

# The profile of university research services staff

**Darlene Sebalj & Allyson Holbrook**

**University of Newcastle**

This paper considers the profile of research administration, based on a survey of 36 Australian universities. The findings identify a group that is typically female, older and university qualified. Males tend to be more likely than females to have a research higher degree, earn a significantly higher salary and move up the salary scale at a faster rate. Of the 194 respondents more than half reported previous research experience with just under one third having previously been employed as an academic. Almost two thirds had worked in research services for five or fewer years and the majority reported they had held their current position for five or fewer years.

## Introduction

The research performance of universities now attracts global attention, and while academic staff and research students are at the forefront of the analysis, we know little about the contribution of administrative staff. University administrative staff, including research administrators, have rarely attracted attention, although their invisibility in both the lexicon and the literature has now been clearly identified (Castleman & Allen, 1995; Conway, 1999, 2000b; Dobson, 2000; Szekeres, 2004).

A recent study of occupational identity in universities found that research administrators believed their role was even invisible to their academic work colleagues '...particularly when the job was performed effectively and efficiently' (Collinson, 2006, p. 282). Administrative and other support staff now make up over 55 per cent of Australian universities (DEST, 2007) yet statistical collections relating to staff other than academic staff remain thin on detail. It is argued here that in order to build a complete picture of university research activity there is a need to address the gaps in knowledge about the role and activity of research administrators, not least because of the growing numbers and changing functions of this group.

At the close of the twentieth century Coaldrake and

Stedman (1999) noted the increasingly blurred lines between the work of academic and non-academic staff. As universities have become more complex the roles and responsibilities of administrative staff have shifted from being fundamentally subsidiary in nature to the work of academics towards forms of independent functioning and specialisation (Gornall, 1999; Whitchurch, 2004, 2006). This development is underlined by a concomitant push for university administration to be recognised in its own right (Conway, 1998, 2000a; Dobson, 2000; McInnis, 1998).

This paper draws on the findings of a doctoral study that investigates the profile, roles and understandings of research administrators in Australia, their contributions to university research activity and their perspectives regarding large-scale workplace change. The specific foci here are the demographic characteristics, career paths, and staffing profile of this group.

## Background

Australian Research Services staff are located within divisions in universities variously termed: 'Office of Research'; 'Research Services' or 'Research Office' or similar. Research services forms part of the university's central administration with primary responsibility

for supporting the research activity of the institution and for ensuring compliance with statutory requirements governing research. The structure and specific functions of these offices vary in complexity across the sector, ranging in size from four to fifty administrative and managerial staff members (excluding academic staff).

In September 2006, an invitation to participate in an online questionnaire was emailed to all university managers and administrative staff within the research services sections of 36 of the 37 Australian public universities (the researchers' own institution was excluded). The questionnaire was directed to centrally located university administrative staff undertaking functions in research policy development and implementation, research grants administration, higher degree research (HDR) administration and scholarships, ethics and safety clearances, research committee administration and research information systems and statistics.

The identified research population of 640 research services staff was compiled from staff contact information contained on each university website during the period March to May 2006 and updated post questionnaire launch in September 2006. The population is qualified by the following statements:

- It is a working guide to the total number of university administrative staff (assumed to be either full-time or fractional appointments as casual general staff contact details tend not to be listed on university internet sites) centrally located within a research service area in 36 Australian public universities as at September 2006.
- It understates the total number of university administrative staff undertaking research administrative activities including HDR student administrative activities across the sector as it does not account for staff based in Faculties/Schools/Research Centres or separate Graduate Schools or consulting arms.
- It was subject to the vagaries of staff contact information listed on university internet websites from which the identified population was drawn given the absence of an alternate data source and forms of data verification.

Of the 640 research services staff invited to participate in the study, 194 responded by completing the online questionnaire resulting in a response rate of 30 per cent of the total identified population. Details on the demographic and career profile of participants have been drawn from the questionnaire and are presented in the following sections.

