

At last, a job
or
The academic underclass

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Reportage

If you get a casual job as an academic at an Australian university, you think you are very lucky – a job working in your own discipline, a beginning to an academic career. You may be given casual teaching while you are a postgraduate student. You may expect that when you graduate you will get a real job, a staff job, a permanent position.

You eventually begin to notice that you are employed for only a few hours a week but it feels like you have a full-time job. Still, you're working in your chosen field and it's all leading to something.

You may have worked for your university for years, taught many courses, many students, but no one will find you on the staff register, no one can find your email address on your university's website.

You might one day realise you've been doing this for years and they're not creating jobs and you will always be a casual.

You've worked for so long that you remember when as a casual you were asked to the department's Christmas party – nice restaurant, menu, order a drink. Now you're asked to the special Christmas lunch for casuals, all crowded into the staff common room for finger food and cask wine, where you might catch up with your course convenor for the first time since the start of semester and maybe meet for the first time colleagues teaching the same subject.

The offer of casual work, says one of the academics I spoke to, seems to be based on a system of "patronage. To be given casual work is seen as a gift," she says. Some people get offered more work, more hours than others. Various kinds of discrimination are perceived. Where several casuals want and need more hours of work there can be bitterness over the personal preferences of the staff who assign the contracts.

"Don't use that story," she said to me later about some standard tale of disappointments around casual work in her department, "they might identify who it is." I set out to speak to various academic casuals and found I had to offer repeated assurances that nothing I was told would be attributed, that I would not identify anyone. There is widespread anxiety, even paranoia, among casuals who rely on the work for their livelihood and still nurture a hope that they're working towards a permanent job.

"If you say you don't like it you don't get any more work," another said. "You feel more than vulnerable."

The number of hours a casual works a week varies and no one can expect consistency from one semester to the next. The increasing reliance on casual teaching staff is indisputable – more so in some disciplines, some departments, some universities. Often known as "sessionals" – with a contract for so many hours a week per course for a "session" or semester – casuals juggle their need for paying work with time needed for their own research.

In some departments casuals may be restricted to no more than six hours a week. They might be told that they can't do more than that or they'll never get their research done, or they might be told any more hours brings the danger of the union stepping in to claim that it's actually a part-time job (forcing a budget-conscious department to pay accordingly).

Or as a casual you might be given as many hours as you want. You might notice that this means you teach more hours a week than any full-time member of staff but earn a fraction of a full-time salary.

The greatest difference among the stories I heard from a couple of dozen casual academics was their level of satisfaction with the guidance they received.

The greatest consistency was in their claim that they worked far more hours than they were paid for.

Read, research, think, write lectures, find and choose readings, make photocopies – many hours are worked for each paid hour. Course convenors ask favours – photocopy this, look that up, come and discuss something. Casuals usually comply. “It's slave labour. But everyone's overworked so you do it. I'm always swinging between guilt and martyrdom.”

The hourly rate doesn't seem so bad, though, compared with an hour working at Subway, so that's what you compare it with. But we haven't yet talked about marking and student consultations. Still, the work is not that far off from what you'd choose to be doing anyway: academic teachers and researchers typically work in a chosen field, one in which they invest personal interests, obsessions, passions. “I'm paid for four hours but really work between twelve and sixteen.”

Casual academic teaching hourly rates are subject to a table of various rates (roughly a minimum of \$45 for a repeat tutorial up to about \$95 for a PhD-qualified first tutorial – universities vary). There are rates according to levels of experience and qualification, and according to whether the class is given for the first time or is a repeat. First-time rates are deemed to include an hour of preparation and an hour of assessment (so divide the hourly rate by three and it suddenly doesn't sound so great); repeat hours include an hour of assessment. Subway no longer looks so bad, and you don't need a PhD to work there.

One casual who had recently been awarded her PhD was given a new contract at her old rate. She was told there wasn't enough money to pay her at her qualified rate. “I had to accept,” she says, “I couldn't do anything about it.”

“My rate of pay dropped when a new head of school decided that all my lectures would be paid at the repeat rate, on the grounds that I'd given lectures in that course before,” says another. “‘You don't have to prepare,’ they said. And yet I have to do lots of research every year to update my knowledge – I teach in history, politics, popular culture. You have to keep up, whatever your discipline. I tried to point out that I still had a lot of preparation. But again, it was ‘take it or leave it’. I found out that a woman who'd begun teaching in the department – younger so even more powerless – was being paid at the repeat rate for her lectures on the grounds that the convenor of the course was giving lectures in the same subject at another campus!”

