

The Future of Academic Work Conference: Themes and Findings

The deliberative aspect of the conference on the future of academic work was organised around six workshops and a closing plenary. The following summaries outline the main themes.

Workshop 1: Crises in higher education: impacts on academic work

University policy on academic teaching has been driven by external funding constraints, higher education metrics, labour market initiatives and inter-institutional competition, rather than by any consideration of universities and the public good. With uncertain funding, universities have sought to shift risks ‘downwards’, reducing contact hours and imposing additional fees for students, shifting to non-continuing employment, both for professional and academic staff, with fixed-term contracts for researchers and casual status for teachers. The main problem is that governments are generally happy with the current situation. The question is how to change this? One key issue to focus on is the changing categories of employment and mode of work.

Workshop 2: Transformations in academic teaching?

There is greater intensification, specialisation, stratification and segmentation of academic work. One impact is the growing separation of academic research and disciplinary scholarship from academic teaching. This is driven by two pressures—reduced funding per student and metrics that reward research specialisation. Research and teaching are thus unbundled, and the teaching process is casualised and deskilled, broken into various aspects of delivery. The STF initiative, in part, attempts to bring scholarship back, to reskill the teaching process and recognise the abilities required for university teaching, though there are tensions between this pedagogical objective and the wider industrial objective to enable decasualisation. To address this issue, the university definition of teaching and research has to be revisited. What is scholarship-driven teaching, as required under TEQSA: how should teaching staff contribute to scholarship or research?; what is best practice? Research likewise needs a major rethink—to value research-led teaching and publicly-engaged research.

Workshop 3: Institutional perspectives on education-focused roles

There is significant variation between types of universities, types of faculties, and pedagogical traditions, and the variations produce different outcomes for the STF initiative. The intensification of academic work is carried-over *pro rata* into the STF positions. To address the STF role there needs to be a serious assessment of workload models overall—both of research-and-teaching academics and education-focused academics. Teaching has to be recognised as a key aspect of university work, and universities need to invest in it, in terms of staff time. Education should not be seen as a drain on the university budget, and as a source of faculty cost-cutting. Nor should it be a residual commitment, after the university has secured its research reputation. To defend the quality of education, regulatory bodies need to take a clear stand in favour of properly funded teaching programs, and be clear about the widely recognised problems

of casualisation: TEQSA for instance should clarify on how it assesses the ‘risks’ that it says come with over-reliance on casual staff, and how universities can be required to address those risks; external bodies, including the NTEU, need to pursue rigorously the issue of wage theft for teaching casuals.

Workshop 4: The STF as a career pathway?

Being an STF does not prepare an academic to become a lecturer: generally, universities do not give credit for undertaking face-to-face teaching, they are more interested in educational development, in terms of subject or course development for instance, and (especially) demonstrated research capacity. In this sense the STF roles exploit the aspirations of those seeking an academic career, who may apply for the positions ‘under duress’ as there are very few entry-level positions available. The impacts are unacceptable, in terms of workload and health. The STF initiative has also created unrealistic expectations in terms of reduced casualisation. The motives are correct: there is a need for career pathways, for income security and career security. But the mechanism is flawed. There are some improvements, in terms of making the promotion pathway less contingent and conditional, and in terms of reducing the workload. More widely, a paradigm shift is needed in the sector, to define and recognise education, and to require new continuing staff when enrolments increase or staff retire.

Workshop 5: The scholarship–teaching and research–teaching nexus

There is lack of clarity around the meaning of ‘scholarship’. In some contexts, a distinction is drawn between scholarship of teaching, and disciplinary scholarship, with STFs told to focus on the former. Staff seeking a career in educational development generally welcome this; those seeking a research-and-teaching career see it as a constraint on academic freedom, and take the view that disciplinary engagement is at least as important as pedagogical development. It is in practice impossible, and counterproductive, to separate the two aspects of scholarship. There is also a growing disconnection between research and teaching, reflecting the output-centred definition of research under ERA. Many STFs seek workload to enable disciplinary engagement and research, but are told the positions do not allow for this. Education-intensive positions like STFs, to the contrary, are often used to free researchers from teaching, and to reduce the ‘research active’ pool of staff assessed under ERA. Research metrics here delink teaching from research. This needs to be corrected as scholarship and research are essential aspects for any academic role (not least as demonstrated by the importance of the doctorate as an entry-level qualification). Both scholarship and research have to be defined and reasserted as essential to the teaching process.

Workshop 6: The academic workforce and academic teaching

There is a growing crisis in the academic profession. There are several dimensions to this—from the problem of renewal to levels of contingency. For academic work there is a dramatic unbundling of roles, driven in the main by incremental managerial responses to external pressures, rather than by a more proactive rethink of the pre-existing model of continuing ‘integrated’ teaching and learning employment. The drift away from this model has put pressure on the unified national career structure for academics,

established under the award in 1998. There is a need to revisit that structure to regularise and reintegrate the diverse categories of employment emerging across the sector, establishing sector standards, cross-institutional equity, and best practice for quality higher education (including, for instance, in relation to STFs and EFRs).

Conference Plenary Recommendations

The conference plenary emphasised the need to assess the STF initiative in relation to the extent to which it has reduced sector casualisation in terms of the mode of employment for academics, and also what impacts it has had on academic roles at universities where it was most actively embraced. There also needs to be some assessment of the extent to which it has created a momentum to address casualisation into the future.

In terms of the mode of employment, a key first principle, which applies to any sector, is that there should be ongoing employment for ongoing work. The mode of employment should reflect the ongoing nature of work: the question raised by the STF initiative is how to institute this in academia. The STF positions were secured through enterprise bargaining and now may prefigure more extensive initiatives to address contingency, either through successive bargaining rounds or through other mechanisms, such as via external agencies able to position casualisation as a reputational cost to university administrations. There is strong evidence that such mechanisms may be available, as accrediting agencies recognise the problems of the contingent academy.

A second principle centres on the issue of academic roles. Academics' career progression should reflect capacity, and not be constrained by arbitrary categorisations. This entails a reassertion of 'bundled' roles for academics, allowing capacity to be maximised over the course of a career. The role of a staff member should develop over time and not be locked in. This requires a unified career structure, allowing different forms of specialisation at different stages in a career. Related to this is the challenge to properly define the meaning of university teaching and its relationship with both scholarship and research. Measuring research by scholarly outputs, not by engagement with teaching or more widely with the professions and public life, undermines this.

In terms of the process for achieving this, there is a strong desire to overcome reactive managerialism and supersede inter-university rivalry, and instead use the extensive strategic capacity of the sector to reflect and act on its failings. Related questions about the reviving the idea of the public university were raised, along with other socially-engaged academic initiatives. These can help reconceive and reground the intellectual project of universities, and break the conceptual constraints on rethinking academic work.