gov.au/higher-education-statistics> (Date viewed 2 April 2023).

<sup>2</sup> Because of the absence of data on the headcount of casual staff employed in Australian universities, we have taken a very conservative approach in estimating the number of people who make up the casual FTE. In this instance we have used the ratio of 1:3. In reality the ratio is likely to be higher.

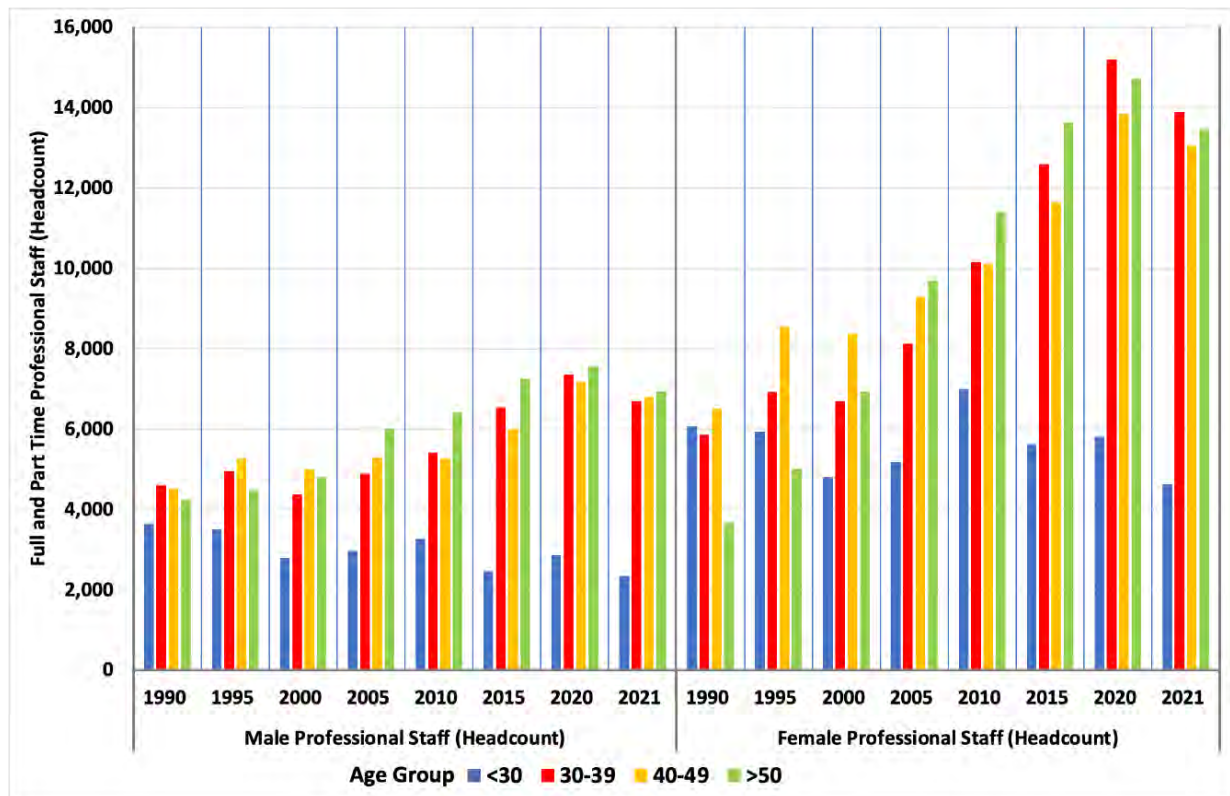
**Diagram 2** shows full and part-time professional and academic staff in FTE (full time equivalents) over 1990 to 2020, and shows the ratio between the two. With the casual academic and professional staff excluded from these data, this professional/academic FTE staff ratio has remained largely unchanged over 30 years. The gap in numbers which appears to exist between the full and part-time professional and academic staff FTE numbers in **Diagram 2** is largely made up of academic casual staff.

**Diagram 2:** Total full and part time (FT, PT) professional and academic staff (FTE) and professional/academic staff ratio (FTE) 1990 - 2020



**Diagram 3** illustrates the growth in male and female professional staff numbers over the past 30 years. What is significant is the increasing feminisation and the gradual aging of this workforce.

