

Victoria and Otago Universities employ more non-academic than academic staff

Drs. James Kierstead, Dennis Wesselbaum, and Michael Johnston

19 June 2023

New Zealand's universities are in crisis. AUT announced 170 academic redundancies last year. Massey is planning to cut a net 36 academic roles. Otago is looking to shed 'several hundred' positions, while Victoria University of Wellington plans to cut some 100 academic and 150 professional staff.

The leaders of these universities now need to make some very tough decisions about where, precisely, the cuts will fall. They will want to be working with the most up-to-date and accurate information about their own staffing numbers. But are they?

It is our understanding from a member of Victoria's academic staff that Vice-Chancellor Nic Smith may be working with figures that have academic employees outnumbering non-academics at Vic.

If so, we feel it is vital to point out, at this critical juncture, that those figures are inaccurate.

According to Victoria's latest annual report, the university employed 1,110 academics and 1,245 professional staff last year on a Full-Time Equivalent (FTE) basis. That means for every academic staff member, there were 1.1 non-academics. It also means that about 53% of Victoria's staff consisted of non-academics – a small majority.

Past university reports show that this is no anomaly. In fact, as Figure 1 shows, it has long been the norm in New Zealand universities to employ more professional than academic staff. The only exceptions to this since 2006 have been Victoria from 2009-2011 and AUT before 2013. All the other universities have not only employed more professional than academic staff throughout the period covered by the graph, but considerably more.

At Otago, the ratio of professional to academic staff has since 2015 hovered between 1.5 and 1.6 to 1 – meaning that the university has been employing 50-60% more professional than academic staff. As Sir David Skegg, a former vice-chancellor of the university, said recently, 'there has been a big growth in central bureaucracy' at Otago over the past dozen years.

According to our data, taken from the universities' Annual Reports, since 2009 academic staff numbers at Otago and Victoria have grown by only 3% and 9% respectively. During the same period, professional staff numbers have increased at Otago by 18% and at Victoria by 31%.

As a forthcoming report from the Initiative will reveal, New Zealand universities have some of the highest ratios of professional to academic staffing in the world. As Figure 2 shows, New Zealand has a higher percentage of non-academics as a proportion of total staff than the US, UK, and Australia, and by some distance. Australia is the only other country that employs more non-academic than academic staff.

To put this into even broader perspective, the UK itself has relatively high levels of non-academic

staffing. This is clear from Figure 3, which shows the range of proportions of non-academic staff to total staff in a number of European countries. The UK has the third highest proportions of non-academic staff in the chart. New Zealand’s numbers are higher still.

As we have noted, Victoria plans to sack some 100 academics and 150 professional staff. This would not significantly reduce the university’s ratio of non-academics to academics.

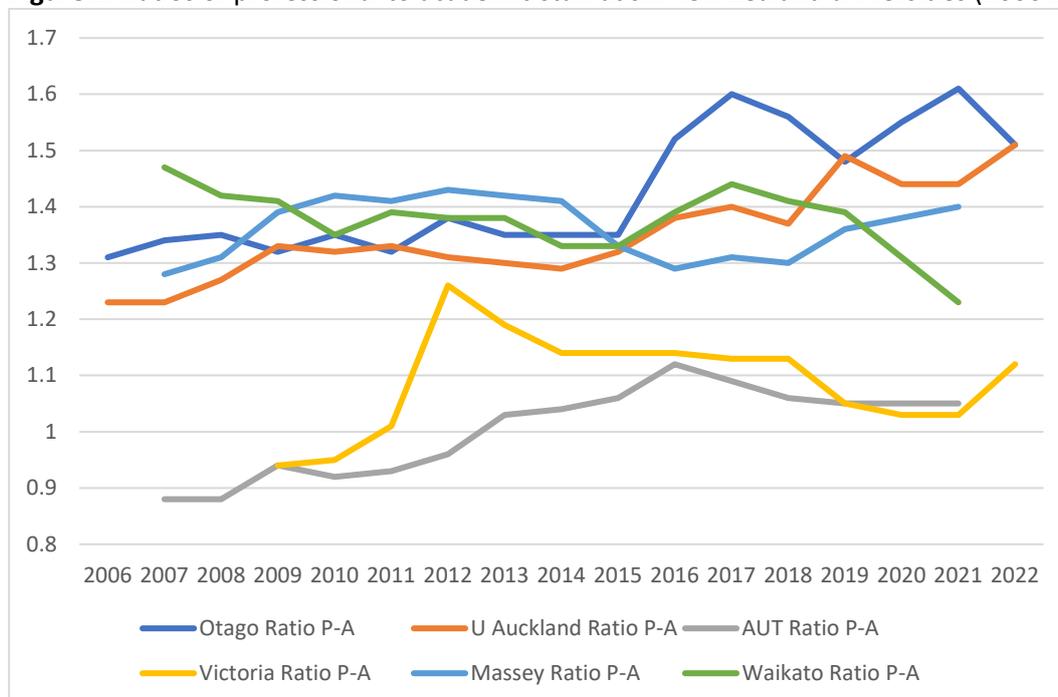
In fact, even cutting only professional staff at this juncture, with 250 professional staff redundancies, would only bring the proportion of professional staff at Victoria down to 47%, still slightly higher than the average at US universities in 2012 (45%), and higher than at most European universities (see again Figure 3).

We are not recommending that whatever cuts have to be made at Victoria should come through professional staff redundancies alone. Victoria University leaders will have to weigh up a number of considerations before arriving at final decisions about where cuts should be made.

It is crucial, though, that they weigh up these factors with an accurate picture of the university’s staffing numbers in mind. Victoria’s vice-chancellor seems to be operating with an inaccurate picture of the level of non-academic staffing at Vic. We think it is important to make that clear now, before any final decisions are made.

