

Australia's "education revolution" sends university staff casualisation soaring

Our reporters
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The "education revolution" initiated by the previous federal Labor government has driven a sharp rise in the exploitation of poorly-paid and highly insecure casual teachers in Australian universities.

Under that government, supported by the Greens, market-style competition was imposed on the tertiary education sector. Combined with the slashing of funding by billions of dollars annually, continued by the current Liberal-National government, this has compelled universities to fight each other for student numbers, as well as to cut costs and increase class sizes and workloads.

Casual or sessional staff now do more than half the teaching and research in Australia's public universities, up from 40 percent at the turn of the century. This is part of a wider process throughout the economy, where the rate of casualisation has risen to 23 percent, but universities and their staff and students have been among the most affected.

The trend has worsened since Labor's "education revolution" began to be imposed in 2010. According to one survey, seven out of 10 new positions are now casual. In 2013 alone, the number of university casuals rose by 17.4 percent to the equivalent of 22,958 full-time staff.

Casual academics are employed on a semester-to-semester basis and paid only for the hours they teach. Often, because of enrolment fluctuations in the new "marketplace," they are not told whether they will be employed, or how many hours they will be allocated, until the first week of a semester. In some cases, they are led to believe they will be engaged for a semester, only to be informed at the last minute that their services are not required.

According to Griffith University's *Work and Careers in Australian Universities Survey*, 60 percent of casual academics earn less than \$499 a week and that is only during active teaching weeks. The semester breaks leave

them financially vulnerable, often having to rely on other jobs, family, partners, pensions or welfare payments.

Despite arguments from universities and trade unions that academic staff value the flexibility of casual employment, research suggests that only 12 percent of the affected academics are "casual by choice."

The deterioration began under the Hawke and Keating Labor governments from 1983 to 1996, which reintroduced student fees and cut funding per student, compelling universities to slash costs. The next Labor government then tied funding to student numbers. With universities now constantly under-cutting each other, casuals have increasingly been employed, both to cut budgets and cope with unpredictable enrolment totals.

This offensive has been facilitated and enforced by the university unions, notably the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU), which covers most academics. While claiming to oppose casualisation in every enterprise agreement that it strikes with university managements, the NTEU has promoted short-term contracts to replace a small number of casuals, thus not reducing the overall insecurity of employment at all. The union has also encouraged the use of "teaching only" positions, creating a pool of over-worked and under-paid teachers, largely unable to secure promotions to better-paid posts.

Politically, the NTEU has sought to tie its members to the parties that launched the "education revolution"—Labor and the Greens, which propped up a minority Labor government from 2010 to 2013. During the campaign for the July 2 federal election, the NTEU condemned only the Liberal-National Coalition government, denouncing its plans to lift student fees. The union presented Labor as a defender of public education, thanking Labor leader Bill Shorten for "consistently fighting against the Coalition government's dangerous agenda of fee deregulation." Labor's 30-year record shows this to be an utter fraud.

The NTEU bureaucracy, like the rest of the trade union movement, supports the underlying pro-business restructuring that successive governments, Labor and Coalition alike, have pursued. The financial hardship faced by casuals stands in stark contrast to the profits being generated for the universities and the entire corporate elite, particularly by international students. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, total spending by international students in Australia—including course fees, accommodation, living expenses and recreation—was \$19.2 billion in 2015, up from \$17 billion the previous year. This makes education Australia’s third-largest foreign exchange earner, after coal and iron ore, and well ahead of tourism.

The WSWS interviewed **Alex**, whose area of expertise is cultural studies. An academic for 20 years, she has worked for five different institutions in 2016 on a part-time or contract basis, and this has been typical of her employment during the past 10 years.

For five years, Alex has worked for an online university. Over a 13-week program, Alex is paid for just five hours a week, at a “demonstration rate” of \$55 per hour. “It’s impossible for me to do the work in the time given to me. I do it anyway, and don’t get paid. In those five hours, I am meant to read and be familiar with the entire unit, respond to students on an ongoing basis, and moderate the unit—determine grades and outcomes. In a unit that is about to start, I have spent 30 hours already in reading materials. Over the next 13 weeks, I expect to do another 15 hours.

“I can’t even begin to describe how insecure my employment is. They are getting me to do more and more work under the pretext of getting ready for the next semester. Then they hand the work to someone else. At several of the places I work, the contract for teaching is given out in the week before teaching, or sometimes in the first week of semester. In one case, classes were merged in week four, with the loss of teaching hours, despite a contract. The contract means nothing. I see this pattern everywhere, not just at private colleges but also at major institutions. It’s getting worse...

“In one instance, I was writing a third of a unit. I was told where to take material from, and provided with links. Part of the other material was fully plagiarised. The remainder of the material didn’t come through, and I was told to write the totality with a two-week time frame. I worked myself to death doing this, again writing material from scratch. This included detailed lesson plans. Then with two days’ notice, the unit was cancelled. I was told

by a text message. I have not been paid for any of this work.

“I work every week, including over Christmas and summer breaks. The weekends are not a break. Typically I work seven days a week. As work for one place is under way, work at another place is beginning. It never stops.

“Some of these private colleges have now been taken over by the universities themselves and the conditions are even worse. One has gone from offering 13-week programs to six weeks, six times a year. The contact hours for the students have gone from 52 hours to 36 hours and the pay rate for staff has been cut. We were being paid \$160 for a lecture, and \$110 for a tutorial. Now it’s a flat \$99.

“I have no time for research. I don’t even have time to properly research or read in my subject area. I am always exhausted and have constant health issues.”

Alex spoke on the underlying processes. “The concern for profits in education has impacts for the students. Content has been dumbed down. We are presenting Year 8 material as first-year university. We are surface teaching. I have been explicitly told to ‘skim across’ material...”

Placing the current conditions in education as part of a broader decline, Alex said: “Following World War II, [welfare] safety nets were introduced so that fascism couldn’t happen again. Now those safety nets are being dismantled in all countries. It started with Chile under Pinochet with the Chicago school of economics. Then there was Thatcher and Reagan.

“In Australia there has been the same neo-liberal aggressive agenda for more control, more profit. There has been a massive transfer of wealth of public wealth into private hands. Roads, health, education—everything that was publically owned has been transferred to private hands.”



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