

La Trobe to pay casuals \$2m for ‘wage theft’

TIM DODD
HIGHER EDUCATION EDITOR

La Trobe University will hand nearly \$2m in backpay to casual academics who have been underpaid for marking student assignments as far back as 2015.

The payments, to be made in June, bring to \$6.5m the amount that La Trobe University has returned to casuals to make good underpayments from mid-2015 to mid-2022.

The settlement in the Fair Work Commission is the latest in the casual worker underpayment scandal in the higher education sector, which has led to more than \$80m in lost wages being repaid to staff at 18 universities in recent years. The University of Melbourne underpaid its casual staff by more than \$30m and the University of Sydney by more than \$12m.

The latest La Trobe payment settles a claim made by the National Tertiary Education Union, which said the university had based payment to casual academics on the number of assignments

marked rather than time spent, and that the piece rates did not reflect actual hours worked.

“Some NTEU members at La Trobe University reported being paid as little as 32 minutes per student, for a whole semester of marking,” the union said.

The La Trobe settlement follows an agreement by the University of Technology Sydney last week to repay \$4.4m in lost pay, plus \$1.3m in superannuation and interest, to its casual workers.

La Trobe University said in a statement that the “unintentional underpayments were the result of inefficient and outdated systems and processes, and devolved decision-making”.

“We have now addressed these issues to avoid any future errors, including a continuous review of the marking guidelines for each discipline to ensure fairness across disciplines,” the university said. “We regularly remind staff to claim the actual time spent marking to ensure they are appropriately compensated for their time and effort.”

The NTEU said that, for many years, casual staff at La Trobe had

been “too afraid” to complain about the piece work payments for marking.

“In a survey of casual staff conducted by the (NTEU La Trobe Casuals) Network in 2020, 49 per cent of respondents said they feared repercussions if they were to simply ask to be paid for all their hours worked,” the union said.

“This evidence gathering paved the way for the successful dispute and settlement in the commission.”

However, La Trobe branch president for the NTEU Anastasia Kanjere said this particular settlement “does not come close to rectifying all of the underpayment, exploitation and injustice that casual workers experience – we know it is only the beginning”.

“We believe that wage theft as a practice is baked into the business models of universities,” Dr Kanjere said.

She said other issues to be resolved included payment for required attendance at lectures and meetings on plagiarism, course design and moderation, and payment for class preparation and pastoral care.



Heads-up displays are one of many uses for the new augmented reality screens developed by the University of Melbourne and KDH Design Corporation

Visionaries on road to curved screen success

TIM DODD

A University of Melbourne research team has made the world's first curved augmented reality display screens, a breakthrough that is expected to widen the use of AR technology in recreation and the workplace.

The researchers used 3D printing techniques to create AR screens from polymers in any desired shape – which means that, for the first time, AR technology can be used in prescription lenses for glasses or goggles.

University of Melbourne researcher Ranjith Unnithan said the potential applications were vast, including gaming goggles

and visors, and in education and healthcare.

“In education, AR displays could be incorporated into educational tools and simulations, allowing for interactive and engaging learning experiences,” Associate Professor Unnithan said.

“In healthcare, AR displays could be used in medical training, assisting surgeons with real-time information during operations, but there are many other potential applications, from transport to tourism.”

Augmented reality is a technology in which a user's view of the real world is overlaid with digital information, improving their perception and making them

better able to interact with their environment.

Associate Professor Unnithan and his colleagues Christina Lim and Thas Nirmalathas developed the new technology in collaboration with Taiwanese company KDH Design Corporation and the Melbourne Centre for Nanofabrication.

KDH chief executive Jeremy Lu, who went to school in Melbourne and graduated from the University of Melbourne, said the new technology was first of its kind.

“Today, all the AR lenses are made with glass and it's impossible to make them with prescriptions or curvatures,” he said.

Mr Lu said the new AR screens

were made of flexible polymer when they were printed and then a special process was used to harden the polymer to ensure that a lens stayed rigid.

KDH will soon integrate the new technology into its range of AR motorbike helmets, glasses, and sports goggles which now use current technology relying on flat glass AR screens.

Mr Lu said the 3D-printed AR lenses would be produced in Australia and then shipped to Asia where they would be integrated with the micro LEDs (or light-emitting diodes) that provide the light for the devices. The 3D printing technique allows for very precise production with the potential for efficient mass manufacturing.

Mr Lu said the technology was power efficient and the aim was for a pair of AR glasses, for example, to give eight hours of use without recharging.

Glasses also needed to be light and convenient. “We can make the AR glasses less than 50g,” he said.

KDH owns the intellectual property on the technology and has filed nine patents.

Mr Lu said KDH had strong ties with Australia. “You can tell from the name of the company, Koala Design House,” he said, revealing what the company acronym stands for.

“We have abundant optical research talents in Australia. I think of KDH like a bridge.”

Sydney posts \$300m surplus

TIM DODD

The University of Sydney has withstood the financial storm that pulled most universities into deficit last year and has posted a near \$300m operating surplus for 2022.