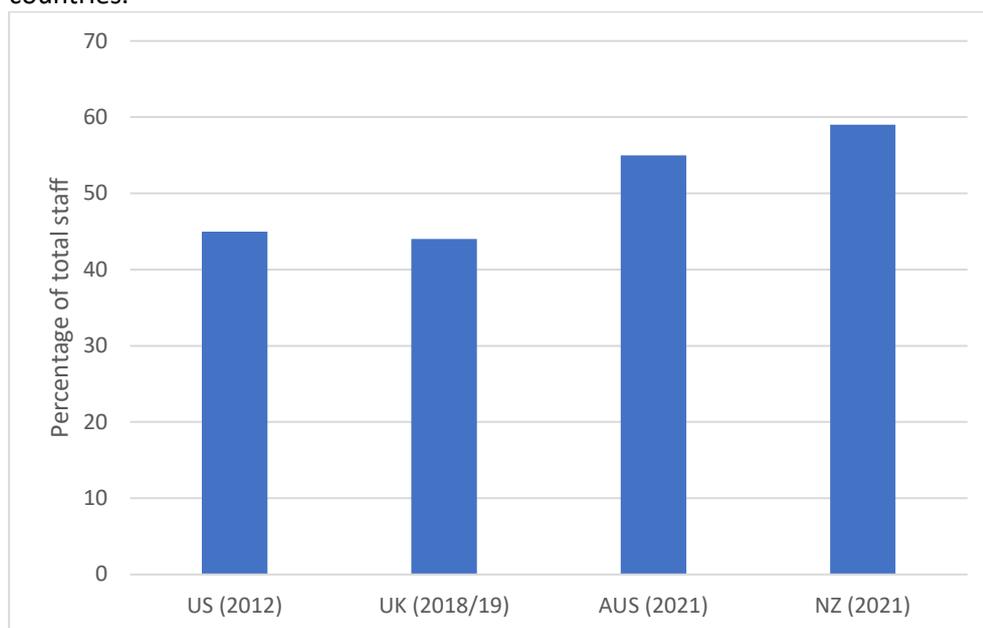
Postscript: After we asked Prof. Smith for a comment, Communications Director Katherine Edmond emailed us noting that ‘the definition of who is professional and who is academic is not always straight forward.’ Our figures rely on the distinction between academic and ‘other’ staff in Ministry of Education data and between academic and professional staff in university annual reports.

Figure 1: Ratios of professional to academic staff at six New Zealand universities (2006-2022)



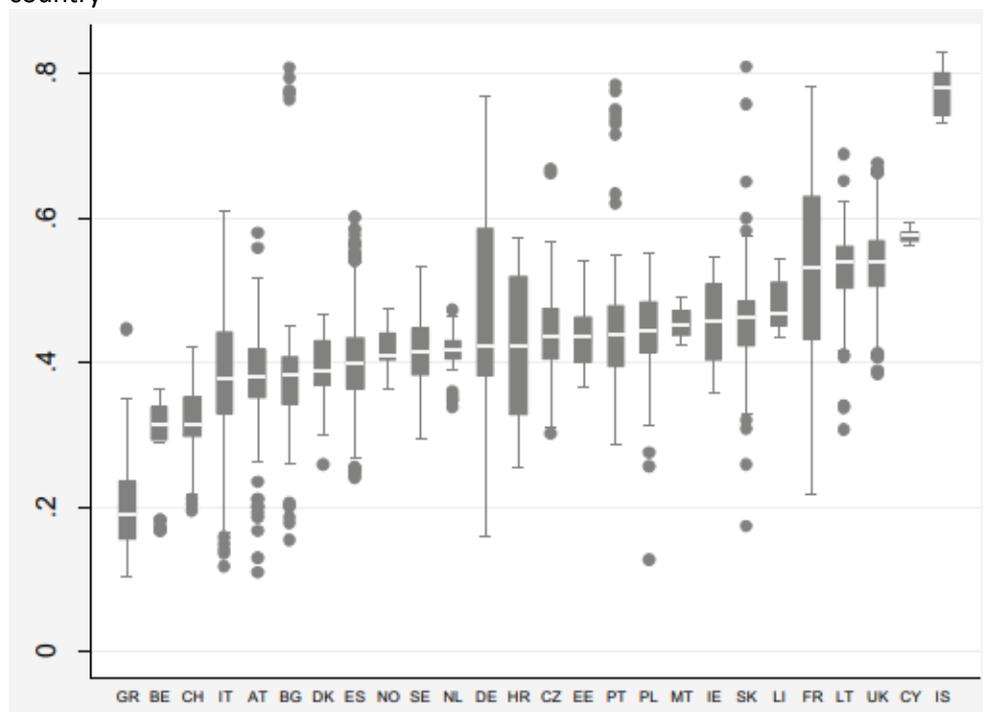
Source: Universities’ annual reports.

Figure 2: Proportions of non-academics as a percentage of total staff in four English-speaking countries.



Sources: Education Counts (Ministry of Education) website; Australian Department of Education; Desrochers and Kirshstein 2014; UK Higher Education Statistics Agency.

Figure 3: Distributions of the proportions of total university staff in non-academic positions by country



Source: Avenali, Daraio and Wolszczak-Derlacz 2022, using data from the European Tertiary Education Register (ETER).

Desrochers, D.M. and Kirschstein, R. (2014) *Labor Intensive or Labor Expensive? Changing Staffing and Compensation Patterns in Higher Education*. Delta Cost Project, American Institutes for Research: Washington.

Avenali, A., C. Daraio, J. Wolszczak-Derlacz (2022) 'Determinants of the incidence of non-academic staff in European and US HEIs,' *Higher Education* 85: 55-83.