

Trends in Australia's Gender-Wage Ratio

Alison Preston and Therese Jefferson

ABSTRACT: Contrary to expectations, Australia's gender—wage ratio (GWR) has remained remarkably stable throughout a prolonged era of significant labour-market deregulation. This article examines recent trends in Australia's GWR and cautions against its use as an accurate measure of women's and men's labour-market experiences. In particular, three key issues need to be considered: (i) women's patterns of workforce participation and over-representation in part-time work; (ii) different methods of pay-setting relevant to different labour-market sectors; and (iii) data limitations on our capacity to fully monitor developments in some labour-market sectors.

Introduction

It is widely argued that women are disadvantaged by reforms to increasingly deregulate the Australian labour market, with expressions of concern about the federal jurisdiction's WorkChoices legislation being a recent example. The concern for women's relative labour-market positions stems from their often weaker bargaining position, commonly attributed to their occupations and skills. Within Australia and internationally, it has been demonstrated that women are more likely to benefit from the protections afforded by labour-market institutions such as tribunals, legislation and collective agreements (Gregory and Ho 1985; Gregory and Daly 1992; Blau and Kahn 1993; Harbridge and Thickett 2003; Rubery 1992; Whitehouse 1992; Gregory 1999; Crockett and Preston 1999). In recent years, the concern for women's relatively vulnerable position in an increasingly individualised labour market prompted several key organisations with an interest in gender and public policy to commission a report examining the potential for data to adequately assess changes in women's wages and working conditions (Preston, Jefferson and Seymour 2006).

Contrary to expectations, however, Australia's gender-wage ratio (GWR) has remained remarkably stable throughout a prolonged era of significant labourmarket deregulation since the mid-1990s. From a theoretical perspective the stability of the gender-wage ratio over this period is somewhat surprising and puzzling. This article examines recent trends and identifies three key issues that serve to caution against interpreting stability in the national wage ratio as an indicator of women's performance in the labour market.

Trends in the Gender Pay Gap

In this section we provide an overview of recent trends in Australia's gender pay gap and identify some of the key patterns that are neglected by focusing on nationallevel data. Tables 1 and 2 below describe wage ratios across Australia's states and territories for the period 1992 to 2007. Table 1 details the GWR and its percentage change across this period, while Table 2 compares the earnings of women at the state and territory level with the earnings of women nationally. In all cases the data are for average weekly ordinary time earnings (AWOTE) for persons employed full-time and include managerial and non-managerial employees.

Table 1 illustrates divergent trends in the GWR at the state and territory level. Between February 1992 and 2007 the GWR fell by 8.26 percentage points to 72.9 per cent in Western Australia (WA), while in Tasmania (TAS) it converged by 6.35 percentage points to 90.8 per cent. Convergence also featured in the New South Wales (NSW), Queensland (QLD), Australian Capital Territories (ACT) and Northern Territories (NT) labour markets.

Table 1: Annual average weekly ordinary time earnings gender wage ratio (in full-time employment) by states and territories, 1992 and 2007 (%)

	Aust.	NSW	VIC	QLD	SA	WA	TAS	NT	ACT
Feb 1992	83.7	82.4	84.7	83.2	90.6	81.2	84.4	81.3	82.3
Aug 2007	83.7	84.5	83.9	84.8	86.1	72.9	90.8	88.3	85.4
Change 1992–2007*	0.05	2.09	-0.75	1.59	-4.57	-8.26	6.35	6.98	2.81

Source: ABS 6302.0.

Table 2 provides further detail of these trends and compares the earning relativity of women at the state and territory level with the earnings of women nationally. Again, the data are for all employees (managerial and non-managerial)

[%] point.

in full-time work. The advantage of these comparisons is that they allow insight into patterns of changing relativity while effectively holding constant the differential effects of industry and occupational forces on the gender pay gap. The assumption is that across Australia there has been little change in the industry and occupational composition of the female labour market in recent years. Changes in the female state—national full-time wage relativity are therefore less likely to derive from industry and occupational effects and more likely to reflect institutional forces.

