

# WHEN THE BLOAT BEGAN: NON-ACADEMIC STAFFING AT NEW ZEALAND UNIVERSITIES, 1961-1997

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Research Note

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## When the Bloat Began: Non-Academic Staffing at New Zealand Universities over the Long Run, 1961-1997

In our recent report *Blessing or Bloat? Non-Academic Staffing at New Zealand Universities*, we revealed that New Zealand universities have a ratio of non-academic to academic staff of about 1.4 to 1 – higher than US, UK and Australian universities.

In one section of our report ('The rise of non-academics,' 13-16), we also asked *when* the number of non-academics first became greater than the number of academics at our universities. We were able to show that this did not occur between 2012 and 2021 (with non-academics more numerous than academics throughout that period). However, our lack of data for academics before 2012 and for both academics and non-academics before 2002 prevented us from going back any further.

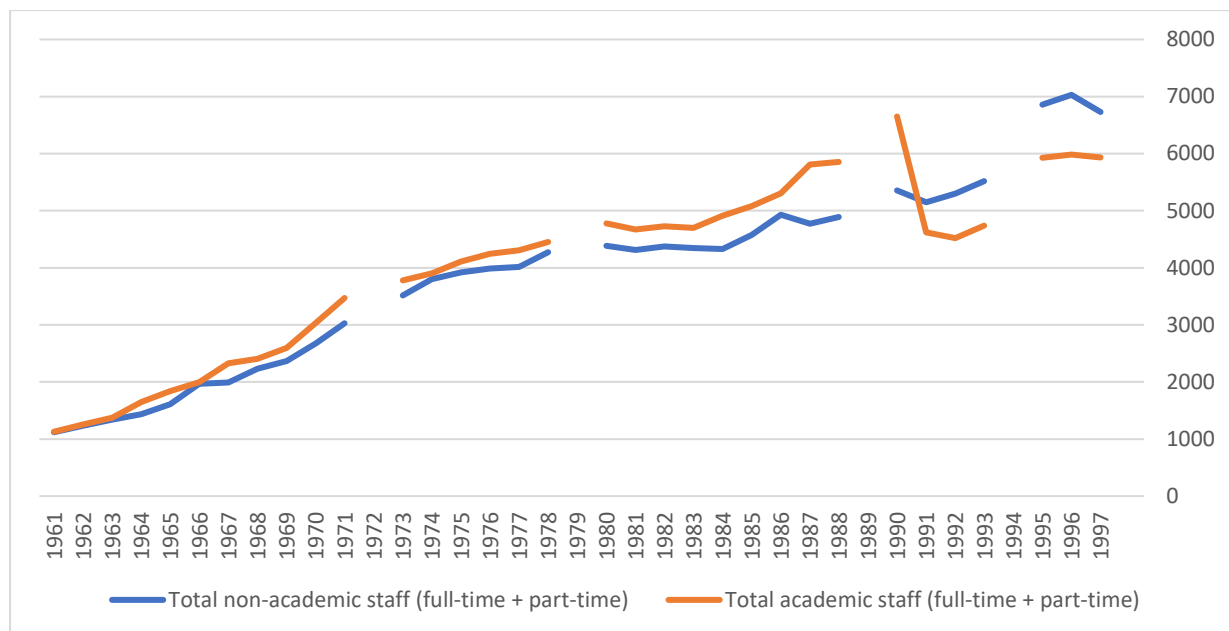
We were delighted, then, when our colleague Dr Bryce Wilkinson drew our attention to the series of New Zealand Official Yearbooks available on the Statistics New Zealand website.<sup>1</sup> These include numbers of academics and non-academic employees at universities back to 1961 and breakdowns of non-academics by type (management, library, etc.) back to 1970.

In this brief note, we will use the annual reports to gain a fuller picture of non-academic and academic numbers at New Zealand universities over the long term. We will also look at how the composition of non-academic staffing has changed since 1970, comparing this with the changes we noted in Chapter 3 of our report.

### Non-Academic Numbers, 1961-1997

The yearbooks provide numbers for non-academic staff (called 'non-teaching staff' 1961-1989 and 'support staff' 1990-1993) from 1961 to 1997, though not (for some reason) in 1972, 1979, 1989, and 1994. Throughout the period, breakdowns are given for 'full-time' and 'part-time' staff, both academic and non-academic. Figure 1 shows the total staff numbers at New Zealand universities through this period.

