# UNEVEN DEVELOPMENT: THE DISJOINTED GROWTH OF UNIVERSITY STAFFING SINCE DAWKINS

**Ian R Dobson**

*The Australian university sector has grown rapidly over the past two decades but the acceleration in numbers of students has far exceeded that of staff. Moreover numbers of staff in administration and support roles have grown more sharply that those of teaching staff. The key reason for the disproportionate growth in administrators is the way in which federal governments of both persuasions have introduced polices that require more and detailed accountability from universities.*

## INTRODUCTION

The past two decades have seen unprecedented growth in Australian higher education. Universities now have many more students and, understandably, they have also appointed many more staff. During this period, universities changed from being elitist institutions through the process described by Trow as 'massification'.[1] In fact, the overall number of individual students enrolled at Australian universities has increased from about 441,000 in 1989[2] to over one million enrolled at 38 universities and myriad private institutions in 2007.[3] Expressed in full-time equivalent terms, in order to control for those students enrolled part-time, and to match staff numbers which are also expressed as full-time equivalents, there has been a growth in the student body of just over 100 per cent.[4] About 26 per cent of the expanded student population by 2007 were overseas students.

Given the doubling of the number of students to be taught, one might have expected a similar increase in the number of teachers. However, this is not the case. As shown in Table 1, teaching staff numbers increased by about one-third overall, but over half of that growth was in casual staff. Teachers with continuing or longer time-limited contracts increased by only 19 per cent. This casualisation of the academic labour force is a story in itself and has been dealt with elsewhere.[5]

Table 1 shows that there were 65,660 full-time equivalent (FTE) academic and support staff in 1989 and 97,885 in 2007, an increase of over 32,200 or 49.1 per cent. These numbers include casual staff which, by 2007, represented 22.2 per cent of teaching staff and 14.8 per cent of staff over all.

In 2007, these staff were divided between the academic activities of teaching (34.2 per cent) and research (9.7 per cent), and administrative and other activities (56.0 per cent). This represents a considerable redistribution since 1989 between teaching and research (38.2 per cent and 3.2 per cent respectively), with administrative and other activities at 58.6 per cent. As shown in the Table 1, the number of teachers grew by a relatively modest 8,435 or 33.7 per cent and, given the growth in student numbers, the student to teacher ratio increased from 14 to 21 students per teacher. The number of research-only academic staff increased more spectacularly, growing by 7,426, or 352.7 per cent. The number of staff involved in administration and support increased by 16,365, or 42.5 per cent. It should be noted that some of these support staff occupy positions classified as academic, such as vice-chancellors, their deputies and an ever-expanding number of pro-vice-chancellors who, in most instances, would previously have been academics engaged in academic work. These support academics

are employed under academic conditions, but their universities have reported that they have a 'non-academic' function. The number of these grew by 45.1 per cent, but their proportion of the total has remained relatively unchanged.

It is clear that total staff growth has not kept pace with the growth of the student body. Moreover, the staff most directly linked to students, that is, the teachers, have increased in number at only one-third the rate that student numbers have increased. Much of the growth that there has been is in the number of casual teachers. This outcome also has an impact on staff who are on continuing appointments as they will usually be responsible for the supervision of casual staff.[6] Although the number of research academics has increased spectacularly in proportionate terms, these staff make up less than 10 per cent of all staff.

Of course, universities do not live by teachers and researchers alone; considerable numbers of staff are required to provide direct support to teachers and researchers and to provide central administrative support. Table 1 shows that the biggest increase in university staffing has been in staff involved in administrative and other support. In effect, 16,365 new FTE positions have been created, an increase of 42.5 per cent. This represents a considerable increase in university staff, but it is rather less spectacular than the increase in the number of students.