Table 2: Ratio of annual average AWOTE of state and territory women (employed full-time) benchmarked to the national female annual average AWOTE, 1992 and 2007 (%)

	Aust. (bench- mark)	NSW	VIC	QLD	SA	WA	TAS	NT	ACT
Feb 1992	100	102.7	100.4	92.0	103.1	98.8	94.4	102.4	113.0
Aug 2007	100	104.1	98.7	94.9	94.9	96.6	95.9	100.6	119.7
Change 1992–2007*	0.00	1.47	-1.62	2.94	-8.28	-2.29	1.46	-1.83	6.64

Source: ABS 6302.0.

The data in Table 2 reveal some interesting trends. In South Australia (SA) over the period 1992 to 2007, for example, women in full-time employment experienced an 8.28 percentage point deterioration in their relative pay when benchmarked to women nationally. By 2007 women in SA received 94.9 per cent of the female national average. This suggests that the 4.57 percentage point deterioration in the South Australian full-time gender wage gap (Table 1) was underpinned by labourmarket developments that impacted particularly on women. Similar trends to the SA experience may be observed for WA and Victoria and invite questions as to the labour-market experiences of women in these states. What institutional factors are behind the deterioration in the relative pay of women in WA, SA and Victoria?

The ACT, in contrast, has seen a significant improvement in the relative earnings of women when compared to the national average. In 1992 women in the ACT in full-time employment earned thirteen per cent more than women nationally; by 2007 this earnings premium was much higher, equal to 19.7 per cent.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to explain the divergent experiences of women in states and territories such as SA, WA, VIC and ACT, and it seems likely that they will reflect a range of labour-market and institutional factors (Jefferson and Preston 2007). It is, however, worth considering briefly whether or not the observed outcomes in states such as WA, SA and VIC reflect sector effects, with

^{* %} point.

women in the ACT more likely to be employed in the public sector where wages growth has been faster.

Table 3 shows the significance of public-sector employment in each Australian state and territory. At March 2007 6.6 per cent of all public-sector expenditure on wages and salaries was in the ACT. This compares to 1.3 per cent of all private-sector wage and salary expenditure. The private sector was more strongly represented in WA, SA, Victoria, and NSW (in particular).

Table 3: Distribution of employers' total expenditure on wages and salaries by sector and state, March 2007 (%)

	NSW	VIC	QLD	SA	WA	TAS	NT	ACT	Aust. (total)
Private	36.3	27	16.4	7	9.7	1.6	0.8	1.3	100
Public	34.7	19.3	19.5	6.8	8.8	2.4	2	6.6	100

Source: ABS 6345.0, appendix A, Table A1.

Table 4: Changes in the wage cost index (total hourly earnings, excluding bonuses) by sector, all employees, 1997-2007 (%)

	NSW	VIC	QLD	SA	WA	TAS	NT	ACT	Aust.
Private sec	tor								-
Sep 1997	81.3	81.6	82.6	81.7	81.6	83.6	84.1	81.6	81.8
Mar 2007	111.6	112.2	113.9	111.5	114.8	113.1	112.4	112.2	112.5
Change*	30.3	30.6	31.3	29.8	33.2	29.5	28.3	30.6	30.7
Public sect	or								
Sep 1997	77.6	90.9	80.1	79.9	81.8	82.2	81.3	81.7	79.9
Mar 2007	115.1	113	114.4	114.9	113.4	115.6	113.4	114.5	114.3
Change*	37.5	32.1	34.3	35.0	31.6	33.4	32.1	32.8	34.6

Source: ABS 6345.0.

* % point.

Table 4 shows the percentage change in the wage cost index for the public and private sectors in each state between 1997 and 2007. Again, the patterns are different on a state-by-state basis. A general pattern is that private-sector wages costs have grown more slowly than those of the public sector, with Western Australia the exception.

