

Senate Estimate Committee on Job Security

The University of Newcastle – Opening Statement

I would like to acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land on which we all meet today, including the Pambalong clan of the Awabakal people here in Newcastle. I pay my respects to Elders past, present and emerging.

Thank you for the opportunity to address the Senate Inquiry on Job Security, and for visiting the Hunter Region today.

The University of Newcastle is a university of our regions. We have campuses in Newcastle, Gosford, Ourimbah and a significant presence across the Hunter and New England regions, coordinated from our Department of Rural Health in Tamworth.

Every year we teach more than 39,000 students primarily drawn from the Hunter, New England and Central Coast regions. These students reflect the makeup of our regions:

- More than half are first in family to attend university
- Nearly one quarter are from low SES backgrounds
- About 4.3% are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander students – the largest cohort in the country

Our aim is to deliver an exceptional student experience, and to serve our regions by taking research that matters to the world and bringing our global expertise home. Both in our teaching and in our research we are highly engaged with industry. We employ staff from across a broad range of professions to teach into our programs, and work with industry to solve problems in real world settings.

Here in the Hunter we are one of the largest employers. The University currently has more than 6,000 staff, of which 1,663 are permanent staff, 1,476 are on fixed term contracts, and 3,201 are casual staff.

Staff at universities are grouped into professional, academic and teaching staff. Professional staff are broadly those that work on the operational side of the university – including those who work in finance, information technology, strategy, human resources, infrastructure and planning, analysis, risk management, libraries, hospitality, student support and student accommodation services.

Academic staff are those who teach students and those who conduct research – in most cases, academic staff do both.

Teaching staff constitute a small but important cohort supporting our English language programs, pathways programs and community music programs.

The University has two separate Enterprise Agreements for these categories of our staff. One covers professional staff up to a level known as a Higher Education Worker (or HEW) 10. The other

agreement covers academic and teaching staff. Both agreements are currently under renegotiation, between the University and representative unions, as part of our Enterprise Bargaining process. Some staff (i.e., senior managers and executives) are employed under individual contracts.

It is the University's policy to ensure our people have the most appropriate employment settings for the type of work they do, while enabling the institution to move quickly when needed, in response to changes in policy settings, changes in the way we teach, and changes in what we teach and research.

I understand the Committee is particularly interested in numbers and conditions of our casual staff over time, and I will talk in some detail about this.

Firstly, I would like to address a letter tabled by the Committee.

This letter was sent to all casual staff members in late September to fulfil our obligations under the Fair Work Act, to advise staff members their work had been assessed in accordance with the casual conversion provisions of the Act.

Due to the nature of engagement of our casual staff, very few – just six – met the criteria under the Act. These numbers reflect the legislative criteria, rather than the enormous contribution our casual staff make to our workforce and operations.

Further, the email did not convey the value we place upon our casual staff members, or their important role in our community.

We recognise in this instance that we got it wrong. The Vice-Chancellor apologised both in an all-staff forum, and in a follow up email to all casual staff members outlining their value to our institution and community.

In terms of the application of the new provisions under the Fair Work Act, we will be required to make these assessments regularly, and we will continue to work closely with our casual and sessional staff to assess individual staff circumstances and keep our people informed.

Put simply, without casual staff members we would not be able to meet our goals and obligations to our students and our communities.

We value our casual and non-ongoing staff very highly, as members of our university community. They enable us to be a responsive institution that meets the needs of our students.

We employ casual and contract staff across both the professional and academic streams of the University.

In 2021, (year to date as at 3 December) 1,617 of our casual staff were professional staff, and 1,838 were academic staff.

Two large categories of casual staff are students, and people whose primary employment is outside the University. Our students, including PhD students, work in a range of areas to supplement their

income or gain relevant experience in their area. They work in areas including the library, as musicians, or as tutors, but in reality are in diverse positions across our institution.

Other casual employees engage with our university either in teaching or research but have primary employment elsewhere. A large number are health professionals – specialist doctors, nurses and midwives most commonly – who teach our students clinical skills. Another large group are teachers who support education students. Others represented include industry experts who lecture or take tutorials on a casual basis, for example in law or engineering.

This kind of exposure to industry experts enables us to deliver job-relevant courses with real world connections. It gives students exposure to some of the professions they may work in in the future. And in health, it provides essential, high-quality clinical training, a feature of all our health courses.

It is very important that our staff are employed with the most appropriate arrangements. We have spent a considerable amount of time recently trying to better understand our casual staff members, including their patterns of working and the type of work they do.

The figures we have indicate the large majority of casual staff are in the appropriate category.

The majority, around 80%, of casual staff were paid less than \$10,000 in the last financial year.

Of our casual staff in the professional stream, 80% worked total hours equivalent to less than one day per week, and 95% less than 2 days per week during 2021.

Approximately 40% of our casual staff have other primary employment outside the university.

We see a strong role for casual staff members as part of our University community. We are committed to having a work environment characterised by positive relationships and communication, and strive to support a safe and healthy workforce for the benefit of our staff, students and region.