A more detailed explanation of the staff statistics used in this paper can be found in the references.[7]

The principal focus of this paper is the distribution of the staff described in Table 1 as 'administrative and support staff', because this group has expanded more rapidly

**Table 1: University students (FTE) and staff by staff type (FTE), 1989, 1998 and 2007**

|  | 1989 | 1998 | 2007 | Growth | Per cent |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Students FTE[1] | 350,000 | 524,000 | 702,000 | 352,000 | 100.6 |
| Academic teaching staff |  |  |  |  |  |
| Continuing and time-limited | 21,898 | 24,036 | 26,056 | 4,158 | 19.0 |
| Casual | 3,162 | 5,544 | 7,440 | 4,278 | 135.3 |
| Sub-total[2] | 25,060 | 29,580 | 33,496 | 8,435 | 33.7 |
| Per cent casual | 12.6 | 18.7 | 22.2 | — | — |
| Teaching per cent of total | 38.2 | 36.9 | 34.2 | — | — |
| Academic research-only staff |  |  |  |  |  |
| Sub-total[2] | 2,105 | 4,971 | 9,531 | 7,426 | 352.7 |
| Research per cent of total | 3.2 | 6.2 | 9.7 |  |  |
| Administration and support staff |  |  |  |  |  |
| Academic staff | 1,285 | 1,625 | 1,864 | 579 | 45.1 |
| General staff | 37,209 | 43,922 | 52,994 | 15,785 | 42.4 |
| Sub-total[2] | 38,494 | 45,547 | 54,859 | 16,365 | 42.5 |
| Administration and support per cent of total | 58.6 | 56.9 | 56.0 |  |  |
| Total | 65,660 | 80,098 | 97,885 | 32,226 | 49.1 |

Source: DEEWR aggregated datasets STAG and ULAG, various years
Notes: [1] Excludes approximately 25,000 FTE students enrolled at institutions for which staff numbers are not reported
[2] Includes staff employed on continuing, time-limited and casual contracts.

than the number of teaching staff. Table 2 shows the distribution of these support staff according to the type of department they work in. In statistical returns to the government, universities link staff to one of several types of department. In 2007, 42.9 per cent of support staff were in academic departments, 18.5 per cent were in 'academic support' areas (including 7.5 per cent in libraries), about 7.4 per cent were involved in student services or public services, and 31.2 per cent were in 'general university services' which is another name for 'central administration'. 'Student services' includes health services, counselling and accommodation services and student residences, employment services, student loans/scholarships/assistance services and other student services and 'public services' refer to adult education, continuing education, public broadcasting services and other public services. Student services and public services represented 6.0 per cent and 1.4 per cent respectively of total administrative and support staff in 2007. Table 2 also includes academic staff members who work neither as teachers nor as researchers, as shown in Table 1 (1,285, 1,625 and 1,864 FTE in 1989, 1998 and 2007, respectively).

Some academic staff are inclined to think that the growth in administrative support has occurred in central administration. In fact, the largest increases have occurred in the numbers of support staff in academic departments. Between 1989 and 2007, the equivalent of an additional 8,761 full-time administration and support jobs were created in academic departments, an increase of 59.2 per cent. By comparison, general university services' overall growth was 3,432 full-time jobs, or 25.1 per cent.

There has also been growth in the number of staff shown in Table 2 as 'academic support services' staff, but it is interesting to note that this growth has not occurred in the university sector's libraries. In 2007, there were 23 fewer FTE staff in libraries than in 1989. The proportion of all staff made up by library staff declined from 10.7 per cent to 7.5 per cent over that period. Perhaps new information and communication technologies (ICT) have improved library efficiency over the years, although it often seems that new ICT leads to the need for additional rather than fewer staff. Whatever the reason, few universities are likely to advertise the fact of steady-state staffing in their libraries at a time when the number of FTE students has increased by 352,000 and the number of staff by over 32,000 FTE. There has been growth in non-library academic support departments. Included here are computing centres, educational research and development centres, external studies centres (excluding academic functions), and audio-visual and media. Staff in student services and public services departments are also shown in Table 2.

