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**Beware the forks in the road: Trifurcation of career paths in the Australian higher education sector**

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## 1. Introduction

The importance of value-added production through the knowledge economy has become a clichéd chorus amongst commentators and politicians (for example, Sheehan et al. 1995; Brain 1999; Grierson 2007; National Tertiary Education Industry Union [NTEU] 2007; ABC Radio 2007). This is a pertinent issue for Australia, which despite the resource boom, continues to have an alarmingly high current account deficit (ABS 2007). When the resource boom declines, coupled with the nation's inability to compete with lower cost competitors such as India and China, then developing high value-added production will be even more imperative. Obviously, a strong higher education sector is vital to drive a knowledge-based economy (ABC Radio 2007). What is contentious is if this objective is better achieved by an increasing reliance on market-based solutions for the sector. In the current climate of declining public investment, with less than 40% of university income coming from government funds, there is an emphasis on universities to operate as more market-driven, yet ironically still under constraints of more centralist Federal Government control of funding and enforcement of new industrial relations laws (NTEU 2006; 2007). The traditional model of largely autonomous, predominantly government-funded institutions is in decline (Davies 2005). Universities now have to 'satisfy both the invisible hand of uncertain markets and the long arm of micro managing governments' (Davis 2006: 2).

Despite the rhetoric of the 'knowledge economy', Australia is the only OECD country where government investment in higher education declined by 4% in real term between 1995 and 2005, whereas the OECD average was an increase of 49% (ABC Radio 2007; NTEU 2007). Australian universities are under dual pressures of attracting more fee paying students to make up public sector funding short falls, whilst making their research commercially relevant. For instance, by 2004 15% of university revenue was provided by international students (Department of Education, Science and Training [DEST] 2005). Funding is shifting from the public purse to fee-paying students and commercialised research contracts. Table One summarises some trends; starkly evident is the increasing student to staff ratios and the growing casualisation of the sector. In order to balance the competing demands of education and research, there is suggestion that there should be teaching-intensive and research-intensive universities and career structures (DEST 2002; DEST 2007a; 2007b; Kleeman 2002). Deakin University (Victoria) has already initiated moves in this direction (Deakin University 2007).

This paper identifies that in response to declining public support of higher education, there is pressure for career paths within the tertiary education sector to change irrevocably. A managerial approach pervades academic administration by addressing the constraints of tight budgeting with policies for labour market flexibility. The tertiary education sector, traditionally a bastion of long-term job security, has developed stratified career pathways. That is, the academic career is no longer assumed to be just one pathway, offering its servants lifetime tenure in a stimulating environment where teaching and research harmoniously co-exist. Indeed, since the 1990s the sector has become increasingly reliant on a marginalised casualised academic workforce (Marginson 2000; Kimber 2003; Junor 2004). The argument in this paper is that the stratification of career paths is not in the long-term interests of developing cutting edge research and innovative teaching practices, given that moves toward workplace 'flexibility' create a climate of insecurity for a large proportion of the non-tenured workforce. The next section identifies the reasons for the casualisation of academic labour, which initiated the original bifurcation of the academic career path during the 1990s. The consequences of this on the sector are also highlighted. Section Three argues that the bifurcation of casual and tenured positions, coupled with the emerging push to have research-intensive and teaching-intensive career paths within institutions, is leading to a further forking of career paths. Reasons why this 'trifurcation' is not desirable for the needs

of a knowledge economy are presented. Section Four concludes that re-establishing a teaching- research nexus is in the long-term benefit of academia.