Take it or leave it, the world of WorkChoices.

For some writers a parallel (or intersecting) career in university teaching is something you fall or are pulled into, rather than set out to achieve.

Some but not all of the above stories are similar to my own. Like many writers, once I began publishing books I was expected to be able to teach. I began at various TAFE and community groups and was given some writer-in-residence

positions in universities where I gave the occasional seminar or lecture. I began teaching university courses in 1998 and for eight years taught at least one semester a year at one university, as well as a single semester at three other universities.

I was lucky enough to begin in a school where high morale and a collegiate atmosphere offset the iniquities of the terms of employment. I had great colleagues and students. There were fewer casuals then. Although we were occasionally paid for extra duties, and heads of school conscientiously acknowledged our work, like everyone else I worked more hours than I was paid for, marking student work for unpaid hours, days and even weeks. I attended meetings and quasi-social university functions and made appointments with students for no pay. I got together with my colleagues to discuss our courses and students and methods of marking. No one told us to and we weren't paid for that. Mostly, I had no idea what was going on in the department or the university unless I happened across some rumour.

And things were going to get better.

I wrote my PhD dissertation and though I didn't do it in order to get an academic job, I was told it would ensure one. I'd been promised a permanent position for some years, but the school at which I taught failed to win another staff appointment for its writing program, where in 2005, 822 students in ten courses were taught by two full-time staff and seven casuals. Rumours quickly spread that a new head of school was taking very seriously the directive to save money, and casuals are being advised to seek work elsewhere.

While as a casual academic I've never had a paid sabbatical or research leave (except my summers on the dole), I've been lucky enough to have been able to attend conferences and take time out to research and write new books through grants and fellowships from various arts bodies and other universities. As a casual, I can't apply to the university I've worked at for eight years for funds for research or to attend conferences.

When I was a postgraduate student, I used my research fund to attend the conference of the Australian Association of Writing Programs (AAWP), the professional organisation for my discipline. Although many of the creative writing courses in Australian universities are taught by casuals, there has been no study to obtain figures and, so far, none of the AAWP conferences has addressed industrial issues.

I understand a similar situation exists in other disciplines. Most of my younger colleagues are looking abroad for the kinds of opportunities they need to develop careers.

The story of the rare casual who becomes a permanent staff member is that they now "do half the work for double the pay". Casuals stay casual for longer than they used to and usually longer than they meant to or were led to expect they would have to. In many cases, casual work was taken on in the belief that it would lead to a permanent position. Now, for many, that belief has faded. "I now expect to be casual for ever," was the kind of remark I heard a lot. "The area I teach in has not appointed any tenured academics in ten years – perhaps more – apart from the new director and, knowing that, I expect it would be unlikely that I'd be offered tenure," says a casual who would like greater job security and says the present situation makes her think twice about having children. Another says: "When I began I believed my casual work would lead to permanent, but as they keep employing new casual staff every semester, I stopped believing it."

The loss of belief in a forthcoming permanent job, the cuts in pay and the increasing burden of unrecognised responsibility have led to a crisis of morale. Other researchers confirm that the outstanding issues for academic casuals are the lack of respect and acknowledgment for their work and commitment and the exclusion from decision making in courses they have worked for.

“My motivation has really dwindled,” was a typical disclosure. “I don’t try as hard.”

There are advantages, of course, to being a casual: you do less administrative work than a permanent staff member, go to fewer meetings and can pass the most troublesome students on to staff.

But there are disadvantages to being excluded from those staff meetings: missing out on essential information.

“A student put in a complaint about me,” says another long-term casual, a popular and hardworking teacher. “I had no idea that the staff knew that this was a trouble-making student who does this to everyone. We don’t hear about chronically troublesome students, we’re expected to know how to deal with ethical situations and where to get advice but no one has ever told us. When I started, I was just dropped into a classroom, with no experience or training as a teacher. It’s on the web now, but it wasn’t when I began, and even now you might never be told where the information is to be found.” Another said: “My only guidance is remembering the good teaching I once received.”

“The support we give to casual teachers is very poor,” says a senior staff member. “But because of the increase of casual teachers to full-time staff it’s very difficult to give casual teachers appropriate support, particularly at assessment time. Full-time staff ideally would provide important professional development for the casual teachers.”

As a sessional, you’re generally ineligible to apply for academic research grants. You don’t have a formal position at the university, so you can’t attract an organisation. Thus you don’t have the opportunities to build on your credibility. “A career killer for casuals,” remarks one of the casuals.