General university services grew by 3,432 or 25.1 per cent over the period, with a particular advance by administrative and overhead services (4,391 or 50.7 per cent). Few would argue that this is not a lot of extra staff to have at HQ. It must be noted that these official figures for the growth in number of general university services staff mask a much greater growth in numbers of general university services staff. Table 2 shows that there were 14 fewer buildings, property and grounds staff, 1,030 fewer cleaning staff and 319 fewer security staff in 2007 compared with 1989. It is not likely that there has really been a decline in the number of people involved in these facilities-related areas. Rather, these were among the first areas to be out-sourced. For example, most universities ceased hiring their own cleaning and security staff some years ago, but instead now hire them from companies that supply such services. Therefore, the apparent decline in the number of staff providing these services is misleading.

In the modern university, therefore,

many facilities-related services are provided by outside companies and paid for via a monthly invoice, rather than being provided by university staff members paid through the university payroll. Notwithstanding the debate about the relative cost efficiency of using inhouse vis-à-vis purchased services,[8] it is extremely unlikely that there would have been fewer staff in cleaning and security had there not been a fundamental change in the way universities acquired these services. It is likely that, with a doubling of the number of students and an increase of over 49 per cent in the number of staff, on top of an indeterminate increase in the number of campuses, more cleaning, security and other facilities staff would have been required, not fewer. Table 2 indicates that there were 156 cleaners and 294 security personnel in 2007. If the requirement for cleaning and security had matched the additional 'administration and overhead services staff' (that is, an increase of over

50 per cent since 1989), the combined total number of cleaning and security staff would have been around 2,700 in 2007. Under this scenario, the overall increase in general universities services staff would have been around 41 per cent, not the 25.1 per cent shown in Table 2.

## WHY THE GROWTH OF STAFF INVOLVED IN SUPPORT?

The number of staff involved in work other than academic work is large and growing. Why has this occurred? Why has the growth rate in numbers of administrative and other support staff been so much greater than the growth rate in the staff required to teach all the extra students now enrolled in university (and equivalent) courses? Even if the link between the number of students and support staff is somewhat indirect, a burgeoning student body increases the need for support staff as well as teachers. However, teaching staff numbers increased by only 33.7 per

**Table 2: University administrative and support staff by type of department, various years, 1989 to 2007**

| | 1989 | | 1998 | | 2007 | | Growth | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| | No. | per cent | No. | per cent | No. | per cent | No. | per cent |
| Academic departments | 14,790 | 38.4 | 18,839 | 41.4 | 23,551 | 42.9 | 8,761 | 59.2 |
| Academic support services | | | | | | | | |
|   Libraries | 4,116 | 10.7 | 4,324 | 9.5 | 4,092 | 7.5 | -23 | -0.6 |
|   Other support services | 3,716 | 9.7 | 4,719 | 10.4 | 6,034 | 11.0 | 2,318 | 62.4 |
| Sub-total | 7,832 | 20.3 | 9,043 | 19.9 | 10,126 | 18.5 | 2,294 | 29.3 |
| Student services | 1,493 | 3.9 | 2,092 | 4.6 | 3,301 | 6.0 | 1,809 | 121.2 |
| Public services | 704 | 1.8 | 859 | 1.9 | 773 | 1.4 | 68 | 9.7 |
| General university services (GUS) | | | | | | | | |
| Administration and | | | | | | | | |
|   overheads | 8,655 | 22.5 | 10,138 | 22.3 | 13,046 | 23.8 | 4,391 | 50.7 |
| Buildings, property and | | | | | | | | |
|   grounds | 2,575 | 6.7 | 2,885 | 6.3 | 2,561 | 4.7 | -14 | -0.5 |
|   Cleaning | 1,186 | 3.1 | 437 | 1.0 | 156 | 0.3 | -1,030 | -86.8 |
|   Security | 613 | 1.6 | 494 | 1.1 | 294 | 0.5 | -319 | -52.0 |
|   Other GUS | 647 | 1.7 | 761 | 1.7 | 1,050 | 1.9 | 403 | 62.4 |
| Sub-total | 13,675 | 35.5 | 14,714 | 32.3 | 17,108 | 31.2 | 3,432 | 25.1 |
| Total | 38,494 | 100.0 | 45,547 | 100.0 | 54,859 | 100.0 | 16,365 | 42.5 |

Source: DEEWR, aggregated datasets STAG, various years

cent, and staff with continuing or time-limited contracts by only 19.0 per cent, and over half of the growth in teacher numbers was generated by casual staff. Is it reasonable, therefore, for the number of support staff to have increased by 42.5 per cent?