## Staff profile

### *Gender and age*

Of the 194 research services personnel who responded to the questionnaire 143 (73.7 per cent) were female and 51 (26.3 per cent) were male. This ratio represents the gender balance of the target population of 640 research services staff of whom 492 (76.9 per cent) were female and 148 (23.1 per cent) were male. The median age of respondents was 44.5 years. In percentage terms, 35.1 per cent of respondents were aged in their 40s, 26.8 per cent in their 50s, 24.7 per cent in their 30s, and 8.8 per cent in their 20s or younger and 4.6 per cent over the age of 60. There was no significant decadal age difference between male and female respondents ( $\chi^2 = 3.327$ ,  $df = 4$ ,  $p = 0.505$ ).

Comparison with the most recent and relevant government statistics available (DEEWR, 2008) indicated that there was a higher percentage of females in the respondent group than in centrally located university administration units generally (73.7 per cent versus 65.8 per cent respectively). Furthermore the percentage of female staff in centrally located university administrative units is higher than in the population of all general staff in all Australian universities (61.5 per cent) of the same year (DEST, 2006). In the absence of other historical data pertaining to university research services staff the high female-to-male ratio may be explained in part as continuation in, and reflection of, the underlying trend established by Dobson (2006) on university staffing patterns from 1994-2003. Dobson's work showed an increasing number of female university staff in total for that period and more specifically an increasing proportion of female-to-male general staff.

That said, according to trend data for the period 2001-2007 for central university administration (DEEWR, 2008) (a population which includes research services staff) there has been a very steady gender ratio of two-thirds female to one-third male staff. This ratio has fluctuated by no more than 1 per cent during the seven year period. The data suggest therefore that the higher proportion of female research administrative staff is not only reflective of a higher proportion of female administrative staff generally, but also more strongly pronounced within research administration units.

For age, a single humped distribution with a peak in the 40-49 decadal age range was found for the respondent pool and the 2006 population of general staff as drawn from the higher education statistics collection

**Table 1. Educational level by Gender (n=194)**

	No university qualification		Bachelor degree or equivalent		Other postgraduate qualifications		Higher Research Degree		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%	n	%
Males	8	15.7	13	25.5	12	23.5	18	35.3	51	100.0
Females	42	29.4	45	31.4	34	23.8	22	15.4	143	100.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>50</b>	<b>25.8</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>29.9</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>23.7</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>20.6</b>	<b>194</b>	<b>100.0</b>

(DEST, 2006). Further it is clear from the distributions reported in Figure 1 below that this group had a similar age distribution as male central university administration staff in 2006. However, the age distribution of female central administration staff shows a younger profile with a single humped distribution peaking in the 30-39 decadal age range. A review of the trend data for the period 2001-2007 for central university administration (DEEWR, 2008) indicates that 2006 was the first year in which a younger profile of females in central administration was evident. Prior to that time female central university administration staff peaked in the 40-49 year decadal age range indicating flow on effects of earlier recruitment patterns.

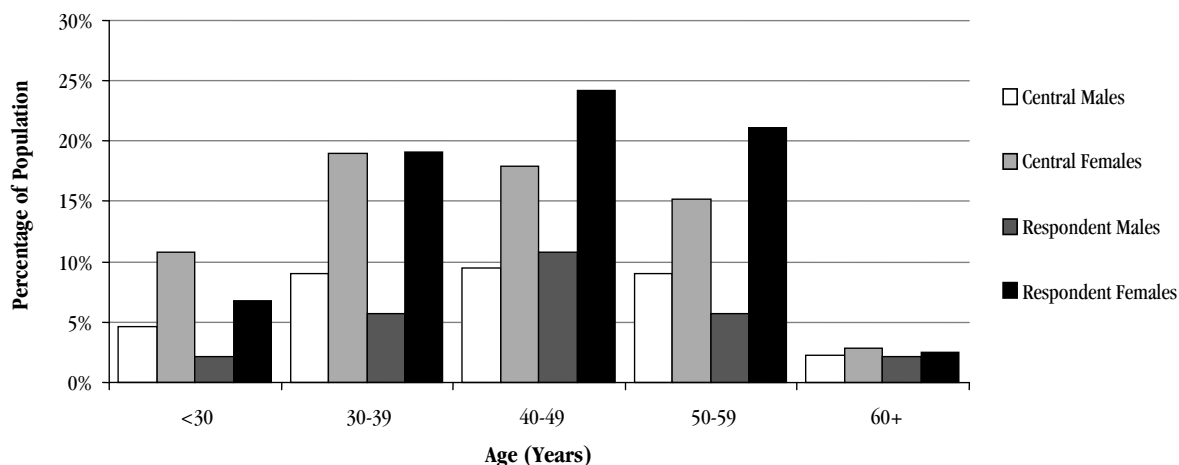
### Educational level

Respondents were asked for their educational level in the questionnaire and the results by gender are reported in Table 1. The majority of respondents had a university degree. Male respondents were more likely to have obtained university qualifications than female respondents and were clustered at the higher end of the qualification spectrum, whereas a higher propor-