Figure 1: Academic and non-academics (full-time and part-time) at New Zealand universities, 1961-1997

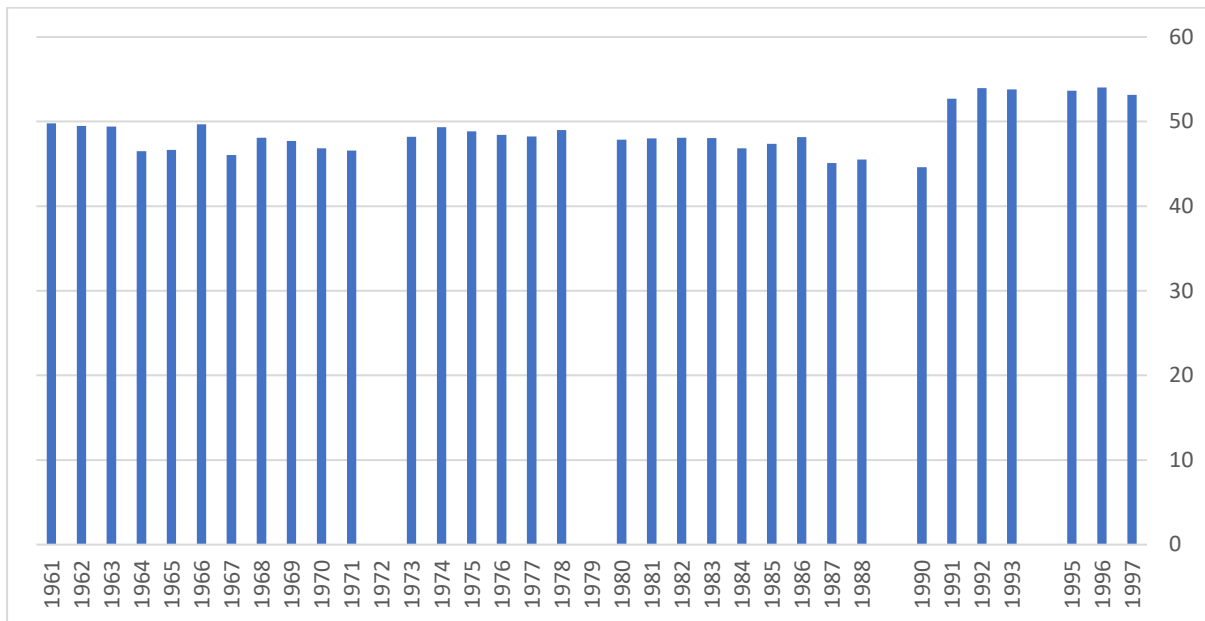


<sup>1</sup> We are grateful to another colleague, Max Salmon, for helping us compile the data.

The graph shows that both academic and non-academic numbers grew in the period and that academic numbers were higher than non-academic numbers from 1961 to 1990. In 1991, though, academic numbers plummeted, bringing them below non-academic numbers for the first time. Non-academic numbers remained higher than academic numbers until 1997, and our report showed that they were also higher between 2012 and 2021.

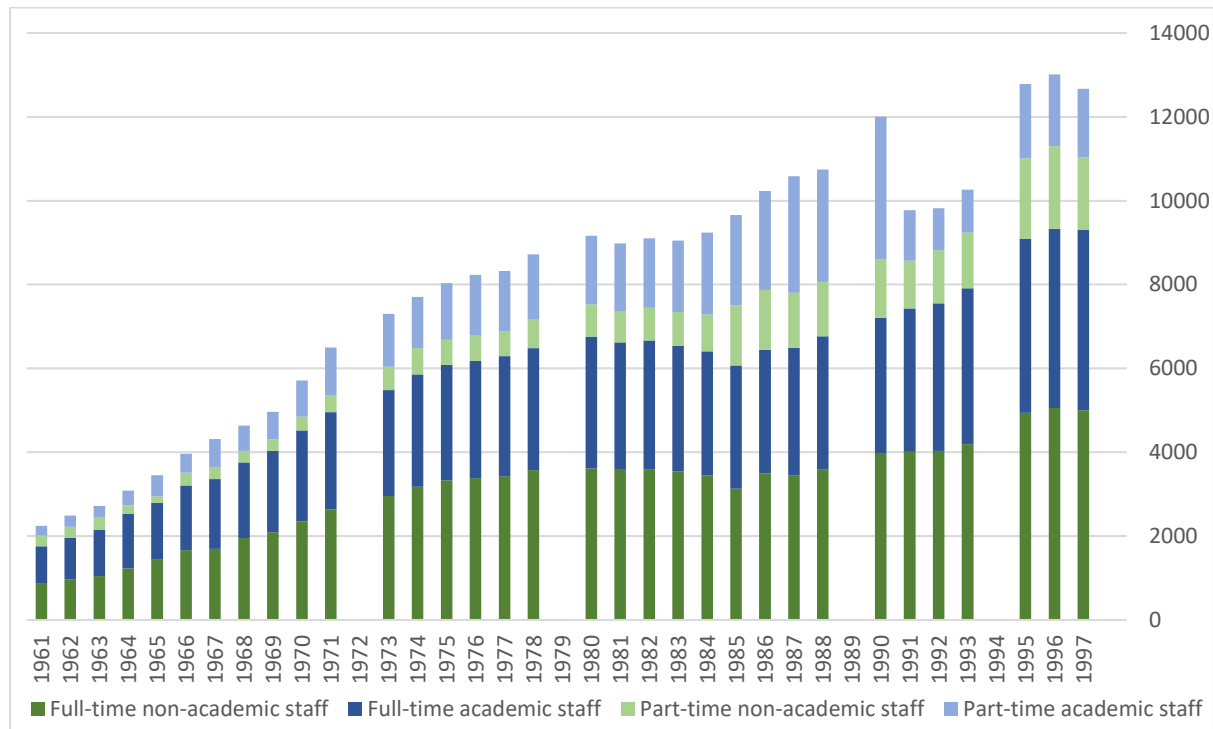
The same points emerge if we graph the proportion of non-academics as a percentage of total university staff in the way we did in Figure 5 of our report. That showed that non-academics formed just under 60% of total university staff between 2012 and 2021. Figure 2 below shows that non-academics were never a majority of total staff between 1961 and 1991, when they became a small majority, accounting for between 52% and 54% of total staff.

