Institute of Public Affairs

IPA RESEARCH NOTE

The growth of the university bureaucracy

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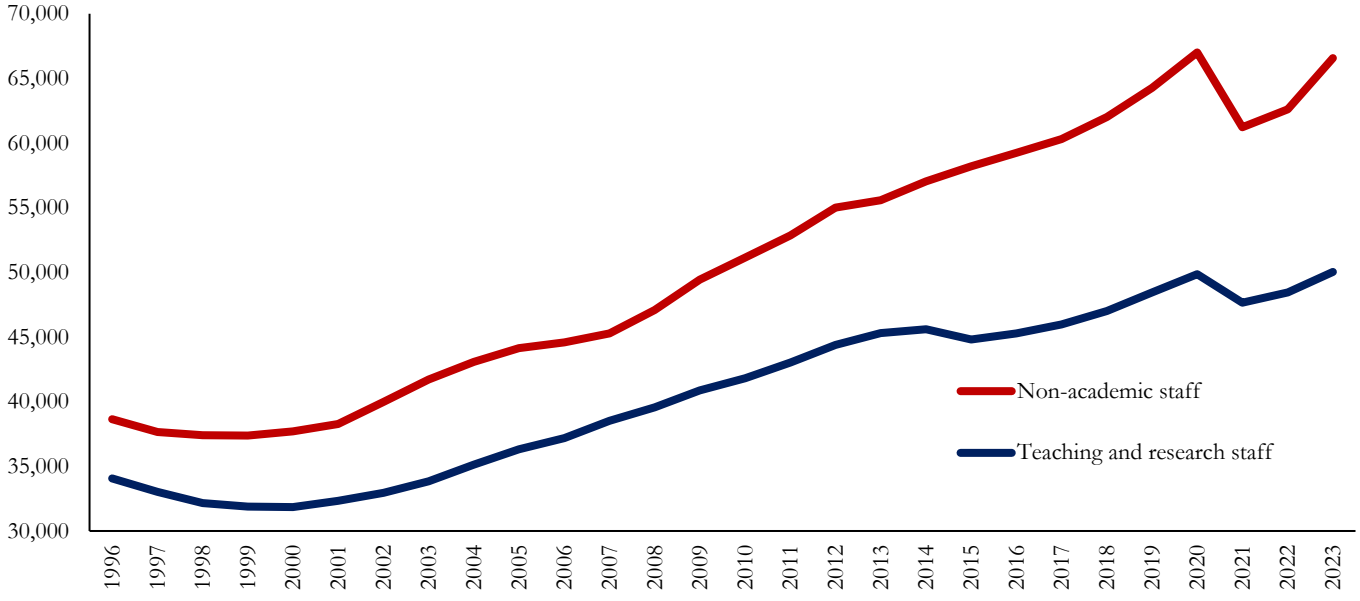
Key findings

The number of bureaucrats employed by Australia's universities has risen sharply in recent decades, with Australia's most prominent universities—the Group of Eight (G8)— devoting resources to non-academic staff at a collective cost of over $3 billion each year in salary costs alone.

- Of the 116,610 people employed at an Australian university in 2023, 43 per cent (50,033) were employed in teaching and research roles, while 57 per cent (66,577) were employed in non-academic roles (such as administrators).
- Since 1996, the number of non-academic staff employed has increased by 72 per cent whilst the number of teaching and research staff employed has increased by 47 per cent. This means that the number of non-academic staff has grown 70 per cent faster than that of academic staff.
- According to the latest data, non-academic staff outnumbered academic staff in six of the G8 universities, with the University of Queensland having the widest margin at 60 per cent of employees in non-academic roles.
- In their latest reporting periods, Australia's G8 universities spent $3.2 billion per annum on non-academic staff salaries.

Figure 1: *Growth in full-time equivalent staff at Australian universities*



Source: Federal Department of Education (2024)

Table 1: Number and salaries of academic and non-academic staff at G8 universities (latest publicly available data)

University	Academic staff		Non-academic staff	
	Total number	Salary costs	Total number	Salary costs
University of Sydney (2022)	3,574	$577,344,000	4,909	$602,960,000
University of Melbourne (2022)	4,945	$673,532,000	4,864	$491,830,000
Australian National University (2022)	N/A	$250,820,000	N/A	$270,259,000
University of Queensland (2023)	2,989	$470,058,000	4,515	$444,382,000
University of Western Australia (2023)	1,393	$235,697,000	1,847	$209,384,000
University of Adelaide (2022)	1,454	$216,867,000	1,652	$180,781,000
Monash University (2020)	4,162	$562,678,000	4,977	$514,511,000
University of NSW (2022)	3,251	$522,012,000	3,750	$471,035,000
Total expenditure		$3,509,008,000		**$3,185,142,000**

Source: University annual reports

Analysis

Growth of the non-academic bureaucracy

An analysis of data published by the federal Department of Education[1] reveals that both academic and non-academic staff numbers in Australia's universities grew significantly between 1996 and 2023, with the growth of non-academic staff occurring at a considerably faster rate than academic staff.