Thus far the focus has been on state differences. In Table 5 national-level data are used to provide further insight into the trends. The data are disaggregated by

sector and, as with Table 4, the data show markedly different patterns of earnings growth between the public and private sectors. Closer inspection reveals that this primarily applies to men. Across both sectors women experienced the same (nominal) earnings growth of 90.3 per cent between 1992 and 2007. In contrast, the earnings of men in full-time private-sector employment only increased by 86.1 per cent between 1992 and 2007. Men in full-time public-sector employment experienced the fastest earnings growth, equal to 95.1 per cent.

Stability in the gender wage gap in the full-time labour market may therefore have as much to do with men's labour-market experiences as with women's. Research controlling for compositional changes in the sectors would help answer these questions. Such research would also shed further light on differential gender pay outcomes in the ACT and WA labour markets, where, in the former, the gender pay gap is equal to 14.6 per cent and in the latter it is nearly twice as large, equal to 27.1 per cent. Within the limits of the data, the tables suggest that improvements or stability in the national gender pay gap may not be a result of women's advances, such as improved skill levels or experience, but an effect of men's deteriorating labour market position.² In the following sections we look at some key issues that allow us to further understand these trends.

Table 5: Average weekly total nominal earnings growth of adults employed full-time, February 1992 to August 2007 (seasonally adjusted)

	Publi	c Sector	Private Sector		
	Females	Males	Females	Males	
	\$	\$	\$	\$	
Feb 1992	593.40	684.70	495.40	654.20	
Aug 2007	1129.20	1335.70	942.50	1217.50	
Rate of Growth (%)	90.3	95.1	90.3	86.1	

Source: ABS 6302.0, Time-Series Workbook available from <www.abs.gov.au>, Tables 5. (Private Sector) and Table 8 (Public Sector).

Understanding the Trends

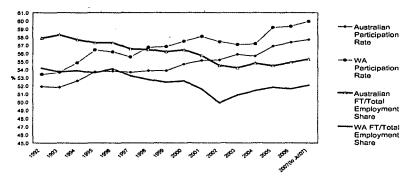
(i) Women's patterns of participation

Over the course of the last few decades there have been a number of important developments that theoretically should have helped narrow the gender wage gap. There has, for example, been a significant increase in the proportion of women

participating in higher education and moving into non-traditional jobs (Preston and Burgess 2003). Figure 1 shows that women are also increasingly participating in the workforce and this is likely to be related to lower birth rates, along with fewer and shorter breaks from employment over the life course. In other words, it can be argued that, relative to men, women's average labour-market experience will have risen, in turn contributing, in part, to a narrowing of the gender wage gap.

Women's increased labour-market participation, however, warrants additional consideration. Women's patterns of participation vary from men's and much of the increase has been in part-time employment. Figure 1 shows the trends nationally and within WA, the state with the least improvement in GWR. In 1992 the female participation rate in Australia was equal to 51.9 per cent, by July 2007 it was at 57.7 per cent. In 1992, 57.9 per cent of all women participating in paid employment worked on a full-time basis (35 hours or more per week); by July 2007 this share had fallen to 55.3 per cent. The trend at the national level is mirrored in WA (which only accounts for around 10 per cent of the total Australian workforce).

Figure 1: Australian and WA female labour force participation rate and full-time employment participation rate, 1992-2007



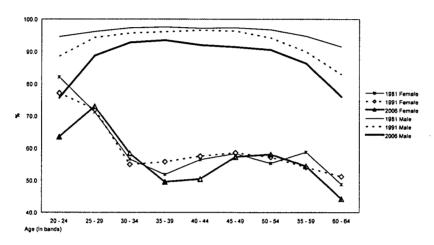
Source: ABS 6202.

Note: average annual estimates used to smooth the data.

Figure 2 shows the full-time employment participation ratios for 1981, 1991 and 2006 disaggregated by age. A number of patterns are worth noting. Firstly, there has been a shift towards part-time employment by young men and women (aged 20–24), presumably reflecting changes in education and an increasing preference to combine part-time employment with study. Secondly, there is a sharp drop in the full-time employment participation of women after the age of 29, with previous rates of participation never to be recovered. Thirdly, in recent years, there has been

a relative shift away from full-time employment participation by women aged 35–44 and by older women.

