

OVER

LOAD

ED: AUSTRALIA'S UNIVERSITY CLASS SIZE CRISIS

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"I now have 50 students in a tutorial. These are timetabled in lecture theatres because there are too few classrooms large enough. Students form long queues up the side of the lecture theatre waiting to see me and the other tutor. Students can wait 15 minutes or more to get help or to have their work checked. After I teach a 2-hour tutorial of this size I am physically exhausted. Day after day it takes a toll on my health."

"I feel sorry for the students – they pay more and get less in return."

"Casual overwork leads to ongoing staff overwork. It is a circle of wage theft."

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Australian universities are in crisis. Students and staff are paying the price.

A major national survey of more than 4,000 university staff has found that class sizes have expanded dramatically since 2019, with profound consequences for the quality of education, the experience of students, and staff working conditions. The findings paint a picture of a system under severe and sustained strain: academics and professional staff stretched to their limits, and students unable to access the individual support they need and deserve.

The cause is not complex. Australia has chronically underfunded its universities for decades. The Job Ready Graduates package deepened that underfunding, cutting per-student Commonwealth funding for many of the most popular degrees while doing nothing to address the structural pressures universities face. In that environment, growing revenue by growing class sizes - rather than securing adequate public funding - has become the path of least resistance for too many institutions.

The solution is not complex either. There is widespread acceptance across the sector that Job Ready Graduates has been an abject failure. The evidence in this report makes clear why that reform cannot wait.

WHAT THE SURVEY FOUND

The Class Size Explosion

Three in five university staff — **62%** — report that tutorial and lab sizes have increased since 2019, with more than a third (35%) describing the increase as significant. Across all teaching formats, the picture is consistent: course sizes are up (53%), workshops up (47%), lectures up (38%).

The shift in tutorial sizes is stark. In 2019, more than one in four tutorials (27%) had 30 or more students. Today, more than half (54%) do. Meanwhile, the proportion of tutorials with the optimal number of students - 10 to 19, as identified by educators themselves - has more than halved, from 21% to just 9%.

The Gap Between Evidence and Reality

University staff know what works. More than half (51%) say tutorials of 10 to 19 students produce the best learning outcomes. But that is not what most students experience. The most common tutorial size is now 20 to 29 students. A growing share have 30, 40, or more. Most Australian university tutorials are now two to three times larger than what academics teaching them say is optimal.

The Workload Crisis

Larger classes mean more work. In most cases, that work is going unrecognised and uncompensated. Among casual staff, **83%** report that their unpaid workload has increased since 2019, with 55% describing the increase as significant. Among ongoing and fixed-term staff, **88%** report an increase in work that goes entirely unrecognised, with 62% describing the increase as significant. Two thirds (67%) directly attribute this explosion in unpaid labour to growing class sizes.

Women are bearing a disproportionate share of this burden. 65% of women report a significant increase in unrecognised work, compared to 53% of men.

And despite this surge in labour, **78% of staff have never had their compensation adjusted** to reflect the additional workload that larger classes create. Only 4% say their pay has been significantly adjusted.

Students Paying the Price

The consequences for students are serious and well-documented by the staff who teach them. **83%** of respondents say their ability to support students individually has been impacted by class size increases - half of them significantly. **78%** have observed a worsening in student engagement and learning outcomes. More than half (52%) have seen declining student satisfaction reflected in formal evaluation scores.

Only 1.7% of staff report any improvement in student outcomes since 2019.

What Must Change

These findings are the documented observations of thousands of experienced academics and professional staff - people who know what good teaching requires, and who are being denied the conditions needed to provide it.

Australian universities should be engines of opportunity, discovery and public good. That mission is being compromised by decades of underfunding that has pushed institutions to expand class sizes as a cost-cutting strategy, at the direct expense of education quality.

The Albanese government has an obligation to act. Properly funding Australia's universities is not only an investment in the students who attend them. It is an investment in the researchers, teachers, communities and industries that depend on them. The evidence is clear. The time for action is now.

The NTEU National Class Sizes Survey was conducted in early 2025. A total of 4,421 staff responded, including 3,666 academic staff and 755 professional staff. Respondents were asked to compare current conditions to those in 2019 - the last full academic year that was pre-COVID and pre-JRGP. Participants included both NTEU members and non-members working in the sector.

CHAPTER 1: THE CLASS SIZE EXPLOSION

Something has changed in Australian university classrooms. Walk into a tutorial today and you are likely to find more students than you would have six years ago - often significantly more. Ask the academic at the front of the room whether that is typical, and the answer, overwhelmingly, is yes.

The NTEU National Class Sizes Survey asked more than 4,000 university staff to compare today's class sizes with those in 2019, the last full academic year before COVID-19 disrupted higher education, and Job Ready Graduates (JRGP) put pressure on managements to cut costs. The results are unambiguous. Across every teaching format - tutorials, lectures, workshops, courses - class sizes have grown. The increases are not isolated to particular disciplines or institution types. They are widespread, sustained, and in many cases severe.

A System-Wide Shift

The breadth of the change is striking. When asked about class sizes across all teaching formats since 2019, a clear majority of staff report increases:

- » **Tutorials and labs: 62% report an increase** (35% significantly)
- » **Overall course/subject sizes: 53% report an increase** (30% significantly)
- » **Workshops: 47% report an increase** (28% significantly)
- » **Lectures: 38% report an increase** (20% significantly)
- » **Demonstrations: 34% report an increase** (20% significantly)

In no teaching format did more than 16% of staff report a decrease. These are not isolated pressure points.

The consistency of the pattern across teaching formats matters. It suggests that what is driving class size growth is not a specific curriculum change or a single institutional decision, but something more structural: a sustained financial pressure that is reshaping how Australian universities deliver education.

The Tutorial Crisis

Of all the findings in the survey, the tutorial data is the most alarming and the most consequential for students.