And yet you might be expected to add your own publications, your articles and books, written in your own time, to the research quotient of the department. “I rebelled, I refused,” one long-time casual told me, “after all I wrote them in my own time.” But a beginner academic is unlikely to refuse.

“If you look at the ads for academic jobs,” another points out, “they are almost never at A level, usually B and C.” A level is the lowest lecturer level, the entry level for people beginning academic careers, usually after or while completing a postgraduate degree.

“Most of the permanent positions are held by baby boomers,” points out a worker in education policy, “and by 2010 most of them will be retiring. Will those positions be filled or will they be made casual, too?”

Welcome to the world of choice.

As budgets to universities have been cut and as they have been pressured to think of themselves as businesses, they increasingly employ casual labour.

“We’re told, ‘we can only afford to pay so much, so work accordingly’,” says another casual in a similar position. “The message is that teaching doesn’t count.”

But, of course, conscience, passion and career building mean that casuals do put a lot of work into the quality of their teaching.

And it is widely observed that casuals usually put a lot more work into their assessments than permanent staff. They are often painstaking in providing useful feedback, individual comments and carefully considered grades. And they are often told about the tenured staff who hand back student work with nothing on it but a tick and a mark. And about the tenured staff who seem to think a lecture is telling stories about yourself or showing films.

“I don’t want to be a bad teacher. I don’t want students thinking I’m a bad teacher,” says a long-time casual who conscientiously marks assignment with precise and individual responses and advice much appreciated by her students. It’s a matter of personal standards, of knowing how much such comments mean to students and how much they can learn from them, and of being careful of one’s reputation and the student assessments that might matter to future job applications.

The phrase “reasonably contemporaneous assessment” is used to indicate that the hourly rate for teaching includes an hour of assessment, but there is no definition of “reasonably contemporaneous assessment”. For some casuals, their employer recognises that this would include an assessment of student seminars but not of marking written assignments (and they would be paid extra for it). Others are expected to mark all the essays and creative work their students submit as requirements of the course for no extra pay.

Some casuals mark all their students’ work without any guidance or advice on the standards expected and the application of marks and grades; sometimes without any sessions for consultation or moderation where they might compare their marking with that done by others teaching in the same course. Who has the time? And who wants to pay casuals for these consultations?

“It took me five long days to mark the assignments,” said a recently appointed casual, shocked to discover what is expected of her. “I couldn’t believe I wasn’t going to get paid anything for that. Everyone just laughed at me.”

Occasionally casuals are paid extra for marking. “I get one paid hour per student,” says a long-time casual who had negotiated hard for this. “I was offered a job at another university but they weren’t going to pay extra for marking – there were 70 undergraduates each handing in 3,000 words and 20 masters’ students handing in 25,000 words!”

As for plagiarism, widely acknowledged as a growing problem: “I don’t bother checking on it anymore. It takes too much time and you never hear the result if you report it.” Similarly, you soon find out that where students are fee-paying customers, giving someone a fail mark makes too much trouble for the university, for your overworked colleagues and for you.

I’m also told about casual tutoring work where the tutors are obliged to attend the lectures given by the course convenor or go to meetings unpaid.

“At one university I was paid under \$100 a time [basic rate rather than specially prepared or guest lecturer rate] to give a weekly lecture that would take three days’ preparation. ‘That’s all they could offer,’ they said.”

Apart from preparation and marking, casuals also do a lot of extra unpaid work talking to students. “As tutors in our subject we, the sessionals, are the interface between the students and the university. We’re the ones who teach the courses, mark the assignments, and talk to them about their problems. They come to us.”

I heard a lot of comments about students not understanding the constraints their lecturers and tutors worked under. They generally have no idea that their teachers are not paid full-time salaries and don’t understand why they can’t find them,

why they don't have offices. Students need advice, they need to talk about their ideas and they seek out the people who teach them.

"I sit in the cafe at a set time per week so students can talk to me. No, of course I don't get paid for consultation hours."

"Sometimes I spend ten hours a week on student emails," another told me.

"Email has changed the horizon for casuals," says another. "You're never out of contact with your students. Again, the university gets away cheaply."

"Don't do unpaid work. Talk to your students in the class break," one convenor advised the casuals teaching his course. "Tell them to walk over to get a coffee with you. Tell them not to send emails but to bring things up in class."

Nice try.

