



Wage theft is rife at universities, but do the managers know it?

By Yaegan Doran

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(5 Comments)

Wage theft is rife at universities in Australia. This is the conclusion [of a report released last week](#) by the University of Sydney Casuals Network in conjunction with the Sydney branch of the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU). The report audited the actual hours worked by nineteen casuals across seven schools at the University of Sydney, compared to the hours for which they were paid. It showed that 84 per cent of participants were underpaid in the first six weeks of semester at an average of \$2,521 per person, with one worker being underpaid \$11,469 during this period. These workers were contracted for on average 1.4 days a week but worked close to another day a week (6.6 hours) without pay.

A spokesperson for the University of Sydney [replied in typically nonplussed fashion](#): 'Beyond this report, we are not currently aware of any other data or evidence to suggest our academic staff are frequently working hours beyond what they are contracted to do.' As a co-author of the report and a casual myself, this is a frustrating but unsurprising response. After nine years working on casual or fixed-term contracts at universities, I have become used to high-level managers who avoid acknowledging the systematic overwork and underpayment of their staff.

However, this does raise the question of whether or not managers do in fact know their policies lead to such overwork and underpayment.

The evidence suggests they do. In March this year, the NTEU [made a submission](#) to the Senate Inquiry into underpayment in the Australian economy. It detailed a number of specific cases of wage theft at Australian universities and quoted a 2019 survey which found that 64 per cent of casuals in Australia reported they were underpaid for their work. In [response](#), the Australian Higher Education Industrial Association, the employer body representing most of the public universities in Australia, [stated that the NTEU](#) had 'provid(ed) no data about alleged underpayments', while University of Sydney Vice-Chancellor Michael Spence [simply said](#): 'The University does not agree with the written submissions provided by the NTEU ... that employees are subject to "large-scale wage theft".'

These responses reflect an ongoing pattern. In June, the University of Sydney Casuals Network produced [another report](#) surveying 159 casual staff within the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (FASS) at the University. This survey found that 82 per cent of casuals reported performing unpaid work in semester 1, at an average of 50 unpaid hours over the semester. When approached by the student newspaper *Honi Soit*, the University of Sydney [declined to comment](#).

A similar lack of acknowledgement occurs at more local levels. In August 2019, a group of NTEU members in FASS at the University of Sydney [released a detailed report](#) on the workloads of academic staff in the Faculty, based on a survey of approximately a third of its staff. It found that the Faculty's workload policies severely undercounted how long it takes to complete core tasks, and that 72 per cent of staff felt they were not given enough time to do their work. A month later, [they issued another report](#) showing that these results were remarkably similar to other studies across Australia and that academics had to routinely work around 50 hours per week to do their job – well above the 37.5 hours considered 'full time'. A year after these reports were released, the group has yet to receive a formal response from the Dean of the Faculty or any other University manager.

As these instances illustrate, when evidence arises of systematic underpayment

or radical overwork, it is common for University management to feign surprise or simply not respond.

Perhaps more important than these detailed studies is the actual experience of staff. For casuals and the supervisors who hire them, knowledge of underpayment is standard and regularly acknowledged. To call it an 'open secret' wrongly suggests there is something secret about it.

It is possible that the University of Sydney is an isolated case – a particularly exploitative employer preying heavily on their precarious staff. However, the fact that a third of universities in Australia [have recently admitted to some form of underpayment](#) and seven of the eleven public universities in NSW [are currently being audited](#) for wage theft suggests otherwise. Much of this has come to light due to casuals themselves campaigning. At the University of Melbourne, [millions of dollars are being repaid](#) after casuals staged a years-long campaign, while at the University of Queensland underpayment [has come to light](#) thanks to casuals keeping records of their own work hours. Nonetheless, university managements still avoid acknowledging the endemic nature of this wage theft. A University of Queensland spokesperson read from the same hymn sheet as their University of Sydney counterpart [when they stated that the university](#) 'had not seen a systemic issue with underpayment'.

Staff who do the bulk of university work know that wage theft is standard practice. For any senior manager to deny this suggests they are either wilfully ignorant, or they have been so far away from the ground of everyday teaching, research and administration for so long that they don't know how universities actually work.

To support the campaign against wage theft in the higher education sector, please sign [the petition](#).

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More by Yaegan Doran

Comments

From A broken casual worker on 10 November 2020 at 1.04 pm

The manager's jobs should be on the line, not everyone else's.

Reply

From someone who believes in providing education, not a sham degree on 11 November 2020 at 12.30 pm

What the article doesn't mention is that in juxtaposition to the shamefully low incomes of the casual staff who really are the backbone of the university, the senior management group pay themselves upwards of \$1.5 million on salary alone. 50 of USyd's top paid execs earn over a million dollars a year, no including bonuses and other benefits.

How did it get to this point? How the hell did we end up with these charlatans and philistines leeching such vast fortunes from the university coffers, all the while telling us that we all need to do our bit in these 'tough times'.

These are the same managers that have been systematically destroying the quality of education by increasing class sizes, lowering standards, and most importantly NOT PAYING THE STAFF PROPERLY TO TEACH YOUR KIDS.

We must expel management from their lofty positions and return the administrators back to what they're supposed to be doing: namely, providing