tion of female respondents had exited at an earlier qualification level. These differences in gender for the four levels of education were found to be significant at the .05 level (chi-sq=10.409, df=3, p=.015) indicating that male respondents were significantly more qualified than female respondents. The age of respondents was not found to be a significant factor in terms of the educational level obtained.

### Salary

The salary levels of respondents are presented in Table 2. The largest proportion of respondents (36.6 per cent) were appointed to positions in the Higher Education Worker (HEW) 6/7 salary range and a further 28.4 per cent were appointed in the HEW 8/9 range. Table 2 also provides a crosstabulation of gender by salary level describing a pattern of concentration of females at the lower salary levels and a concentration of males on higher salaries. After collapsing two categories at either end of the original six category salary scale, a chi square test indicated that male respondents were paid significantly higher than female respondents (chi sq=11.341, df=3, p=.010).



**Figure 1. Gender by 2006 Decadal Age (Respondents: n=194, Central University Admin n=12,362)**

**Table 2. Gender by Salary level (n=194)**

Salary Level	Males		Females		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
HEW 2/3 - 4/5	2	3.9	33	23.1	35	18.0
HEW 6/7	18	35.3	53	37.1	71	36.6
HEW 8/9	19	37.3	36	25.2	55	28.4
HEW 10 - 10+	12	23.5	21	14.7	33	17.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>51</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>143</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>194</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Comparisons to the 2006 salary levels of central university administration (DEEWR, 2008) as shown in Figure 2 indicate that the respondent group has a higher median salary with a greater proportion of staff at the higher HEW levels. Further, the respondent group has a higher median salary range compared to the median salary range of HEW 4/5 of the 2005 university general staff population (Dobson, 2008).

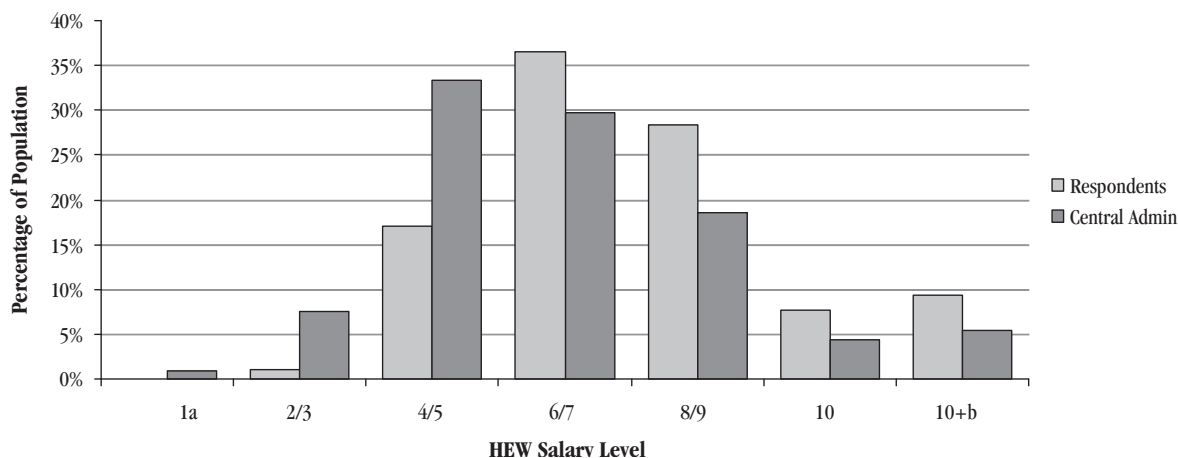
A crosstabulation of gender and qualifications controlled by salary level indicated that neither male nor female respondents had been appointed beyond a HEW 8/9 unless they held a university qualification. There were no male postgraduates under HEW 6/7 whilst there were 3 female respondents in this category. Respondents with research higher degrees were evenly distributed between salary levels of HEW 6/7, HEW 8/9 and HEW 10/10+. Over half of the female respondents with no university qualifications were located within a HEW 2-5 band range while half of the male respondents at this educational level were at

HEW 8/9. This would seem to indicate that there are factors, other than educational levels, behind the finding that male respondents were appointed to salary levels significantly higher than females. Tests of significance were not performed here given the large number of small cell counts <5.

