

Reflections on a discipline in distress

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Martin Crotty, Paul Sendziuk and Emily Winter's report on university staffing and student enrolments in History, 'a discipline in considerable distress' as they call it, makes for sobering reading.¹ In my contribution to this forum, I reflect on two aspects of the report that struck a chord with me. First, what of those historians in allied disciplines not counted in the report's data? In sharing some cross-disciplinary insights, I briefly reflect on the opportunities for historians elsewhere in the academy – and outside it. Secondly, the report emphasises not only declining numbers of historians employed across Australian and New Zealand universities but that precarity is an ongoing, pressing problem. Casual staff continue to keep the wheels turning, Crotty, Sendziuk and Winter note, with most History departments dependent on a pool of casual labour.² This grim reality of casual and fixed-term contracts has shaped my career trajectory – and continues to do so – just as it does for many more of our talented colleagues than it should.

Before I turned to my PhD – accompanied by my first experiences of sessional teaching in museum studies and cultural heritage – I had worked in the museum sector as a curator and collection manager for 15 years. There, I had witnessed an exciting turn to community collaboration and co-creation. The push towards hearing new voices and capturing previously untold stories was one way to reach expanding audiences. I had also observed the challenges museums faced in grappling with their colonial origins as calls for decolonisation strengthened, just as museums increasingly pressed for social and climate justice. (Parallel moves were, of course, taking place in History.) My perspectives in this reflection, then, are those of a historian but also a museum studies scholar and practising curator, who has been embedded in both history and museum studies teams for a decade and who worked in the museum sector for more years before that.

This is one reason for my interest in how historians contribute to different groups – from those of our colleagues in law schools, defence studies programs or in

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¹Martin Crotty, Paul Sendziuk and Emily Winter, 'A Discipline in Crisis? University History Staffing in Australia and New Zealand, 2022', *Australian Historical Association*, October 2023, 2, https://theaha.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/AHA-Staffing-Report-2023_revised_final.pdf.

²*Ibid.*, 6, 34–37.

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other disciplines – as well as how History graduates go on to study in allied fields. I have come to embrace the opportunities provided by two related yet distinctly different disciplines. This shapes the contours of how I tell history, with material culture illuminating the past and a public audience sitting at the heart of my work. I am certainly not the only one for whom this is the case, as opportunities to create connections with museums and their objects and to work with communities grows. There is energy found in these collaborations and others: in academic and professional historians combining to deliver creative projects, or in museums, archives and universities coming together.³ This flow into and out of academic and public spaces creates distinct opportunities for engaging, community-centred work that can move in new directions.

There is great cause, then, to be excited about History and its future. If there wasn't, our colleagues and students would be far less numerous than they are. But this brings me to another, more troubling, aspect of History's future. I started working as a casual academic the same year that I began my PhD, and held a number of casual and fixed-term teaching and research contracts across the years to follow. This marked the beginning of a fragmented period in my working life: in academic research and teaching, as well as museum exhibition and collection projects. I have been fortunate to hold short-term research fellowships – at the State Library of Victoria, the Powerhouse Museum and the National Library of Australia – as well as a three-year post-doctoral role that gave some certainty to the years ahead. In late 2023, I began another fixed-term contract.

Some days I worry; I have 10 years now in casual and fixed-term academic roles. On other days, that worry sits closer to despair. I know I am not alone to feel the pressure. Another report commissioned by the Australian Historical Association Executive, conducted by Romain Fathi and Lyndon Megarrity in 2019, also underlined the dire state of casual employment for historians in Australian universities.⁴ The growth of casualisation in the academic workforce had by then long been underway, creating what Archie Thomas, Hannah Forsyth and Andrew G. Bonnell have termed as a 'reserve army of labour, fulfilling contemporary structural imperatives for a flexible, cheap teaching workforce'.⁵ With more than 150 respondents contributing to the AHA casualisation survey, precarious colleagues voiced their concerns for 'You Matter: The Australian Historical Association's Casualisation Survey Report'. They pointed to unpaid 'invisible' hours, unequal treatment witnessed between casual and permanent staff, the insecurity that impacted long-term plans, producing financial and emotional stresses leading to poor mental health, all of which was exacerbated by an endless cycle of contracts.⁶

Casualisation has not improved. The consultation process for the Australian Universities Accord – the review intended to reform the higher education system,

³Tanya Evans, 'Public History in Australia', *Public History Review* 30 (2023): 15–21; Kylie Message, Frank Bongiorno and Robert Wellington, 'Public Humanities of the Future: Museums, Archives, Universities and Beyond', *Humanities Research* 20, no. 1 (2024): 3–12.