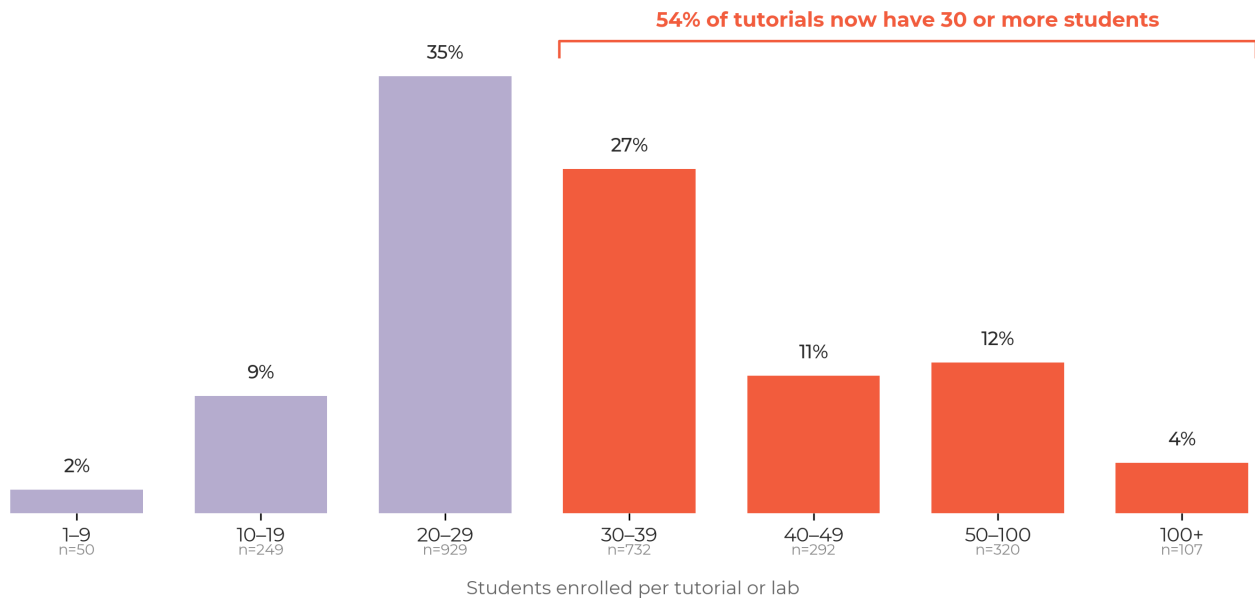
Tutorials and labs are where university education happens at its most personal. They are where students ask questions, work through difficult concepts, receive feedback, and form the connections with peers and teachers that sustain them through their degrees. They are disproportionately important for students who need extra support - those from disadvantaged backgrounds, first-in-family students, students with disabilities, and those navigating university study while managing work or family commitments.

They are also where the pressure of class size growth has been most acutely felt.

Six in ten university staff (**62%**) report that tutorial and lab sizes have increased since 2019. More than a third (34.5%) say the increase has been significant. Just 8% report any decrease.

Most tutorials are now well beyond small-group size

Average number of students enrolled per tutorial or lab, reported 2025



The raw numbers tell an equally stark story. Looking at what staff report about actual tutorial sizes - both now and in 2019 - the shift is substantial:

TUTORIAL SIZES: 2019 VS NOW

SIZE BAND	2019	NOW
1-9 students	2.3%	1.9%
10-19 students	21.2%	9.3%
20-29 students	49.2%	34.7%
30-39 students	14.7%	27.3%
40-49 students	5.0%	10.9%
50-100 students	5.4%	11.9%
100+ students	2.2%	4.0%

N=2230

The numbers reveal a clear and troubling trend. The most striking shift is in the 30-39 student band, which has nearly doubled from 15% of tutorials in 2019 to 27% today. The proportion of tutorials with 40 or more students has more than doubled, from around 13% in 2019 to 27% today.

At the same time, the proportion of tutorials with 10 to 19 students - widely regarded by teaching staff as the range most conducive to quality learning - has more than halved, from 21% to just 9%.

Fewer students are experiencing small-group learning. More are sitting in rooms that are too large for genuine engagement, individual attention, or the kind of feedback that makes a difference to their understanding.

Lectures: Growing at the Large End

The lecture data tells a different but related story. Lectures are by nature larger than tutorials but they too have grown, and the growth has been most pronounced at the upper end of the scale.

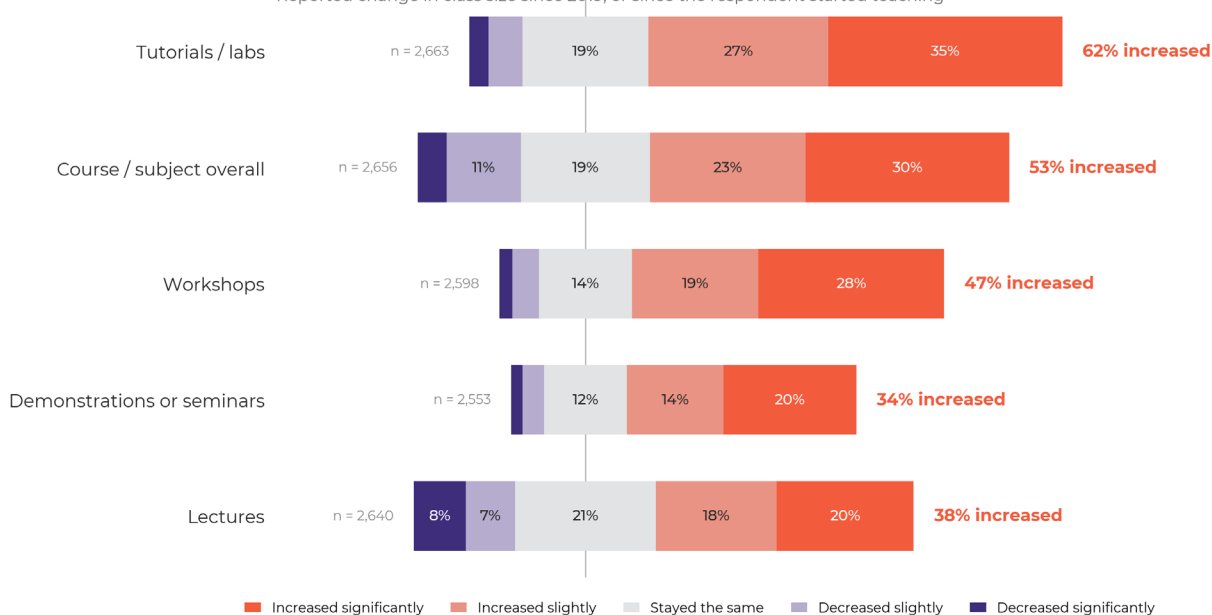
LECTURE SIZES: 2019 VS NOW

SIZE BAND	2019	NOW
Under 50	12.9%	10.2%
50-99	18.4%	18.8%
100-249	24.2%	27.3%
250-499	8.8%	14.0%
500-999	2.8%	5.6%
1,000-1,999	0.6%	1.4%
2,000+	0.2%	0.3%

N=2665

Class sizes have grown across every teaching format

Reported change in class size since 2019, or since the respondent started teaching



Source: NTEU National Class Sizes Survey, Q22. Percentages are of all respondents; bars do not sum to 100% — the remainder is staff for whom the format is not applicable.

The proportion of lectures with 250 to 499 students has grown from 8.8% to 14% - a 59% increase. The 500 to 999 band has doubled. The proportion of lectures under 50 students has shrunk. The trend is consistent: lectures are getting larger, and the growth is concentrated at the upper end of the scale where the distance between teacher and student is greatest.

Notably, 38% of staff report lecture sizes have increased since 2019, while 25% report lectures are not applicable to their teaching context - a reminder that the tutorial crisis is a universal experience across the sector.

Workshops: Significant Pressure

Workshops occupy a middle ground between tutorials and lectures, often more interactive than a lecture but larger than an ideal tutorial setting. Here too, the survey finds significant pressure.

Nearly half of staff - 47% - report workshop sizes have increased since 2019, with 27% describing the increase as significant. Just 6% report a decrease, with a third of respondents indicating workshops are not applicable to their teaching context.