## Career profile

### Length of service

Respondents were asked about the length of time they had worked in: universities overall, in their current university and in research services. In descriptive terms responses to these three questions are reported together in Table 3. The length of time overall ranged from less than one year to more than 20 years. The most common length of time served in research services was 1-3 years (34.5 per cent) and in their the current university it was 6-10 years (25.3 per cent), and in universities in general 28.4 per cent of respondents indicated 6-10 years.



**Figure 2. 2006 Salary levels (Respondents: n=194, Central University Administration n=12,362)**

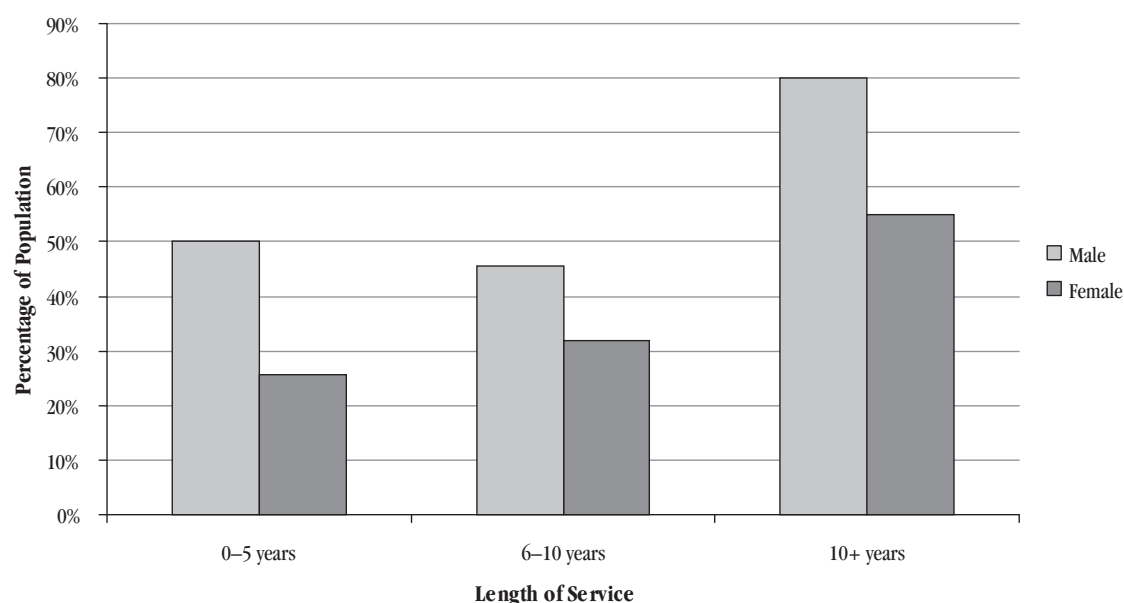
Note: a. General staff outside award, generally junior, trainee or apprentice staff whose remuneration package is below HEW level 1. b. Exceeds level 10 – general staff outside award, generally senior executives whose remuneration package exceeds HEW level 10.

**Table 3. Length of time working in current university, universities and research services (n=194)**

	Length of time worked in current university		Length of time worked in research services		Length of time worked in universities	
	n	%	N	%	n	%
<1 year	16	8.2	15	7.7	6	3.0
1-3 years	45	23.2	67	34.5	23	11.9
4-5 years	36	18.6	43	22.2	30	15.5
6-10 years	49	25.3	36	18.6	55	28.4
11-15 years	20	10.3	21	10.8	30	15.5
16-20 years	14	7.2	9	4.6	21	10.8
20+ years	14	7.2	3	1.6	29	14.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>194</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>194</b>	<b>100.0</b>	<b>194</b>	<b>100.0</b>

From the data it would appear that research service areas have been rapidly expanding in recent years with 64.4 per cent of respondents having worked in research services for five or fewer years. Of these, a large proportion of respondents appear to have transferred across from another university to take up a position in a research services area indicating a relatively recent level of staff churn within the sector. Responses to a related question on length of service indicate that 80.9 per cent of respondents have been in their current position for five or fewer years.

