

Report highlights super-exploited conditions of Australia's casual university staff

By John Harris
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A report entitled “Over-worked and worked over: Casual Academics Bear the Costs of COVID-19,” released by the University of Sydney (USyd) Casuals Network last month, provides further evidence of the increasing exploitation of casual workers in Australia’s universities.

The report was based on a survey of 159 casual workers in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (FASS) at USyd. It focussed on employment and financial insecurity due to the coronavirus pandemic. The results point to the broader experiences of workers throughout tertiary education institutions across the country and internationally.

Over the past three decades, Australian universities have seen a dramatic expansion in the levels of casual employment—part of a wider corporate-government drive to decimate full-time permanent work. Approximately 70 percent of the university workers, both academic and professional, are now on insecure or casual contracts.

This is the result of the worsening under-funding of universities and their transformation into business entities serving the needs of the financial elite, facilitated by successive enterprise bargaining agreements (EBAs) foisted on university staff by the main trade unions covering university staff, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) and the Community and Public Sector Union (CPSU).

Casual workers have been increasingly denied any possibility of securing permanent work. Across the tertiary education sector, the report said approximately 62.9 percent of casuals had remained in a casual job between 3 to 10 years, with 12.6 percent in a casual position for over 10 years.

Casual staff often fill critical teaching positions, including course coordination (27 percent), tutoring

(91.2 percent) and lecturing (40.9 percent), conduct research and provide professional support functions.

The report highlights growing underpayment. Before the pandemic, 40.5 percent of the FASS casual workers reported that they tended to work between “0-3 hours” of unpaid work per week. Another 35.6 percent workers indicated between “4-7 hours;” Some 11.1 percent worked between “7–10 hours;” 6.3 percent selected “11–14 hours;” 1.6 percent selected “15–18 hours” and 2.4 percent selected “22+ hours.”

In Semester 1 this year, unpaid work hours increased substantially. Of all the respondents, 18.3 percent selected “0–3 hours;” 31.3 percent selected “4–7 hours;” 24.5 percent selected “7–10 hours;” 10.7 percent selected “11–14 hours;” 6.1 percent selected “15–18 hours;” 4.6 percent selected “19–21 hours” and 4.6 percent selected “22+ hours.”

On average, FASS casuals were contracted for 12 hours per week, or 156 hours for a 13-week semester. The average number of unpaid hours for Semester 1 was 50.58, equivalent to nearly a third of the contracted hours. Some casuals worked over 280 unpaid hours during the semester.

Similar trends were identified at other universities. At the University of New South Wales (UNSW), a UNSW Casuals Network survey recorded that 42.9 percent of its respondents completed 4–10 hours of unpaid work per week during the first trimester of 2020.

USyd casuals said most unpaid work came under categories of increased work with administration, and communication, particularly with students, compounded by the shift to online courses.

One USyd worker reported: “The transition to online learning has meant that I have had to put in significantly more time and effort without compensation... I’ve earned about \$8 per hour.”

One casual tutor commented: “I’ve had to reply to significantly more emails... because students felt so much more overwhelmed, and unsupported, because they were at home in isolation.”

Another said that they “had significantly more zoom consults with students too, outside of our tutorial hours, because I think students just wanted a more human connection when talking about things like writing essays.”

One casual said: “The time to prepare almost doubled to adjust to online teaching and class management.” Others said online learning presented unique pedagogical challenges.

Even before the impact of the Victorian COVID-19 disaster, Universities Australia predicted that 30,000 jobs would be destroyed in the next three years. Thousands of these have already gone, especially the jobs of casuals.

Over 76 percent of respondents reported being highly stressed about the possibility of losing their jobs. Furthermore, 59 percent said they would likely leave academia permanently if they lost their jobs.

Australian governments, like their counterparts internationally, have seized upon the pandemic to accelerate major workplace restructuring, including in the university sector. University workers and their students are bearing the brunt of this.

The USyd Casuals Network report covers up the role of the NTEU in enforcing this assault. It merely says that “the current EBA limits the university’s capacity to convert casuals to permanent staff when they have been originally contracted as a HDR [Higher Development Research] candidate.”

In fact, the agreement that the NTEU pushed through at USyd in 2017 ensured that casuals would continue to be denied sick leave, parental leave and 17 percent superannuation, and would make up an increasing proportion of the workforce. The EBA—imposed despite considerable rank-and-file anger and bewilderment—also allowed management to inflict forced redundancies when implementing its restructuring plans.

The NTEU national executive praised the deal as a “breakthrough” and a model for such agreements at other universities. At the time, the USyd Casuals Network issued a leaflet saying: “The NTEU should not give up the fight for casuals’ rights before it has

truly begun.” The truth was, as the WSWS warned, the NTEU had no intention of mounting a struggle for the rights of casuals, having agreed to successive EBAs for years that have helped managements casualise the workforce.

These EBAs have straitjacketed university workers while every government beginning with the Greens-backed Gillard Labor government of 2010–13 has cut billions of dollars from university funding. To fight this assault requires an opposed political perspective—that is, the struggle for a socialist program against the existing economic order based on corporate profit and the accumulation of private fortunes.

That is why the Committee for Public Education (CFPE) and the International Youth and Students for Social Equality (IYSSE) have jointly called for staff and students to form independent rank and file committees to develop a genuine industrial and political offensive against the deepening attacks on conditions.

The author also recommends:

NTEU enforces deep pay and job cuts at Australian universities [6 August 2020]

“NTEU Fightback” aims to block revolt against Australian university trade union [17 July 2020]

Reject Australian universities - NTEU job and pay cuts ! [15 June 2020]

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