Figure 2: Full-time participation rate shown as a share of total participation rate, by sex and age, 1981–2006



Source: ABS 6202.

Amongst women aged 35–44 increased participation in part-time work most likely relates to family care requirements. Relative to women in other countries, women in Australia are more likely to balance their work and family responsibilities by engaging in part-time work (Austen 2005; OECD 2003). Whether the recent trend reflects an increased preference (demand) for part-time hours (possibly affected by a shortage of childcare places) or an increased supply of part-time jobs cannot be inferred from these data. It is nevertheless apparent that employed women are more likely to be in part-time work during their prime labour-market years than were earlier cohorts of employed women. The implications for their future career opportunities and earnings growth also cannot be inferred from these data, although the type of part-time work (and conditions of part-time work) is obviously an important determinant. Interestingly, data show that men's participation rates in full-time work have also declined between 1981, 1991 and 2006. This suggests that the GWR is likely to reflect not only changes in women's employment and pay but also changes in men's labour-market experiences.

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(ii) Methods of pay-setting in part-time labour markets

As noted above, part-time employment is an increasingly important feature of the Australian labour market for both women and men. At May 2007, 48.7 per cent of all Australian employees were women, with 45 per cent (equal to 21.9 percentage points) of employed women participating on a part-time basis (see Table I — appendix). Although part-time employment has increased amongst men (and now constitutes fifteen per cent of all male jobs), the majority (75 per cent) of part-time employees are women.

Many part-time jobs are based on casual employment contracts and are located in low-wage sectors of the labour market. For example, recent data indicate that nearly one quarter (24.2 per cent) of all women employed part-time are employed in the retail sector, and a further 9.4 per cent are in the accommodation, cafes and hospitality sector. Both sectors have experienced below-average wages growth since the early 1990s (see Table II). The five industries exhibiting slowest wages growth (cafes, accommodation and restaurants; communication services; personal and other services; retail trade; and transport and storage) employ between them nearly 40 per cent of all women employed part-time (Table I).

Again, it is beyond the scope of this article to account for the differential rates of wages growth by industry. It is likely that the patterns reflect, in part, differences in the composition of industry workforces (for example, skills and qualifications); different levels of product market power and capacity to pass on rents (for example, mining); different levels of unionisation; and different approaches to industrial relations and methods of wage-setting. Sectors where labour constitutes a high share of total operating costs (for example, cafes, child-care, personal and other services) are likely to have a particular focus on cost-minimisation through wage restraint.

Recent Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) data show that relative to full-timers, part-timers are relatively more likely to have their pay and conditions determined by an award only. In other words, their pay constitutes a minimum rate and there is little over-award (informal individual) bargaining taking place. At May 2006, 33.7 per cent of all women employed part-time had their pay set by an award only. The corresponding share amongst women and men employed full-time was equal to 14.3 and 11.3 per cent, respectively (see Table 6). This suggests differences in the labour-market experiences of full-timers and part-timers.

In addition, international research shows that limited part-time employment opportunities in professional spheres, particularly non-traditional areas such as mining and information technology, are affecting the retention of women in these fields and contributing to ongoing segmentation of the labour market (EOC 2007).

If women in professional jobs are trading-down (that is, prioritising hours over earnings and accepting lower-level jobs where part-time work is possible), this is unlikely to help narrow the gender pay gap. It also constitutes the waste of an important economic resource (EOC 2007). Similar arguments hold for women discouraged from seeking higher-level jobs where the opportunity cost of doing so is a loss of hours flexibility.