A New Normal

What the data collectively describes is not a temporary disruption but a new normal. Class sizes increased and for the most part, they stayed increased. The survey's 2019 comparison baseline makes this clear: what staff are describing is not the chaos of pandemic-era remote learning, but the settled, ongoing reality of their teaching today.

For students, that reality means larger tutorials, bigger lectures, and less access to the individual attention and feedback that good university education requires. For the academics and professional staff delivering that education, it means more students to support, more work to do, and - as the following chapters show - less time and recognition to do it.

The class size explosion is not an accident. It is the predictable consequence of asking universities to do more with less and expecting quality to survive.

CHAPTER 2: THE GAP BETWEEN EVIDENCE AND REALITY

University staff are not simply reporting that class sizes have grown. They are reporting class sizes have grown beyond what they know, from experience and training, produces good learning outcomes. The gap between what teaching staff identify as optimal and what students are actually experiencing is one of the most striking findings of the survey. It is one of the clearest indicators of what chronic underfunding and the JRGP is costing Australian students.

What Good Teaching Looks Like

The survey asked staff not only about current and historical class sizes, but about what they consider ideal. The responses are remarkably consistent.

More than half of all teaching staff - **51%** - say a tutorial or lab of 10 to 19 students is the optimal size for quality learning. A further 30% consider 20 to 29 students workable. Only 6% regard a tutorial of 30 or more students as ideal, and just 2% would consider 40 or more acceptable.

WHAT STAFF SAY IS THE IDEAL TUTORIAL SIZE

SIZE BAND	% OF STAFF
1–9 students	12.6%
10–19 students	50.6%
20–29 students	30.1%
30–39 students	4.0%
40+ students	2.1%
Size not important	0.6%

N=2680

This reflects a broad professional consensus formed through years of teaching practice about the conditions under which students learn best. Small enough to allow every student to participate. Small enough for the teacher to know who is struggling and who needs more. Small enough for genuine dialogue, not just delivery.

The picture for lectures is more varied, reflecting the different purpose lectures serve. The most preferred lecture size is 50 to 99 students (25%), followed by under 50 (17%) and 100 to 249 (20%). Notably, 18% of staff say lecture size is not important to them.

51% OF STAFF SAY THE IDEAL TUTORIAL HAS 10–19 STUDENTS.

ONLY 9% OF TUTORIALS TODAY MEET THAT STANDARD.

WHAT STAFF SAY IS THE IDEAL LECTURE SIZE

SIZE BAND	% OF STAFF
Under 50	17.5%
50–99	25.5%
100–249	19.6%
250–499	4.2%
500+	0.7%
Size not important	18.1%
Not applicable	14.4%

N=2667

The Reality Students Face

Set against what staff say is ideal, the reality students face is starkly different.

For tutorials, the most common size is now 20 to 29 students - already at or beyond the upper range of what most staff consider workable. But that is not where the real concern lies. The most significant growth has been in larger size bands: 30 to 39 students (up from 15% to 27%), 40 to 49 students (up from 5% to 11%), and 50 to 100 students (up from 5% to 12%).

Meanwhile, the proportion of tutorials in the optimal 10 to 19 student range has more than halved from 21% in 2019 to just 9% today.

TUTORIALS: IDEAL VS 2019 VS NOW

SIZE BAND	IDEAL	2019	NOW
1–9 students	12.9%	2.3%	1.9%
10–19 students	50.7%	21.2%	9.3%
20–29 students	30.2%	49.2%	34.7%
30–39 students	4.1%	14.7%	27.3%
40–49 students	1.5%	5.0%	10.9%
50–100 students	0.5%	5.4%	11.9%
100+ students	0.1%	2.2%	4.0%

N=2679

More than 60% of teaching staff say the ideal tutorial has fewer than 20 students. Just 9% of tutorials today meet that standard. At the other end, just 6% of staff consider a tutorial of 30 or more students acceptable, yet more than half of all tutorials now fall into that category.

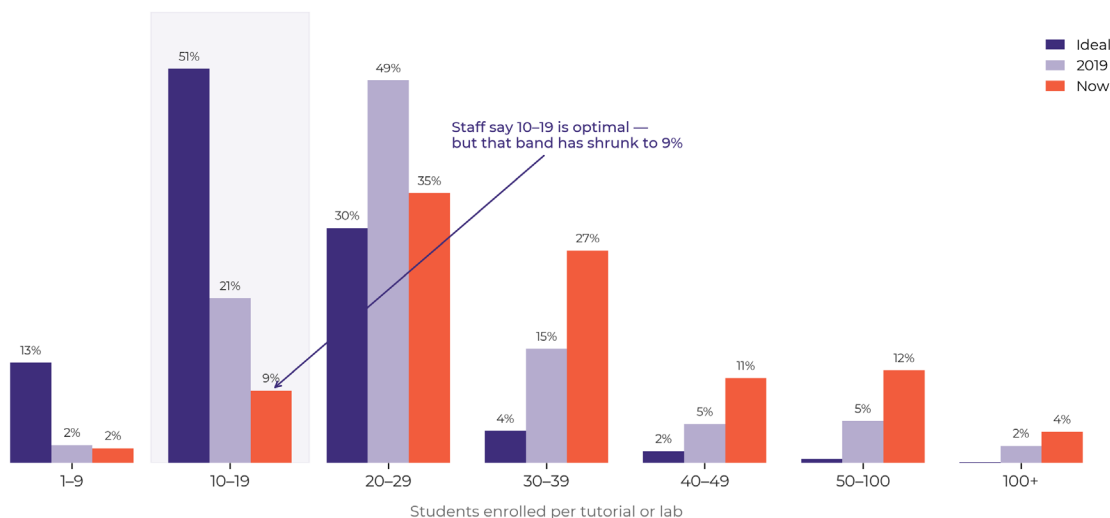
For lectures, the gap between ideal and reality is also pronounced. The most preferred lecture size is under 100 students, yet the most common lecture size is now 100 to 249, and the fastest-growing bands are those above 250.

Two to Three Times Too Large

The simplest way to describe the gap is this: most Australian university tutorials are now two to three times larger than what the academics delivering them say is optimal.

Tutorials are now far larger than staff think they should be

Tutorial size distribution: what staff consider ideal, 2019, and now



Source: NTEU National Class Sizes Survey, Q16/Q17/Q18. Percentages exclude non-comparable options ("not applicable", "size not important"); bases: ideal n = 2,665; 2019 n = 2,230; now n = 2,679.

The difference between a tutorial of 15 students and one of 35 or 40 is not just quantitative, it is qualitative. It changes what is possible. It changes whether a student who is confused can get their question answered. Whether a student who is falling behind gets noticed. Whether the teaching staff member has any sense of who is in the room and what they need.

The research literature on class size and learning outcomes is consistent on this point. Smaller classes are associated with higher student engagement, better academic performance, improved retention, and stronger outcomes for students from disadvantaged backgrounds¹. The staff responding to this survey are not asking for something unreasonable. They are asking for the conditions that the evidence shows are necessary for good teaching.

