Respect, Recognition, Reward
NTEU gets set for next round of bargaining

Lessons in Naivety
The pitfalls to avoid as a casual academic

Tired of marking at McDonalds’ rates?
Murdoch marking campaign

Journey on the Precarious Career Path
From ‘The Research Academic’

ACTU Congress
Chris Elenor takes the stage for the launch of the report of the Insecure Work Inquiry

Why I’m A Member
Clare McCarty

Casuals Conferences
NSW and Victoria

NTEU survey confirms Howe Inquiry outcomes
1. Universities leaders of the pack in precarious employment practices
2. Constantly meliorating ourselves to show our worth
3. NTEU survey confirms Howe Inquiry outcomes
4. NTEU Bargaining Conference: Respect, Recognition, Reward
6. The Research Whisperer: Lessons in Naivety
8. Tired of marking at McDonalds’ rates?
9. NSW Casuals Conference: Casual conditions and pathways to secure employment
11. Victorian Casuals Conference: Action needed to achieve secure work
12. Why I’m A Member: Clare McCarty
14. The Research Academic: Journey on the Precarious Career Path
16. Chris Elenor at ACTU Congress
17. NTEU Membership Form
Universities leaders of the pack in precarious employment practices

Academic casuals are not alone. Precarious work has become the norm in Australia over the past few decades. This was the astounding finding of the recent Independent Inquiry into Insecure Work, chaired by former Deputy Prime Minister Brian Howe. Launched at ACTU Congress in May, the report, Lives on Hold, found that around 40% of Australian workers are precariously employed.

The Australian workforce used to be characterised by secure full time jobs – at least for most adult men. The objective of campaigns for women’s, Indigenous and immigrant equal working rights focussed, with varying degrees of success, upon achieving equal access to secure full time employment. But the 21st century Australian workforce has deteriorated markedly with new jobs being predominantly contract, casual and/or part time, as well as former secure jobs also now precarious.

The distinguishing characteristic of academic casualisation is that the work is not casual or occasional, but the workers are. The NTEU’s recent survey of casuals provided further overwhelming evidence that academic casuals are doing the same work, semester after semester. Sixty per cent of survey respondents had been working casually for more than three years. More than ten per cent had worked casually for ten years.

The academic profession in Australia is being undermined. Academic teaching is significantly casualised with about half of all undergraduate classes being taught by casuals. Academic research has always relied upon the flow of project specific grant money, but the change is that individual researchers are now employed for the grant, even though, like teachers, they may be re-employed as their skills continue to be needed. There is just no certainty, and management can take advantage of a vulnerable and acquiescent workforce to undermine all workers’ salaries and conditions.

It was particularly important for NTEU academic casual members who gave evidence and mounted protests at the Howe Inquiry to know that they were not alone, and that the Inquiry Panel recognised their plight. Their presence also disputed the assumption that all precariously employed workers lack education, skills and experience. It is hard to accuse a PhD holder with years of academic teaching experience of being underqualified and in need of retraining. It is not the precarious worker who is at fault.

The reason why teaching has become casualised in universities is not because massively greater flexibility is required. The excuse is that the funding base has diminished. Less guaranteed government base funding, reliance on domestic and international student contributions, and a lack of other sources of income are used by university managements to take the easiest way out – pay qualified academics by the hour to undertake the core work of universities of teaching undergraduate students.

NTEU has had some success in improving the pay and conditions of casual academics, including successful conversions. The Early Career Development Fellowships introduced through the last rounds of enterprise bargaining have been successfully implemented at some universities. But there are still very few new entry level academic positions being created. The reality is that there are 80-100,000 people doing some casual teaching in universities. The research has now established that a high proportion of these people do want an academic career. They are not mainly professionals doing a bit of teaching on the side, or retired academics keeping their hand in. They are current postgraduate students, recent higher degree graduates and PhD holders who have been trying to get a foothold in academia for years. They are clearly competent as they are re-employed year after year, but cannot get on to the academic career path of research, collaboration, supervision, promotion and leadership.

Meanwhile, the proportion of ongoing academics in university departments has diminished and there are not enough people to supervise and collaborate, to coordinate courses, sit on exam and progress boards, or write and review courses. Increasingly the academics writing courses are not teaching the courses, and the casual academics have no say in the regular rounds of review and evaluation. And then universities wonder why student satisfaction is falling, and there is an increasingly vocal debate going on about standards and quality!

Consequently, the NTEU Bargaining Conference in June decided that while we will keep on fighting for improved conditions for academic casuals and conversion schemes, we will make a proposal to university managements to create more entry level academic positions with an increased teaching component.

The NTEU proposal is for 2000 guaranteed new entry level jobs starting at the PhD entry point. The new positions would include a maximum of 70% teaching with capacity for designated research time in the other 30%, and a review within the first three years. These positions would not be conversions, but would be open to anyone who had worked in an Australian university. They must be created out of currently casualised teaching work. 2000 EFT positions only account for about 20% of the current casualised teaching work, but it would start to make a difference for students, existing staff – and especially for people trying to get started on an academic career.

The onus is now on university managements to demonstrate that they are fair dinkum about academic workforce renewal. ☺

Jeannie Rea, NTEU National President

read online at www.unicasual.org.au
The first six months of this year have flown! Welcome to the second (and last) edition of Connect for this year.

