

Communique

01

Academics for Public Universities

PROPOSALS FOR THE CONTINUED ACADEMIC EMPLOYMENT OF 'REDUNDANT' ACADEMICS

Featuring:

- 1 The **three** aims of this communique
- 2 Universities **cannot maintain quality and range of teaching** with a permanent reduction of teaching staff on this scale.
- 3 Pushing unemployed academics into the Centrelink system means the end of their careers and a **threat to the future of our universities**.
- 4 A Permanent Private University: Failure by government and university management to implement needed changes could force **academics to re-organise themselves outside of that system**.
- 5 Long-term neglect and poor management, not Covid, have caused current problems, and failure to address this would **lead to the collapse of our university system**.

Summary

As a result of long-standing problems in the sector that have been exacerbated, but not caused by Covid, our universities are now losing:

- i an estimated 21,000 full-time teaching staff
- ii 10,000 support staff, and
- iii probably most of the 100,000 sessional lecturers.

Under these circumstances, they will be unable to maintain the standards and range of teaching of undergraduate degrees that they did pre-Covid.

This will have an incalculable impact on tertiary education in Australia for domestic students, as well as constituting an unacceptable end to those academics' professional careers. They will not find other suitable employment.

This communique argues that redundant academics should be kept out of the Centrelink system for the unemployed, and suggests that they could be re-employed in transitional positions as lecturers, re-trained as high school teachers, and supported to provide more textbooks for Australian students and the general public.

If long-term funding and systemic management issues are not resolved, academics may be forced to leave the public universities and re-organise themselves in private universities that they control.

01

THREE AIMS

Current redundancies of academics will seriously reduce the capacity of our universities to maintain the quality and range of their teaching. The sector will not be sustainable under these conditions.

This communique has three objectives:

- i to suggest means by which the universities may be able to maintain to some degree the same level of teaching that they need to offer if degree programmes are to resemble pre-Covid courses, until such time as government and universities achieve permanent solutions to this problem;
- ii to ensure that no redundant academic who wishes to remain active professionally is forced into the Centrelink and job seeker system that will effectively deny them any academic future;
- iii to indicate that failure to resolve these problems may force academics to move outside of the residual university system and establish new universities for themselves.

02

**UNIVERSITIES CANNOT
MAINTAIN QUALITY AND
RANGE OF TEACHING
WITH A PERMANENT
REDUCTION OF
TEACHING STAFF
ON THIS SCALE.**

Granted that redundancies are still being decided and the full extent of these cuts will not be known until around mid-2021, projections of **20,000+ academic job losses and 10,000+ administrative and support staff cuts constitute roughly one-sixth or more of the entire national lecturing workforce.** Further redundancies and increased workloads can be expected if the Higher Education Support Amendment Bill is passed. **Additionally, there are an estimated 100,000 sessional academics whose future employment is also at risk.**

There is no indication that those losses will be compensated for in the foreseeable future. That would only be possible if government committed to permanently and substantially increasing funding of the sector, without relying upon foreign student revenue, and if the current non-academic budget expenditure of universities of 50-70% were to be strictly reduced to ca. 30%, **thereby allowing a higher percentage of their budgets to be allocated specifically to the employment of lecturing and research staff.**

These cuts will seriously affect universities' capacity to continue offering the same standard and range of degree programmes that they provided pre-Covid for domestic students. **Over the past 30 years, the academic standards and the range of our degree programmes have significantly declined,** judged by a series of criteria, both from what they were in the 1980s and in international comparison; that is true for all discipline areas, including Medicine, Law, and STEM subjects, and

from undergraduate to PhD levels. That decline is universal in this country. **These cuts will continue that decline.**

Without improved funding and more transparent and accountable regulation of its spending, **it will only be possible for universities to preserve any semblance of pre-Covid teaching by further increasing the workload of remaining academic staff,** beyond their pre-Covid workload of on average 20 hours/week un- or underpaid overtime beyond their contracted hours, which is not sustainable, and by increasing dependence upon underpaid and insecurely employed sessional lecturers beyond the pre-Covid estimate of 54-66% of the national academic workforce.

That may be possible, but it **constitutes a permanent exploitation of tens of thousands of academics,** and may also prove unsustainable; it would also mean re-negotiating with sessional and full-time lecturers who are now being made redundant.

Academics do not become 'redundant'.

Every university lecturer, regardless of the form of their employment (full-time, fixed-term contract, or sessional), has **invested on average 10 years of their lives in acquiring their qualifications**, as well as continuing to add to their knowledge and skills throughout their careers. That represents one of the highest investments of any professional cohort in this country in their education and training, and it is unconscionable that tens of thousands of these professionals – and their investment in their education - should now be treated as disposable by government and their employers.

