

Blessing or Bloat?

Non-academic staffing in New Zealand universities in comparative perspective

Dr James Kierstead with Dr Michael Johnston

Universities need administrators. But how many? Can there be too much of a good thing?

In this report, we look at non-academic staffing at New Zealand universities and compare it to university administrative staffing in the UK, the US, Canada and Australia.

In terms of the numbers of non-academic staff, we find that:

- Non-academics form the majority of staff at New Zealand universities, and have for at least a decade. There are 40-50% more non-academics than academics at New Zealand universities, depending on whether we include research-only staff;
- New Zealand universities have the highest ratio of non-academic to academic staff of any of the countries we looked at; and
- New Zealand and Australia were the only countries we looked at which employ more non-academic than academic staff (and New Zealand employs more non-academics than Australia).

When did these numbers get so high? The available data doesn't go back far enough to enable us to answer that definitively, but there was a surge in non-academic numbers in New Zealand in the first years of the new millennium. Over the last decade, the ratio of

non-academic to academic staff has not grown, and may have fallen slightly.

How much do our universities spend on non-academic staffing? Though we lack figures for some universities, the Universities of Otago, Canterbury, and Auckland together spent around \$551 million on non-academic salaries in 2021, compared to \$668 million on academic staff salaries. That means that almost half these universities' salary expenditure was spent on non-academic staffing.

How has the composition of non-academic changed? Between 2001 and 2021, executive and student welfare staff roughly doubled as a proportion of all non-academic staff at New Zealand universities, while technicians and librarians roughly halved.

This reflects a broader trend across the English-speaking world for universities to hire more white-collar managerial staff and to outsource technical and maintenance workers.

This is important for three reasons:

- Since outsourced workers still have a presence on campus, our numbers probably underestimate the number of non-academics working at our universities (even if not employed directly by them);
- Since universities still pay contractors, our figures also likely underestimate the amount universities spend on non-academics; and

- University staffing at our universities is now heavily white-collar and managerial in nature, with almost no significant socio-economic diversity.

Pay at the very top of the university hierarchy is generous. Though New Zealand vice-chancellors are paid less on average than their US and Australian counterparts, the average New Zealand vice-chancellor was paid \$556,000 in 2020-21, almost four times what a full professor makes and more than six times the salary of a regular lecturer.

Why should we be concerned about the level and composition of non-academic staffing at New Zealand universities?

The first reason should be obvious. Victoria, Otago, Massey, and AUT are all going through massive budgetary crises. Though less is spent on non-academic salaries than academic salaries, the amount spent on non-academic staffing is still almost half of universities' salary expenditure.

The second reason is that our universities have changed. They are no longer composed almost entirely of academics and students. A majority of total staff are now non-academic

staff, and over the past couple decades non-academic staffing has become increasingly managerial.

This leads us to our final concern. 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.

Moreover, the topics people feel most uncomfortable discussing – the Treaty of Waitangi, for instance – tend also to be in the remit of administrators working in the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) sphere at our universities.

Others may find other things to concern – or reassure – them in our report. Our main aims were to stimulate more debate about administrative staffing at New Zealand universities, and to provide data that would help inform that debate.

A key part of our recommendations is that more data on this topic should be made available more regularly. In the meantime, we hope that our work will prove useful to anyone with a stake in New Zealand universities, whatever their perspective.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Dr James Kierstead is Senior Lecturer in Classics at Victoria University of Wellington and a Research Fellow at the Initiative. He holds a PhD in Classics from Stanford as well as MAs in Political Science (also from Stanford) and Ancient History (London). Besides his academic publications on ancient and modern democracy, he has published pieces in *The Dominion Post*, *The Spinoff*, *The New Zealand Herald*, *The Australian*, *The Spectator Australia*, *Quillette*, *Quadrant*, *Times Higher Education*, *Chronicle of Higher Education* and other outlets. He is also the co-host, with Michael Johnston, of the Free Kiwis! podcast, which focusses on free speech issues in New Zealand.

Dr Michael Johnston is a Senior Research Fellow at the New Zealand Initiative. He is a cognitive psychologist by training and completed his PhD at the University of Melbourne in 1997. He commenced his academic career as a lecturer in psychology and became interested in educational assessment and measurement during a six-year tenure as Senior Statistician at the New Zealand Qualifications Authority. In 2011 he took up an academic role in the Faculty of Education at Victoria University of Wellington, where, prior to his appointment at the New Zealand Initiative, he was Associate Dean (Academic).