So far 2012 has delivered many changes in the Higher Education arena. There were staff cutbacks at many institutions. We were all hopeful that the uncertain international market would pick up, but it would seem that this trend has continued into the second half of this year too. This, of course, results in fewer opportunities for us as casual academics to take up classes and creates uncertainty in our financial positions and consideration on whether we should stay on in academe.

In the last round of Enterprise Bargaining, NTEU successfully bargained that sessional academics should be paid for marking (outside of class) separately and in addition to the class contact. This was a great step forward for sessional academics. However, what has emerged since then is the issue around whether marking outside of class should be mandatory for sessionals. The view generally is that marking is understood to be part of your responsibility (whether in or out of class). In some units, however, sessionals have the option of not doing marking. For these units additional staff are usually employed to assist in this task, allowing for a quicker turnaround time. Some academics argue that employing ‘marking staff’ has negative pedagogical outcomes; others believe this task can be fairly executed by providing ‘marking staff’ with sufficient training and support. Which is the better option? My belief is that the staff member who is most committed to this task, will perform the best.

Sessional academics can broadly be categorised into one of three profiles: 1) those whose main commitment consists of sessional teaching, 2) those who are primarily completing a PhD and subsidising their income with sessional teaching, and 3) those who principally work in industry and teach in a part-time capacity. All three types have something special to offer. Full-time sessionals usually have a breadth of teaching knowledge, utilising their pedagogical skills to achieve the best outcomes for students across a range of subjects; research student sessionals present the opportunity to bring in-depth subject and research knowledge to the classroom; industry teachers highlight the difference between practice and theory. All are valuable assets to a student’s learning experience, and the challenge is to expose students to sessionals who preferably have all of these qualities. Do such sessionals exist? For the most part, I believe the answer is – No. Individuals with 1) a PhD, 2) a number of years of teaching experience, and 3) contemporary industry experience usually do not have to take up sessional teaching. A résumé with such substance commonly allows the subject individual to become a permanent academic with a much larger remuneration and work certainty. At times it seems that universities are seeking perfection from sessionals. In reality they are looking through a questionable lens blurred by very elusive all-rounder expectations of sessional capabilities.

You may ask where am I going with this? I’m trying to highlight that as sessional academics, we all have different experience and knowledge bases, but ultimately we all try our best to achieve optimum outcomes for those students in our classrooms. Even if we may not necessarily have years of experience (in either classrooms or industry), we are all committed to educating our country’s future workforce. And while staff cutbacks are now happening all too often, we are anxiously trying to continuously excel in our teaching tasks in a bid to keep our sessional positions.

In an environment where technology is changing the way we teach, and in many ways reducing the need for the past and current (higher) levels of staffing, we need to constantly meliorate ourselves to show our worth. My suggestion is to embrace what technology has to offer, and to find new ways to demonstrate how we can (with the help of technology) still be an invaluable asset to student learning.

Carpe Diem

Chamonix Terblanche
CAPA President

Chamonix Terblanche is a PhD candidate in Information Systems at Curtin University, and is CAPA National President for 2012.
The results of NTEU’s survey of casual academic staff in Australian universities are consistent with the outcomes and recommendations of the Howe Inquiry into insecure work, Lives On Hold, and reveal a casual academic workforce struggling to make a living and do their job with the resources they are given.

Nearly 1500 casual academic staff responded to the survey conducted earlier this year. It showed that large numbers of casual academics are struggling to put together an income, with many having more than one appointment and a significant number having as many as four separate jobs in multiple universities.

The majority of survey respondents work over and above what they are paid for. Many indicated they did not have access to the resources necessary to do their job properly. Given that more than half of all undergraduate teaching in universities is carried out by casual academic staff, this has implications for the quality of undergraduate education.

The survey also explodes the myth constructed by many in university management, that staff appreciated casual working arrangements because it gives them flexibility. The majority of survey respondents aspire to a full time academic career. Many are trapped, however, in a succession of insecure, stressful, temporary work arrangements that have harmful financial and physical impacts.

Meanwhile, the Howe Inquiry has found that people in casual, labour hire and contracting jobs are literally putting their lives on hold because they have no job or income security to plan for the future.

The Inquiry panel, comprising former deputy Prime Minister Brian Howe, former Industrial Relations Commissioner Paul Munro, union activist Jill Biddington and academic Sarah Charlesworth, submitted its report and recommendations to the ACTU Congress in May. The Inquiry’s findings are that the new divide among Australian workers is the gap between those in secure employment and the 40% of the workforce that endures insecure employment.

The report is the result of the most thorough analysis of the issue of insecure work, its causes, its effects on individuals, communities, workplaces and the economy, ever undertaken in Australia. The Inquiry received 521 submissions from groups and individuals and held six weeks of public hearings across 23 locations around Australia, with experts, community groups and workers all shedding light on the issues.

The report recommends a series of legislative changes, and that Australia needs greater investment in its workforce. Australia’s welfare system needs reform and we need to improve the bargaining system so workers can pursue their rights. Casual workers need more protections; sham contracting needs to be tackled; and greater protection is required for people who get their work through labour hire.

The ACTU Congress committed the union movement to campaigning to improve job security for people in insecure work. An industrial and legislative agenda was endorsed by the Congress that includes these immediate priorities:

1. Improved regulation of the labour market that provides all workers with a universal set of protections and entitlements;
2. Reducing and removing the ability of employers to shift economic risk onto their workforce;
3. Measures to provide better protections to workers employed indirectly through labour hire and agency arrangements; and
4. To eliminate disguised employment arrangements like sham contracting.