A Particular Concern for Equity Students

The class size gap has implications that extend beyond the average student experience. For students who already face barriers to success at university - those from low socioeconomic backgrounds, first-in-family students, students with disabilities, students from regional and remote areas - the erosion of small-group teaching is especially damaging. These are the very same student cohorts the government has committed to growing under the higher education under the Accord.

These are also the students who benefit most from the individual attention, early intervention, and personal connection that smaller tutorials enable. They are also the students least likely to have the external support networks - family experience of university, financial cushions, established social capital - that can compensate when institutional support is withdrawn.

As Australia has expanded access to higher education, the diversity of the student population has grown. The support needs of that population have grown with it. Expanding class sizes at the same time is moving in precisely the wrong direction.

The Evidence Is Clear

There is no serious dispute about what produces good learning outcomes in university teaching. The staff who responded to this survey are not outliers or idealists. They are professionals who have spent careers in classrooms, who have watched their students succeed and struggle, and who know from experience what makes the difference.

What they are describing - the gap between what they know works and what they are being asked to deliver - is not a preference. It is a professional judgment. And it is a judgment that Australian universities, under sustained financial pressure, are increasingly unable to honour.

¹ Bandiera, O., Larcinese, V., & Rasul, I. (2010). Heterogeneous Class Size Effects: New Evidence from a Panel of University Students. *The Economic Journal*, 120(549), 1365-1398. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0297.2010.02364.x>

Kara, E., Tonin, M., & Vlassopoulos, M. (2021). Class size effects in higher education: Differences across STEM and non-STEM fields. *Economics of Education Review*, 82, 102104. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.econedurev.2021.102104>

CHAPTER 3: THE WORKLOAD CRISIS

Larger classes do not just affect students. They affect the people who teach them.

Every additional student in a tutorial or lecture represents more work: more essays to mark, more emails to answer, more students to notice when they are struggling, more individual feedback to write, more administrative load to carry. When class sizes grow - and when they grow as substantially as this report documents - the workload burden on teaching staff grows with them.

What the survey reveals is that this burden has become, for the overwhelming majority of university staff, both enormous and invisible. The work is being done. It is simply not being counted, recognised, or paid for.

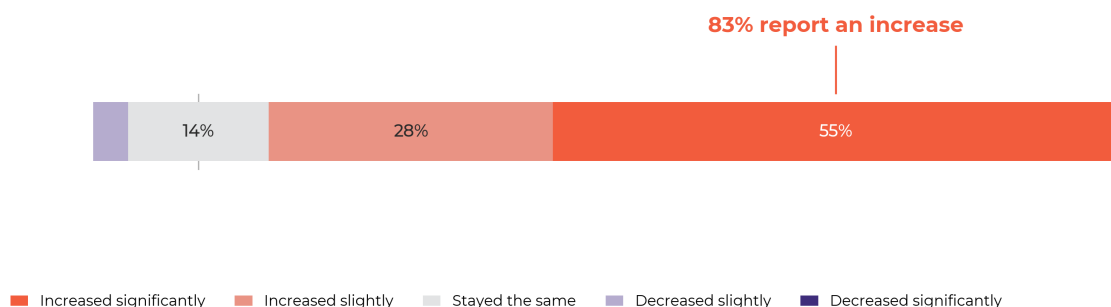
The Explosion in Unpaid and Unrecognised Work

The workload crisis facing university staff takes different forms depending on how people are employed. But the underlying reality is the same: more work, with no additional recognition or reward.

Casual and sessional staff were asked whether the volume of their unpaid teaching-related work had changed since 2019. Because casuals are only paid for specified contact hours and a small, fixed allocation of associated work, any work performed beyond those hours is categorically unpaid. **83% report their unpaid workload has increased since 2019.** More than half - 55% - describe the increase as significant.

Unpaid teaching work has risen sharply for casual staff

Reported change in the volume of unpaid teaching-related work since 2019 — casual and sessional staff



Source: NTEU National Class Sizes Survey, unpaid teaching work question, casual/sessional staff only. Base n = 350.

HOW HAS THE VOLUME OF UNPAID TEACHING-RELATED WORK CHANGED COMPARED TO 2019?

	% OF STAFF
Increased significantly	55.14%
Increased slightly	27.71%
Total increased	82.85%
Stayed the same	13.71%
Decreased slightly	3.43%
Decreased significantly	0.00%

CASUAL/SESSIONAL STAFF, N=350

Ongoing and fixed-term staff were asked a related but distinct question: whether the volume of their unrecognised teaching-related work had changed since 2019. For salaried staff, the issue is not just about unpaid hours but labour that happens within the job and is never formally counted in workload models — invisible to the institution even as it consumes time energy and opportunities to undertake research or professional development. **88% report their unrecognised workload has increased**, with 62% describing the increase as significant.

HOW HAS THE VOLUME OF UNRECOGNISED TEACHING-RELATED WORK CHANGED COMPARED TO 2019?

	% OF STAFF
Increased significantly	62.37%
Increased slightly	25.23%
Total increased	87.60%
Stayed the same	10.83%
Decreased slightly	1.03%
Decreased significantly	0.54%

ONGOING AND FIXED-TERM STAFF, N=2,041

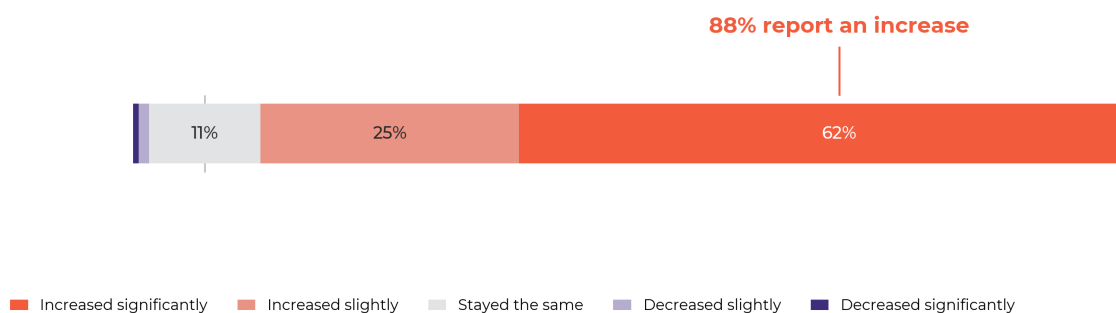
Whether a casual academic is marking essays without pay, or an ongoing staff member is absorbing an ever-growing administrative load, the result is the same: more work, no recognition, and a workforce being quietly asked to subsidise an underfunded system with their own time.

Class Sizes Are Driving It

The connection between class size growth and workload increase is direct and well-documented by respondents. When asked whether class size increases had caused their unpaid work to grow, **two thirds of staff - 67% - said yes**. A further 22% were unsure. Only 11% said class sizes had not contributed to their increased workload.

Unrecognised teaching work has risen sharply for ongoing staff

Reported change in the volume of unrecognised teaching-related work since 2019 — ongoing and fixed-term staff



Source: NTEU National Class Sizes Survey, unrecognised teaching work question, ongoing and fixed-term staff only. Base n = 2,041.