Table 6: Percent of non-managerial employees, by methods of paysetting, part-time and full-time status, and sex, Australia, May 2006

	Male - FT	Male - PT	Male - total	Female - FT	Female - PT	Female - total	Persons - FT	Persons - PT	Persons - total
Award only	11.3	34.0	17.1	14.3	33.7	24.8	12.5	33.8	21.0
Registered collective agreements	41.0	32.8	38.9	45.0	42.2	43.5	42.6	39.3	41.3
Unregistered collective agreements	3.7	•	3.5	2.9	2.8	2.8	3.4	2.8	3.2
Registered individual agreements	4.3	•	4.0	2.9	•	2.5	3.8	2.4	3.2
Unregistered individual arrangements	39.7	27.3	36.6	34.9	19.2	26.4	37.8	21.7	31.3
All methods of setting pay	100	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: ABS 6306.0, unpublished data.

From a pay equity perspective, growth in part-time work, particularly part-time work at minimum rates in sectors with below-average wages growth, does not augur well for efforts to close the gender pay gap. Monitoring the effects of part-time employment growth on high-level indicators such as the gender pay gap should, therefore, be an important priority of government. However, at this point in time there are no time-series data available that would enable such analysis. Currently the gender pay gap, widely recognised as a key indicator of women's progress in the labour market, is only monitored with reference to women in full-time employment. By examining our capacity to adequately measure the gender pay gap we gain further insight into the apparent long-term stability of the GWR.

^{*}Indicates cell size too small to report.

(iii) Data limitations

The ABS currently publishes three main statistical collections on wages and earnings. These include *Average Weekly Earnings (AWE) Survey* (Catalogue 6302.0), *Employee Earnings and Hours (EEH) Survey* (Catalogue 6306.0), and the *Labour Price Index (LPI)* (Catalogue 6345.0). Each collection has specific strengths and weaknesses for the purposes of monitoring the GWR in Australia.

The EEH survey contains the richest source of information on earnings. Data from this survey may be disaggregated by employment status (full-time, part-time), hours (allowing a study of hourly earnings), industry, occupation, firm size, sex, and state. Other important classification items include managerial and non-managerial categories and methods of pay-setting (for example, individual agreement). Estimates on average earnings are made publicly available, although median estimates are available by request for unpublished data. The key weaknesses of this survey are: (a) it is cross-sectional; and (b) it is only published on a biannual basis.

The AWE survey is the only series providing time-series information on earnings that can also be disaggregated by sex.³ Data from this survey are used to show trends in the gender pay gap. The data cannot be disaggregated by managerial status, nor can they be disaggregated by hours of work.

Given the above, the most common approach used to study trends in the Australian gender pay gap is to use data from the AWE survey and restrict the analysis to the full-time labour market. This approach (as adopted in Figure 1) shows a highly stable gender pay gap of around 16 per cent. The key weakness of this approach is that it excludes half the female workforce and a growing proportion of males — those working part-time.

Is this important? Does it matter if part-timers are not included in the estimates? The analysis presented above suggests that their inclusion is very important. Part-time employment is an increasingly important characteristic of female employment and it is located in particular sectors of the labour market where recent legislative reforms are likely to have had a particular affect. The shift away from national-level bargaining (for example, national wage cases) towards individual bargaining is likely to have particularly affected groups of workers who have traditionally relied on awards to define their employment conditions. Reforms that marginalise the institutions and processes associated with award conditions are likely to weaken the support mechanisms traditionally relied on by part-timers.

Compositional changes in the full-time workforce, associated with a fall in the share of employed women working full-time, might also be expected to impact on the gender pay gap as currently measured. If the women who remain in fulltime employment do so because of career opportunities and commitments then it may be that, relative to those who leave, they are on a higher average wage, thus helping to raise the overall average wage of women employed full-time and thus helping to 'close' the gender pay gap.

Thus far we have only discussed average earnings. However, the presence of a few high-earners can skew the data. In such circumstances it may be more appropriate to base analysis on median earnings rather than average. Table 7 below compares the outcomes of using unpublished ABS data on average earnings and median earnings in collective (union and non-union) agreements. The analysis is restricted to non-managerial employees. When median data are used the GWR widens by three percentage points between 2004 and 2006. When average data are used the corresponding deterioration is 0.8 percentage points.