A briefing paper on results of the NTEU’s Casual Teaching and Research Staff Survey 2012 can be downloaded at www.unicasual.org.au/survey2012

Further information on the Howe Inquiry (including the full report and recommendations) and the ACTU Secure Jobs campaign can be found at www.actu.org.au/Campaigns/SecureJobsBetterFuture

By Michael Evans
NTEU National Organiser

read online at www.unicasual.org.au
NTEU will use the current round of higher education enterprise bargaining to create 2000 new ongoing jobs to replace casualised academic work, as well as strengthening the gains from the last bargaining round. A two day conference of NTEU delegates in June resolved to not only create more secure jobs, but also to pursue more enforceable entitlements around intellectual property, payment for non-teaching duties and access to professional development and appropriate resources and facilities.

The conference also recognised the success of the Early Career Development Fellowship scheme at some universities and encouraged all NTEU Branches to pursue similar claims or strengthen their current claims.

In a media release following the conference, NTEU President, Jeannie Rea said “Over half of academic teaching in universities is now undertaken by people paid by the hour. This growth in casualisation is the dirty secret of Australian higher education, which now threatens to undermine the quality of our university system. We intend to use the upcoming enterprise bargaining round to call time on this.”

Secure Jobs

A key feature of the log of claims NTEU will be serving on all universities is the creation of 2000 new ongoing jobs, to substantially and permanently reduce the unacceptably high level of casual academic employment in the sector. This equates to approximately 20 per cent of academic casuals working in universities. The new positions, to be known as ‘Scholarly Teaching Fellows’, will usually be teaching focused positions, with a maximum teaching load of up to 70 per cent, with remaining time being
available for other activities (including an entitlement of 20 per cent for scholarship and/or research). The teaching duties of these positions will be made up of no less than 80 per cent of the work previously done by casual employees, and will be continuing appointments (either full or part time).

Through this claim, NTEU is challenging universities to create decent academic jobs that provide security and career entry for the next generation of academics. We want to provide real opportunities for career advancement for younger academics presently locked out of the system.

Improved Conditions for Casual Academic Employees

After broad consultation with casuals, and feedback from State based Academic Casuals Conferences and the National Academic Casuals Committee, NTEU delegates resolved that Branches pursue a number of other claims to build on the achievements of the last round of bargaining.

In particular, Branches are encouraged to seek and provide for more enforceable entitlements around intellectual property, payment for non-teaching duties and access to professional development and minimum resources/facilities.

All NTEU Branches are encouraged to make claims in respect of the following matters, where there is no existing entitlement:

- Designated funds to allow certain casuals to undertake appropriate professional development opportunities.
- Agreed remuneration to casual staff members whose research or publications are ‘used’ by the university in any way.
- An information technology allowance to be provided to casual staff who are not provided with appropriate on campus resources to perform their duties.
- Equal access to ongoing staff to resources and facilities required to perform their duties, including eligibility to apply for internal funding opportunities.
- All required duties other than teaching be paid for separately including attendance at School/Faculty meetings and attendance at lectures.
- Payment of an allowance for casual staff members who are required to maintain contact with, or answer enquiries from students on an intermittent or irregular basis, by telephone, email or like communication.
- Payment of an allowance to casuals in recognition of the time required to maintain currency in their academic discipline.

Early Career Development Fellowships

One of the achievements from the last round of enterprise bargaining is that the Union successfully negotiated for over 250 Early Career Development Fellowships (ECDFs) resulting in more secure work for a number of casual academic staff, and access to a career path for long term casuals.

These ECDFs entitle casuals who have taught consistently over 5 years to an opportunity to obtain a two-year ‘teaching and research’ fixed term position, and beyond that, a further two-year fixed term position which is convertible to permanent. Branches that do not have an ECDF provision are encouraged to seek such an entitlement in this round of bargaining.

Where ECDFs exist, Branches should seek an increase in the number of ECDFs available under the terms of the Agreement, and that these positions be funded from central resources.

At their core, the NTEU claims are not only about reducing the rampant casualisation in our sector, and paying casual staff for all of the work that they are required to do, but they are also about attracting and retaining academic staff to ensure the ongoing quality and reputation of Australian universities nationally and internationally.

“We believe that not only can universities choose to meet these claims, it is in their interests to do so to ensure their most valuable resource, their staff, get the respect, recognition and reward they deserve,” said Jeannie Rea.

Follow NTEU bargaining at universitybargaining.org.au
LESSONS IN NAIVETY

By Tseen Khoo
The Research Whisperer

This article is very much about ‘do as I say, not as I do,’ because it addresses the things I did badly as an ECR and fixed-term research academic.

Just as a quick career snapshot: I had a series of fixed-term roles after I submitted my PhD for examination. These roles were in academic and non-academic spheres.

Two of them were full-time research fellowships, Holy Grail kind of jobs that came with their own flavours of angst. After scoring these roles, this also happens: imposter syndrome took up permanent residence in my psyche and, along with it, the attendant feeling of guilt that I had such plush positions and must be determinedly grateful (I was in the humanities, after all...)

My practice – such as it was – was to spend the first six months marvelling at getting the position, establishing myself at the university and getting research underway. Those times are usually a blur, especially with the interstate move to Melbourne for my second fellowship.