As a casual, you are not only not employed full-time, but you are only employed for half the weeks of the year. Explaining this to Centrelink is a challenge. While many casuals have the support of spouses and, especially in the case of young postgrad students or recent graduates, of parents, many are also self-supporting adults, some parents themselves. "And it's been cut down, semesters are shorter," says a long-time casual. "We used to get a contract for fifteen weeks, then fourteen, now thirteen." No matter how many semesters, how many years, you have worked, you never get a paid holiday, a paid sick day. Casual rates are meant to cover this; of course they don't. If your normal teaching day is a public holiday, if the department decides that it is a staff development day (casuals not invited), your class is cancelled and you don't get paid. You don't get paid in the week of mid-semester break and you don't get paid in the several weeks between semesters.

It's not as if you can find some other paying work to supplement your income. Your teaching hours are scattered all over the week; if your two- or three-hour seminar is in the middle of Tuesday that takes up Tuesday.

At the end of second semester, Centrelink offices must be crowded with all the casual academics who turn up to sign on for the dole. Not only does this offer income support even lower than the casual work, you are subjected to the usual Jobsearch requirements, all the attendant absurdities and humiliations. You have to prove that you have applied for two jobs every week, anything; you are made to attend seminars on how to apply for a job and how to write a résumé. You might have done one of these every year. But until the next semester starts, you have no pay, no guarantee of being offered work and no idea how many hours you might be given.

"I would like not to worry about how I will support myself during the semester breaks and wonder whether the next semester I will actually be offered more hours or go to a staff meeting just weeks before the new semester and find out that my hours have been cut in half and nobody told me because they don't have to."

Even casuals who enjoy good conditions (adequate guidance, appropriate rates, paid marking) invariably cite the problem of finding employment out of semester time. That's about half a year. If, that is, they are self-supporting adults. Spouses and parents help support many casual academics, as no doubt many casual workers in other industries. Other industries. This is how we speak of universities these days.

The National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) has a current membership of just over 27,000; its casual membership is just under 2000 – about 7 per cent. The percentage has stayed fairly steady since the union was formed in 1993 as an amalgamation of university and TAFE-based unions with 22,000 members.

Ask the union and they'll point to their handbook *Smart Casuals* and their occasional specific campaigns focusing on the recruitment of casuals. But, with such a small proportion of casuals as members, the union is not pressured to do more. As it is perceived not to do very much on casuals' behalf, casuals tend not to join. The union fee (\$77 a year) makes a significant dent in the hand-to-mouth budget many casuals work with. And as casuals generally spend little more than their assigned teaching hours at the workplace, they are less likely to hear about union campaigns, and so less likely to become involved in them. Another vicious circle.

There are no clear, reliable statistics for the number of casuals employed in Australian universities. Casuals are more widely employed in the newer disciplines, such as business, and less in the older disciplines, such as engineering. The numbers have risen since the NTEU negotiated a new award in 1996; to try to maximise permanent jobs, short-term contracts were replaced by casual work. Cost containment and even cost cutting while student numbers rise have meant that many departments increasingly offer casual work amid disputes about whether current limits should remain.

Casualisation in academia is controversial, says Gavin Moodie, principal policy adviser at Griffith University (GU). Policies and practice between universities differ, but there is a sense that the data is reported and analysed in a way that understates casualisation and lauds "more flexible" employment.

At crux is the way that casuals are counted. There is no count of how many academics are employed on a casual or sessional basis, nor is there a count of what proportion of university teaching and research is done by casuals. Instead, there are conversions made of how many casual hours add up to the equivalent of a full-time job. The Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee counts ten hours of lectures a week, or 25 hours of teaching or research, as equivalent to a full-time job.

"Universities do their counting according to a system of FTEs (full-time equivalents). Effective full-time staff equivalents might be seen as three or four or even five or six casual appointments," says Margaret Buckridge at GU's Centre for Learning Research.

Reform, rationalise, restructure, reconfigure: such words are heavily employed as universities consider their staffs' research and teaching loads, and it is widely thought that there will be less employment for casuals in several areas while overall the casualisation of universities will increase.

As I conclude this piece, casuals are still contacting me with tales of iniquity, more and more grievances. And grief, too, over what looks like a total destruction of any past idea of universities as places where the life of the mind, the spirit of inquiry and the value of student-teacher relationships were nurtured. With the insidious growth of the language that refers to all university endeavours as "elite, irrelevant" and other neo-con soubriquets, the idea of academics as workers barely exists, just as those who would once have been proud to call themselves working-class are now Howard's "battlers", being seduced by the idea of individualism in workplace agreements.

One can easily imagine the effect on student life of this grim picture. Anyone who has had a university education or been associated with universities in the past will barely recognise today's realities.

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