Figure 2: Non-academics as a percentage of total staff at New Zealand universities, 1961-1997



We can get a better sense of the nature of the surge in the proportion of non-academic staff in 1991 by looking at the yearbooks' breakdowns of academics and non-academics into full-time and part-time staff. These are shown in Figure 3, with non-academics and academics in green and blue respectively, and full-time and part-time staff distinguished by dark and light shades. What emerges particularly clearly from this chart is that the lion's share of the fall in academic staff from 1990 to 1991 was caused by a dramatic fall in part-time academic staff in particular, with part-time staff losses accounting for 2198 of the total reduction of 2234 staff of all types (academic and non-academic, full-time and part-time).

Figure 3: Academic and non-academic staff, full-time and part-time, at New Zealand universities, 1961-1997



What might account for this is not clear. 1991 came near the end of a period of thoroughgoing reform of New Zealand universities (most recently in the Education Act of 1989 and the Education Amendment Act of 1990). One possibility is that some part-time academic staff (tutors, for instance) were relabelled as full-time academic staff or as non-academic staff (full-time and/or part-time). But this seems unlikely to account for much of the loss of 2198 part-time academic staff, since full-time academic numbers only increased by 170, full-time non-academic numbers increased by only 48, and the number of part-time non-academics decreased by 254.

Another consideration is that the change was a response to the government's decision to gradually lower the tuition subsidies it was paying to universities from 1991.<sup>2</sup> Universities were allowed to increase their fees to compensate for the loss, with all government controls on fees being abolished the same year. But universities increased their tuition fees only gradually, and in 1991, universities faced a certain loss of revenue from the government and uncertainty about how much they would be able to raise through fees. Cutting part-time academics and non-academics might well make sense in response to this, though hiring more full-time staff would make less sense.<sup>3</sup>

Another possibility is that the change has less to do with changes in tertiary education and more with changes in labour regulations, especially as these affected university tutors. Professor Brian Boyd of the University of Auckland suggested in an email that 'it was at the beginning of the 1990s that it was mandated that tutors could not be hired for more than four years without being offered permanent positions, either as Senior Tutors or Lecturers.' Professor Douglas Elliffe (also at the University of

<sup>2</sup> See Roger Smyth, "20 years in the life of a small tertiary education system," a paper prepared for the 2012 general conference of the OECD unit Institutional Management in Higher Education, Paris, <https://rogersmyth.com/20-years-in-the-life-of-a-small-tertiary-education-system>

<sup>3</sup> We are grateful to Emeritus Professor Bob Buckle for suggesting that reduced funding from government played a role here. We are also grateful to professors emeriti Frank Tay and Lew Evans for their suggestions.

Auckland) similarly suggested that ‘changes in employment law’ in that period ‘made it much riskier to roll over fixed-term contracts.’<sup>4</sup>

If this is right, then universities may have been incentivised either to hire part-time academics full-time or get rid of them completely. The first (much more costly) option may explain the addition of 170 full-time academics in 1991. The second option perhaps accounts for the loss of 2198 part-time academic staff the same year.