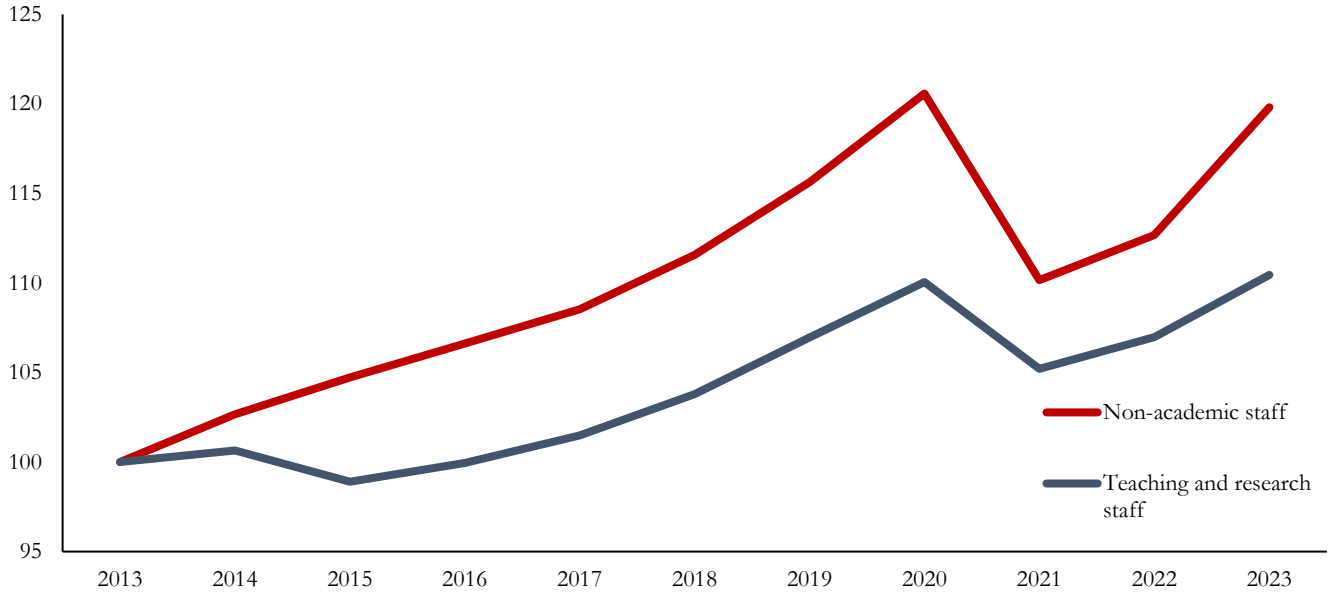
Since 1996, the number of non-academic staff employed by Australian universities has increased by 72 per cent, whilst the number of teaching and research staff employed has increased by just 47 per cent. This means that there are now more non-academic staff than teaching staff. For example, in 2023, for every ten staff employed by higher education institutions, six were non-academic staff (administrators), less than one are teaching staff, one was employed in a research role, and two were employed in a combined teaching and research role.

Data in the most recently published annual reports[2] by the Group of Eight universities show that non-academic staff outnumbered academic staff in six of the Group of Eight universities, with the University of Melbourne employing only 81 more academics than non-academics, and the ANU failing to report staff numbers for each category (though ANU does spend more on non-academic wages than academic salaries). The largest difference is at the University of Queensland, which employed 4,515 non-academic staff versus 2,989 academic staff in 2023.[3]

The relative increase in staffing equates to an increase in total university salaries. Analysis of university annual reports reveals that Australia's elite universities spent $3.185 billion per annum on non-academic staff during the most recent reported year.

Two notable trends emerge from the data. The first is the sharp increase in university bureaucrats that takes place in the period 2007 to 2012. This coincides with reforms undertaken by the federal government to adopt a demand-driven system model. Before 2009, the number of places funded by the Commonwealth Grants Scheme was capped, but these caps were removed on public university places and from 2012, providing a place for every domestic undergraduate student. According to a parliamentary research paper, 'The uptake in demand from this policy was significant with an increase from some 440,000 to 541,000 Commonwealth supported places between 2009 and 2013.'[4] This influx of students likely enabled an expansion of the university bureaucracies. Since 2013, the growth rate of non-academic staff has been double the growth rate of academic staff.