HAS THE INCREASE IN CLASS SIZES CAUSED AN INCREASE IN YOUR UNPAID WORK?

	% OF STAFF
Yes	66.5%
Not sure	22.3%
No	11.2%

N=2401

The pattern is the same when staff are asked about unrecognised work specifically: 66% directly attribute increases in unrecognised labour to larger class sizes.

The workload crisis facing university staff is not a separate problem from the class size crisis. It is the same problem, experienced from a different angle. When universities grow class sizes without growing resources, the gap is filled by the unpaid labour of the staff doing the teaching. The work does not disappear. It is simply transferred onto the time, energy and goodwill of academics and professional staff who are already stretched.

Women Are Bearing a Disproportionate Share

The workload crisis is not distributed evenly. Women, who make up 59% of survey respondents, are bearing a disproportionate share of the burden.

Some 65% of women report a significant increase in unrecognised work since 2019, compared to 53% of men.

This is consistent with a broader body of research on gendered patterns of academic labour.² Women in universities are more likely to take on pastoral and support roles, the kinds of work that expand most when class sizes grow and students need more individual attention. They are more likely to respond to student emails, to notice when a student is struggling, to go beyond the formal requirements of their role to provide the support their students need. In an environment of growing class sizes and inadequate resourcing, that disproportionate commitment comes at a significant personal cost.

The Compensation Scandal

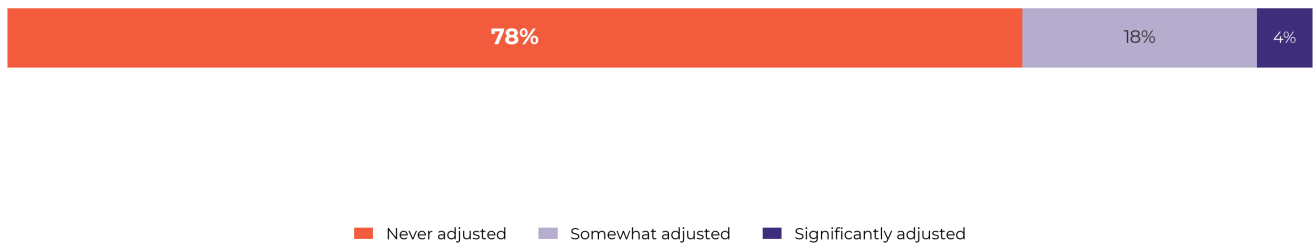
Perhaps the most damning finding in this chapter concerns compensation. Despite the dramatic growth in workload that staff are experiencing, the overwhelming majority have received no formal recognition — let alone additional pay — for the extra work they are doing.

² For example Järvinen, M., & Mik-Meyer, N. (2025). Giving and receiving: Gendered service work in academia. *Acta Sociologica*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00113921231224754>

Casey, S., Hands, K., Innes, P., Ashford, T., & Blake, J. (2025). Wasn't COVID-19 emotional enough? Gendered emotional labour through COVID-19 in a regional Australian university. *Labour & Industry*, 35(2), 159–182. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10301763.2025.2520675>

More than three in four staff have never been compensated

Has compensation ever been adjusted to recognise larger class sizes?



Source: NTEU National Class Sizes Survey, Q59. Base n = 306; excludes "not applicable" responses.

78% of staff say their compensation has never been adjusted to reflect the additional workload created by larger class sizes. Only 4% say their pay has been significantly adjusted. A further 16% have received some adjustment.

This finding sits at the intersection of the class size crisis and the broader casualisation of the university workforce. For ongoing staff, the failure to adjust workload allocations means unpaid overtime is quietly normalised. For casual and sessional staff the problem is worse. Casual academics are typically paid for a fixed number of hours in relation to each workshop, lab or tutorial they teach, this fixed allocation of one or two hours outside of the classroom includes all preparation, student contact, support and consultation, contemporaneous marking and administration. When class sizes grow, the result is an effective pay cut, borne silently by the most vulnerable members of the academic workforce.

The Human Cost

Behind these numbers are real costs to careers, wellbeing, and the sustainability of the profession.

Staff who are spending increasing hours on unpaid work are spending less time on research, on their own professional development, on the activities that sustain academic careers over the long term. The burden falls hardest on those who can least afford it: early career researchers, casual academics building a foothold in the profession, and women navigating the additional expectations that come with gendered academic labour.

The survey's open-ended responses - explored in Chapter 5 - give voice to what these numbers represent in human terms. But the quantitative picture alone is clear enough: Australian university staff are being asked to absorb, through their own unpaid labour, the costs of a funding model that does not provide universities with the resources they need to teach well.

That is not a sustainable arrangement. And it is not a fair one.

CHAPTER 4: STUDENTS PAYING THE PRICE

The class size explosion documented in this report is, at its heart, a story about students.

It is students who sit in tutorials that are too large for genuine engagement. It is students who cannot get their questions answered, whose confusion goes unnoticed, whose need for individual feedback goes unmet. It is students who submit assignments into a system too stretched. And it is students - particularly those who face the greatest barriers to success at university - who bear the heaviest cost when the conditions for good teaching are attacked.

The survey asked teaching staff directly about the impact of class size increases on their students. The findings are sobering.

The Erosion of Individual Support

The most fundamental consequence of larger classes is the simplest: there are more students, and the same amount of time to support them. Something has to give. Overwhelmingly, that is the individual attention that students need.

83% of staff say their ability to support students individually has been impacted by class size increases. Half of all respondents - 50% - say the impact has been significant.

IMPACT ON ABILITY TO SUPPORT STUDENTS INDIVIDUALLY

	% OF STAFF
Yes – significantly impacted	50.0%
Yes – somewhat impacted	33.3%
Total impacted	83.3%
No impact	8.7%
Not applicable	8.1%

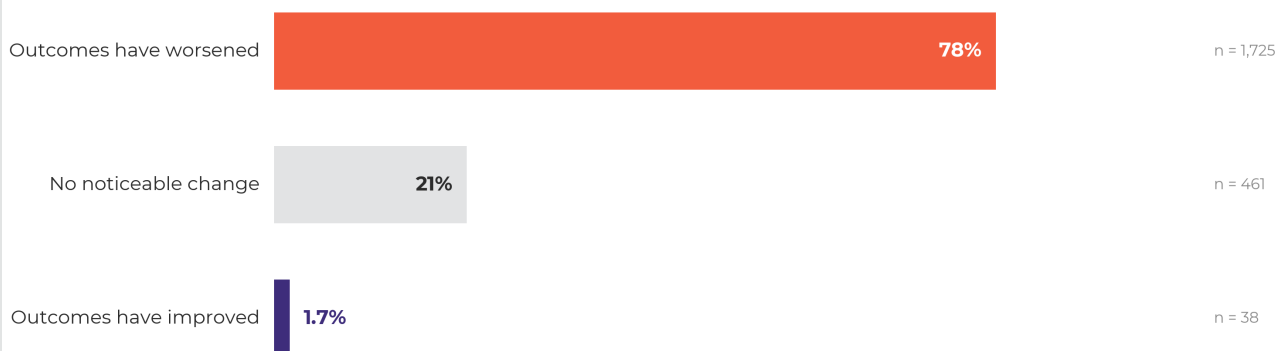
N=2401

This finding cuts to the core of what university education is supposed to provide. The proposition at the heart of higher education depends on those academics having the time and the conditions to actually engage with the students in front of them. When class sizes grow beyond what good teaching allows, that proposition becomes harder and harder to fulfill.