Across my time as a research fellow, some major personal things happened, including the death of a parent, and suicide of a close friend. When these things were going on (six months apart), I asked a professor whether I could take time out of the fellowship and come back to it in a few months when I got my head back into the right space.

I was told no.

Though I railed at how unfair it was, I didn’t take it further. I assumed she knew what she was talking about.

It pains me now to think of how vast my trust and naivety were. Although I worked through that grim time, I probably ‘lost’ about six months of fellowship productivity because I was focused on things other than optimising research outputs. I assumed that things like compassionate leave and the option to take some leave-without-pay were not available to me as a fixed-termer and member of the academic ‘precariat’.

Things that I know now, having moved from the non-academic to academic and back to non-academic roles:

Go to the source of information

There’s value in finding senior mentors and chatting with your academic executives about many things, but finding out about your entitlements as a staff member is not one of them. Most senior staff are aware of policies and conditions but, mostly, they are not up to date or informed of the minutiae.

If you want to know if you’re entitled to various types of leave, ask the HR section. If you want to ask about access to library resources, ask the library. If you want to know whether you qualify to apply for grants, ask the Research Office.

Don’t – as I did – depend on the presumed expertise of a professor.

Feed correct information back into the local loop

At times, incorrect or outdated information is still circulated as gospel. If you’ve found out for yourself that there’s dodgy information being passed around, try to feed the right stuff back into your unit.
When I was preparing the paperwork for maternity leave for my second child, I realised that things were changing around how fellowship time was recalculated to extend it to cover the time you were on maternity leave.

Before, the understanding was that maternity leave just meant your fellowship was 6 months (or a year!) shorter. Too bad, so sad. When I tried to point out that this was severely disadvantaging women who have babies during a fellowship, my complaint was acknowledged but ‘this was just the way it was’.

As it turns out, I don’t think it ever was that way, but it required someone to chase the policy down and put enough knowledge in front of the right people to get a positive outcome.

Think about Number One

We all know people who are too zealous on this front but, in my experience, most ECR academics find this a difficult thing to practice. For example, doing a bit of teaching to develop skills and keep your hand in that side of academia is valuable, but you need to draw extremely tight boundaries around what time you commit to it.

If your role is research-only, or majority research, future assessors of your CV will be looking for that level of concentrated productivity. Saying that you undertook teaching in your research-focused role, and that’s why you haven’t published as much as you’d have liked, doesn’t work in your favour.

Similarly, don’t be lured by promises that if you just take on subject Y, you’d be in a better position should a job appear because: a) the job may not appear and you’ll have a compromised track-record, and b) a fabulous research track-record may well be the key to your next good job. A good way to judge things is to view possible commitments and ask yourself, “Does this build towards better (or new) possibilities?”

As a fixed-term academic, it’s essential to inform yourself and get to know when you’re excluded from (or disadvantaged by) the arcane formulas that universities use to calculate staff entitlements.

Research-only staff – the situation I know best – can often be overlooked because they’re inconsistently on campus and not in the regularly chaotic stream of the university corridors. Sometimes, in less research-intensive universities or units, research-only staff are exotic creatures that aren’t often encountered. When you’re not producing concrete, commonly understood outcomes such as teaching classes of X students and convening courses or marking committees, you can lurk at the edges of the everyday administrative radar.

The big lesson from all this is: “Ask more, angst less.”

After all, realising the limits of your knowledge is a sure sign of intelligence.

Dr Tseen Khoo was a research-only fellow for almost ten years, and is currently working as a research developer at RMIT University. She helps researchers with their grant applications and building of research track-records.

Tseen Khoo and Jonathan O’Donnell blog at The Research Whisperer, theresearchwhisperer.wordpress.com
Every university in WA, except Murdoch, pays Academic Casual staff for all ‘non-contemporaneous’ marking. It’s an unwieldy term, this ‘non-contemporaneous’, but for casual academics, who do around 50 per cent of undergraduate teaching in Australia, its pretty straightforward. Non-contemporaneous marking is all the marking that has to be done outside class contact time – essays, reports - the usual things. So it doesn’t count, for example, for marking of a student presentation during class time but it does count all the other marking outside class time.

In the 2010 Enterprise Agreement, Murdoch University management committed to undertake a review of the work undertaken by casual academic employees and the appropriateness of the remuneration for the work undertaken. The management also agreed that, at the conclusion of the review, if the University and NTEU did not agree to the proposed outcomes, the University would make separate payment for all authorised marking outside class contact time from the first pay period on or after January 2012.

NTEU asked for a copy of the details of the review in January 2012 so that we could discuss the findings. We knew it was an important issue. Our casual members had related story after story of the increasing demands placed on them to prepare materials for escalating class sizes (often 30 or more students in a tutorial / workshop), to access LMS, to respond effectively to student emails, and to attend moderation meetings etc. We heard stories that different casuals were paid different rates and that many take on the role as unit coordinator with all its extra responsibilities.

Eventually, at the end of March, we were told by management that they had undertaken an ‘informal review’. This review turned out to be a few meetings with the Deans and PVCs and the outcome, to our surprise, was that they hadn’t identified an imbalance between the work and remuneration of casual academic staff. Perhaps they should have asked some casuals or unit coordinators!

What next? We are continuing to gather information from casuals about the amount of work they need to do in order to provide a high standard of teaching at our university. And we are continuing to draw management’s attention to the urgent need to take seriously the need to improve the conditions of employment for casual academic staff.