If the graphs above do pinpoint the year when non-academic numbers first overtook academics at New Zealand universities (rather than just reflecting some change in the collection or labelling of the data), what they suggest is, we would submit, rather surprising. If this data is accurate, the fact that New Zealand universities have had more non-academic than academic staff for some time now was not due primarily to a surge in non-academic numbers, but is a result instead of a one-off cull of academics – and part-time academics in particular – in 1991. This may cast doubt on accounts that attribute New Zealand’s internationally high non-academic numbers to the marketisation of universities at the end of the 1980s, and a resulting need for more non-academic workers to cope with new accountability requirements.<sup>5</sup>

At the same time, the make-up of New Zealand universities’ administrative bureaucracy does seem to have been more stable before the period we covered in our report, and this may suggest that the reforms did have an effect on the composition of non-academic staffing at our universities.

### The Composition of University Bureaucracies in New Zealand, 1970-1997

As well as total academic numbers and breakdowns into full-time and part-time, from 1970 the yearbooks also provide breakdowns of non-academic staff by category (technical, library, administrative, and so on). The categories in the yearbooks are different to the more recent Ministry of Education categories we used in Chapter 3 of our report (‘The composition of university bureaucracies,’ 21-26), but with the appropriate caveats we can nonetheless extend our enquiry into the composition of non-academic staff back to 1970.

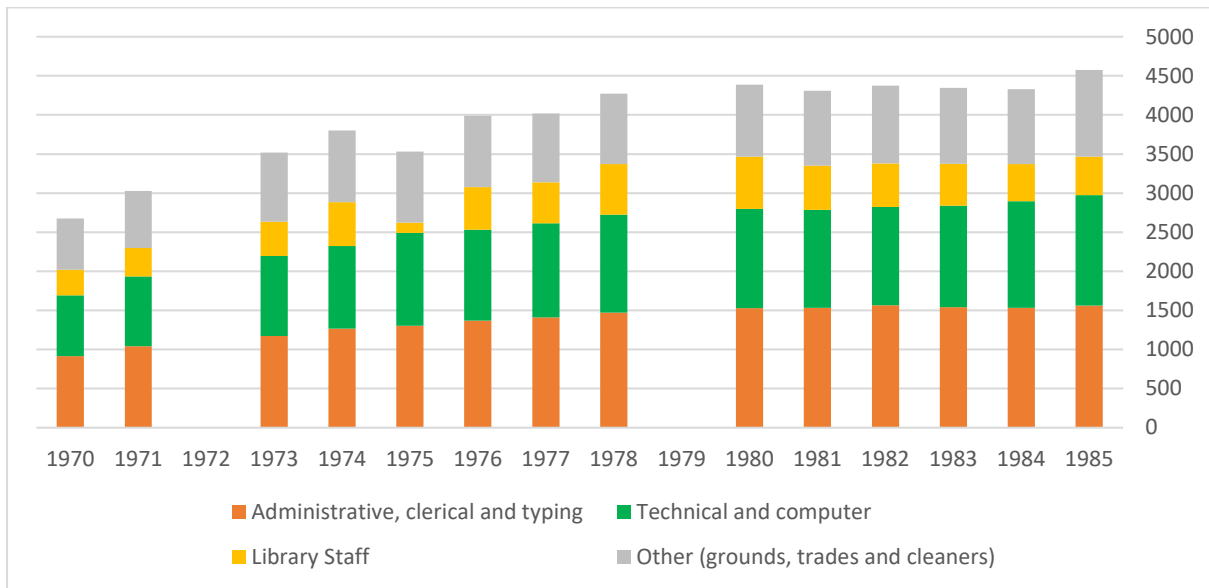
From 1970 to 1985, the yearbooks used the four broad categories in Figure 4. The chart shows some ups and downs in the various categories from one year to the next (with library staff contracting sharply in 1975, for instance). Overall, though, the proportion of non-academic staff in each category was remarkably stable throughout the period.

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<sup>4</sup> VUW Emeritus Professor Gordon Anderson further suggests that this was because terminating rolling part-time contracts came to be treated as dismissal by the courts, and thus had to be justified. This would have made shedding part-time staff later more difficult, limiting universities’ flexibility around budgets in an era when revenues seemed increasingly uncertain.