For students, the consequences are practical and immediate. A student who is confused about a concept and cannot get time with their tutor may fall further behind. A student whose essay receives no meaningful feedback cannot improve their writing. A student who is struggling personally - with their mental health, finances, or sense of belonging at university - and who is invisible in a large class, may not get the early intervention that could make the difference between staying and leaving.

Where class size affects students, it almost always harms them

Reported change in student engagement or learning outcomes linked to class size



Staff reporting worse outcomes outnumber those reporting improvement by more than 45 to 1

Source: NTEU National Class Sizes Survey, Q51. Base n = 2,224.

Worsening Engagement and Outcomes

Staff are not only reporting that they cannot support students as well as they once could. They are reporting that the consequences of that decline are visible in how students engage with their studies - and in the outcomes they achieve.

78% of staff report that student engagement and learning outcomes have worsened since class sizes began to grow. Just 1.7% report any improvement. One in five staff report no noticeable change.

CHANGES IN STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AND LEARNING OUTCOMES

	% OF STAFF
Worsened	77.6%
No noticeable change	20.8%
Improved	1.7%

N=2224

These observations come from the people best placed to make them: the academics and professional staff who teach, mark, and work with students every day. They are describing what they see in their classrooms - students who are less able to participate meaningfully, less likely to ask questions, less engaged with the material, and less likely to achieve the outcomes they are capable of.

The finding that nearly eight in ten staff have observed worsening outcomes is the predictable result of a system in which the conditions for good learning have steadily deteriorated. What is striking is the consistency of the observation across the workforce.

Declining Student Satisfaction

The impact of larger classes is also being registered in the formal mechanisms universities use to measure student experience. More than half of staff - **52%** - report that they have seen declining student satisfaction reflected in formal evaluation scores.

HAS DECLINING STUDENT SATISFACTION BEEN REFLECTED IN FORMAL EVALUATIONS?

	% OF STAFF
Yes	51.7%
No	31.6%
Not applicable	16.8%

N=2241

Student satisfaction surveys are an imperfect instrument. They measure perception as much as outcome, and are influenced by factors well beyond class size. But they are the metrics that universities themselves use to assess the quality of the student experience. By that measure too, the picture is declining.

In the current funding environment, student satisfaction scores carry real institutional weight: they inform quality assurance processes, influence rankings, and shape how universities present themselves to prospective students. If staff are observing declining satisfaction at scale, the implications extend beyond individual student experience to the broader reputation and accountability of the institutions concerned.

A Particular Concern for Students Who Need Support Most

Not all students are equally affected by the erosion of individual support that larger classes produce. For students who already face significant barriers to success at university, the consequences are likely to be most acute.

First-in-family students - those for whom university is unfamiliar territory, who do not have parents or siblings to help them navigate the system - depend heavily on the relationships they build with teaching staff. Regional and remote students, who may already feel disconnected from the social life of the campus, are more likely to disengage when their tutorial becomes a room full of strangers. Students with disabilities, who may require adjustments and additional support, are more likely to fall through the gaps when academics are stretched too thin to notice who needs help.

Australia has made significant progress over recent decades in widening access to university education. More students from more backgrounds are attending university than at any point in the nation's history. But access without adequate support is not equity. Enrolling students from disadvantaged backgrounds while simultaneously degrading the conditions under which they are taught is not a coherent approach to closing educational gaps or to achieving the government's own stated objectives.

What the Numbers Cannot Capture

The data in this chapter documents, in aggregate, what is happening to students across the Australian university system. But aggregate data cannot capture individual stories - the student who gave up on a difficult subject because they could never get time with their tutor; the first-year student who felt lost in a tutorial of forty people and quietly stopped attending; the graduate who finished their degree without ever feeling that any of their teachers knew who they were.

Those stories exist in the open-ended responses of the survey, and they are explored in Chapter 5. They are the human face of findings that can feel abstract. They are also, in a system that is supposed to be organised around the needs of learners, the most important evidence of all.

CHAPTER 5: VOICES FROM THE CLASSROOM

The data in this report tells a clear story. But behind every percentage point is a person, an academic, a tutor, a professional staff member, who goes to work each day trying to give their students a quality education in conditions that make that increasingly difficult.

The NTEU National Class Sizes Survey asked staff to describe, in their own words, the impact of growing class sizes and unrecognised workload on themselves and their students. Thousands responded. What follows is drawn from those responses. All voices are anonymous.

Students form long queues up the side of the lecture theatre waiting to see me and the other tutor. Students can wait 15 minutes or more to get help or to have their work checked.

"I feel sorry for the students – they pay more and get less in return."

"I couldn't connect with them all and many fell through the cracks."

The most consistent theme across the responses is simple: there are too many students and not enough time. Staff describe tutorials that have become mini-lectures, classrooms where students queue along the walls waiting for help, and a creeping impossibility of knowing - let alone supporting - the students in their care.

"I now have 50 students in a tutorial. These are timetabled in lecture theatres because there are too few classrooms large enough. Students form long queues up the side of the lecture theatre waiting to see me and the other tutor. Students can wait 15 minutes or more to get help or to have their work checked. After I teach a 2-hour tutorial of this size I am physically exhausted. Day after day it takes a toll on my health."

"The larger classes can't be run with the design for smaller classes. The pedagogy is different. We often went from spaces designed for interaction to running tutorials in lecture theatres."

"Me: Has turned the large tutorials into 'mini lectures' with less time at end of class to talk to individual students; students packed into rooms at legal capacity (hard to manage group work). Students: Alienation in these large classes. Many decided not to turn up at all towards end of semester... No time at end of class for individual discussion or clarification."

"It is hard to avoid students going under the radar, particularly those who desperately need support but are not confident enough to demand it."

For many staff, the most painful consequence is the loss of the personal connection that makes university education distinctive and worthwhile.

"You cannot build rapport with students when there are so many of them. It makes classrooms feel transactional and the marking is impossible to do to the standard required for student learning and improvement."

"I don't know them by name anymore. They don't know me."

"It's literally impossible for me to learn more than 200 names per semester. Generally I get 150. And that's only 10% of the students I teach. The students get no meaningful personal connection to staff nor individualised support."

"Students generally consult less now, and are often apologetic, starting with 'I know you are busy...' – it's very sad that students feel a query they have to support their learning is going to someone who is already overworked."

"I don't know all the students by their name so I think that has impacted our connection compared to the pre-COVID classes."

"Students are starting their emails with 'I know you are busy...'"

The collapse of individual attention is felt by students too. Some of the most striking observations in the survey come from staff describing students who have internalised the expectation of being underserved.

"Students generally consult less now, and are often apologetic, starting with 'I know you are busy...' – it's very sad that students feel a query they have to support their learning is going to someone who is already overworked."

