**CASUAL EMPLOYMENT AND BACK-PAY MOVE**

The university has committed to spend $8-million for a further catch-up on short-payment of staff in the casual employment area. The Vice Chancellor, Deborah Terry, announced the move on 27.5.24, following an extensive review by the university covering the calendar years 2017 to 2023.

It is a new instalment in a long-running issue, where universities were pushed to begin [correcting under-payments in 2020](https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-08-18/rmit-uq-now-among-universities-accused-of-underpaying-staff/12565528), estimated to have now totalled more than $180-million across Australia.

This time, at UQ, it was to do with failure to apply rules of employment, on minimum hours for engagement of casual academic and non-academic staff, and recognition of a casual academic’s doctoral qualification with an extra payment. These are provisions usually applied through a check-list when making an appointment, but with large numbers employed in this way, 9743 current and former staff have been identified, to receive a median back-payment of $243.03.

**“Wage theft” on the national scale**

The universities union, NTEU, which negotiated the Enterprise Agreement under which the payment rules were set, said [the answer was to have fewer casual staff](https://www.msn.com/en-au/money/other/university-of-queensland-underpaid-casual-staff-by-nearly-8-million-between-2017-and-2023/ar-BB1naxt6?ocid=BingNewsSearch).

Problems with heavy reliance on casual employment have included a threat to standards of teaching, discipline knowledge and research, but extend beyond universities, across the economy; part of a “wage theft” crisis where many employers will not be so responsible about paying back what is owed.

Fifty years of neo-liberal thinking, outsourcing, casualisation, de-unionisation, “labour hire”, the “gig economy”, have produced adverse consequences for employees and an eventual back-lash in the workforce.

Back at UQ, a program has already been agreed on, in the Enterprise Agreement last year, to create 50 regular jobs for Teaching Associates, to begin providing regular work at least for some.

**UQ undertaking**

The Vice Chancellor’s undertaking to make good the losses is an exercise in fair dealing, to be outlined in an all-staff circular:

“The University initiated this external review in October 2021 to ensure our employees were paid accurately and in accordance with UQ’s applicable Enterprise Agreement (EA) between January 2017 to December 2023 ...

“In my communication to staff about this matter, I will unreservedly apologise for these errors and reaffirm the University’s commitment that affected staff will receive all pay due, including superannuation and interest ...

“I want to assure you that the University is undertaking an extensive program of work to further strengthen our pay systems and processes and to ensure ongoing pay accuracy. This includes investment in our new time and attendance and payroll systems ...”

The size of the problem is indicative of the scale of universities in 2024, with pressure on them to grow more, in line with the federal government [Accord](https://www.education.gov.au/australian-universities-accord), to provide more graduates for the “new economy”.

For context the payments back-log of $8-million is a large sum but in a very big pool. The UQ Rugby Club has a rebuilding project to cost another $8-million, half from the university. These relatively “small sums” are among many demands in an overall budget of some $2.5-billion, of which $1.33-billion is for staff salaries and related expenses.

**ARE DEGREES BEING DOWNGRADED BY MARKS INFLATION?**

Worry about inflation of marks, and grades, in universities was given a boost by survey results reported in March showing distended increases in the numbers of “merit grades” – High Distinctions and Distinctions.

**Large research project shows marks blow-out**

Two researchers in the Finance discipline at Sydney University said they had tracked results over ten years to 2021 at their own university, entailing almost 400 000 individual undergraduate marks across 127 degree subjects.

They identified a 234% increase in the number of High Distinctions awarded.

One of the co-authors, Senior Lecturer Craig Mellare, told the [Sydney Morning Herald](https://www.smh.com.au/national/nsw/distinction-the-new-credit-grade-inflation-puts-uni-integrity-at-risk-20240321-p5fe7i.html), “we’re now getting close to the average mark being a Distinction.”

“If I didn’t know better I would think someone who gets an HD is going to be the absolute cream of the people who sat that course, and it’s only going to be an elite group – but actually, it isn’t, it’s one in four”, he said.

His colleague Lecturer Abdul Razeed said it raised concerns about degrees being devalued.

“If everyone ends up receiving a really good mark, then there’s no way of distinguishing the best students, and hence the whole degree comes into question: the intensity, the rigour of that degree that the university is offering”, he said.

**Qualifying the research**

Their [report appeared to have been on work in progress](https://www.vice.com/en/article/93kjw7/university-grade-inflation), maybe given at a seminar, awaiting the outcome of a peer review process ahead of publication in academic journals. My request for a copy of the research report got no reply.

An [article in *The Conversation*](https://theconversation.com/if-uni-marks-are-going-up-does-that-mean-theres-a-problem-226506#:~:text=This%20week%2C%20a%20report%20by,call%20this%20%E2%80%9Cgrade%20inflation%E2%80%9D.) by specialists in the assessment field cautioned against getting anxious over grade inflation, suggesting assessment and learning itself have improved.

Their idea is that with more formative assessment and organised feed-back to students, and with criteria based assessment, including rubrics spelling out the standard for each grade, in each subject, performance will improve.

**Better performances, or shaky marking?**

The problem with that is the actual high extent of upward marking identified in studies like the one at USYD. If those big numbers are credible, the extreme level of diversion from tighter outcomes in previous years puts doubt on the proposition that actual improvement is taking place in knowledge and intellectual capability. Which is to say, that “improvement” looks too good to be true.

Another problem is being voiced by academic staff that students have become steadily more fixated on assessment, working only to the universities’ detailed criteria points, in lieu of committing to broad and deep study of the course materials. It leads to an argument that current assessment practices will be counter-educative.

The critique in *The Conversation* characterises earlier assessment practices as “norm referenced”, determining grades by comparing performances of students within a particular group doing a subject – so really only valid for that group. That was not all it was about, and that aspect was not invented by the teachers. Bad “norm referenced” systems that were formalised, and foisted on academic staff, would make it be that a poor performance, if top of the class, had to be an HD, “fitting” the so-called bell curve. It happened.

**Getting authentic – a barrier against over-marking?**

The value of assessment devised and conducted by academics who were teaching the courses was its “authenticity”; evaluation related to the material taught at the time, the assessors deploying their discipline knowledge to set and judge the student’s work. Formative work in such situations, giving feedback and encouragement, is within the learning-teaching process, and produces much of the assessment. On the other hand, where summative assessment applies, giving feedback and encouragement remains within the learning-teaching process but is separate from the assessment procedure.

“Authentic assessment” is referred to in current debates as an antidote to cheating, that close relative of inflated assessment – two variants on working the system to get higher marks.

The proposal is to include authentic assessment because being original, it resists being penetrated or traduced; an expensive option as it involves academics’ time and expertise, but invaluable where it preserves standards of learning and knowledge.

At the UQ Senate I have asked if cheating can be listed for mention at all meetings and to date reports on the management of cheating have been regular and fairly reassuring, even with the upsurge of Artificial Intelligence both in crafting assessment and in defending it. We can check for information on grade inflation at UQ, one university that easily could both be a standard setter and keep the best prizes for true, thoroughly demonstrable academic achievement.

As most readers would know, the [seven-point grading system](https://www.scholaro.com/db/Countries/Australia/Grading-System/University-of-Queensland-24917) used by universities is near universal but with variations in the number of marks applicable to each of the categories, being HD (7), D (6), Credit (5), Pass (4), various grades of low pass or pass conceded, through into failures (1,2,3). They add up these grades for individual subjects then divide to get a Grade Point Average (GPA).