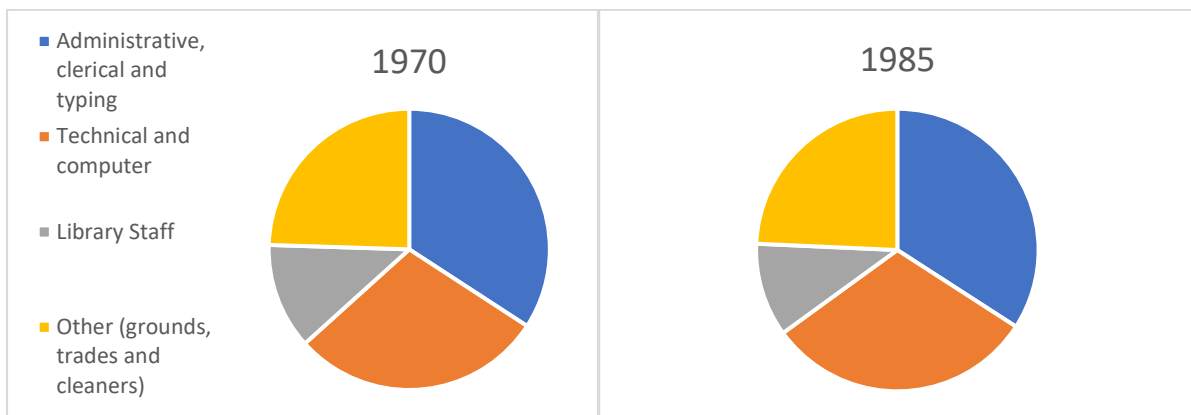
<sup>5</sup> See e.g. Karl Löfgren and Ben Darrah-Morgan (2022), ‘The growth of organisational professionals in tertiary educational institutions in New Zealand,’ *International Journal of Public Sector Management* 35.7: 765-782.

Figure 4: Non-academic staff by category in New Zealand universities, 1970-1985



We can get a better sense of this stability by looking at the proportion of non-academic staff in these four categories in the first and last years of this period. These are displayed in Figure 5 below. The administrative and other staff categories comprised 34% and 24% of the total at both the start and the end of the period. Technical and computer staff increased from 29% to 31% of the total, while library staff decreased from 12% to 11%, but these are small changes that can easily be accounted for by the increase in the importance of computers in this period.

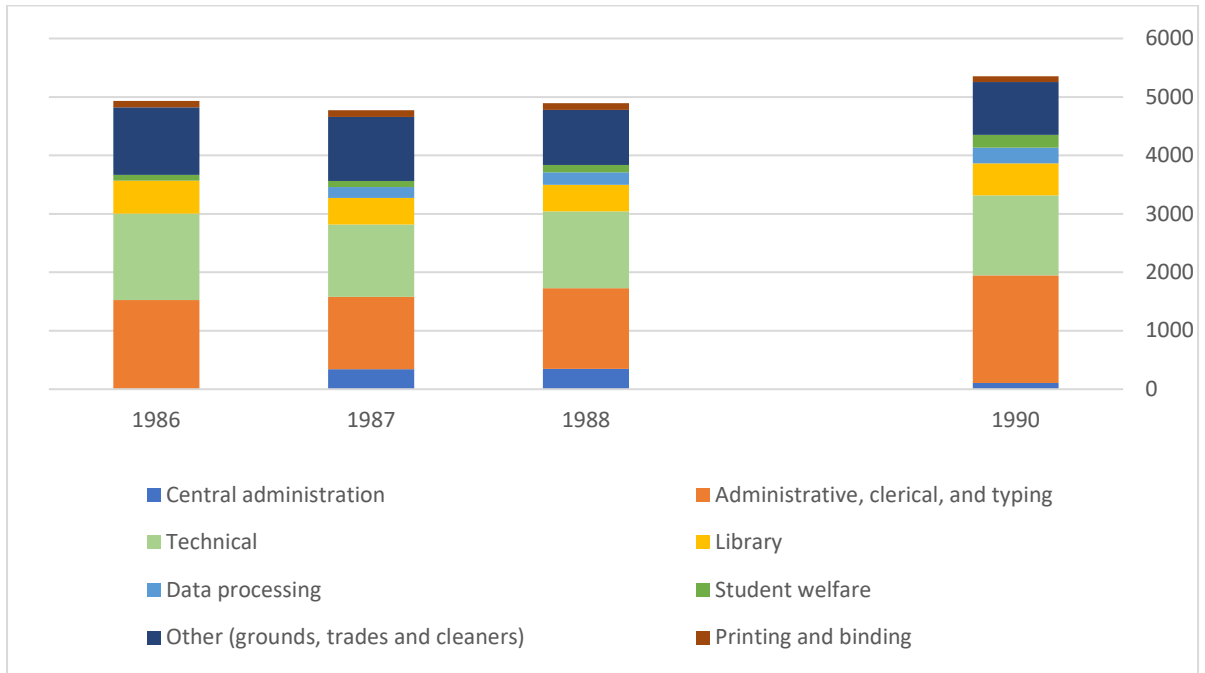
Figure 5: Categories of non-academic as a proportion of total non-academic staff in New Zealand in 1970 (left) and 1985 (right)



In 1987 and 1988, the yearbooks shifted to the eight categories used in Figure 6. In 1986 there were no 'central administration' or 'data processing' categories, with the 'administrative, clerical, and typing' and 'technical and computer' (as it was called that year) categories apparently still including employees who would later be categorised there. In 1990 there was a 'senior administrative/clerical/typing' category instead of the 'administrative, clerical, and typing' one, the 'computer' category replaced 'data processing,' and a 'caretaking and cleaning maintenance of buildings and grounds' category came in for the 'other (grounds, trades and cleaners)' one. We have given the renamed categories the same colour as previously.