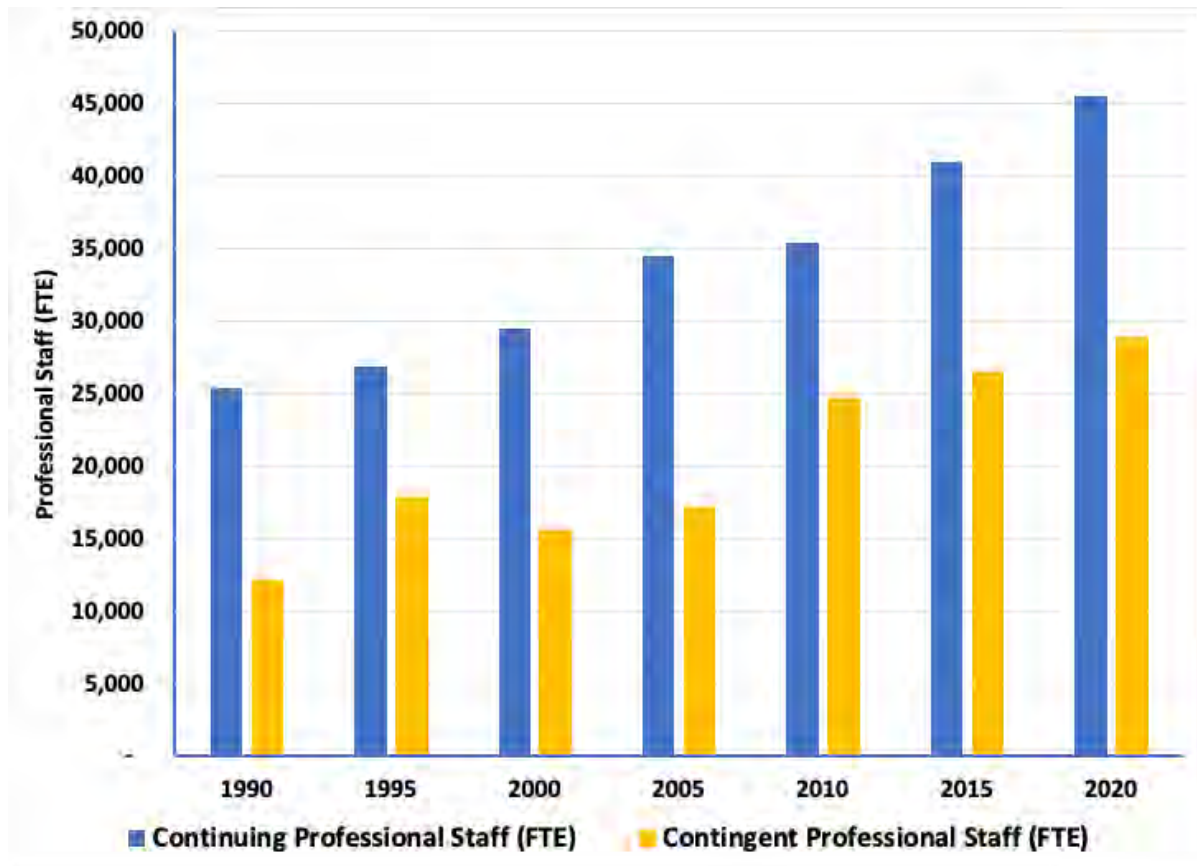
**Diagram 3:** Number of full and part time male and female professional staff (headcount) by age group 1990 - 2021





Although not approaching the levels of casualisation as for academic staff, many professional staff have limited job security. **Diagram 4** illustrates the level of contingent employment of professional staff in Australian higher education (casual and fixed term staff combined).

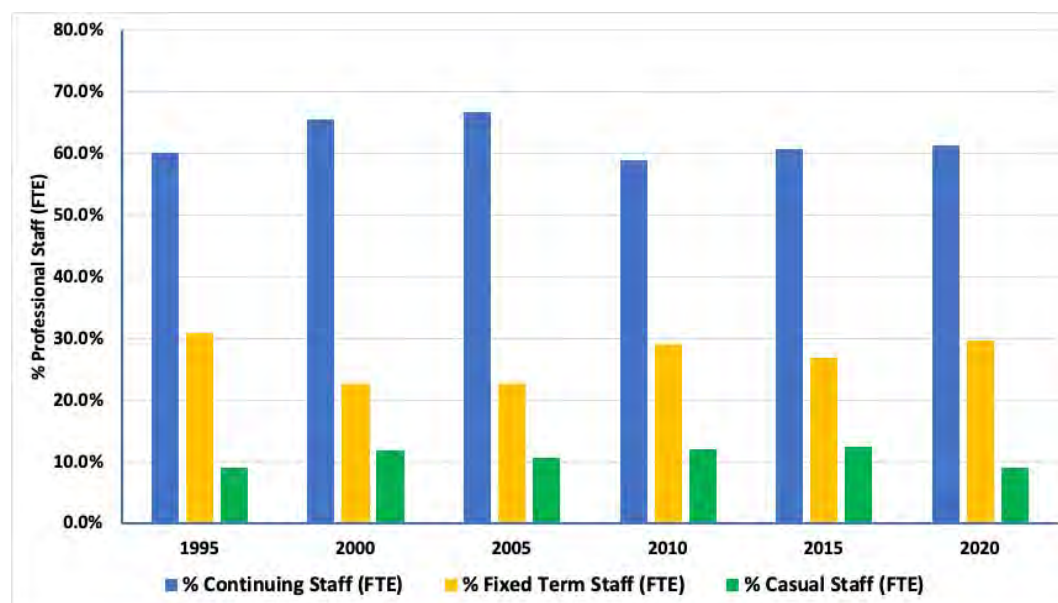
**Diagram 4:** Continuing and contingent professional staff (FTE) in Australian higher education 1990 - 2020



In percentage terms, the HES data indicates that the proportion of professional staff employed on a contingent basis ranges between 9 and 13% for casual staff and 21 and 29% for fixed term staff (**Diagram 5**) over the period 1995 to 2020<sup>3</sup>. The range for continuing professional staff is 59 to 67%. It needs to be noted that during 2020 most universities reduced their casual workforce as part of the response to the COVID pandemic.