Several reasons for the disproportionate growth of administrative and support staff can be identified, and many of them relate directly to government policies, particularly those of federal governments over the past twenty years.

First, government policies require universities to compete with each other for funds through a range of research and other schemes, and for prestige, in order to attract an increasing flow of students, particularly those paying full-cost fees. The same policies then require universities to account for those funds. On the surface, there is nothing wrong with providing evidence that funds have been applied appropriately, but the pattern has been that funding is provided in smaller and smaller parcels, each with its own set of accountability requirements.

This increased control of universities by governments has been described as 'steering at a distance'.[9] According to Marginson:

> The Australian [higher education] system provides an example of a quasi-market in which the development of a stronger institutional management, the introduction of government-institution negotiations over educational profiles, and the new systems of competitive bidding, performance management and quality assessment have all been used to steer academic work and to install a process of continuous self-transformation along modern neo-liberal lines. Following a change of government in 1996 there has been some movement from a quasi-market to a more fully developed economic market, but no relaxation of government control.[10]

Therefore, universities find themselves in a situation that requires more rather than less reporting, even though the proportion of funding from government sources has dropped from over 80 per cent towards the end of the 1980s to about 40 per cent by 2007.[11]

Quality and research policies have led to increased numbers of support staff and, in the case of research, to an increase of nearly 7,500 research academics (see Table 1). Quality assurance procedures instituted from the early 1990s have seen universities becoming conscious of what they do, how well they do it and how they can improve what they do. Therefore, universities needed to create new administrative departments to collect, assess and report in fine detail on their activities. All types of staff, including academics, have been involved in these departments. As a result, the numbers of support staff have had to be increased.

Research policies have had the effect of requiring all universities to become research universities. This has had a two-fold effect on staffing. On the one hand, many more academic staff now spend time applying for government-sourced grants from agencies such as the Australian Research Council. Largely as a consequence, there has been a spectacular increase in the number of research-only academic staff. In 2007, research-only academics made up 9.7 per cent of total university staffing, up from 3.2 per cent in 1989. On the other hand, most universities have also increased the number of support staff built into the research process. Centralised 'research services' departments have increased their numbers, and most academic departments and faculties now have a range of research-support, business and commercial officers seeking to foster research.

Related to this is another factor that can be included under what Jeff Goldsworthy described as 'research grant mania'. He notes that universities have a manic obsession with maximising external funding, especially via competitive grants schemes.

His complaint is that many scholars, particularly those in the humanities, do not need grants to conduct their research, but are pressured into applying for them because research income is used as one of the measures for evaluating research performance.[12]

There are several examples of government initiatives that are likely to have increased universities' bureaucratic workloads, necessitating the hiring of more support staff. It is much less easy to defend these demands than it is for policies related to quality and research. The year 1989 has been taken as the starting point for the analysis here. This year represents the start of the so-called Dawkins revolution and it was also the year that tuition fees for domestic students were reintroduced, initially called HECS—the Higher Education Contribution Scheme. Although universities were compensated for their role in collecting money on behalf of the federal government, it meant university fees offices had to be expanded. The need for such offices had been all but redundant since the abolition of fees for domestic students from 1974.