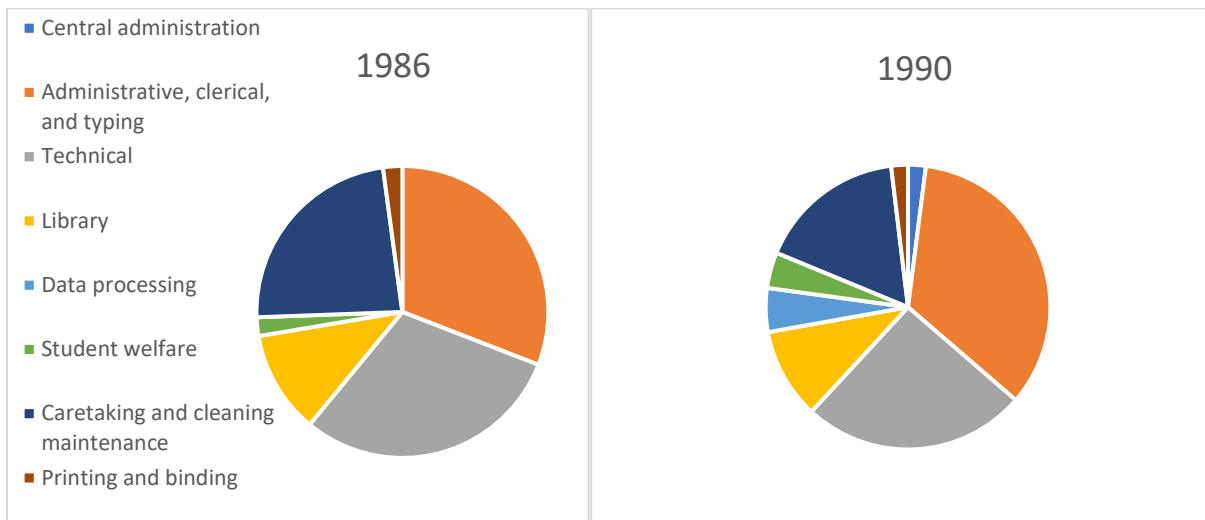


Figure 6: Non-academic staff by category in New Zealand universities, 1986-1990



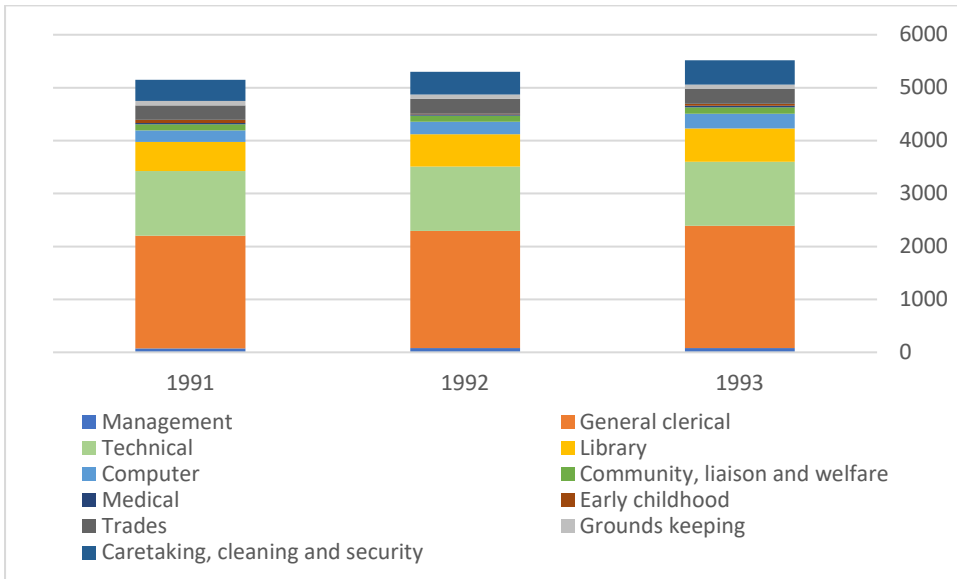
If we except the two categories added in 1987, there were no great changes in this period either. This is confirmed by Figure 7, which presents pie charts for the proportions of non-academics in each category for the first and last years in the series.