<sup>3</sup> **Diagram 5** uses data from 1995 rather than 1990 as for other diagrams as the separation between casual and full and part time employment on limited term contracts is difficult to interpret.

**Diagram 5:** Percentage of continuing, fixed term and casual professional staff (FTE) employed in Australian higher education 1995 to 2020



### The nature of professional staff work

Professional staff work covers a broad range of activities and disciplines. **Table 1** illustrates, at a high level, the generic nature of the tasks undertaken by professional staff.

**Table 1:** Examples of the type of work undertaken by professional staff

Supporting academic endeavour	Student recruitment/ engagement management	Administration, management and external relations	Facilities
Libraries; student IT support; specialised educational professionals for teaching and learning eg learning designers, management of work integrated learning and student practical work placements; industry partnerships; research grants processes; issues associated with research integrity; engineers and other qualified professionals (eg building the bionic ear, inventing urls); registration of courses with professional bodies.	Managing the student experience from recruitment, and enrolment to graduation including academic and emotional support; marketing and student recruitment of domestic and international students; student advice and enrolment; academic integrity case management; careers services; complaints; student well being; student health; student housing.	Major institution-wide IT systems; cyber security; financial management; human resources management; risk management; governance; alumni; government relations; compliance; data analysis and Government reporting; management of commercialisation; fundraising; registration with TEQSA.	Buildings and use of space; capital planning and managing capital works; maintenance, trades, grounds, cleaning.

This level of complexity and diversity of professional staff work is often not understood by academic staff or new recruits to institutions. There is considerable research in Australia and internationally suggesting that professional staff play a significant role in fostering student success and outcomes<sup>4</sup>. Significantly, over the past 10 years and exacerbated by the pandemic, we have seen the growth of specialist professional staff roles such as learning advisers, experts in on line pedagogy and high level research roles. These roles, known as “Third Space” roles<sup>5</sup> blur the distinction between academic and professional staff work. How staff working in these roles fit and make contributions to the broader university endeavour is the subject of some research<sup>6</sup>, but formal discussion on the employment and reward structures has been limited. The number of people in Third Space roles is not known. Currently in Australia, Third Space staff remain professional staff but potentially could become a third career stream. Should Third Space professionals become a separate career stream, the staff in these roles currently classified as professional would be removed from the professional/academic staff ratio shown in **Diagram 2**.

Since 1993, remuneration and reward for professional staff has been governed by the 10 level Higher Education Worker (HEW) classification structure where the skill and experience required of the individual to undertake the job and the complexity of the task are recognised for reward purposes. A study of unpublished HES data by Croucher and Woelert<sup>7</sup> highlights the growth over the past 25 years of more senior roles and the decline of lower level support roles, largely as a result of technological change and outsourcing of work associated with more junior roles (eg cleaning, maintenance). This change is clearly reflected in time series data from university annual reports, and as an example, **Diagram 6** illustrates the changes since 2002 at an Australian research-intensive university.