Every academic career should be life-long, and every academic should be in full-time continuing employment. If this country requires universities to provide much of its higher education for all of its professional and other workers, then it continues to need a numerically sufficient and adequately trained and remunerated lecturing workforce. Academics are not and do not become 'redundant'.

If these academics now losing their jobs become permanently lost to the university sector, this country cannot immediately replace them if universities begin recruiting more lecturing staff. If they continue their usual recruitment procedures and application of metrics, universities will not re-recruit academics

once they have fallen outside the sector; that also applies to recent PhD graduates.

Due to earlier cuts, universities have already pushed several thousand academics out of the sector, who have not been replaced. There is also no mechanism by which our universities have ever systematically ensured that they are educating and mentoring and transitioning into permanent career paths sufficient younger Australian lecturers across all disciplines to be able to replace the natural attrition and maintain the same quality and content of degree programmes on a permanent basis. It would be normal for any university system to do that, and other OECD countries do, but Australia has not.

This country has no over-supply of academics, and we cannot educate and train tens of thousands of new lecturers within a few years.

Already pre-Covid, this system depended over close to three decades upon an incalculable scale of institutionalised exploitation and wage theft among both sessional and full-time academics. We have expected many thousands of qualified lecturers to be permanently 'on call' if and when universities need them, but we have never been willing to pay the price of having that available workforce by employing them properly and securely.

In order for this system to have allowed every academic to complete all of their tasks within their paid contracted hours:

- i to maintain the optimum 15:1 student-staff (full-time continuing only) ratio, regardless of teaching modes (face-to-face or online);
- ii to have facilitated ideal preparation of courses and individual mentoring and supervision of students, and to have preserved higher academic standards;
- iii. to have taught all degree programmes to international standards and standardised national curricula ensuring the same (core) content for the same degrees across all universities;
- iv. and to have maintained other normal activities such as research,

our universities would need to have employed several times the entire national lecturing staff complement they did employ pre-Covid, and for government to have adequately funded universities so that they could do that.

We did not do that then and we will not be able to do that in the foreseeable future.

These cuts will also substantially reduce national research activity, which will have knock-on effects in diverse other sectors of the economy. Current discussions around research tend to focus only on immediately economically relevant research, when in fact research in many other areas that does not feed directly into the economy but which remains nonetheless essential to it, is also done in universities.

The future of that research is also at stake.

03

**PUSHING UNEMPLOYED
ACADEMICS INTO THE
CENTRELINK SYSTEM
MEANS THE END OF
THEIR CAREERS AND A
THREAT TO THE FUTURE
OF OUR UNIVERSITIES.**

For various reasons, not all redundant academics will wish to continue to pursue an academic career should there be opportunities to do so. These proposals will therefore not be relevant to all, but should also include un- and under-employed academics not being made redundant at this time. Some of the following suggestions would also facilitate some employment for redundant administrative and support staff.

Unemployed academics cannot be subjected to prevailing Centrelink requirements, and it is urgent that measures be taken immediately to ensure that they are not so subject and that they are removed from them.

- i Centrelink and job seeker agencies are not equipped to provide profession-specific support to the unemployed;
- ii Government policy is not directed towards ensuring that all unemployed are enabled to obtain jobs relevant to their qualifications and experience;
- iii Issues such as age discrimination, which will affect some redundant academics, have not been addressed, so that some will probably become long-term unemployed; and
- iv There are not and will not be enough jobs in the national economy to absorb even a majority of these redundant academics in appropriate further employment.

Any professionally relevant activity they undertake should be recognised as legitimate and sufficient for the purposes of Centrelink or any other support scheme. Initially, this would envisage a range of temporary measures that would probably also entail a reduction in income. However, it is essential that any such proposal ensure transition into more permanent continuing academic employment within a reasonable time period, whether within or outside existing universities.

Redundant academics do not need to be retrained, and with one exception below, these proposals do not envisage any retraining or ‘up-skilling’ as a means of keeping them in paid employment.

Existing Centrelink Legislation is in need of emendation

Existing Centrelink legislation only recognises and may provide financial assistance for retraining or further tertiary study, and absolves individuals from job seeking activities or mutual obligations, where a course of study or training is at a level higher than that already attained.