Table 1 Comparison of selected staffing trends in Australian universities

Type of measure	1995/96	2005/6
Students per academic staff member <sup>1,2</sup>	14	19
Students per academic staff member <sup>3</sup>	16	21 (This amount is for 2003)
Full time equivalent casual density as proportion of total academic staff <sup>4</sup>	16.3%	20.2 (This amount is for 2002)
Casual employment as proportion of total university sector	11.5 %	14.9 %
Estimated casual employees <sup>5</sup>	9, 249	14, 231
Fee income from students	\$30 million	\$200 million (2004)
Estimated casual employment (all sectors, Australia-wide) as percentage of all employees <sup>6</sup>	25%	27%

Source: Summarised from Junor (2004); DEST (2004; 2005); Davies (2005); Buddelmeyer et al. (2006); NTEU (2006; 2007).

Notes:

1. In the UK the ratio of students to staff increased from 9:1 in 1980 to 17:1 in 2000 (Bryson 2004: 38)
2. NTEU (2007: 10) data.
3. This data is from the Australian Vice Chancellor's Committee (AVCC) (cited Davies 2005).
4. It is difficult to obtain precise figures of casualisation levels as official figures from the DEST and AVCC do not disaggregate figures into academic and non-academic casual workers (NTEU 2006).
5. Casualisation increased by 54% in the ten year period (NTEU 2007: 9).
6. Although, aggregate national trends do not show a dramatic change in general workforce casualisation, the increase for that period is most notable with female employees, rising from 18% in 1995/6 to 24% by 2005 (Buddelmeyer et al. 2006).

## 2. The initial bifurcation of the academic career: casualised labour

Traditionally, higher education institutions have used part-time or casual staff to assist in teaching undergraduate subjects. However, researchers examining the Australian context argue that the post Dawkins era in the 1990s began to see an emerging division between a tenured core and a casualised tenuous periphery with more insecure working conditions (Marginson 2000; Kimber 2003). Kimber (2003) theorises that the trend had its origins in 'new managerialism' motives that permeated the public sector during the 1980s. These motives are founded on neo-classical liberal ideals of individualism and preference for the private sector to deliver so called 'efficient' economic outcomes. Kimber identifies that Dawkins - a key minister in the Hawke Labor government - instigated the Public Service Reform Bill in 1984 with bipartisan support, and took his managerial agenda with him when he moved into the Education portfolio.

These managerial assumptions have contributed to unbundling of teaching and research activities via an accelerated use of casual/ part time staff for the delivery of teaching and providing research assistance. The NTEU (2006) argues that university management has vested interest to increase casualisation as the managerial ideology seeks to reduce salary

costs, diversify income sources and shift from collegial to corporate style decision-making. Using a political model of power structures, Watters and Weeks (1998, cited Kimber 2003: 44) argue that resources are allocated in a stratification of power with part-time staff subordinate. "Academic power lies with the full-time staff. Part-timers are a consumable and low cost academic workforce with employment prospects governed by short-term economic considerations". Universities respond to budget and managerial pressure to reduce costs and achieve flexibility in staff appointment by relying on casuals and relieving them of the responsibilities associated with employment tenure. But as Kimber (2003) observes, casualisation often has hidden costs such as additional paperwork with processing contracts, high employee turnover and student dissatisfaction from not having equivalent level of access as they do with full time staff. In the long-term, appointing casuals may have a longer term higher cost than appointing a continuing academic.

Research by the NTEU (2006) and Junor (2004) reveals three disturbing trends. First, as reported in Table One, casualised labour in Australian universities has grown along with the growth of student numbers (including fee-paying students). DEST figures from 2003 suggest that 20 % of academics and 13% of general staff are employed on hourly casual contracts (cited Junor 2004). Furthermore, in 1990 casuals accounted for the equivalent of 8% full-time jobs in universities; by 2001 this had doubled to 18% (AVCC 2004, cited NTEU 2006). The second trend is the breakdown of the traditional academic apprenticeship model where casual, part-time or contract employment was traditionally a brief transition period between completing a post graduate degree and gaining of tenure. The majority of casual academics in 2001 (79.3%) were being re-engaged in the same university for periods up to 5 years and being employed in universities generally for periods between 6 months and 10 years (74.5% of casual workers) (Junor et al. 2001, cited Kimber 2003). The third trend is that women continue to be over-represented as casual employees (Collins 1994). In 2003, 38% of full-time continuing academic employees were women (DEST 2004). Of the 19% casual density of academic staff in 2000, the composite was that this represented 25% of all women employed in academia, compared with 15% of all men in academia.