⁴Romain Fathi and Lyndon Megarrity, 'You Matter: The Australian Historical Association's Casualisation Survey Report', *Australian Historical Association*, November 2019, <https://theaha.org.au/you-matter-the-australian-historical-associations-casualisation-survey-report/>.

⁵Archie Thomas, Hannah Forsyth and Andrew G. Bonnell, "'The Dice Are Loaded": History, Solidarity and Precarity in Australian Universities', *History Australia* 17, no. 1 (2020): 38.

⁶Fathi and Megarrity, 'You Matter', 18–23.

with its final report published in February 2024 – ‘repeatedly’ heard concerns about casualisation in the sector.⁷ Such was the degree of the problem that the Review ‘formed the view that the consistently high rates of casualisation in the system since 2010 hinder the higher education sector as it strives for improvement in learning and teaching quality’.⁸ Not only that, alongside the effects of casualisation, the Review heard a raft of evidence around how the complexity and misclassification of casual pay rates was a root cause of wage theft – creating, as the Review underlined, ‘an untenable situation’.⁹ With more universities hauled before the courts on wage theft claims, the National Tertiary Education Union’s ‘Wage Theft Report’ released in June 2024 records a staggering figure. In excess of \$382,000,000 in identified wage theft has been tallied across the higher education sector.¹⁰

As I write this, the Closing Loopholes legislation comes into effect. It brings with it the right to disconnect, just as it does new rules for casual employees.¹¹ How it plays out and what it means for casually-employed academics, however, is yet to be fully seen. As Hannah Forsyth so terrifyingly described for the *Guardian* in response to the legislation (terrifying because it rings so true), our work has the potential to be

pokies-level addictive. Indeed, it uses some of the same techniques. Rewards arrive randomly but these help to encourage us to entangle who we are with what we do. Even when it starts to damage us, how can we leave the machine, when it is surely just about to pay out?¹²

The temptation for overwork to secure one more publication, to submit one more grant application, to take on one more service role as we wait for the academic pay-out is real. What if it never comes? Yet something binds us to History (or allied disciplines in which we move): colleagues who care, students with infectious enthusiasm, research that matters. Even with the uncertainty, there are moment of pure joy. And so, with dogged perseverance, I press on.

About the author

Lorinda Cramer is a lecturer in Cultural Heritage and Museums Studies at Deakin. As a social and cultural historian, her work explores the gendered dimensions of dress and textiles, and sustainable fashion and waste. Her decades-long professional background as a museum curator and collection manager reveals the potential for incorporating exhibitions, material culture and a close reading of ‘things’ into her research.

⁷Mary O’Kane (chair) and Australian Universities Accord Review Panel, ‘Australian Universities Accord Final Report’, *Australian Government*, December 2023, 4, <https://www.education.gov.au/australian-universities-accord/resources/final-report>.

⁸*Ibid.*, 199.

⁹*Ibid.*

¹⁰National Tertiary Education Union, ‘Public Universities: Wage Theft Report’, *NTEU*, June 2024, <https://nteau.sharepoint.com/sites/documents/Public/Forms/Gallery%20Files.aspx?id=/sites/documents/Public/Campaigns/National/Public%20Universities%20Wage%20Theft%20Report%20June%202024%20Epdf&parent=/sites/documents/Public/Campaigns/National&p=true&ga=1>.

¹¹Fair Work Ombudsman, ‘Closing Loopholes’, *Australian Government*, 12 April 2024 (updated 7 August 2024), <https://www.fairwork.gov.au/about-us/workplace-laws/legislation-changes/closing-loopholes>.

¹²Hannah Forsyth, ‘Caught Up in the Rewards and Excitement, I Became Hooked on Work. Until One Day I Couldn’t Do It Any More’, *Guardian*, 26 August 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/article/2024/aug/26/caught-up-in-the-rewards-and-excitement-i-became-hooked-on-work-until-one-day-i-couldnt-do-it-any-more>.

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