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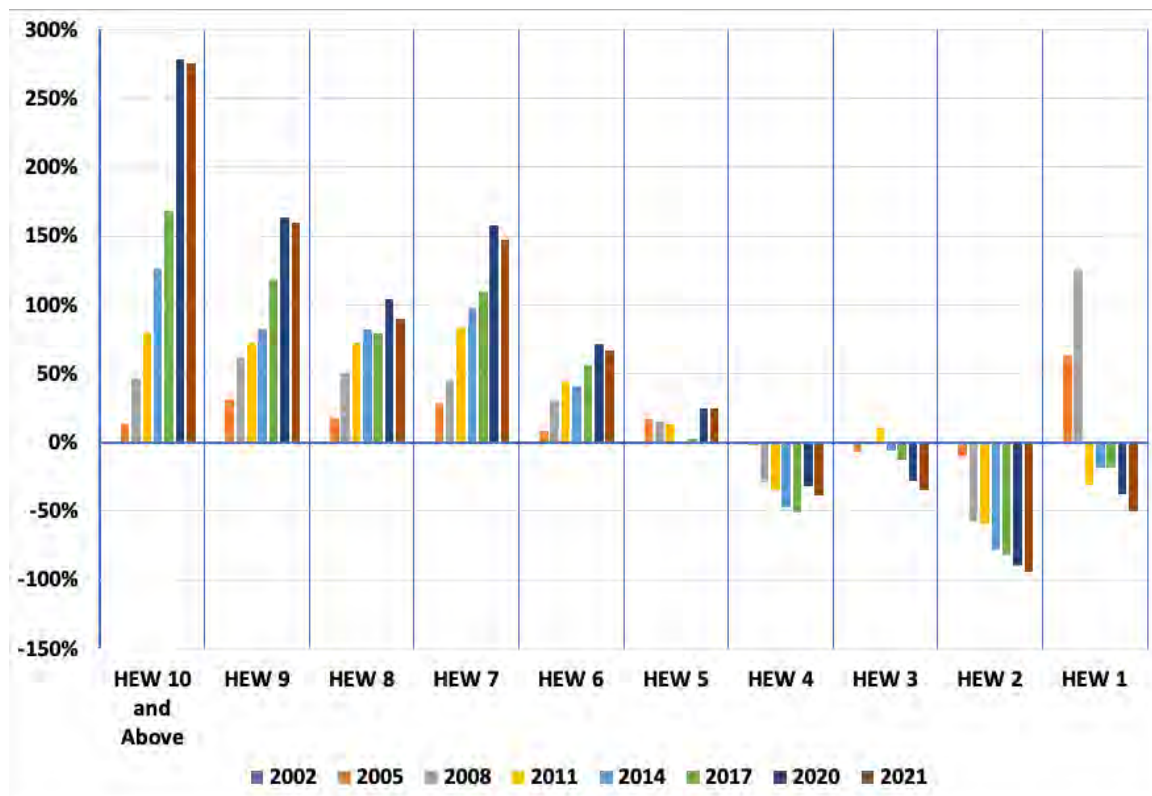
<sup>4</sup> Graham, C. and Regan J. ( 2016). Exploring the contribution of professional staff to student outcomes: a comparative study of Australian and UK case studies. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*. 38(6): 595 – 609.

<sup>5</sup> Whitchurch C. (2008). Shifting Identities and Blurring Boundaries: the Emergence of Third Space Professionals in UK Higher Education. Vol. 62. Issue 4. *Higher Education Quarterly*. Wiley Online Library.

<sup>6</sup> McIntosh, E. and Nutt, D. (2022). The Impact of the Integrated Practitioner in *Higher Education*. *Studies in Third Space Professionalism*. Routledge. London.

<sup>7</sup> Croucher, G. and Woelert, P. (2022). Administrative transformation and managerial growth, a longitudinal analysis of the changes in the non-academic workforce in Australian universities. *Higher Education*. <https://findanexpert.unimelb.edu.au/scholarlywork/1591912-administrative-transformation-and-managerial-growth--a-longitudinal-analysis-of-changes-in-the-non-academic-workforce-at-australian-universities> (Date viewed 22 April 2023).

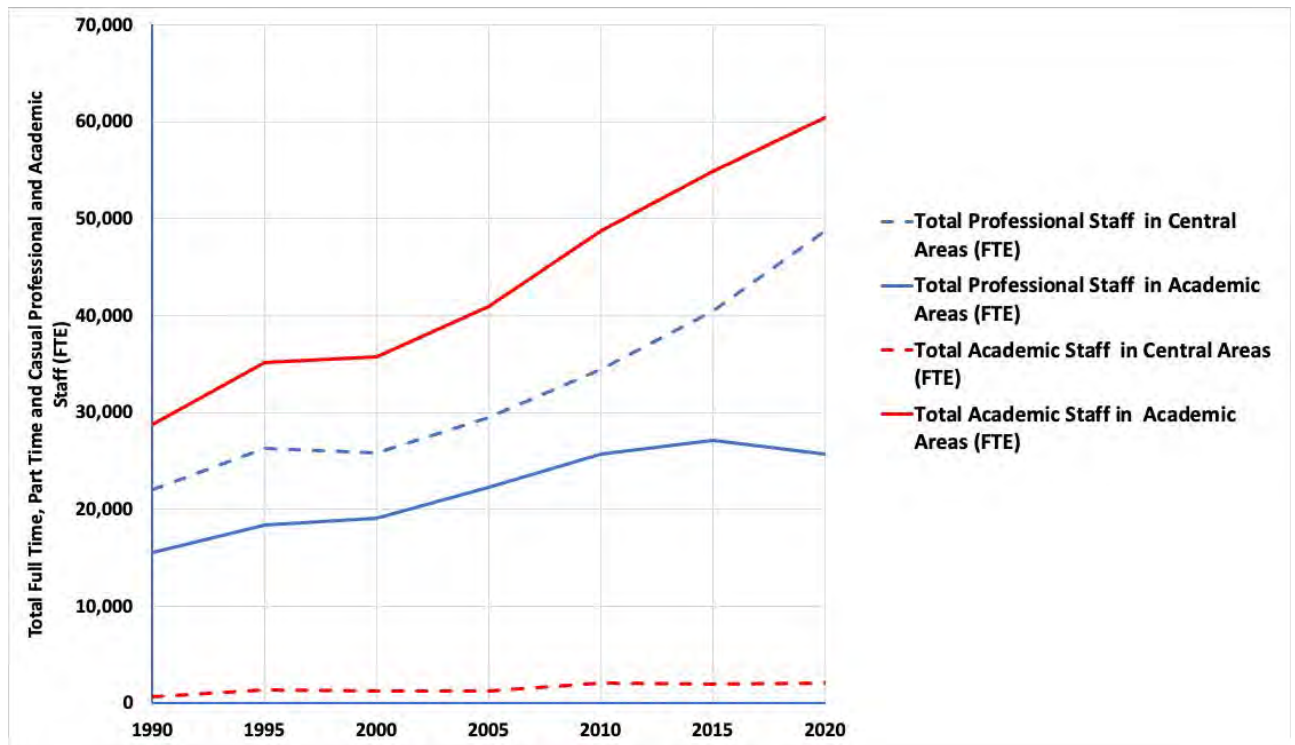
**Diagram 6:** Percentage change in HEW level each year compared with 2002 in continuing and fixed term professional staff (headcount) at an Australian research-intensive university