An analysis of salary levels by gender, controlled for length of service in universities, was conducted. It was found that a greater proportion of male respondents were employed at higher HEW levels regardless of the length of time they worked in universities compared to female respondents. Male respondents were initially appointed at higher salary levels moving through each HEW level faster than female respondents with only 10 per cent of male respondents on a HEW 4/5 salary level within the first five years of service compared to 46.2 per cent of females. No male respondents remained at a HEW 4/5 or below after five years of

**Figure 3. Respondents at HEW 8/9 or above by Length of service in universities (n=194)**

*Note: Percentages are based on the proportion (per gender) of respondents within each length of service period. e.g. 50% of all male respondents who had worked in universities for five or fewer years were at HEW 8/9 or above (and therefore 50% of male respondents in this service period were at HEW 7 or below).*

university service compared to 20.5 per cent of female respondents at the 6-10 year period reducing to 10 per cent at the 10+ year period. Figure 3 illustrates the gendered differences in HEW 8/9 and above salary levels at three time periods of service in universities. Tests of significance were not performed here given the large number of small cell counts <5.

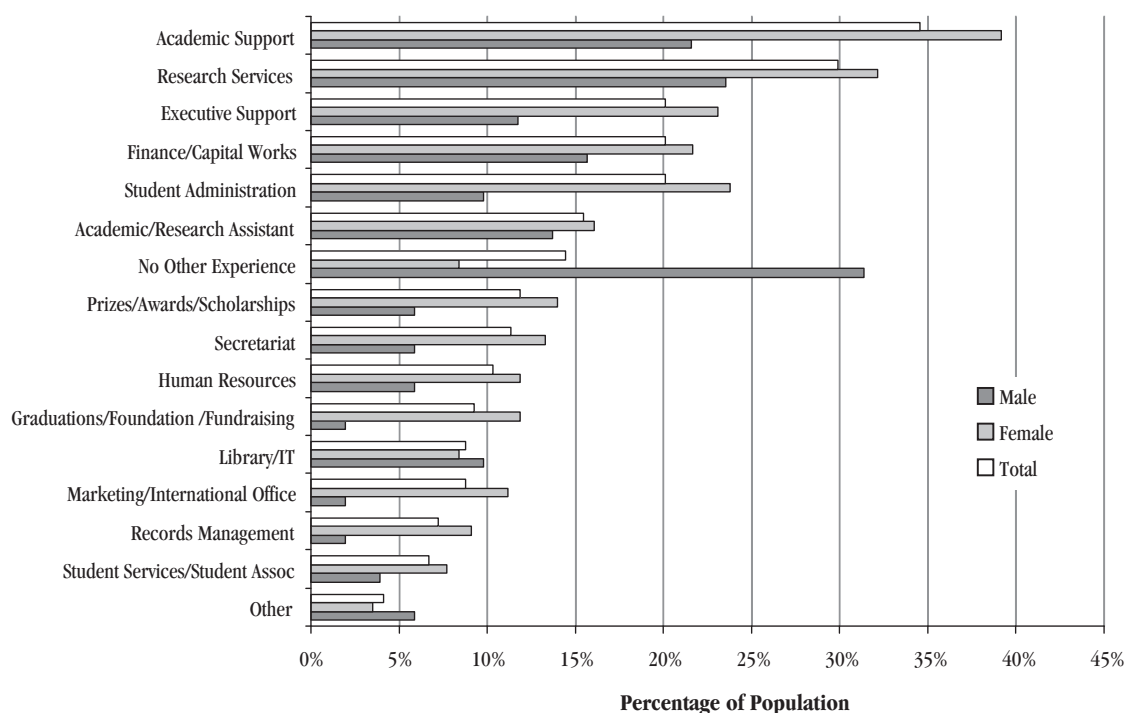
### Employment history

Respondents were asked about previous employment both within and external to the university sector. The responses are described in Figures 4 and 5. In both instances multiple selections were possible and responses under the original response category of 'Other' were coded to the most appropriate category where possible and many such responses indicated previous 'academic' experience. Response categories have been reordered to reflect highest to lowest for the combined responses of males and females.