"Students feel short-changed. They recognise that their tutor is under a lot of stress and time crunches, and deserve better. Staff are stressed and tired and spend hours every day managing emails and admin."

"I am depressed – my passion for teaching no longer 'sparks joy'."

"I feel sorry for the students – they pay more and get less in return."

"Students are promised a flexible and personalised experience that will equip them for a rapidly changing economy. However, staff have not been resourced with extra time to support this bespoke way of teaching... When students realise the extent of this gap between the university's resources and their hopes for higher education, they are often shocked and dismayed."

"Students were so upset about how they were being treated we spent 20 minutes discussing their concerns and how they might address this. None of this is recognised work."

"It is making it harder and harder to do the job I love."

The emotional toll on staff emerges as a dominant theme. These are people who chose their profession because they care about education and about students. The survey responses describe what it looks and feels like when that care runs up against a system that cannot support it.

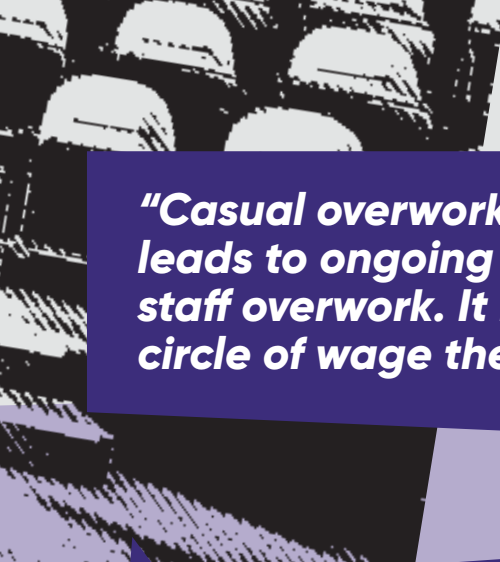
"It is making it harder and harder to do the job I love – to enjoy teaching and engaging with students, and to be able to build relationships with and support them in meaningful, in-depth ways. It is having a deteriorating effect on their education, which more and more feels like they are simply 'paying for a degree' rather than a transformative learning experience, and is having a damaging effect on my work-life balance, mental health, and that of my colleagues."

"It's exhausting and demoralising providing students with meaningful learning opportunities in institutions that don't care for me or them because their attention is on progressing their market position. If I didn't consider teaching social sciences an important activity in itself, I would have left the university."

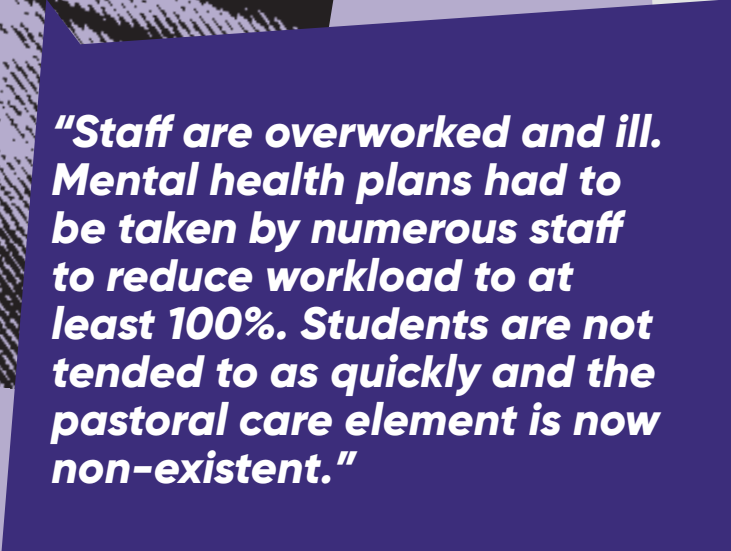
"I am depressed – my passion for teaching no longer 'sparks joy'."

"I've fallen out of love with my job. It used to be the best in the world, but poor management and university greed, or fiscal ineptitude, have ruined it. I pity the students."

"I've gone from a happy, satisfied worker with leadership roles and great performance to someone who eyes my super balance every fortnight to see when I can retire."



"Casual overwork leads to ongoing staff overwork. It is a circle of wage theft."



"Staff are overworked and ill. Mental health plans had to be taken by numerous staff to reduce workload to at least 100%. Students are not tended to as quickly and the pastoral care element is now non-existent."

"Across the year I did 25% more hours in 2025 than I was paid for. Since starting teaching at [my university] in Feb 2022, my own records show that I have completed six years worth of work in terms of 1,590 hours paid for each working year. Two years worth of free overtime for [my university] in four years. I'm knackered."

"For a course I coordinate, I have worked 160 hours and got paid for 17."

"I work until close to midnight nearly every night just so I can be present for my primary-school-aged kids in the late afternoons and evenings."

"I regularly work 50–60+ hours per week and it interferes with work/life balance – feeling very burnt out and not sure how or if things will get better."

"I didn't have a weekend off for five months straight last year."

For casual and sessional staff - who are paid only for specified contact hours - the situation is particularly acute.

The unpaid hours

Staff were asked to describe the nature of their unpaid and unrecognised work. The responses reveal a workload that bleeds into every corner of people's lives - evenings, weekends, public holidays, annual leave.

"I once tracked myself over a semester, doing more than 400 hours of work outside of my allocated workload document. Management simply doesn't want to listen, and we are between a rock and a hard place – if we don't do the work under extreme timeframes, students complain, and that impacts our 'scores' each semester."

"Casual staff are paid one hour per student for marking per semester. In reality, I routinely take at least double – and often more than double – the paid time to thoroughly read assessments of 2,000–4,000 words, apply the marking criteria, check referencing and AI use, and provide meaningful, pedagogically sound feedback."

"As a casual, I already undertake additional extra unpaid labour for yearly compulsory training... With larger class sizes I have additional time spent sending emails back and forth from students... I'm tired, they're losing out because of the conditions."

"Casual overwork leads to ongoing staff overwork. It is a circle of wage theft."

The health cost

Many respondents describe consequences that extend well beyond professional dissatisfaction. The survey reveals a workforce experiencing significant health impacts both physical, and psychological.

"I am exhausted and burnt-out. I worked 14-hour days, reading student work on my commute. At times the quality of my lecture preparation suffered, though I take pride in my work. This has been emotionally difficult, especially as I don't know if I'll have a position to apply for at the end of my contract."

"I literally collapsed on Boxing Day – it was the first day I stopped and my body couldn't cope. I am mentally and physically drained, burnt out and cannot give anything my best."

"Higher levels of stress and longer working hours. For me, this has resulted in Graves Disease (autoimmune hyperthyroidism) which is known to be brought on by stress."

"I have been suffering and being treated for severe occupational burnout, costing me thousands of dollars per year in healthcare and medical expenses to cope with the extra pressure."

"My massive increase in workload has severely impacted my mental health, leading to suicidal thoughts."

"Staff are overworked and ill. Mental health plans had to be taken by numerous staff to reduce workload to at least 100%. Students are not tended to as quickly and the pastoral care element is now non-existent."