That limitation affects all academics who have earned a PhD: none of these provisions will apply to any of them. If, therefore, redundant academics choose to undertake further tertiary studies as a means of retraining, they must be allowed to do so with financial assistance, as full-time enrolled students, and without being subject to other Centrelink requirements. [This legislation requires amendment for all unemployed Australians.](#)

The Role of the NTEU

[It would be necessary that any provisions necessary for the purposes of these proposals be embedded in redundancy agreements negotiated by the NTEU, or that those agreements not exclude these possibilities.](#)

That would include an agreement on redundancy pay-outs being treated by government and universities as remuneration for work done under these proposals.

It would be useful if the NTEU, and organisations for sessional lecturers, would collect data on those redundant academics wishing to continue in their careers, including personal and contact details and discipline areas. Information concerning other academics not included in those negotiations would need to be obtained from other sources, including, potentially, Centrelink. Those data should be available in a central database, subject to standard privacy conditions but accessible to relevant third parties.

Mental Health

Any redundancy agreement must acknowledge and provide for mental health consequences of this unemployment. Academics reportedly already have exceptionally high incidences of mental health problems.

They are also high achievers, who are particularly prone to PTSD complexes when their achievements are devalued and when they are prevented from continuing in their chosen careers. This has been recognised and publicised in the case of professional sportspeople, but not in other professions, including academics.

There need to be adequate and appropriate means of support for this contingency, and those currently available through Centrelink are emphatically not adequate. These issues must not be allowed to affect their further career opportunities. The risk of mental health problems will be significantly reduced by the concrete implementation of these proposals, thereby offering hope for the future.

Re-Training as High School Teachers

Many academics would be potentially suitable as high school teachers, particularly perhaps for Years 11-12. With appropriate financial support and Centrelink flexibility, a teaching diploma should be able to be acquired for that purpose.

The principal disincentive in this career path is that incoming teachers, regardless of previous experience or qualifications, are normally required to commence at entry level, which represents a substantial loss of income between a starting salary for teachers and the salary level that any academic would previously have been on. Consideration could therefore be given to recognising their previous experience and their knowledge in salary agreements for academics becoming high school teachers.

Para-University Colleges

To the extent that our university system will struggle to continue providing the same quality and range of teaching with the loss of these academics, consideration should be given to adequately funding on-going secured employment for them as sessional lecturers

and tutors with support throughout the year, not as under normal contracts only for the weeks taught.

Such a scheme could be funded directly under a government programme and independently of existing university funding, on the model of other types of funding that have previously been made available in redundancy packages (for example, for redundant auto and coal-fired power station workers) and for start-ups etc. All redundant academics in individual cities could be organised within a centre with necessary equipment and support to provide that teaching which universities will for the foreseeable future not be able to offer.

Organising all of these academics in single or multiple centres as a single new entity will entail administrative, financial, resource, and accreditation problems, but these should not be insurmountable if government and the universities acknowledge the necessity of such a proposal. This would be a temporary means of assisting universities to provide the necessary teaching that will be reduced by these redundancies, under a contractual arrangement with them but not necessarily within them. However, **failing longer-term improvements in academic employment opportunities and in sectorial funding, these groups could become self-standing institutions and businesses.**

A National Liberal Arts College System

There has already been some discussion around establishing undergraduate degrees as broad liberal arts-style general education qualifications, which would be full undergraduate degrees but which would also serve as preparations for specific professional qualifications and higher degrees, on the American model.

This concept has been experimented with both in 'the Melbourne model' and with some universities raising medical degrees, for example, to graduate status and requiring a Bachelor qualification as a pre-requisite. Neither of these models has been implemented with any consistency nationally, and the manner in which Bachelor degrees prior to medical studies have tended to be studied not as broad general education qualifications but rather as preparatory qualifications, for example, in pharmacology, has not achieved the purpose originally envisaged. A similar analogy is the traditional double Law degree.

The now redundant academic workforce we are seeing could be employed to teach Bachelor degrees on that original model nationally, and this could be used by government as an opportunity to establish a national programme of liberal arts education either in separate, designated institutions or within existing universities.

Conventional liberal arts degrees include a combination of both STEM and HASS subjects. Insofar as HASS disciplines are universally recognised as being essential to critical thinking and problem-solving skills desired by government and employers, there should be no inconsistency in such a suggestion with stated education aims. Insofar as these skills have not been adequately taught in our existing degree programmes to date, such liberal arts colleges could provide an opportunity for improving the teaching of those skills and providing a solid, essential knowledge foundation for them. They would also provide a broader general education for professionals than either our secondary education or their professional qualifications offer. There are other advantages to this proposal, such as the probability of reducing non-completion rates for other degrees. Were this proposal to be adopted, it would obviously become a permanent arrangement.