As Figure 4 illustrates, 34.5 per cent of respondents previously worked in academic support areas such as faculties, colleges and schools. The next highest response area was in Research Services with almost 30

per cent of respondents. The inference here is that the remaining 70 per cent were currently employed in their first position within a university research services section at the time of this study, a finding consistent with the information provided on length of service. Almost a third of male respondents had not worked outside a research services section during their employment at a university whilst over 90 per cent of female respondents had. This is in part related to an overall finding of gendered difference in respondent employment histories within a university setting. A further example of this is that 41.3 per cent of female respondents had worked in three or more separately definable university areas external to research services compared to 13.7 per cent of males.

Figure 5 indicates that just under one third of respondents had experience in one or more government departments prior to working in a university with the next largest area of previous employment being in education. In both cases the proportion for male and female respondents is very similar. The responses also indicate that over 90 per cent of respondents had previous employment experience external to the university sector.



**Figure 4. Previous employment within universities (n=194).**

*Note: The employment category of 'Academic/Research Assistant' was derived from coding of questionnaire responses received to the original response category of 'Other'.*

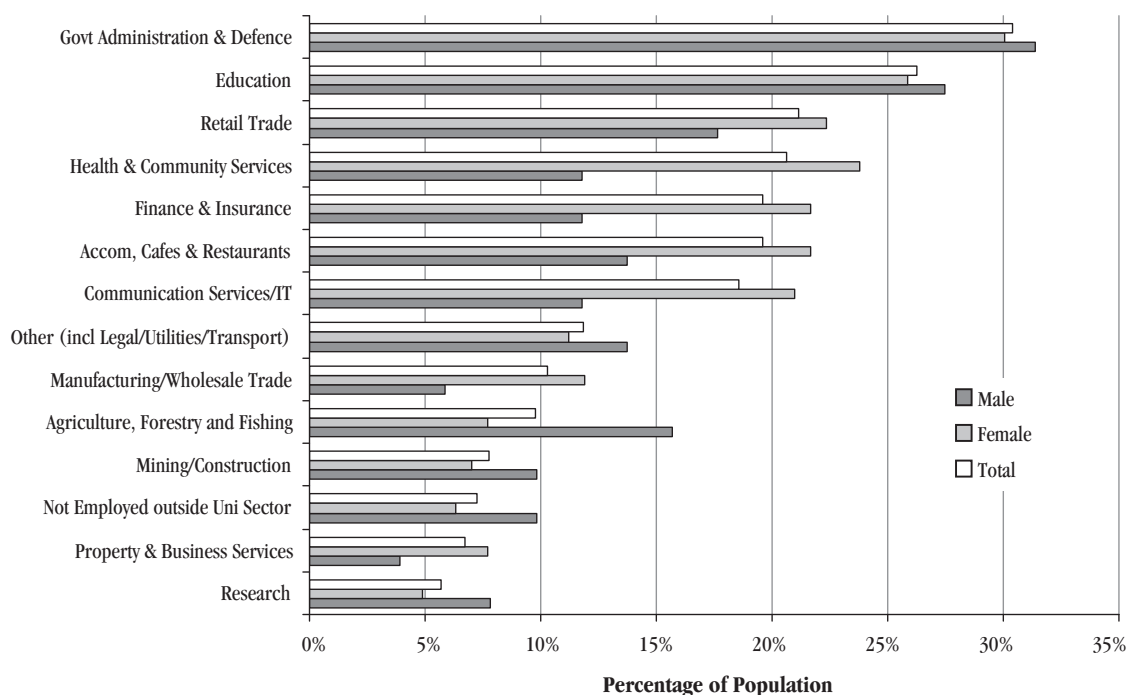
At the time of writing no comparable data had been found in relation to previous employment trends of university general staff.

Participants were asked if they had previous experience as an academic and/or previous research experience. Just under one third of respondents had previously been employed as an academic with half of all respondents having undertaken some form of research. For all those reporting previous research experience (n=98), their responses (a total of 110) were analysed and grouped under five separate headings ordered to reflect highest to lowest:

1. 'Undertaking research higher degree' (41 per cent of responses).
2. 'Discipline specific research'. This category can be illustrated by the example: 'I undertook medical research'. (33 per cent of responses).
3. 'Research Officer/Assistant' (16 per cent of responses).
4. 'Research consultancy'. This category can be illustrated by the example: 'I undertook contract research' (6 per cent of responses).
5. Did not specify research activity undertaken (4 per cent of responses).