### Academic and central areas of institutions

**Diagram 7** shows the distribution of professional and academic staff between academic and central units since 1990. The diagram indicates that professional staff numbers in academic units appear to have been tapering off in the last 10 years compared to growth in professional staff numbers in central areas and academic staff numbers. This substantial, but declining, proportion of professional staff work in academic units either to directly support the academic endeavour with specialist skills (eg technical laboratory work) or to undertake management and administrative roles, particularly in large decentralised universities.

**Diagram 7:** Total full time, part time and casual professional and academic staff in central and academic areas of Australian higher education institutions 1990 - 2020

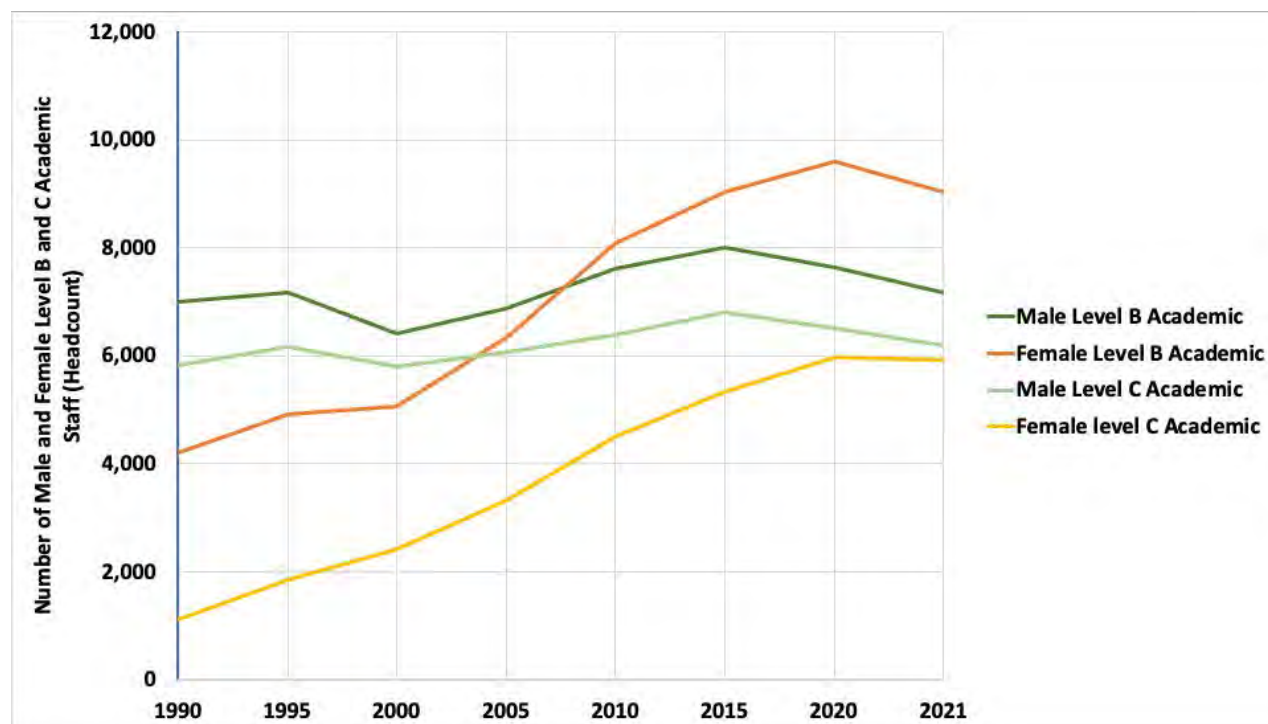


### AN EMERGING GROUP OF MANAGERS AMONGST ACADEMIC STAFF

Our experience, especially in the area of leadership and management, suggests that there is a growing group of academic staff as subject coordinators at Levels B and C who are responsible for the management of cohorts of academic casual staff. We have experienced an increased demand from staff in these cohorts for support in developing their administrative skills and leadership capacity.

