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

**Introduction.**

The initial submissions to the Australian Universities Accord (AUA) covered a broad but consistent range of recommendations designed to ensure that Australia’s higher education system meets future workforce requirements, is equitable and is properly funded for education and research. Some submissions expressed concerns over the casualisation of the academic teaching workforce, identifying a range of reasons for the current situation or consequences for the individual casual or the quality of higher education. Whatever its causes, the implicit assumption of many submissions is that amendment to the current funding or structural drivers will ultimately reduce the level of casualisation. It is suggested that the incentives for the use of academic casuals in Australian higher education are such that any change in funding or structures may be insufficient and that without a more radical approach to the use of academic casuals for teaching, the current situation will continue. This submission is an attempt to suggest consideration of alternative approaches to the management of the academic casual workforce.

**Incentives for the use of casuals may continue.**

*Role of research and reward for research*

In an analysis based on publicly available data, Baré, Beard and Tjia[[1]](#footnote-1) conclude that the there appeared to be little consistency in universities’ management of casuals during the first year of the pandemic (2020). They suggest that this highlights the complexity of academic workforce planning in universities, in particular for Teaching and Research (T and R) Academic staff (45%of the total FTE academic cohort in 2020)[[2]](#footnote-2). T and R academic staff are generally required to achieve levels of excellence in research as one of several grounds for promotion. Institutions have explicit targets for institutional and individual research outcomes, in part to improve rankings and international student recruitment. Academic workload models agreed by universities in enterprise agreements often reward excellence in research by reallocation of teaching time (largely to casual academic staff). Workload models have been hotly contested industrially and are likely to remain a feature of academic employment.

*Impact of workloads*

Some universities have actively sought to create structures and a culture which explicitly values the contribution of casual academics. Despite this, some research suggests that casuals are treated as a subordinate or worker subclass within institutions, a common thread expressed in press articles on casualisation. Given workload pressures on continuing and fixed term academic staff, continued access to casuals to undertake what might be regarded as high volume and routine tasks may remain important in many academic disciplines.

*Institutional budgeting practices*

Financial accounting practices coupled with devolution of budgets to small discipline groups within academic organisational units may result in suboptimal staffing decisions driven by budgets. Other factors, such as the importance of running a balanced budget to ensure the continued viability of the discipline in the university may result in extensive use of casual staff, generally perceived as being less costly.

*Institutional HR practices.*

Universities correctly establish a high bar for recruitment and selection to continuing academic and professional staff roles, with lower bars (or no bars) for entry to short term fixed term and casual roles where decisions are usually undertaken at a local level. This facilitates flexibility but will continue to be used to avoid the perceived bureaucracy and inevitable time delays of more formal recruitment processes.

**Attempts to limit the extent of the casual academic workforce.**

Since the early 1990s in a range of enterprise bargaining agreements (EBA), universities and the NTEU have agreed on measures designed to curb the extent of casualisation. These include agreements to abide by ratios of casuals to continuing and fixed term staff, casual conversion clauses, creation of a limited number of fixed term or ongoing roles open only to existing casual staff and creation of a range of continuing roles on small time fractions. Nearly 30 years’ experience attest to the failure of a regulatory approach.

**Should alternative approaches to academic employment be considered within the Accord?**

While there is a general concern over the extent and implications of academic casualisation, there have been few suggestions, other than initiatives to increase regulation either though EBAs or by individual employers. Many institutions have actively sought to improve administrative and decision-making processes, and, as mentioned above, others have attempted through creation of structures such as the Newcastle Academy to provide career and other support.

The difficult but unanswered question is whether there are better ways to manage the nations’ academic teaching needs in a flexible manner and at the same time to be fairer to the individuals concerned? There are no simple solutions, but it is suggested that the AUA is one of the few venues where a discussion might occur.

With the caveat that the detailed composition of the casual academic workforce needs to be better understood before any significant change could be contemplated, the following are possible approaches which might be considered.

*Develop an alternate approach to engagement/ employment of research higher degree* students which incorporates their current stipend scholarship with an employment relationship with the university which entitles them to regular work ( within stipulated limits).

Change the current industrial settings by *eliminating the limitation on fixed term appointments* for teaching and reinstate the former Tutor range, allowing for 3 year appointments for early career academics.

*Determine the true cost of academic casual employment* in particular looking at the overall cost of supervision, administration and management of large cohorts of casual staff.

Attempt to reduce job insecurity. Climate surveys suggest that casual academics like the work that they do however are concerned over insecurity and pay. Many casuals work across several institutions. One option is for institutions to share risk and ensure quality by establishing a national university owned organisation (similar to UniSuper) which recruits, employs and develops academic staff on a continuing or fixed term basis. As a mandated labour hire company, the staff employed by the entity would be contracted to universities as a service to undertake academic duties for specific periods.

*Create a new form of engagement for staff allowing regular payments across a year,* but requiring a work pattern which allows for periods of high activity at key times of a year, eg. Marking at the end of semesters.

1. Elizabeth Baré, Janet Beard and Teresa Tjia **What happened to casual academic staff in Australian public universities in 2020?. https://melbourne-cshe.unimelb.edu.au/publications/occasional-paper-series** [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Teaching Only academic staff consisted of 26% of the total FTE academic staff, but 69% of Teaching Only staff were casual. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)