## Discussion and conclusions

This paper set out to describe as completely as possible, the profile of research administrative staff in Australian universities. This group is expected to work in close concert with academic staff to develop and support research across a spectrum of grant, research higher degree and training activities. The profile is predominantly female, aged between 40 and 49 years, degree qualified or above with a median salary range of HEW 6/7. It is a representative sample by gender of the identified population of university research services staff. In comparison to the wider population of university general staff, respondents had a higher median salary and a higher female-to-male ratio with a similar age demographic. The profile further indicates that despite being almost three quarters of the identified population female respondents were significantly underrepresented at the higher salary levels and had significantly lower levels of education compared to male respondents. Male respondents were appointed at levels higher than female respondents with equivalent or higher levels of education. Similarly, male respondents with no university qualifications were



**Figure 5. Previous employment external to the university sector (n=194).**

*Note: Employment categories used here were largely drawn from ABS occupational categories (ABS, 2001). The employment category of 'Research' (external to a university) was added to the above list following coding of questionnaire responses received to the original response category of 'Other'.*

more likely to be paid at higher HEW levels than were female respondents of the same educational level. When length of service in universities was taken into account, it was found that 90 per cent of male respondents would be on a HEW 6/7 or above compared to 53.8 per cent of female respondents within five years of initial appointment.

Half of the respondents reported previous research experience with just under one third of all participants having previously been employed as an academic. This would indicate a high proportion of respondents with 'mixed identities' having crossed over the traditional binary divide of academic and administrative domains as described by Whitchurch (2008). It would appear that this area of university administration is an expanding one with just under two-thirds of respondents having worked in research services for five or fewer years. A majority of respondents have held their current position for five or fewer years. There is also *prima facie* evidence of a relatively recent level of staff churn as a number of respondents have moved within the sector to their current university to take up a position in research services.

The profile map provided here was initially designed to be a fundamental building block for developing a dialogue about the contribution of university research administration and by extension, university administration as a whole. However, it is clear that such a dialogue can not be had without due regard to the underlying gender inequities affecting female general staff. It was not the original intention of this research to examine gender based issues. Indeed none of the guiding research questions which informed the study's design included gender as an area of investigation. However, the findings of significant gendered differences in this demographic and career profile of university research services staff have emerged as the predominant feature.

Such findings support an earlier observation by Allen & Castleman (1995) in their ARC funded study into the employment positions of both academic and general staff that time and increased participation rates of female staff in universities did not translate into equity of pay and increased access to the more senior positions. The authors found that '...there are factors operating in higher education employment which systematically and pervasively favour male employees and operate as barriers to female employees...' (Allen & Castleman, 1995, p. 24) it would appear from the results of this profile study that the

same or similar factors remain in the workplace more than a decade later.

This is underscored by a recent submission of the National Tertiary Education Industry Union (NTEU) to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment and Workplace Relations inquiry into gender pay equity (Allport, May, & Roberts, 2008) where a number of features that were creating greater pay inequities in the current work environment were raised. Key recommendations of the submission were that a 'gender pay equity principle' be inserted into any new Federal Workplace Relations legislation (Allport et al., 2008) and further that increased reporting in the higher education sector for both academic and general staff occur to highlight expected gender pay equity gaps in particular.

Wieneke (1995) in her work on female general staff in Australian universities wrote that '...the importance accorded to women in this arena may be gauged by the virtual absence of information about their numbers, positions and experiences in higher education...' (p. 6). Given this, Wieneke, a strong advocate for this group of university staff, raised the importance of published research on female general staff in order to: '...increase their visibility within and start to place value on their contribution to, the higher education sector...' (1995, p. 7). Analogously, more research is needed on all aspects of university administration, including gender based studies, to raise the profile and increase the visibility of a group of staff whom collectively make up over half of today's universities in Australia, but of which so little is known.

## Acknowledgements

The authors wish to acknowledge the constructive comments and advice of Hedy Fairbairn, Professor Sid Bourke and Dr Ian R Dobson which considerably contributed to the development of this article. The usual caveat applies.