**Diagram 8** illustrates the growth in the numbers of these staff (noting that numbers in 2020 and 2021 would have been impacted by COVID).

**Diagram 8:** Full and part time male and female level b and c academic staff (headcount) in Australian higher education 1990 - 2021



## PROFESSIONAL STAFF CAREERS

### Professional staff work as a career

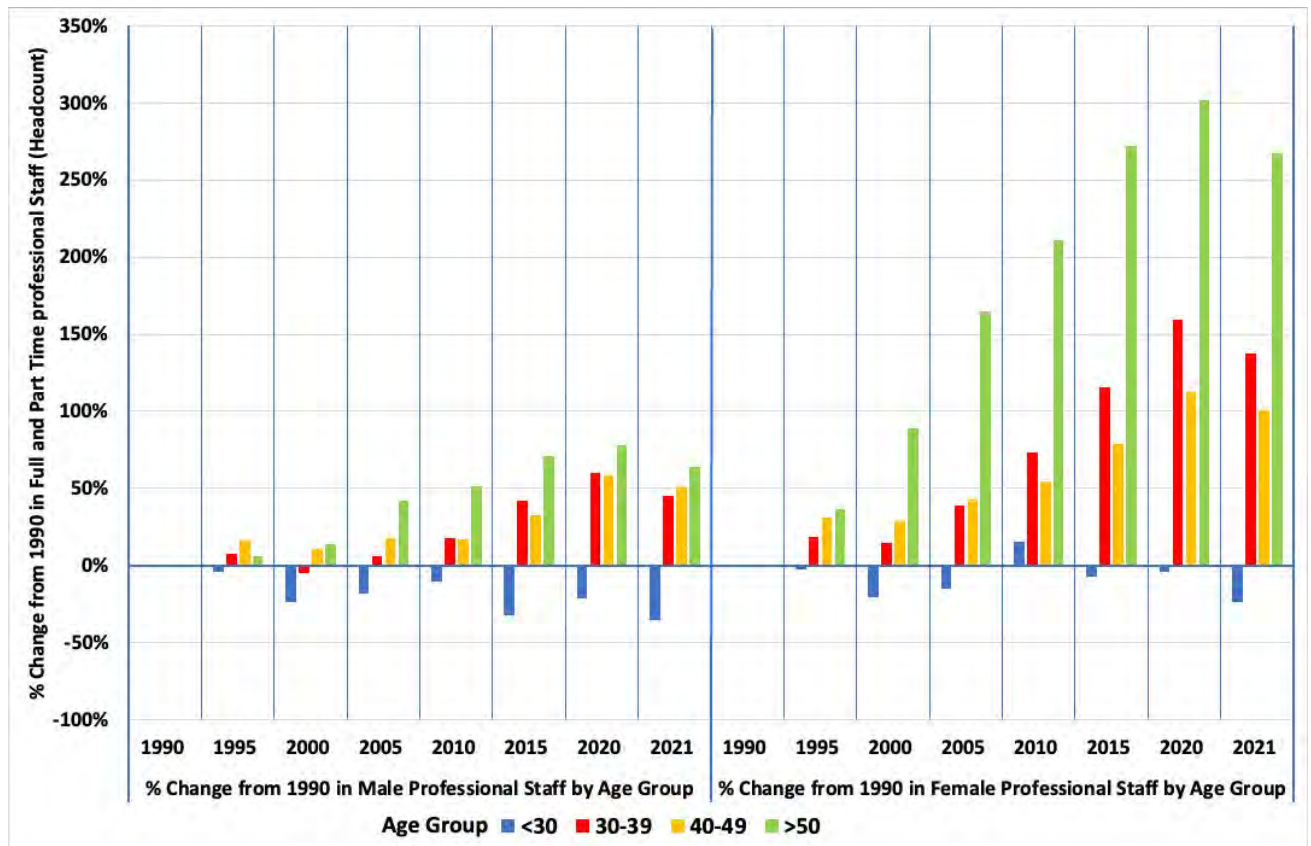
The work of professional staff in higher education has a low public profile and it is not regarded as a career path. Notwithstanding the business of universities being to provide education and produce graduates, few if any universities run graduate recruitment programs. Some have systematic professional development and secondment programs for the development of their staff in their careers, but the opportunities for staff are limited. Many professional staff say their career in higher education has happened by accident, not following any clear process for advancement<sup>8</sup>. Advancement may depend on advice or encouragement from a good mentor or supervisor. Many professional staff are supervised by an academic staff member who may not fully grasp how best to develop their staff.

That higher education management may have become a less attractive workplace for younger people is shown in the decline in the proportion of people under 30 in recent years as indicated in **Diagram 9**.