The solid result comes even though the university's bottom line worsened by \$750m compared with 2021 when it reported a huge \$1.05bn surplus, the first time any Australian university had pushed its annual operating surplus through the \$1bn mark.

Sydney University achieved a \$298.5m surplus last year even as the other big research universities with which it competes plunged into deficit, hurt by the loss of a one-off boost in research funding handed out by the federal government in 2021 and a decline in the book value of investments because of poor market conditions.

The University of Queensland reported a \$31m deficit last year, the University of Melbourne reported a \$203m deficit and Monash University reported a \$78m deficit. The University of NSW, the other university in the big five,

has not yet announced its results for 2022.

At least 10 other universities also have disclosed deficits so far in 2022. When all 39 major universities have reported, the overwhelming majority are expected to be in the red.

Vice-chancellor Mark Scott said Sydney's 2022 surplus “still provides us with financial sustainability but there is no question we are navigating the challenges currently facing a volatile higher education sector”.

Professor Scott said the university's huge \$1bn surplus in 2021 was a one-off caused by gains from land sales, temporary research support from the federal government and strong investment performance in 2021, all of which were not repeated in 2022.

The university said it had an underlying surplus of \$381.5m in 2022 compared with a \$453.7m underlying surplus in 2021. It arrives at the underlying result by removing non-recurring items such as gains and losses from asset sales, philanthropic donations and funds that can be spent only on specified capital investments.

Last year \$142.3m in phil-

anthropy was pledged to the university.

Professor Scott said the university was “fortunate to be able to reinvest our surplus to support our core activities of teaching and research”.

“We also know our most important asset is our staff, and we are committed to providing the best overall conditions, including maintaining the highest salaries in the sector and expanding our academic workforce,” he said.

The university said its domestic undergraduate enrolments this year were similar to last year but domestic postgraduate numbers were down by 19 per cent following a surge during the pandemic.

This year international enrolments were ahead of target, the university said. Undergraduate international enrolments are 2 per cent above target and postgraduate international enrolments are 10 per cent ahead of target.

Full details of Sydney University's 2022 results won't be known until all NSW university annual reports are tabled in state parliament later this month.

Scientist ‘first’ Murdoch fellow

Murdoch University agricultural scientist Rajeev Varshney has been elected a fellow of the prestigious London-based Royal Society, the first researcher from the university ever to receive the honour.

Professor Varshney, who specialises in crop genomics, genetics, molecular breeding and capacity-building in developing countries, said he was “thrilled to be included with the stalwarts and giants of my field”.

Murdoch University vice-

chancellor Andrew Deeks congratulated Professor Varshney, saying his research had “impacted the lives of some of the world's most vulnerable people”.

“He is a very fitting recipient of this high honour and we are very proud to have him as Murdoch's first Royal Society fellow,” he said.

Also among the 59 new Royal Society fellows elected this year was CSIRO chemist Graeme Moad.

TIM DODD

Can Labor do real reform of unis?



TIM DODD
COMMENT

Last week's federal budget confirms one more way in which Anthony Albanese is breaking the mould of the stereotypical Labor government.

There was no generous flow of resources to universities. Higher education was virtually invisible this budget and, where it did appear, the few measures were targeted very specifically to solve other policy problems.

About \$130m will be spent to enrol an extra 4,000 students who will learn skills necessary to build, operate and maintain Australia's future fleet of nuclear-powered submarines and \$50m will help nurses to postgraduate study to improve their skills.

Politically there is nothing driving Labor to do more for universities when foremost in its mind are the looming fiscal deficits over the next decade. There are far more pressing policy issues including the rising cost of living, a shaky world economy, huge defence and security challenges, and the problems posed by climate

change and the switch to sustainable energy.

When it comes to universities any hard-headed Labor political strategist would see them as “safe seats” that don't need pampering. Universities had such poor relations with the Coalition, and were so pleased by Albanese's victory, that they are unlikely to cause political problems for Labor in the foreseeable future.

Instead of money, universities have been given a review that is being conducted as part of Education Minister Jason Clare's Universities Accord process.

Any and all issues are able, for the moment, to be kicked down the road to await the final report of the review at the end of this year. And its terms of reference are wide enough to encompass all issues ranging from funding for both teaching and research, to equity and access in higher education, and the often repeated calls for a closer links with vocational education.

But it's also being made clear, sotto voce, that universities shouldn't expect extra money in whatever policy changes emerge from the accord review.

This means that if the review is to tackle real reform then it is bound to cut into entrenched interests. The money won't be there to build something bigger without cutting into something else.

Hopefully the review panel,

chaired by Mary O'Kane, will be willing to take on big issues and absorb the flak.

For example, Australia needs to boost high-quality research in both fundamental and applied sciences but lacks the money. Yet at the same time a huge and growing amount of research is being done in universities as ranking systems drive the publication of more papers and our regulatory system requires all universities to do broad research across many disciplines, even if they are not very good at it.

It's obvious that research funding could be more efficiently allocated, but it will take a high level of determination on the part of the government to do so.

Another thorny issue is the relationship between higher education and vocational education. Both offer tertiary qualifications, but higher education has grown disproportionately over the past decade while VET has suffered from ill co-ordinated state policies and confused regulation.