Regional University Centres

Academics in regional universities would face challenges different from those for redundant city-based academics. The numbers of redundant academics in the capital cities will conceivably be sufficient in numbers and diversity of discipline areas represented for them to be able constitute new teaching groups, **whereas that**

will be more difficult for regional-based academics, whose numbers will be smaller; their student demand and discipline range will also presumably be more limited.

There already exists a national network of regional learning hubs for tertiary students: Regional University Centres (community-owned centres initiated in 2018). Currently, those hubs do not offer formal teaching, but are limited to being video, computer, library and tutoring centres. However, regional-based academics who become redundant could be assisted to work at those hubs, to provide tutoring and some formal teaching, so that from being only resource and support centres, they could become academically staffed teaching centres as well.

Accreditation

Any teaching by academics outside of existing university structures would be confronted with the problem of accreditation of their teaching. Under this transitional proposal, they would not constitute a new, permanent university, but would be working in a temporary situation on the periphery of existing universities.

Granted that they have previously been employed by individual universities to teach within their degree programmes, their accreditation could be extended from their former employers, and universities should agree to accredit courses taught under

these conditions for degrees awarded by them, until such time as their longer-term future employment is determined.

The Writing of Textbooks

In international comparison, Australia does not publish a large number of textbooks for its own population. We are forced to pay inflated and unnecessary prices for many textbooks imported from overseas, and we have supply problems obtaining many books necessary for teaching and research.

Textbooks and other materials used for teaching in any country are normally written by working academics, but in Australia, academics have been discouraged from producing textbooks on the false assumption that doing so does not constitute or involve original research, and because university administrations and research funding bodies have prioritised what is narrowly deemed to be original research only. Evidently, there has been no perception that it would benefit our population were our academics to be supported in providing more textbooks and books for an educated public, including contributing to the alleged aim of lifelong, continuing learning by this means.

The writing of textbooks would not permanently occupy substantial numbers of redundant academics, but:

- i It should be possible to provide sufficient financial support to those who could write them
- ii To recognise this as a legitimate and sufficient activity for Centrelink
- iii To make universities' research resources available to these academics, and
- iv To negotiate contracts with publishers.

If this proposal were to be adopted, it would also hopefully form the basis for more permanent arrangements – but not as a permanent form of academic employment as an alternative to teaching and research in a university.

It is normal practice in other OECD countries for governments to subsidise these publications, and government in Australia would therefore need to consider how it would do likewise. One purpose of locally producing such textbooks is that they should be cheap, and not subject to the expenses and inflation incurred in importing such materials.

04

A PERMANENT PRIVATE UNIVERSITY: FAILURE BY GOVERNMENT AND UNIVERSITY MANAGEMENT TO IMPLEMENT NEEDED CHANGES COULD FORCE ACADEMICS TO RE-ORGANISE THEMSELVES OUTS/DE OF THAT SYSTEM.

If government and universities do not agree to properly fund our public university system such that all academics are able to return to or obtain full-time continuing professional employment, with acceptable and fully remunerated workloads, then **it will become necessary for academics to take their knowledge and skills elsewhere, where they are appropriately remunerated, where they are able to exercise effective control over their own governance and employment independent of current management, and where they are able to ensure higher academic quality and content than is now offered in the public universities:** the marketplace of private education. This would mean further, undesirable fragmentation of the sector, with the establishment of a private university on the model of international elite universities, funded by higher student fees and, possibly, philanthropists and business concerns. Those academics now being made redundant and those previously un- and under-employed can be expected to provide a sufficient quorum of the lecturing staff necessary for such a project.

05

**LONG-TERM
NEGLECT AND POOR
MANAGEMENT, NOT
COVID, HAVE CAUSED
CURRENT PROBLEMS,
AND FAILURE TO
ADDRESS THIS
WOULD LEAD TO THE
COLLAPSE OF OUR
UNIVERSITY SYSTEM.**

The real causes of the crisis now facing our universities are not Covid and the loss of foreign student revenue. **Those causes lie in the implementation of the Dawkins 'reform' over the last 30 years, and the failure of consecutive governments at all levels either to properly regulate and monitor the sector or to guarantee sufficient funding of it without dependence upon foreign student revenue, and to ensure proper regulation of the use of that funding.**

Without permanent and far-reaching changes and improvements within the sector, the consequences of this crisis represent the death knell of our public tertiary education sector. The crisis is not confined to funding issues: it extends to every aspect of university activity and governance. The situation that will emerge from it is not sustainable. That will affect not only every student and every academic: **it will adversely affect every Australian who at any time in their lives ever depends upon any professional educated by these universities.**

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THE FINANCIAL FAILURE OF THE AUSTRALIAN CORPORATE UNIVERSITY: AN ALTERNATIVE WAY FORWARD

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