<sup>8</sup> Regan, J. and Graham, C. (2018). A career in professional services: accident, serendipity or something more?, *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*. 40(1):3-17. DOI:10.1080/1360080X.2017.1411062.



**Diagram 9:** Percentage change from 1990 in full and part time male and female professional staff (headcount) 1990 - 2021



Individual institutions maintain data on turnover, however, we understand that on a national basis the annual total turnover rate for all professional staff hovers at about 18% with over half of that amount arising from resignations. We have been advised that about 30% of staff recruited at lower HEW levels resign within the first year of employment. We do not have any data on reasons for resignation, although this data is collected by universities. High turnover limits the development of institutional knowledge and capacity amongst staff.

### Career structure

The HEW structure is generally used as the (theoretical) basis for a career structure. At its inception, the structure was designed to simplify the multiple occupationally focussed classification structures and salary levels that existed across Australia and provide universities the opportunity to create internal career structures in university management based on an Australia-wide 10 level reward structure.

The dominant model of career advancement in universities is academic, based on the development of expertise and recognition of excellence in teaching and research. This sits at variance with the broad

work value-based approach underpinning the HEW structure<sup>9</sup>. Given the limited research, any comments on professional staff careers is anecdotal, nonetheless we note that:

- a. Professional staff tend to become specialised in particular areas, eg student administration, and do not or are not readily able to move across into other occupational areas, eg research management. These limitations have been described as glass walls within institutions<sup>10</sup>. Hence, gaining broad knowledge and experience through internal mobility may be limited.
- b. Specialised roles (eg in HR, finance and marketing) tend to be filled by qualified professionals who may not see higher education as a career and leave after a few years to seek broader professional opportunities.
- c. There is a view that the current HEW structure based on work value does not allow for careers to be developed in the Third Space, where the development and maintenance of specific expertise is critical.
- d. The location in an organisation where a staff member works drives different career paths. Staff who work in central units may be more removed from the core day to day work of the university, but have a broader picture of their specialisation across the university. Staff who work in academic units may better understand and be involved in the core work of the university, but may lack institutional breadth.

One concern that ATEM has is that universities may not be developing sufficient professional staff with the knowledge and capacity to take a whole of university view or a whole of sector view, thus limiting their capacity to contribute. The extent that consultants are used is a concern too, especially when in house expertise may be available. Since 2012, the Victorian government has required universities to publish data on consultancy purpose and spend. While expert external advice may be needed to either introduce completely new techniques especially in high cost areas, eg facilities and IT systems, or to advise on high risk situations/events, a surprising number relate to strategic planning, marketing strategies and management advice, some of which given the numbers and level of internal experts, might be undertaken in house by staff with a broad, and often better, understanding of higher education. As with the Australian Public Service, this extensive use of consultancies not only adds to the cost of managing universities, but does not capitalise on internal expertise and also deprives professional staff of valuable opportunities for capacity development<sup>11</sup>. **Table 2** illustrates the average distribution of consultancy spend in Victorian universities.

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<sup>9</sup> Significantly, a study of current enterprise agreements indicates that many universities have abandoned the broadbanding of classification levels which were previously used as a means of allowing recognition that jobs grow in work value as the skills, knowledge and expertise of the staff member grows.

<sup>10</sup> Campbell-Perry, Sonya. (2022). The blended professional; barriers and boundaries to collaborative institutional cultures. In McIntosh, E. and Nutt, D. (Eds), *The Impact of the Integrated Practitioner in Higher Education: Studies in Third Space Professionalism*. pp 115-125. Routledge. London.

<sup>11</sup> Our Public Service Our Future. Independent Review of the Australian Public Service, Canberra, Commonwealth of Australia, 2019. p 185.



**Table 2: Average distribution of annual consultancy spend in Victorian universities 2019 2021**

Year	No Unis	Distribution of consultancy spend								
		Strategy	Management, Business Advice	Legal	Buildings, Environment, Physical Planning	Human Resources, Industrial Relations	Marketing, Alumni, Fundraising	Info Tech	Research	Other
2019	8	12%	48%	2%	5%	3%	9%	4%	6%	11%
2020	5	47%	24%	0%	12%	0%	3%	11%	3%	1%
2021	6	6%	19%	0%	17%	3%	7%	34%	12%	2%

## Career and capacity development

Individual institutions to a greater or lesser extent offer development programs for professional staff as well as academic staff; some are on-line programs. Most common are mandatory programs for compliance purposes, eg Occupational Health and Safety, or programs which relate to immediate skill requirements, eg committee secretaryship. More limited are broader programs which through formal learning, development opportunities and project based work, build long term higher capacity to work in higher education. Where they are offered, our members indicate that these are not always available or are only available to a limited group of staff, but they are very well received when made available. ATEM places priority on career development of its members and runs well received leadership programs<sup>12</sup> such as the Middle Managers Program (MMP) which has been running more than 35 years. The MMP is open to 20-50 members annually, but as a largely volunteer organisation we have limited funds and capacity.