The personal cost extends to families and relationships.

"My family is missing out on the care and support and energy I can give to them as it is going as unpaid additional hours to students."

"It means I lose my weekends, come to work undressed, burnt out by the end of semester."

"The need to complete work cuts into time for me to sleep, exercise, parent my children, care for older relatives, or have leisure time to recover from work."

"We are all so sad and stressed. Teaching is so wonderful but it's hard to find time to connect."

Not all the responses are expressions of despair. Many reflect the deep commitment staff continue to bring to their work, even as the conditions make that harder to sustain. Several staff describe absorbing the costs themselves, working unpaid so that students are protected from the consequences of institutional underfunding.

"So far, we have insulated the students by absorbing the additional pressure ourselves, but that insulation is fraying."

"The students get no meaningful personal connection to staff nor individualised support. The additional unpaid hours also take away opportunity for me to find other work."

"We are all always close to burn-out. Academic standards are dropping as a result. I am a good teacher and I want to keep the standards high but everything is about McDonaldisation."

"The unrecognised unpaid work from the increase in tutorial sizes just adds to the burden that is continually being shifted onto us as workers within the tertiary sector. We represent the core of the work of the university, and yet it is us who are constantly being expected to shoulder the additional work."

"Teaching is so wonderful but it's hard to find time to connect with and mentor students."

"We are all always close to burn-out. Academic standards are dropping as a result. I am a good teacher and I want to keep the standards high but everything is about McDonaldisation."

What comes through in response after response is a profession that has not given up, but is being pushed to its limits. Staff are not failing their students out of indifference. They are failing, where they are failing, because the system they work within has stopped providing the conditions in which good teaching is possible.

CHAPTER 6: THE CRISIS BEHIND THE CRISIS

The findings documented in this report are not the product of bad luck or poor management alone. They are the predictable outcome of a funding system that has, for decades, asked Australian universities to do more with less and expected quality to survive.

Understanding why class sizes have grown, why workloads have exploded, and why students are receiving less individual attention than they deserve requires looking beyond the campus gate. It requires examining the policy choices that have shaped Australian higher education funding over the past two decades — and the consequences that were always going to follow from them.

Decades of Chronic Underfunding

Australian universities have faced real-terms reductions in Commonwealth funding per student since the introduction of JRGP.³ At the same time, the shift towards a student-contributions-dependent funding model has, over time, transferred an increasing share of the cost of higher education from government to students, while leaving universities structurally dependent on growing enrolments to maintain revenue. More students means more money. And more students, without commensurate increases in funding for teaching, means larger classes.

The Job Ready Graduates Failure

The most significant recent policy intervention in Australian higher education funding was the Morrison government's Job Ready Graduates

package, which took effect in 2021. Presented as a reform to align student choices with the needs of the economy, it restructured Commonwealth Grant Scheme funding in ways that significantly cut per-student government contributions.

Under the package, Commonwealth funding for courses in humanities, social sciences, communications and the arts, along with business and law were reduced substantially, while student contributions for those courses were increased. The stated rationale - that lower fees for STEM and teaching degrees would redirect student demand - has been an abject failure. And institutions offering large numbers of humanities and social sciences students found themselves with significantly less Commonwealth revenue per student than before.

The consequence was predictable. Universities facing reduced per-student revenue had three choices: reduce the number of students they enrol, reduce the cost of educating each student, or find other revenue sources. For most institutions, growing class sizes - reducing the per-student cost of teaching - became a central strategy for managing the shortfall.

The Job Ready Graduates package did not create the problem of large classes in Australian universities. But it accelerated it, and it did so at the worst possible moment - when the sector was already under strain from the pandemic, the loss of international student revenue, and years of accumulated funding pressure.

There is now broad agreement across the sector - including, it appears, within government — that the Job Ready Graduates package has failed. Now we need a strong federal response.

³ <https://andrewnorton.id.au/2025/08/22/has-funding-for-commonwealth-supported-students-been-cut/>

Institutional Spending Priorities

The funding crisis does not excuse every institutional decision. Universities have made choices about how to manage their resources — and not all of those choices have put teaching quality first.

In a period when academic staffing has been cut, class sizes have grown, and casual and sessional staff have been asked to absorb increasing workloads without adequate pay or recognition, university executive remuneration has continued to rise. Average vice-chancellor salaries are more than \$1 million. Almost 300 university executives earn more than their state premier.

The contrast matters — not because executive pay is the primary cause of the class size crisis, but because it speaks to institutional priorities. A university that pays its vice-chancellor \$1 million a year while asking tutors to mark hundreds of essays unpaid is making a statement about what it values. So is a university that responds to reduced government funding by growing class sizes rather than by advocating forcefully for the funding its students need or allocating resources to where they matter most to the core mission of the institution.

A Sector That Has Lost Its Way

The deeper problem is structural. Australian higher education has, over several decades, drifted toward a market model in which universities compete for students, chase revenue, and manage costs, rather than focusing on their core mission of teaching, research and public benefit.

The language of that drift is visible in the survey responses. Staff describe feeling like they work in a “degree factory.” They describe students who feel like “numbers.” They describe institutions that prioritise student satisfaction scores over genuine learning

outcomes, that respond to academic concerns with performance management rather than resources, and that ask their staff to deliver a premium education on a budget model that does not support it.

“We are constantly told that we need to learn to ‘teach at scale’... Education is a personal experience, not mass production.”

“It feels like a degree factory.”

“Universities have an important and irreplaceable role in sustaining a well-functioning society, and instead of protecting and furthering that role, instead of cherishing the opportunity to help shape the minds of future generations, they are abandoning and abdicating that responsibility.”

This is not the university system Australia needs — for its students, its workforce, its research capacity, or its future.

The Government's Opportunity

The Albanese government has signalled that Job Ready Graduates is a failure. But one year into its second term there has been no action on reforming it.

The evidence in this report makes clear what is at stake. A funding model that systematically incentivises universities to grow class sizes, rather than to invest in teaching quality,

produces exactly the outcomes documented here: overworked staff, underserved students, and a slow erosion of what makes a university education valuable.

Repeal of Job Ready Graduates is necessary. But it must be replaced with something better than what came before. What is needed is a Commonwealth funding model that:

- » Provides adequate per-student funding for teaching across all discipline areas
- » Allows fees to be brought back down to a fair level that leaves no student saddled with life-long debt
- » Supports a university workforce with the secure employment, fair pay, and manageable workloads that good teaching requires
- » Recognises that the benefits of a well-funded university system extend far beyond the individuals who attend, to the communities, industries and institutions that depend on the knowledge, skills and research that universities produce

Australian universities have an extraordinary concentration of talent, commitment and expertise. The staff who responded to this survey are not asking for an easy ride. They are asking for the conditions that allow them to do the job they trained for, that students deserve, and our communities needs.

That is a reasonable expectation of a properly funded public system. And it is precisely what decades of underfunding, compounded by the failures of Job Ready Graduates, have made increasingly impossible to deliver.

The government has the opportunity - and the evidence - to change that. The question is whether it will act with the urgency this crisis demands.



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