As reported in Table One, there is a growing trend of casualisation across other sectors in Australia (Buchanan 2004; Pocock et al. 2004; Buddelmeyer et al. 2006). Pocock et al. (2004) interview-based studies with 55 respondents drawn from retail and community services found that the bulk of workers were 'reluctant casuals', that is, workers who if given the opportunity would want to work full-time with a sense of permanency. Research by Buddelmeyer et al. (2006) does suggest that while casual employees are more vulnerable to being unemployed compared with full-time workers, being casually employed increases the probability of being employed non-causally (e.g. full-time permanent) when there are labour market upswings.

The trend of casualisation is also reflected in academia, traditionally a sector of secure full-time employment and generous conditions. The NTEU warns: 'Academic work ...sits at the cusp of the transition from secure, high-status, unionised employment, primarily in the public sector, to insecure, low-status unorganised casual existence, at the beck and call of 'the market'' (NETU 2006: 4). Junor's (2004) large scale survey conducted in 2000/2001 suggests that despite managerial claims of 'flexibility for employees', casualisation in Australian universities is actually a minority preference. Fifty percent <sup>1</sup>of Junor's casual respondents wanted permanent employment, either part-time or full-time.

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<sup>1</sup> It should also be noted that a proportion of casual academics are not aspiring academics seeking a full-time academic career. Instead, some casuals may be a person who is engaged full-time in another industry (i.e. an industry expert), or possibly freelance (i.e. holding down several part-time positions simultaneously) (Junor 2004; Gappa and Leslie 1993 [cited Kimber 2003]).

The increasing trend toward casualisation is not in the interest of developing a higher education sector adapted to the needs of the knowledge economy. It is suggested that changes in the Australian higher education sector over the past decade are driving greater numbers of higher research degree students to contemplate careers outside of academia, due to reductions in funding and foreclosure of opportunities (Kimber 2003). As a number of observers note (Collins 1994; Kimber 2003; Junor 2004), because the academy and NTEU, until very recently, delayed adequately addressing the issues of casualisation, this has done a disservice to individual casual employees and the wider academic profession, as talented people have been discouraged from working in the sector.

In 2004 the NTEU set limits on casual employment to prevent emergence of full-time casual teaching positions. The Union also took steps not to pursue the right to convert to continuing status for long-term teaching casuals. The fear was that long-term casuals would be only offered conversion into continuing teaching-only positions, taking the sector back to the two tiered model of the 1990s. However, in 2005 the Federal Government's 'Higher Education Workplace Relations Requirements' specifically outlawed restrictions on the use of fixed term or casual contract, thus negating the Union's 2004 strategy. The NETU (2006) is developing strategies to counter perceptions of competing interests between continuing and casual staff in order to improve conditions and career paths of casual workers, whilst protecting general employment standards and ensuring that an academic underclass is not allowed to flourish. Yet despite the good intentions of the NTEU, casual academics are still in a state of limbo; the majority of casuals depend on their work as their primary source of income. The NTEU is advocating a limit on casual employment. However, if Federal funding does not increase, there will not be the corresponding growth of full-time tenured positions to soak up the casual work force. Without a Federal Government change in attitudes toward the tertiary sector, the plight of casual academics will remain. It remains to be empirically tested (i.e. similar to Buddelmeyer's et al. (2006) methodology) if long periods of casual academic employment bode well for applicants for full time academic positions, assuming the sector is revitalised with the recent change to a more 'education friendly' Federal Labor Government.