Few dispute that students would benefit from being able to do courses that span both sectors and the accord review should find a way to cut through the thicket and make this happen.

Real reform always slices into entrenched interests and requires real will, and nonchalance about making enemies, to get it done.

Labor's challenge is to push ahead and do it, even at risk of upsetting some of its “safe seats”.

No hiding it, the global workforce is in for a bumpy ride

We have time to gear up for challenges ahead

INNES WILLOX

Imagine if, at the beginning of the industrial revolution, you were given an insight into the incredible economic and workforce transformation that was about to come.

Imagine you had global data foreshadowing the upheaval and change that was about to occur, across almost all industries, and the implications for jobs, skills and workforces around the world.

Of course, no one had that kind of insight in the early 1800s. In contrast, when it comes to the great technological and green transformations of our age, we have much more rich foresight, and we should make good use of it.

The World Economic Forum's recently released Future of Jobs report brings together the perspectives of 803 companies, collectively employing more than 11.3 million workers, across 27 industry clusters in 45 economies around the world.

This significant international survey paints a picture of enor-

mous jobs and skills churn across the coming years, predicting that 23 per cent of jobs are expected to change by 2027, with 69 million new jobs created and 83 million eliminated.

Two key forces – advances in technology and the transition to a cleaner/greener economy – are expected to drive major change in jobs and skills on a global scale across the next five years.

There is a story of strong growth, with the report finding that the green transition and localisation of supply chains will lead to net job gains around the world. The Australian results bear this out even more strongly.

Likewise, the impact of new technology on the workforce will also be momentous but with more mixed results for workers.

Adoption of technology and increased digital access will overall be net positive for jobs, but growth will also be offset by significant losses.

It's probably not a big surprise that the jobs predicted to grow the fastest are artificial intelligence and machine learning specialists, sustainability specialists, business intelligence analysts and information security specialists.

The largest absolute growth in jobs is expected in education, agriculture and digital commerce. The biggest losses will be felt in clerical



Willox

roles such as bank tellers, cashiers and data entry clerks vulnerable to automation.

Overall, the message is clear – the global workforce is in for a bumpy ride.

We know when the types of jobs in demand change, the overall skill profile of the workforce must also undergo major change. The companies surveyed considered only 56 per cent of core skills in the workforce today would remain stable over the next five years. That means 44 per cent of the skills workers currently hold are expected to be disrupted.

Interestingly, the standout skill most in demand by companies around the world in 2023 was analytical thinking closely followed by creative thinking.

The report predicts six in 10 workers around the world will require retraining or upskilling by 2027, but only around half of workers are seen to have access to

adequate training opportunities today. The challenge is huge. The businesses surveyed said skills gaps and an inability to attract talent were the key barriers to industry transformation.

When asked what they planned to do about it, there were two top answers: investing in learning and training; and accelerating the automation of processes.

The upshot: many workers will need to be upskilled, and many will find themselves replaced.

The question is, are we ready? Can our education and training system upskill workers efficiently and effectively? Do we have the policy settings to ensure those replaced by machines can re-skill and find new ways to contribute? If not, let's get on to it – now.

In 2023 we're in a complex place. We're navigating not just one industry transformation but two – technological and green – all while finding a new normal as we emerge from the pandemic and deal with economic instability, cost of living pressures, supply chain disruptions and increasingly divergent labour markets around the world.

It's a lot to deal with.

But, in 2023, we have one clear advantage over those who faced similar big upheavals before us. Thanks to said technology, we now have data, and lots of it, in real

Today's leaders have a fairly good idea of the scale of workforce change that's coming

time, from a wide range of sources.

Of course, no one can predict the future, but today's political and business leaders have a fairly good idea of the scale of workforce change and churn that's coming down the pipeline, the factors driving that change and the areas of the economy likely to see innovation and growth and those likely to see job displacement and contraction.

If knowledge is power, we're much better placed than our predecessors in the 1800s. We have information, data, predictions and insights. As a result, we should be on the front foot, able to navigate these transitions more smoothly and efficiently to maximise potential, growth and innovation and minimise the human cost.

The changes coming may be just as momentous as the impact of the steam engine and the production line, but, this time, we have no excuse for being unprepared.

Innes Willox is chief executive of the Australian Industry Group.

International student numbers grow

International student arrivals were 42 per cent higher in the first four months of this year compared with the same period last year, another sign that education exports will again be a major revenue earner for Australia.

Provisional data released by the Australian Bureau of Statistics on Tuesday show that 299,060 people entered the country on student visas from January to

April this year, compared with 126,650 in the same period last year.

However the number of students entering Australia is still well below the level of 2019, the last year not affected by the pandemic. In the first four months of 2019, 390,810 people on student visas entered Australia, 31 per cent more than this year.

Universities Australia chief

executive Catriona Jackson said that, while numbers this year are still below pre-pandemic levels, “we are steadily working back to those incredibly strong numbers we saw in 2018 and 2019”.

“These students are assets to our nation. They bring new knowledge, skills and perspectives, making Australia and our region stronger, smarter and better connected,” she said.