Another example is the imposition of compliance costs on universities, including projects such as ex-education minister Brendan Nelson's 'student learning entitlement' (SLE) reporting, one of the changes introduced via the government's Backing Australia's Future inquiry. Phillips KPA estimated that the cumulative cost to universities of responding to the government's whims under Backing Australia's Future would be $110 to $115 million between 2004 and 2007.[13] The SLE system requires universities to report extremely detailed information about students and the time they spend at university. The theory behind the introduction of this system was that the university system was riddled with perpetual students. In fact, there was no evidence for this; most students try to get out of the system as quickly as possible, because their fee liability increases whether they pass or not.[14]

A further administrative burden derives from the uncoordinated accountability requirements of federal and state governments. Most Australian universities were established under state legislation, which requires them to report periodically to state parliaments. This requirement is not inappropriate per se, but the states have not synchronised their requirements with each other, nor with the reporting requirements of the federal government. Therefore most universities find themselves reporting similar (but different) information to two levels of government. No thought of efficiency by governments here, just accountability!

There are other areas in which universities have expanded their numbers of support staff. One of these is in the public relations and marketing area. Having adopted the language of business, there is much talk about 'branding'. Expert support staff have been hired by most universities to provide these services. Many universities have devised slogans in recent years, some sillier than others, by which they seek identification.[15] Examples include Monash's *Go Boldly* and Melbourne's *Dream Large*. Universities have had to expand their central bureaucracies in order to promote and market themselves in this way. In some instances, academic faculties and departments have also hired such staff. Unfortunately, published university staff statistics are not sufficiently detailed to allow an assessment of the numbers of staff in university public relations offices.

Another area that has led to an increase in support staff numbers has arisen because of the explosion in overseas student numbers. Universities increased their overseas student enrolment because this was usually the simplest way to replace their dwindling government funds. Overseas full fee-paying students contributed 1.5 per cent of overall university funding in 1989.[16] By 2007, the

proportion had increased to 15 per cent.[17] Although the most obvious need to deal with overseas students is for more teachers, in a highly competitive environment many support staff have been appointed in order to attract students and to deal with the many issues overseas students might have with respect to housing, finances and well-being in general. Overseas students (quite rightly) deserve to receive some of the pastoral and other care that most domestic students receive from their immediate onsite families or from their Australian universities.

Perhaps one of the more surprising things revealed by university staff statistics is the extent of the growth of the support function in academic departments. Table 2 showed that departmental support increased by 59.2 per cent between 1989 and 2007. This was rather more than the growth of central administration, whether or not one adjusts for the out-sourced cleaning and security. Does this mean that support staff are now undertaking duties formally required of academic staff? Are academic staff better-served by having departmental support staff to provide them with more time to spend on research or seeing students? The likely answer to questions such as these is 'no'. Academic departments probably have more staff now than in the past in order for them to be accountable to central administration, which in turn must be accountable to government bodies.

A knock-on effect of the requirement for universities to report to government bodies is that those government bodies also end up requiring more staff to deal with all the reports now required from universities. And so on!

## CONCLUSION

The aim of this paper was to outline changes in university staffing since the start of the higher education reforms introduced by then-education minister Dawkins, from 1989. Universities still teach students and undertake research, but under much greater pressure than in the past. As in the past, these academic activities still require staff to support them. However, as was shown in Table 1, the academic staff component for teaching has grown much less than for academic research, and it has grown less than the numbers of staff to support both these academic staff activities.

It is hardly fair to blame the administrative and other support staff themselves for the situation described, but such blame is directed at support staff from time to time. With few exceptions, former academics run our universities, and support staff merely react to their whims.

The major villain in this disjointed growth in staffing is federal governments of both political persuasions. Through a mixture of poor and misguided policy, these governments have divided funding into smaller and smaller portions, and have demanded that universities expend more and more time and resources in accounting for the use of these funds.

## References

1. M. Trow. 'From mass higher education to universal access: the American advantage', Research and Occasional Paper Series, CSHE 1.00 Berkeley, Center for Studies in Higher Education, 2000. Trow's theoretical perspective was that massification has occurred in a higher education system once participation was seen as a right among many classes of society, not just the elite. Higher education starts to become universal once access is possible for 50 per cent or more of the appropriate age cohorts of the population.