Improvements in pay and working conditions for casual academic staff will be a key issue in the next round of bargaining at Murdoch, but before then, we are seeking legal advice on behalf of our casual members to ensure that they are paid what we believe they are entitled to.
On 25 May 2012, NSW casual delegates gathered for a casuals conference with the focus on establishing claims for the next round of enterprise bargaining. The conference drew on data from the NTEU Casuals Survey as well as the national audit of the last round of bargaining to focus on two main issues – casual conditions and pathways into secure employment.

Casual conditions

The previous round of agreements included provisions for separate pay for marking and increases to the casual loading to 25 per cent. Many Branches also included provisions to improve access to resources such as office space, computers, consultation spaces, library cards etc. These provisions now require enforcement, that is, where these ‘wins’ have not been rolled out, casuals need to be in contact with their Branch to develop a strategy compelling the university to fulfill its promise.

Moving into the next round of bargaining, delegates called on the NTEU National Bargaining Conference to secure Agreements which provide:

- Intellectual property protection for casual academics.
- An increase in the number of hours allocated to lecture preparation.

continued overpage....
Pathways into secure employment

The issue of job security was deemed critical to improving conditions for casuals by converting their positions into ongoing jobs. Importantly, job security is a key way in which academic staff need to be supported and resourced to deliver quality education that is sustainable for the sector.

The conference sought to reconcile three clear priorities:

- To ensure the continuation of universities as institutions of higher learning and research excellence.
- To provide job security for casuals who already perform teaching-only roles but with no job security.
- To provide secure pathways for early career academics – casuals who are already engaged in teaching-only roles, conducting their research in unpaid time.

The conference recognised that casual academics perform a mix of teaching, teaching and research, and research-only roles, and that pathways into academic employment need to recognise and support these different functions. Therefore we proposed that NTEU pursue the conversion of casual workers into ongoing positions via the expansion of teaching-focused positions and Early Career Development Fellowships (ECDFs).

Teaching-focused positions

It was proposed that these ongoing jobs available only to existing casual staff to replace teaching duties that casual staff are currently performing. While these proposed roles will have a higher teaching allocation, they will include a minimum 20% entitlement for research related to the academic’s field of expertise and clear pathways for conversion into a traditional teaching-and-research position.

Early Career Development Fellowships

It was proposed that Early Career Development Fellowships (ECDFs) be expanded for existing casuals who have a doctorate or who are in the final stages of completion. They would be centrally funded 2 year teaching and research or research-only positions, which would acknowledge the research output that casual academics contribute to universities in their unpaid time.

Results from the National Bargaining Conference

Representatives from the NSW conference were instrumental in achieving a mandatory national claim of 2000 permanent teaching-focused roles. In particular they were crucial in inserting an entitlement of 20% for scholarship and/or research, with a career review after 3 years with possible access to the full range of level B academic positions (i.e. to traditional teaching and research roles).

Casuals will need to be involved at the Branch level to tighten these up, for example establishing eligibility criteria, and ensuring that the research entitlement allows for ‘research related to the academic’s field of expertise’.

They were also successful in getting NTEU endorsement for the expansion of ECDFs. However, as this is not a mandatory claim, casual staff will need to lobby in their Branches to take up this recommendation. In the same way, NTEU recommended that Branches pursue for improved working conditions for casual academics, including many of the provisions we put forward above. However, the inclusion of these claims as well as locally developed claims will need consistent pressure from casuals at the Branch level.

Where to from here?

In NSW, we are continuing the dialogue at the Division level with an upcoming organising conference to develop local casuals’ networks and to support casuals to campaign within their Branches. For the first time, some universities will now have casuals on their Branch Committees and will have direct input from casual networks. The success of these delegates and the networks depends, however, on casuals getting behind them, sharing the load and taking part.

So while job security for casuals is now firmly on the Union’s national agenda, there is a lot of work for us now at the Division and Branch levels to ensure that recommended provisions are taken up in local claims and that local casuals’ networks are at the forefront when it comes to crafting casual bargaining claims.

This will only happen if casual staff are active. Now is the time to seek out our casuals’ networks on campus, to attend members’ meetings and encourage our colleagues to participate.

Sharni (left) and Dale (right) express their views at the NSW Casuals Conference. Photos by Adam Knobel.
Victorian Casuals Conference

Action needed to achieve secure work

NTEU Victorian Division held its 2012 Casuals Conference on 8 June at Swinburne University of Technology. The conference saw strong attendance, with over 25 sessional academics coming together from institutions including Swinburne University, Deakin University, RMIT University, University of Melbourne and Monash University.

The tone of the conference was one of action, with attendees passionately describing the experiences they’ve had as sessionals and calling on the Union to stand with them and fight for better conditions and more secure work in the next round of bargaining.

On the Union’s part, Colin Long, Division Secretary and Josh Cullinan, Division Industrial Officer, spoke about their commitment to working towards secure work for sessionals and their words were well received by those in attendance.

The Swinburne Branch’s campaign around late payment of sessionals

In May the Swinburne Branch ran a sessional survival campaign, which included a street stall collecting donations of food and household items from staff and students, to be distributed to sessionals who are paid late in semester 2. The campaign also included social media, posters and stickers.