Figure 7: Categories of non-academic as a proportion of total non-academic staff in New Zealand in 1986 (left) and 1990 (right)



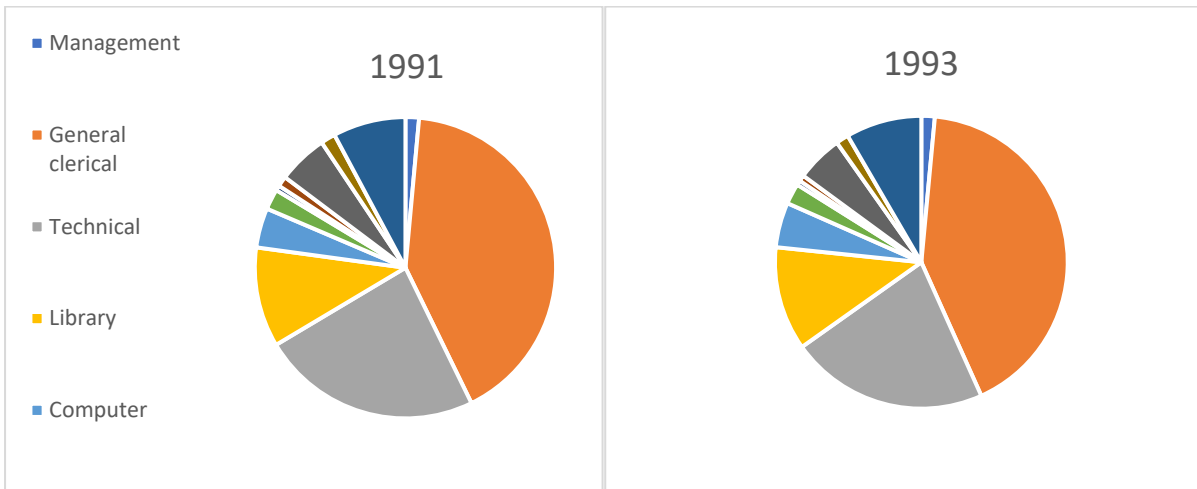
From 1991 to 1993, the yearbooks used no fewer than 11 categories, as shown in Figure 8.

Figure 8: Non-academic staff by category in New Zealand universities, 1991-1993



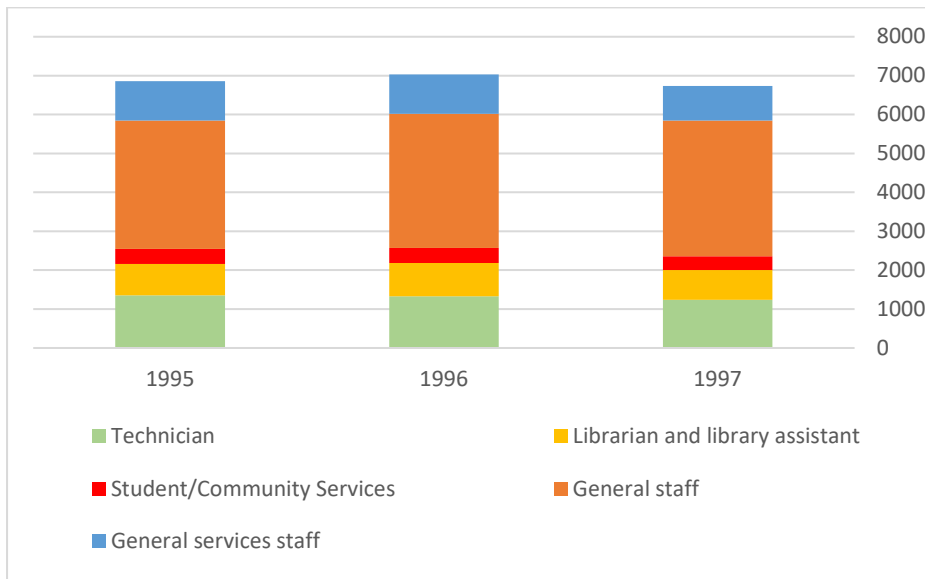
Again there seems to be no great change in the proportions of non-academics accounted for by each category, an impression confirmed by the pie charts in Figure 9.

Figure 9: Categories of non-academic as a proportion of total non-academic staff in New Zealand in 1991 (left) and 1993 (right)