### **3. Further furcation of career paths: the teaching-intensive and research-intensive wedge**

Coupled with the casualisation of academic labour, is an emerging trend in Australian universities to consider separate research and teaching-intensive career paths for full-time tenured staff. Traditionally, teaching and research functions have been inextricably linked for individual academic practitioners. Many academics, however, are now under pressure to choose between time spent on teaching and time spent on research (NTEU 2007; Krause 2007). Deakin University has officially adopted this bifurcation of teaching and research; the University of Newcastle is reportedly considering it (Deakin University 2007; NTEU Newcastle Branch 2007). The managerial justification for this development is that it will offer promotions for academic staff with large teaching loads, who previously had felt compromised with career promotion due to lower research output (Deakin University 2007, DEST 2007b). For example, Deakin University proclaims: 'As a progressive institution, Deakin is keen to provide a similar process (as it does with research-only promotion ) to recognise and support its best teachers and to ensure they have a clear career path' (Media Statement June 6 2007).

Yet there is a contradiction between this managerial push to separate the teaching-research nexus, compared with the public message of unity. As Krause (2007: 1) reports: 'A recent analysis of university websites reveals that all but two of the universities publicly say they embrace important connections between research and teaching'. Meanwhile: 'There appears to be a significant gap between university policy statements and the lived experiences of many academics who are doing their best to forge a career path that juggles the typical elements of teaching, research and service' (ibid.). A recent web-search of DEST (2007a)

material revealed minimal discussion of the implications of bifurcation of the academic pathway into teaching-intensive and research-intensive strands.

It is construed by many in the sector that separate funding policies are driving a wedge between research and teaching (Krause 2007). The Learning and Teaching Performance Fund (LTPF) focuses on student satisfaction and quality teaching (DEST 2007b), whereas the Research Quality Framework (RQF) links funding with the quality and impact of research (NTEU 2007). It is argued that the RQF, initiated by the Coalition Government in 2004, is becoming a costly assessment exercise and its current form is now in doubt, particularly with the recent victory of the Rudd Labour Government (Healy 2007). A further policy identified as accentuating the research-teaching divide is the emphasis on community engagement and knowledge transfer. This activity is mainly linked to research, with only limited acknowledgment of the role of learning and teaching in the knowledge exchange process (Krause 2007).

The separation of the research-teaching nexus is arguably not in the best interests of individual careers, nor the long term interest of the tertiary education sector. Research from the UK forewarns Australian decision-makers of the dangers of following this path. In his analysis of the UK Higher Education Strategy White Paper, Bryson (2004) cautions that postgraduate opportunities are likely to decline with the formation of knowledge transfer or teaching-intensive institutions. As research funding is funnelled into highly rated institutions, there is less choice for students as secondary research centres are removed. Bryson observes: 'Promotion (is) reserved only for research-only staff, while teachers/researchers have extra work dumped on them and find it hard to gain momentum'. Further evidence emerges from a recent IFUW discussion forum that raises concern that the fostering of research 'star' performers abandons the idea of a research-teaching nexus and risks leaving the teaching-intensive staff as second-class members of the academic community (IFUW 2007). Of note, a danger is that teaching-only staff in many institutions will be over-represented by women (IFUW 2007).

Another concern is that teaching-intensive career paths are more vulnerable to the vagaries of the international student market (NTEU 2007). While the impressive growth of Australian educational services export industry is widely noted (for example, Davies 2005; NTEU 2007), the task of servicing growing numbers of international students is likely to be shouldered by teaching-intensive and casual staff. These groups are the first to suffer when the market has an inevitable downturn. A further negative feedback effect is possible if teaching-intensive groups are separated from engaging in research. Declining international competitiveness over time may result as educators lose touch with the cutting edge knowledge of their disciplines. This hypothesis deserves further research.