Standardised payment for marking and an extra allowance for administration duties

Delegates from Deakin University put a motion to the conference that the Victorian delegates to the National Bargaining Forum would work for more prescriptive marking guidelines and an extra hour per week for administrative duties to be part of the Union’s bargaining platform in the next round of negotiations.

Secure work and how we can achieve it

Victorian sessionals support the creation of more ongoing and fixed term teaching positions, as well as expansion of the Early Career Development Fellowship program and urged delegates to the National Bargaining Forum to convey these views.

The conference was a good opportunity for sessionals to come together with their peers from other institutions to compare and contrast their experiences. One attendee commented that they had no idea that payment and resourcing issues were so widespread, and that they had been inspired to become more active in the Union after attending the conference.

Victorian sessionals are pleased and relieved that NTEU is supporting them to fight for more secure work. With the proportion of teaching hours delivered by sessional academics growing, there needs to be more focus on supporting members, and showing future members that the Union cares about sessionals and their rights.

By James Searle
Swinburne Faculty of ICT Sessional delegate
I was a contract teacher once and, thanks to the organising and campaigning over many years by my then union the AEU, the number of contracts was reduced, their pay and conditions greatly improved – and I got permanency. Now I am a casual university tutor and I know that yet again it will take strength, struggle and unified support through a union, the NTEU this time, to change the system and achieve justice.

There was never a truer saying then ‘united we stand – divided we fall’ in the case of the lone UniCasual!

Increase in sessional staff

Sessional staff have increased exponentially in the higher education workforce across the nation. While casual numbers have grown to over 70,000, continuing staff have not similarly increased and are 10,000 fewer than this number. More than half of all casuals are in teaching roles compared to very few of the continuing employees.

It is now quite clear that this situation has come about, put simply, as a result of reduction in public funding for universities between 1995 and 2005 followed, paradoxically, by unregulated entry of students in many schools and faculties as a result of the Bradley Review.

The effect of the market economy

The bigger picture is the supremacy of the market economy leading to greater exploitation of nearly all workers and a marked erosion of their working conditions and security in Australia. Following a market economy model, universities provide a service to customers with little regulation; efficiency and productivity become the hallmarks, leading to reduced budgets, greater work load for permanent staff, more use of casual staff as cheaper labour, larger classes and fewer resources.

Four effects of such insecure work which I have experienced as a casual academic staff member teaching education are:

1. Quality of student learning. This is greatly affected by the larger classes (24–30 students). There is also lack of continuity of tutors and the good learning relationships that brings.

2. Working conditions. I have experienced sitting in my car preparing for the next tutorial, office-type space has been either non-existent or crowded, difficulty accessing photocopying and internet, no name listed as a staff member and no pigeon hole, filling in my own time-sheets, receiving email from and emailing to students on my own home computer, paying for parking, much use of my own home telephone and mobile and even supplied my own textbooks!

3. Exclusion from collegiality. I call it ‘licking the steam off’, you’re not really in it, you’re observing from outside, a jobbing academic hawking your wares from semester to semester and when you do offer to join group research or help design a new topic it is warmly welcomed but goes unpaid – ‘we have a tight budget’!
4. Exploitation. Exploitation in pay is two fold. Firstly, the combining of many tasks under one heading: $100–$70 per hour payment for a tutorial includes: attending the relevant lecture, knowledge of all relevant readings, content of tutorial, teaching the tutorial, attending meetings and, until mid last year, marking.

Secondly, lack of transparency and equity for permanent staff pay and conditions as well as casuals. As I have increased my work over the years fairly close to that of a full time staff member I have never grossed more than $29,000 per annum – the Australian average wage is around $70,000. That’s a lot of uni savings; that’s a lot of casual exploitation!

Worst of all was the lack of respect and value for those who shape the next generation’s teachers and through them the next generation of Australians.

NTEU achievements

In response to such experiences for casuals, NTEU achieved two significant improvements in the last Enterprise Agreement. They were mandatory payment for marking and the possibility of fixed term conversions for casual workers. Attempting to enforce and implement these conditions has been varied and uneven across universities depending on the strength of NTEU membership at the work place and the difficulties of recruiting and organising casual employees.

While marking is now being paid for, the formulae for such payment vary across faculties and universities. Through the National Academic Casuals’ Committee (NACC,) we have tried to formulate common templates for national use and consistency which would fairly assess the various steps required to mark a piece of work properly.

The fixed term conversions have two roles. They seek to provide some security to tutors who are employed year after year as valued and needed staff members and, secondly, as an important step for young academics to become staff members. Both of these improvements also contribute to a quality teaching work force whose members are committed to their work, the students and the institution. Unfortunately, conversions have been thin on the ground. They can only be prompted by a casual’s request. There is no compulsion or requirement for the university to consider, accept or negotiate the application. Here too, national consistency is needed.

NACC’s contribution

Not surprisingly then, the National Academic Casuals Committee (NACC) has worked with casual members to develop improvements in these and other areas of casual work for the next Enterprise Agreement.

NACC members also contributed information and support to the Government’s ‘Independent Inquiry into Insecure Work in Australia’ as representatives at the State wide ‘Round Tables’. NACC Chair, Chris Elenor was also active in the campaign appearing in the media and speaking at conferences (see Chris’s ACTU Congress report, p.16). NTEU’s submission can be found at www.unicasual.org.au/publications/submissions.

More new members!

