

Submission: Quality of governance at Australian higher education providers

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To the esteemed committee, I write to you as a professional geologist working within the mining industry who maintains strong connections to the education sector from secondary to tertiary level.

I have noted that from since the beginning of my formal education until now, there has been systematic reductions in Earth Science education support at all levels of the Australian education system. Pertinently, the tertiary sector has seen marked decreases in Earth Science courses and units offered by universities with many in the past decade being closed such as University of Newcastle, Macquarie University, and the University of Wollongong most recently. This makes up the status quo that less than 50% of universities within Australia offering undergraduate degrees in Earth Sciences.

Such deterioration of Earth Science within our education sector leads to tangible consequences to our economy seen in the lack of Australian students assisting the nation's commitment to the UN Sustainable Development Goals. Geoscientists hold a critical role in ensuring the transition of our country from a non-renewable dominated economy to a renewable economy is a successful one. They are also quintessential within the resource industries to supply the raw materials required for this transition and with which our country sources much of its financial prowess. As a working geologist, I have already felt the pain from the lack of qualified geoscientists to carry out the necessary technical expertise that keeps our mine sites green, waste-efficient, and economic.

The most touted reason that so many Earth Science departments across Australian universities have been reduced or removed wholly is due to high operational costs of teaching and limited enrolments however this is a myopic view. Data from the Federal Department of Education¹ shows:

- From 1996-2024², non-academic staff employment has increased by >70% when compared with academic staff (increases of 72% non-academic vs 42% academic).
- Non-academic staff outnumber academic staff across all Australian universities with 66, 577 non-academic staff (57%) compared with 50,033 academic staff (43%).

¹ Finance 2022: Financial Reports of Higher Education Providers, *Australian Government Department of Education*

² Data from: <https://www.education.gov.au/higher-education-statistics/staff-data>, accessed: 24/02/2024

- Across the G8 universities, over \$3.2 billion dollars³ was spent on non-academic staff per year.

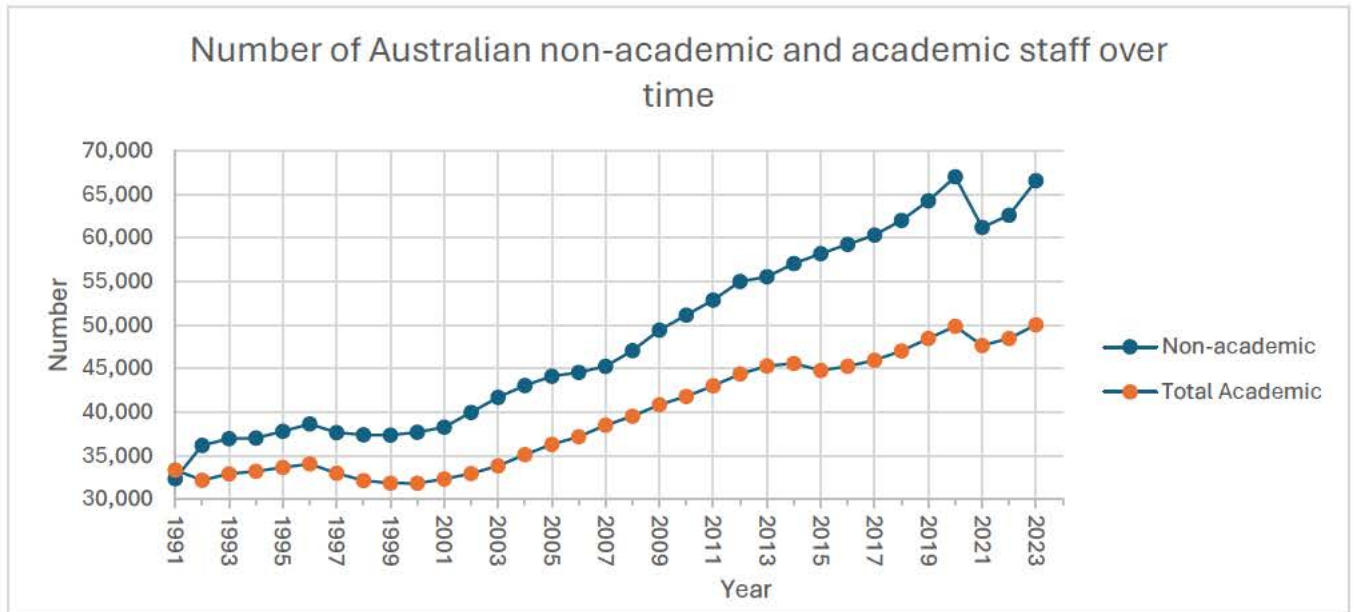


Figure 1: Line graph of the number of non-academic staff employed vs academic staff employed by Australian Universities. Data from the Department of Education (2024).

I posit that a much larger financial lever is taken by the growth of non-academic staff employed within Australian universities which has seen almost greater than double the growth rate compared to academic staff. With the \$3.2 billion dollar a year operating cost devoted to non-academic staff, how many Earth Science departments could have been saved and revitalised throughout the years before such a dearth in talent exists that now has a detrimental effect on the mining sector – a key sector that Australia relies on for its economic and sustainability goals.

Following the adoption of the demand-driven model for tertiary institutions within Australia after 2007, there has been a strong growth in non-academic staff that has been rationalised as necessary but that likely comes at the cost of maintaining the academic quality and teaching innovation developments befitting of Australia's strong position in Education amongst OECD nations and clear attraction for international students to pursue degrees within the country.

I ask the committee to consider how the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency has allowed this growth in non-academic staff to proliferate to the current degree despite the well-known financial decline present within Australian Universities since 2014⁴ and a high potential for brain drought identified by waning domestic STEM

³ Summation of salaries for non-academic staff within 2023 financial reports for University of Melbourne, Monash University, Australian National University, University of New South Wales, University of Sydney, University of Queensland, University of Western Australia, University of Adelaide.

⁴ Critical Challenges in Australia's University sector 2024: securing a sustainable future, *Universities Australia*

enrolments (11% drop between 2021-2023 alone)⁵. As of 2025, Australian universities continue to drop in rankings such as the Times Higher Education World University Rankings which show 7 of the 8 G8 universities dropping in rankings compared to previous years.

If a fundamental change to the financial organisation of tertiary institutions does not occur and the growth of non-academics continues to accelerate, our academic institutions will continue to suffer which will have devastating effects for industries reliant on educated, technical professionals such as mining, engineering, green chemistry and manufacturing.

We owe it to our future to have a nation empowered by educated individuals committed to the economic and sustainable development of the country and such a future is currently at risk given the worrying trends in the governance of our universities.

Warm regards,

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⁵ Federal Tertiary Collection of Student Information