Figure 2: *Growth in full-time equivalent staff at Australian universities from 2013 to 2023 (Index: 2013=100)*



Source: Federal Department of Education (2024)

These findings highlight the lack of priority afforded to strong academic outcomes of students across Australian universities. This is illustrated in the declining global rankings of Australia's universities. In the annual QS World University Rankings, seven of Australia's top 20 universities have seen their ranking decline between 2023 and 2024.[5] This is reinforced by the findings in Times Higher Education World University Ranking, which found Australia's top ten universities declined between 2023 and 2024.[6]

Despite these trends, the recently released Australian Universities Accord final report[7] makes recommendations that would likely lead to the hiring of even more administrators. Its key proposals for reform include raising the tertiary education attainment target from 60 per cent to 80 per cent of working age people and for universities to make greater commitments to 'equity', which will likely require more administrators to oversee and manage.

University bureaucracies undermine freedom of speech on campus

Another consequence of the expansion of university bureaucracies is the proliferation of rules for administrators to oversee and enforce. IPA research has identified that rulemaking has even undermined academic freedom principles: an audit of university rules scoring policies for their treatment of freedom of speech on campus identified that overall hostility to freedom of speech has more than doubled between 2016 and 2023, and almost all Australian universities are hostile to freedom of speech on campus.[6] The audit found:

- 38 of Australia's 42 universities (90 per cent) were rated 'red' for having policies that were hostile to free speech on campus, an increase from 33 in 2018 and 31 in 2017.
- Four of Australia's universities (10 per cent) were rated 'amber' for policies that threaten free speech on campus, a decrease from 8 in 2018 and 10 in 2017.
- Zero universities were rated 'green' for supporting free speech on campus, a decrease of one institution in 2018.

While it is reasonable to expect that the growth in student numbers has necessitated a growth in non-academic staff, it is also reasonable to posit that non-academic staff have contributed to the free speech crisis on campus.

Consistent with the public choice theory of bureaucracies, university administrators face dysfunctional incentives to expand their domains. This means hiring more people and expanding the scope of university administrative departments themselves through the creation of new rules to justify higher budgets and prestige. As identified by political scientist and professor Benjamin Ginsberg in his book *The Fall of the Faculty*, 'Administrators thus have strong incentives to oversupply services. They have selfish incentives to create unnecessary jobs and hire unnecessary staff, which others will pay for.'[7] This 'oversupply' of services in the Australian context appears to extend to the creation of campus conduct policies, including the creation of unnecessary and burdensome free speech policies.[8]

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End Notes

1. Department of Education, 'Selected Higher Education Statistics—2023 Staff Data' (web page, 16 May 2024): https://www.education.gov.au/higher-education-statistics/staff-data/selected-higher-education-statistics-2023-staff-data.
2. University of Sydney, *Annual Report 2022* (Annual Report, April 2023); University of Melbourne, *Annual Report 2022* (Annual Report, 31 March 2023); Australian National University, *Annual Report 2022* (Annual Report, April 2023); University of Queensland, *2023 Annual Report* (Annual Report, 22 February 2024); University of Western Australia, *Annual Report 2023* (Annual Report, 12 March 2024); University of Adelaide, *2022 Annual Report* (Annual Report, 2023); University of Adelaide, *2023 Pocket Statistics* (Report, June 2023); Monash University, *Annual Report 2020* (Annual Report, April 2021); UNSW Sydney, *UNSW 2022 Annual report* (Annual Report, 2023).
3. University of Queensland, *2023 Annual Report* (Annual Report, 22 February 2024).
4. Carol Dow, 'Reform of the higher education demand driven system (revised)' in *Budget Review 2014-15* Parliamentary Library Research Branch, May 2014) 66.
5. QS, *QS World University Rankings 2025: Top global universities* (4 June 2024).
6. Times Higher Education, *World University Rankings* (September 2023).
7. Department of Education, *Australian Universities Accord Final Report* (Report, 21 February 2024).
8. Brianna McKee, *Free Speech on Campus Audit 2023* (Institute of Public Affairs Research Report, August 2023).
9. Jason Brennan and Phillip Magness, *Cracks in the Ivory Tower* (Oxford University Press, 2019) 41.
10. See also James Kierstead and Michael Johnson, *Blessing or Bloat? Non-academic staffing in New Zealand universities in comparative perspective* (New Zealand Initiative, August 2023) which identified an increase in the number of non-academic staff in New Zealand universities. The authors note observe 'there is now good evidence of a free speech crisis at New Zealand universities, with about a third of academics and undergraduates saying in recent polls that they would not feel free or comfortable discussing controversial topics on campus.'
11. Ibid.