Recruiting more casual members is obviously a priority for improving conditions by strengthening the NTEU. More new members are needed and cohesion at work places despite the irregularity of the work. Casuals also need to forge strong alliances with NTEU members who are ongoing employees to prevent divide and rule tactics by the employer.

The cumulative underpayment and undervaluing of these highly qualified and committed professionals should fuel not just our heart felt indignation but our unequivocal support.

Clare McCarty is an academic at Flinders University and an NTEU member.
Over the last four years I have worked between two universities as a casual research assistant and tutor. Journeying along a precarious career path well trodden by many an aspiring academic and dedicated ‘professional knowledge imparters’ before me. The insecure employment conditions, long delays in finalising contracts (let alone payment), hours of unpaid work, limited career prospects and very little facility or administrative support to perform our role, these are all common encounters for the casual academic.

You can read about the experiences of casual workers in the tertiary sector on blogs and comment boards online from Australia, New Zealand, the US, the UK, in fact from all over the world. I don’t need to tell you about my experiences in detail, because if you’re reading this, you probably have your own war stories to tell. What I want to advocate through this article is the importance of sharing our stories, both with each other and with the wider community.

I’m writing this at the end of a particularly tough day in the world of casual academia. My only certain, one day per week, research assistant role on a three year ARC Linkage project was put on notice today, as unexpected funds had been drained for a website and other such research related expenses. It is a research project that I am particularly passionate about and have given countless hours in unpaid work to, only to have my enthusiasm rewarded with a sudden cessation of my role.

Familiar story? Yup. In the initial stages of coping with my bad news I consulted the Casual Voices page on the NTEU’s Uni Casual website. I don’t know why but there is some solace that can be found in understanding that your story is the common experience. You’re not being singled out; this kind of thing happens all of the time, to all sorts of people. I guess it’s the equivalent to Friday afternoon drinks with work colleagues, sharing our experiences is an integral aspect of work.
Increasingly, working as a casual academic is an isolating occupation. As a tutor we mark online through systems such as wikis or blackboard, the majority of our communication with fellow academics is via email, even contact with students is often online through social networking sites, email, Skype, etc. etc. (there’s no escaping them!).

I work mostly as a research assistant and this means mostly working from home alone and communicating with my boss/es via email, which is decidedly the worst way to resolve problems and receive feedback. Ironically I work hard to convince students that they should attend class rather than email for these very reasons and yet, for me, this is my undesirable work communication modus operandi.

If you are one of the few casual academics that have access to a computer or desk at your university (even a shared one) count yourself lucky. According to the recent NTEU casual survey and reading other comments online by casual academics, universities expect us to provide and use our own equipment and facilities, especially access to the Internet, without any real compensation for doing so. This also contributes to the issues of scope creep in our appointments. Especially when it comes to out of contract work for inevitable issues such as dispute of grade that occur long after our period of pay ceases.

If we were present on campus, perhaps students and management staff might be aware of the incalculable hours that go into student emails and preparation. Having worked for large consultancies in the private sector as well as the public service previously, in the contemporary workplace, people working from home is a bit of a workplace health and safety nightmare.

I do often wonder how universities can employ such a large number of people and expect them to complete the majority of their work off site – if anyone reading this teaches risk management, this would be a great assignment for your students.

What are students’ perceptions of how we are employed? Do they think we are paid a full time salary? As a student, I don’t think it ever crossed my mind as to how my tutors were employed (I do hope the conditions were better). They must think I’m paid 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 52 weeks of the year. I get all sorts of emails, from the panicked ones on a Sunday afternoon, students from previous years wanting to discuss issues with a subject, requests for referees, advice about dealing with the university, the list goes on.

My point here is that we are important to students’ experience at the university and we need to make sure that our universities are aware of this. At my universities, large flat screen monitors and furniture on wheels is what they seem to feel is most important to a students’ experience at university.

I work for one university that has a pioneering program called the ‘First Year Experience,’ where they have a call centre with people who are there to help struggling students. These are not people who necessarily know the content of the subjects undertaken by students, rather it acts like a counselling service. I’m not completely adverse to this concept but at the same time I do think it’s absurd. Why not divert that funding into providing more paid contact time with tutors for first year subjects?

We work in the tertiary sector in a time of extraordinary change, globally. Advances in technology, the influx of first generation students and the marketisation of universities make for a sector in transformation, that might be a little confused about its direction. For this reason I think it’s critical that we document our experience of these changes.

Think of the future researchers who will be delighted to find what we have written about our experiences as casual academics. It is also important to establish a collective voice on how our employment conditions affect us. Mostly though, I think we need to share our stories with each other to seek comfort in the isolating work conditions for the casual academic.

I started to write a blog this year about working as a casual academic, I’ve never written a blog before. I have gained so much from sharing my stories in terms of learning where my experience sits amongst others. It has been an exercise in normalising my understanding of how good or bad my situation is. For this reason I urge other casual academics to write a short piece for the Casual Voices page on the Uni Casual website (www.unicasual.org.au) or start a blog, share your story!

The Sessional Academic blogs at hyperlinkacademia.blogspot.com.au
2012 ACTU Congress

Reflections from a casual

By Chris Elenor
Chair of the National Academic Casuals Committee

It was exciting to get an invitation to the ACTU Congress and to be part of the launch of the Report of the Insecure Work Inquiry. Here was a chance to catch up with some of the brave casuals who I have met through involvement in the Secure Work: Better Future’s campaign over the last year and to make another small contribution to the campaign.