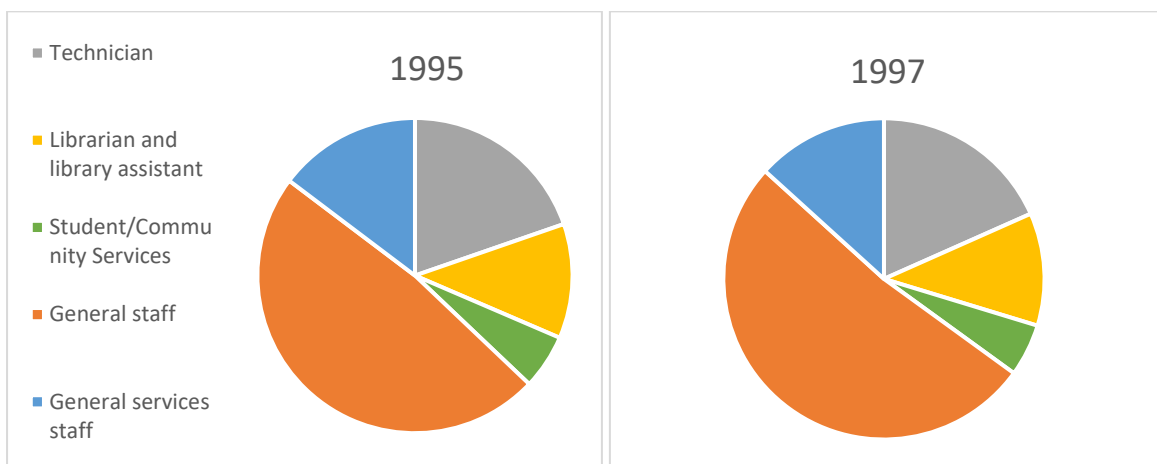
Finally, from 1995 to 1997 we have the five categories displayed in Figure 10.

Figure 10: Non-academic staff by category in New Zealand universities, 1995-1997



Once again, no great change is visible on this graph or when we compare the proportions in the first and last year of the series, as in Figure 11. But general staff did increase from 48% to 52% of the total in this period, and all the other categories decreased slightly (by 1-2%).

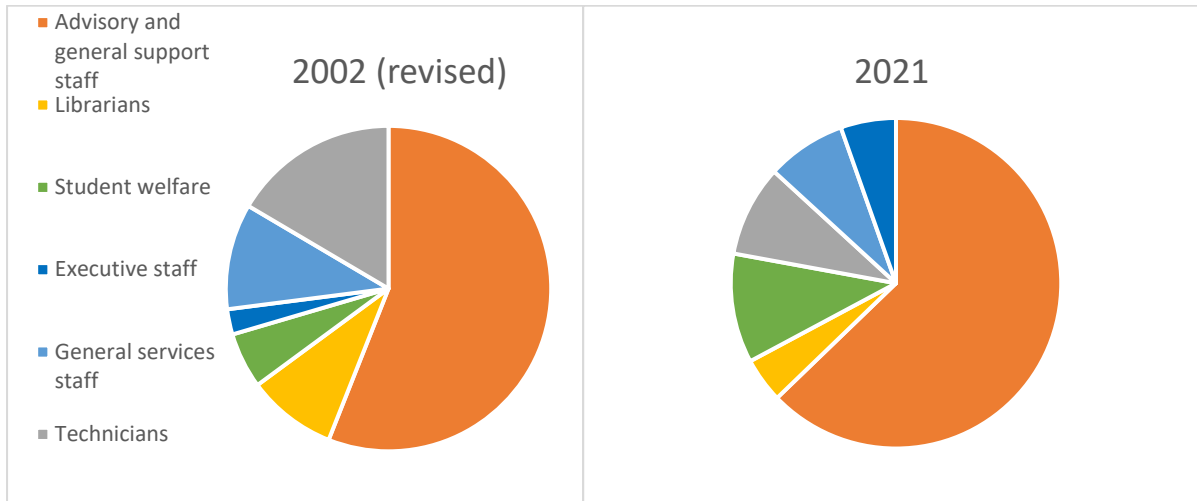
Figure 11: Categories of non-academic as a proportion of total non-academic staff in New Zealand in 1995 (left) and 1997 (right)



In all these periods, then, there was no or only very slight change in the proportion of non-academics in the different categories. This is in strong contrast to the substantial changes we observed in the period we covered in our report. Our revised figures are shown in Figure 12.<sup>6</sup> As the pie charts illustrate, executive and student welfare staff both increased considerably as a proportion of total staff (from 3% to 5% and from 6% to 11% respectively) and librarians and technicians both declined substantially (from 9% to 4% and from 17% to 9% respectively).

<sup>6</sup> For these revised figures, see our Response to a Letter from the Ministry of Education, also available on our website.

Figure 12: Categories of non-academic as a proportion of total non-academic staff in New Zealand in 2002 (left) and 2021 (right)



In our report, we put these changes into the context of similar changes in the composition of university bureaucracies in the UK, US, Canada and Australia since the turn of the millennium. What we can add now is that these substantial changes in the proportions of certain categories of non-academics have not been typical of New Zealand universities over the past 50 or so years. Whatever drivers are behind the substantial growth of executive and student welfare staff at the expense of technicians and librarians over the past two decades seem to have been absent before 1997 (though the small increase in general staff 1995-1997 may be a harbinger for the changes that followed). Teasing out what precisely these drivers are is a topic for further research.

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