2. Department of Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (DETYA), *Higher Education Student Statistics Time Series Tables 2000*, Canberra, Australian Government Publishing Service (AGPS), 2001, Table 1

3     Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR), Staff Statistics 2007, 2008 Table 25 at <www.dest.gov.au/sectors/higher_education/publications_resources/statistics/publications_higher_education_statistics_collections.htm#staffpubs> accessed 25 February 2009

4     Excludes FTE students enrolled at institutions for which staff numbers are not reported. For reasons best known to the DEEWR, numbers of students (both enrolments and full-time equivalents) are reported for all registered higher education providers (including private providers), but numbers of staff for these private institutions are not reported. In order to compensate for this situation, the student figures shown in Table 2 exclude those for private providers, with the exception of private universities Bond University and Notre Dame Australia and the Melbourne College of Divinity, which do report their staff numbers. In order to match the student numerator with the staff denominator in 2007, the former needs to be reduced by something like 24,000 FTE in institutions.

5     See for example A. Junor, 'Casual university work: choice, risk, inequity and the case for regulation', *The Economics and Labour Relations Review*, vol. 14, no. 2, 2004, pp. 276–304; A. Percy, M Scoufis, S.Parry, A. Goody, M. Hicks, I. Macdonald, K. Martinez, N. Szorenyi-Reischl, Y. Ryan, S. Wills and L. Sheridan, *The RED report: recognition • enhancement • development: the contribution of sessional teachers to higher education*, Australia Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC), Canberra, 2008; A. Lazarsfeld Jensen and K. Morgan, *Overload: the role of work-volume escalation and micro-management of academic work patterns in loss of morale and collegiality at UWS: The way forward*, South Melbourne, National Tertiary Education Union, 2009; and H. Coates, I.R. Dobson, L. Goedegebuure and L. Meek, 'Australia's casual approach to its academic teaching workforce', *People and Place*, vol. 17, no.4, 2009, pp. 27–54.

6     Lazarsfeld-Jensen and Morgan, 2009, op. cit.

7     The staff numbers shown in this paper include all types of university staff, except for those employed by dual-sector institutions to work in TAFE/VET (Technical and Further Education/Vocational Education and Training) divisions and CRCs (Cooperative Research Centres). In 2007, there were about 1300 and 337 of these staff, respectively. The reason for their exclusion is that not all universities have these staff types. University staff are formally described in at least two ways in the statistical reporting required by the government. First, they can be described according to what their 'duties' are. About 45 per cent of staff are 'academic' (described as professors, lecturers, research fellows, etc.) The remaining staff are support staff of various types, employed as managers, administrators, laboratory technicians, etc. Second, staff can be described according to their 'function'. These functions are 'teaching-only', 'teaching-and-research', 'research-only' and 'other'. The first two of these functions are the exclusive domain of 'academic' staff. However, 'academic' staff can be employed to undertake all four functions.

8     A. McCue, 'Gartner: outsourcing costs more than in-house', CNET News.com, 2005 <news.cnet.com/Gartner-Outsourcing-costs-more-than-in-house/2100-1022_3-5600485.html> accessed 17 December 2009

9     See for example S. Marginson 'Steering from a distance: Power relations in Australian higher education', *Higher Education*, vol. 34, no. 1, July 1997, pp. 63–80.

10    ibid., p. 63

11    DEEWR, Finance Statistics 2007, Table 1: Adjusted Statement of Financial Performance, 2007 ($'000), 2008

12    J. Goldsworthy, 'Research grant mania', *Australian Universities' Review*, vol. 50, no. 2, 2008, pp. 17–24

13    Phillips KPA, Australian Vice-Chancellors' Committee, *University Reporting Requirements: Final Report (revised)*, Byron Bay, NSW, Australia, May 2006, p. 35.

14    ibid.

15    See for example, J. Gora, 'Run that funky slogan by me', *Australian Universities' Review*, vol. 53, no. 1, 2010.

16    Department of Education Employment and Training, *Selected Higher Education Statistics: Higher Education Institution Income 1989, 1990*, Table 36

17    DEEWR, *Finance Statistics 2007, 2008*, Table 1: Adjusted Statement of Financial Performance, 2007 ($'000)