I have, over the last year, been supporting NTEU’s contribution to the campaign. This has involved telling my personal story as a long term academic casual, doing press and television interviews, giving evidence to the Insecure Work Inquiry and perfecting my nodding head technique as rent a crowd background for ACTU President, Ged Kearney’s media conferences.

I invited my 91-year-old father-in-law to come with me for the occasion. A retired fitter, he is still very active in the MUA retired members’ organisation. On the way to the Congress he was talking about the casual B roster on the waterfront in NSW and the fight by Auckland wharfies against contracting out of jobs. He made the point that casualisation is an accelerating international trend impacting all industries and like many others in the labour movement, who have only had experience of full-time working or periods of unemployment, he was only now waking up to the rapid growth of casualisation in the labour market. Nowadays management ‘flexibility’ is the codeword for a global race to the bottom in job security, wages and conditions.

I found a seat for Ray as we were marshalled down the front of the hall. We were coached by the ACTU media team and practised our walk on parts prior to the performance. My State Secretary thrust an NTEU flag into my hand to join the other Union flags carried by casual retail workers, public servants, retained firefighters, casual TAFE and school teachers, Qantas workers, airline pilots, metal workers and wharfies.

It was great to be introduced by Ged Kearney and acknowledged by the assembled delegates. Former Deputy PM Brian Howe, Chair of the groundbreaking Insecure Work Inquiry, then introduced his Report and laid out the enormous challenge casualisation poses to the organised labour movement. He talked of the history on the waterfront of walking the hungry mile and the successful fight by the Union for permanent jobs. I remembered as a new Australian, standing in a muster at the Dynan Railway yards for casual day work unloading railway wagons and walking home unpicked and empty handed.

Brian Howe talked about how extreme casual employment is taking new forms in the cyber age. The Inquiry took evidence from casuals at factories where all the workforce is supplied through labour hire companies. Casual employees have to be available for work and receive an offer of work by text message the evening before the shift however there is no guarantee they will be paid for a full shift when they turn up to work.

I reflected on my long term experience as a casual academic. My guts churning with anxiety waiting for a return phone call or email in the days before the semester starts, not knowing if there will be any work at all, what, where or when it might be. We now have the hungry mile in cyber space with employer representatives claiming casual employment is a lifestyle choice.

It was uplifting that the fight for more secure employment was the centrepiece of the Congress. The challenge of course, is how to turn this focus into effective campaigns that build active union membership and sustainable secure jobs for the future. NTEU has played a big part in the campaign so far and is positioned in the upcoming bargaining round to negotiate significant improvements to the job security of many long term academic casuals. Be in it to win it. ☺
I want to join NTEU

The information on this form is needed for aspects of NTEU's work and will be treated as confidential.

Title
Surname
Given Names
Home Address
City/Suburb
Home Phone
Incl. Area Code
Email

Have you previously been an NTEU member?
If known

Financial Institution
Signature

Institution / Employer
Faculty
Dept/School
Position
Classification
Level
Lect., HEW 4
Step/ Increment
Annual Salary
Step/ Increment Due
Level
Lect., HEW 4

Have you previously been an NTEU member?
Yes: At which institution?

Are you Australian Aboriginal/Torres Strait Islander?

Your current employment details
Institution/Employer
Campus
Faculty
Dept/School
Position
Classification
Level
Lect., HEW 4
Step/ Increment
Annual Salary
Step/ Increment Due

Your employment group
Academic Staff
Teaching & Research Staff
General/Professional Staff
Research Only

If you are full time or part time, please complete either payment option 1, 2 or 3

Option 1: Payroll Deduction Authority

I hereby authorise the Institution or its duly authorised agents to deduct from my salary by regular instalments, dues and levies (as determined from time to time by the Union), NTEU or its authorised agents. All payments on my behalf and in accordance with this authority shall be deemed to be payments by me personally. This authority shall remain in force until revoked by me in writing. I also consent to my employer supplying NTEU with updated information relating to my employment status.

Signature
Date

Option 2: Credit Card

I hereby authorise the Merchant to debit my Card account with the amount and at intervals specified above and in the event of any change in the charges for these goods or services to alter the amount from the appropriate date in accordance with such change.

Card No.
Expiry
Payment:
Signature
Date

Option 3: Direct Debit

I hereby authorise the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) APCA (ABN 37 243 787 865) to arrange for funds to be debited from my nominated bank account at the financial institution identified and in accordance with the terms described in the Direct Debit Request (DDR) Service Agreement.

BSB
Branch Name & Address
Account Name
Signature

Regularity of Payment:
Monthly
Quarterly
Half-Yearly
Annually

Mail To:
NTEU National Office
PO Box 1323, South Melbourne VIC 3205
T (03) 9254 1910
F (03) 9254 1915
E national@nteu.org.au

Full text of DDR available at www.nteu.org.au/ddr

I hereby apply for membership of NTEU, any Branch and any associated body* established at my workplace.

Signature
Date

NATIONAL TERTIARY EDUCATION UNION
MEMBERSHIP FORM

PAYMENT OPTION 1, 2 OR 3

EITHER

DIRECT DEBIT

I hereby authorise the Merchant to debit my Card account with the amount and at intervals specified above and in the event of any change in the charges for these goods or services to alter the amount from the appropriate date in accordance with such change.

Card No.
Expiry
Payment:
Signature
Date

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