**Darlene Sebalj is currently enrolled as a PhD student in the School of Education, University of Newcastle.**

**Allyson Holbrook is Director of the Centre for the Study of Research Training and Impact, University of Newcastle.**

## References

- ABS 2001, *Census Population and Housing. Selected Education and Labour Force Characteristics*. Australian Bureau of Statistics, Canberra.
- Allen, M & Castleman, T 1995, *Gender Privilege in Higher Education: Examining its Dimensions and Dynamics*. Paper presented at the Women Culture and Universities: A Chilly Climate? National conference on the effect of organisational culture on women in universities, University of Technology, Sydney, 19-21 April.
- Allport, C, May, R & Roberts, S 2008, *House of Representatives Standing Committee on Employment and Workplace Relations. Inquiry into Pay Equity and Associated Issues Related to Increasing Female Participation in the Workforce. Submission of the National Tertiary Education Industry Union: NTEU*.
- Castleman, T & Allen, M 1995, 'The Forgotten Workforce: Female General Staff in Higher Education'. *Australian Universities' Review*, 38(2), 65-69.
- Coaldrake, P & Stedman, L 1999, *Academic Work in the Twenty-First Century*. Retrieved 27 April 2005 from <www.dest.gov.au/archive/highered/occpaper/99H/academic.pdf>
- Collinson, J A 2006, 'Just 'non-academics'? Research Administrators and Contested Occupational Identity'. *Work, Employment and Society*, 20(2), 267-288.
- Conway, M 1998, 'Academics and Administrators: Competitive Collaborators?' *Journal of Institutional Research in Australia*, 7(2), 26-35.
- Conway, M 1999, 'The Role of Administrators: Where have we come from? Where are we going?' Paper presented at the ATEM/AAPA Joint Conference, Victoria University of Wellington.
- Conway, M 2000a, 'Defining Administrators and New Professionals'. *Perspectives*, 4(1), 14-15.
- Conway, M 2000b, 'What's in a Name? Issues for ATEM and Administrators'. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 22(2), 199-201.
- DEEWR 2008, *Staff, Selected Higher Education Statistics (2001-2007)* (No. 08-312): University Statistics Unit, Policy & Analysis Branch, Department of Education, Employment & Workplace Relations (DEEWR).
- DEST 2006, *Staff 2006: Selected Higher Education Statistics*. Retrieved 4 August 2008, from <www.dest.gov.au/sectors/higher\_education/publications\_resources/statistics/publications\_higher\_education-statistics\_collections.htm#>
- DEST 2007, *Publications - Higher Education Statistics Collections*. Retrieved 4 August 2008 from <www.dest.gov.au/sectors/higher\_education/publications\_resources/statistics/publications\_higher\_education-statistics\_collections.htm#>
- Dobson, I R 2000, 'Them and Us' – General and Non-General Staff in Higher Education'. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 22(2), 203-210.
- Dobson, I R 2006, 'Broken Down by Sex and Age: Australian University Staffing Patterns 1994-2003'. *Higher Education Management and Policy*, 18(1), 71-85.
- Dobson, I R 2008, 'Fat Cat and Friends'. *Australian Universities' Review*, 50(1), 40-46.
- Gornall, L 1999, 'New Professionals: Change and Occupational Roles in Higher Education'. *Perspectives*, 3(2), 44-49.
- McInnis, C 1998, 'Academics and Professional Administrators in Australian Universities: Dissolving Boundaries and New Tensions'. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 20(2), 1998.
- Szekeres, J 2004, 'The Invisible Workers'. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 26(1), 7-22.
- Whitchurch, C 2004, 'Administrative Managers – A Critical Link'. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 58(4), 280-298.
- Whitchurch, C 2006, 'Who Do They Think They Are? The Changing Identities of Professional Administrators and Managers in UK Higher Education'. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 28(2), 159-171.
- Whitchurch, C 2008, 'Shifting Identities and Blurring Boundaries: the Emergence of Third Space Professionals in UK Higher Education'. *Higher Education Quarterly*, 62(4), 377-396.
- Wieneke, C 1995, 'Managing Women: Positioning General Staff Women in Australian Universities'. *Journal of Tertiary Education Administration*, 17(1), 5-19.