There are pedagogical reasons why pursuing a teaching intensive focus is not in the best interests of students. As Kleeman (2002) insightfully notes, separating teaching from research activities possibly removes the most active and creative minds from contact with undergraduates. Also, it denies the benefits of shared access by students and other staff to infrastructure paid for from research sources. This is because standard funding models can leave teaching-active sections vulnerable to an inability to support basic levels of research and scholarship. Hilmer (2007) also observes that an institution focused on research can offer teachers who are at the forefront their discipline. Another concern is that teaching-intensive pathways, especially when commercially driven, can lead toward a commoditisation of education that is 'outcomes-based', rather than embracing the overall learning processes (Davies 2005). A recent polemic article by Gava (2007) argues that concentrating on good teaching skills at a tertiary level misconceives the role of university academics. Students at tertiary level should already be motivated self-learners – it is not the lecturer's role to inspire students to learn. Indeed, 'one's passion about ideas is probably the best motivation for student learning' (Gava 2007: 27). In Gava's view, the academic's role should be to impart knowledge, challenge and even offend preconceptions, thereby opening up alternative ways

of problem solving and thinking. Turning university academics into trained teachers is a misdirection of resources. Such views, offered by commentators such as Kleeman (2002), Hilmer (2007) and Gava (2007), imply that teaching-intensive approaches, divorced from research, wrongly cast the tertiary academic in a secondary school teacher's role with the purpose of simply inspiring learning rather than challenging intellectual paradigms.

#### **4. Conclusion: repairing the teaching-research nexus**

The literature reviewed in this paper identifies the developments that have resulted in a trifurcation of the Australian academic labour force. The traditional tenured academic career where scholarship of one's discipline was developed by integrating research and teaching began its transformation - or arguable disintegration - during the Dawkins era of 'new managerialism'. The career pathway bifurcated into a casualised stream with tenuous working conditions. Under the Howard regime of tight funding and an oppressive myopic neo-liberal ideology, there has been a further push to divide career pathways, even for full-time tenured positions, into a teaching-intensive path with increasing student to staff ratios, and a research-intensive path with fierce competition for funding. This trifurcation is arguably not in the national interest of developing a higher education sector responsive to the needs of a knowledge economy. The separation of teaching and research, as Kleeman (2002: 2) articulates, 'threatens the standard and nature of university teaching, which by its nature should take place within a culture of sustained scholarship and creation of new knowledge through research'. Krause (2007) argues that educators should not have to choose between pedagogy and research. Rather, there should be reward schemes - such as promotion and teaching awards - for academics who make meaningful links between teaching and research.

This paper, written at a time of new Federal leadership in Australia with a main policy platform of an 'education revolution', remains hopeful that Marginson's (2000) call will be heeded to revalue higher education as a public good, rather than as an individual utility. Increased public funding can facilitate new academic career pathways that value and integrate both research and teaching for individual academics. There are several ways in which increased funding will help restore the research-teaching nexus. One is that more funding should help build up staff to cope with growing student numbers. After completion of a satisfactory probationary period, staff should be shifted to full-time 5 year tenure, rather than being cruelly relegated to casual or short-term contract ranks as 'production inputs'. Of course a small degree of casualisation is desirable for RHD students who are serving an academic apprenticeship, but not as an alternative career path to satisfy managerial whims and budget constraints. Two, increased funding can wean the Australian tertiary education sector from an overdependence on the volatile international student market. This would lessen the push for teaching-intensive pathways. While some international engagement is a worthwhile scholarly and humanitarian activity, the NTEU (2007) argues that internationalisation of education should be an institution's question of choice rather than being forced into internationalisation out of financial necessity. Third, it is hoped that more secure career paths can nurture an academic culture where the mutual interdependence of research and teaching are recognised. The majority of staff within faculties should be encouraged to pursue both activities in a cyclical manner (i.e. one year devoted full time to teaching then having the following year free to engage in research inquiry). Hopefully the work can soon begin to repair the academic career pathway and eliminate the deceptive forks and dead ends. Teaching and research should comfortably walk side by side along the one road.

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