Since the apparent recent demise of the Emerging Leaders and Managers Program (ELAMP) previously offered to the sector by the University of Melbourne, there has been no sector-wide approach for the development of leadership and management capacity across the sector both for academic and professional staff.

## INTERNATIONAL AND CROSS SECTORAL COMPARISONS

The need for a targeted approach to developing leadership and management capacity in Australian universities has long been recognised and been the subject of numerous reviews and studies<sup>1314</sup>. Although these studies have mainly focussed on the need for development of academic leadership capacity, Australian universities have yet to find a sustainable national model for development and delivery. The Leadership Foundation for Higher Education in the United Kingdom (UK) was established as a membership organisation by Universities UK and the Funding Councils for England, Scotland and Wales in 2004 with the mission of providing both research and capacity development in leadership.

<sup>12</sup> ATEM's professional development programs: [atem.org.au/prodev/professional-development](https://atem.org.au/prodev/professional-development). (Date viewed 2 April 2023).

<sup>13</sup> Learning for life: final report: review of higher education financing and policy. Higher Education Financing and Policy Review Committee. Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra. 1998. [dest.gov.au/archive/highered/hereview/herr.pdf](https://dest.gov.au/archive/highered/hereview/herr.pdf) (Date viewed 4 April 2023).

<sup>14</sup> Scott, G. Coates, H. and Anderson, M. (2008). Learning leaders in times of change; academic leadership capabilities for Australian higher education. ACER. Melbourne.

Although subsumed into Advance HE in 2019, and now required to be self funding, its approach and programs continue and are tied to current higher education needs by advisory boards. See: [advance-he.ac.uk/guidance/leadership-and-management](https://advance-he.ac.uk/guidance/leadership-and-management)

An alternative and emerging approach is that of the Canadian Association of University Business Officers, a membership organisation with a large number of institutional members, which provides a limited range of targeted development programs for professional staff. See: [caubo.ca/knowledge-centre/learningevents/#sqelch-taas-accordion-shortcode-content-UCG](https://caubo.ca/knowledge-centre/learningevents/#sqelch-taas-accordion-shortcode-content-UCG)

A membership organisation with a different approach is the Association of University Administrators in the UK which in addition to targeted development opportunities, has professional accreditation standards, requires regular professional development and sponsors a Post Graduate Certificate in Higher Education Leadership and Management. See: [aua.ac.uk/professional-development/](https://aua.ac.uk/professional-development/)

We note that the APS and public services in NSW and Victoria invest in leadership programs which are designed to develop essential skills and knowledge as well as developing leadership capacity. Although these operate at a scale greater than could be currently sustained by universities, they are interesting models to be explored, particularly given the growth of private providers.

See [www.apsacademy.gov.au](https://www.apsacademy.gov.au)

## **WHAT ATEM RECOMMENDS TO BE CONSIDERED IN THE ACCORD PROCESS**

ATEM recommends the following be considered in the Accord process:

1. Whatever changes are mooted in the Accord Report, give consideration to the capacity of institutional workforces to effect them, and in particular to identify the capacity and skill needs of both academic and professional staff.
2. Consider whether initiatives to enhance capacity and skills should be undertaken at institutional level, or whether there is merit in a national approach to capacity development, and management and leadership development. This may lead to discussion of the feasibility of creating a formal professional career in higher education as there is for academic careers.
3. Consider whether the current structures and processes around recruitment and development of professional staff are sufficient to support the emerging challenges of Australian higher education.
4. Attention on shaping the workforce which is not focused on ratios of professional:academic staff but what is the sustainable mix of skills that support continued growth and expansion of the sector.
5. Exploration of underlying structural difficulties and inequalities which are embedded in current workforce frameworks – open up to greater flexibility.
6. Consider whether new approaches need to be undertaken in relation to Third Space professionals, and to recognise such a group formally in career and award structures in higher education. Should third space professionals become a separate career stream, the staff in these roles currently classified as professional would be removed from the professional/academic staff ratio.

7. Invest in undertaking further research on the profession of university management and the composition and needs of the workforce eg research into the impact of COVID on professional staff – we know that the pandemic had a disproportionately negative impact on employment of women and youth.
8. Consider whether there is merit in a national graduate recruitment program for professional staff in higher education
9. As a basis for national workforce planning, review the way that national data on professional staff are collected and presented in the Australian Government’s Higher Education Statistics data collection so as to truly reflect the work required and the level of professionalism required to undertake the different types of work. It would be very helpful for university planning if HES data included:
  - a. The numbers in headcount and FTE of all professional staff by HEW level and the fields in which they work
  - b. Clearer identification of categories of work undertaken by professional staff
  - c. The numbers in headcount and FTE of third space professionals and the fields in which they work
  - d. Qualifications of professional staff

This paper was developed for ATEM by Liz Bare and Janet Beard, with contributions by Kathryn Blyth, Mary-Louise (ML) Huppatz, and Margaret L Ruwoldt.