Table 7: Comparison of the gender-wage ratio in collective (union and non-union) agreements; average and median earnings data, non-managerial employees, May 2006

		Average			Median				
	Males	Females	GWR (%)	Males	Females	GWR (%)			
2004	\$25.80	\$23.30	90.3	\$23.40	\$21.40	91.5			
2006	\$28.70	\$25.70	89.5	\$26.00	\$23.00	88.5			
Change*			-0.8			-3.0			

Source: ABS unpublished data from 6306.0.

It should be noted that the lack of suitable data and methods for monitoring the effects of labour-market developments affects our capacity to understand changes in the gender wage gap. Detailed consideration is being given to potential monitoring methods (for example, one might wish to monitor the effects of minimum-wage decisions on employment and wages outcomes). While useful methods of monitoring have (and are) being developed, concerns about the frequency of high-quality data collection have been expressed, particularly with respect to disaggregated data that monitor outcomes according to pay-setting method (Access Economics 2006; Healy and Richardson 2006).

Conclusion

This article has examined recent trends in the gender pay gap in Australia and offered some explanations as to the observed stability. The key finding is that the trend data typically used for such analysis only offer a very partial story and

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that there is a need for more adequate monitoring of this high-level indicator of women's progress in employment. Stability in the GWR at a national level neglects important variations between state-level data and the growing significance of part-time employment. By focusing on full-time employment, the GWR understates the effects of women's employment in labour-market sectors traditionally reliant on award wage-setting processes. Further, the capacity to gain a more accurate picture of gender equity in various labour-market sectors is hampered by the availability of relevant data. Adequate monitoring requires time-series data on hourly earnings that are collected and made available in disaggregated form by industry, occupation, sector, sex and method of pay-setting. Efforts should also be made to quantify or value trade-offs (for example, the cashing out of holidays). This series should be available on a regular basis (for example, quarterly) and official reports should use common definitions of key terms.

Notes

- 1. If the rate of labour market integration has varied across the states then this will obviously weaken this assumption. We are unaware of any studies comparing different rates of integration at the state level, although there is reason to believe that there has not been significant levels of activity. Research at the national level shows that between 1996 and 2002 the rate of integration in the full-time labour market was relatively slow (Watts 2002). Much of the employment growth since 1996 has been in the part-time labour market (where levels of sex-segregation are much higher) (Preston and Whitehouse 2004).
- Improvements or stability in the national gender wage gap may, of course, be a combination of both (that is, improvements in women's labour-market position and a deterioration in the labour-market position of men).
- The LPI (6345.0) is suitable for time-series analysis. The data, however, measure the wage costs of 'jobs' rather than positions held by particular individuals. In other words the data cannot be disaggregated by sex or other characteristics such as qualifications.

Appendix

Table I: Distribution of employed persons across and within industry by sex, May 2007

		Males (%)		F			
	Full-time	Part-time	Total	Full-time	Part-time	Total	Female employmen in industry (%
Agriculture, forestry and fishing	2.6	2.0	2.5	1.9	2.7	2.3	46.3
Mining	2.6	0.2	2.3	0.7	0.1	0.4	15.2
Manufacturing	16.9	6.6	15.5	7.4	3.9	5.8	26.
Electricity, gas and water supply	1.6	0.2	1.4	0.6	0.1	0.4	20.
Construction	13.1	5.6	12.0	1.9	2.6	2.2	15,
Wholesale trade	6.4	3.1	5.9	3.8	2.4	3.2	33.
Retail trade	9.8	27.8	12.3	11.9	23.0	16.9	56.
Accommodation, cafes and restaurants	3.2	12.0	4.4	4.5	8.5	6.9	57.
Transport and storage	6.5	4.9	6.2	3.2	2.0	2.7	28.
Communication services	2.8	1.2	2.6	1.4	1.0	1.2	31.
Finance and insurance	4.1	2.0	3.8	5.5	3.7	4.4	52.
Property and business services	12.2	11.0	12.0	13.0	10.1	11.7	48.
Government administration and defence	5.0	2.9	4.7	7.4	2.9	5.4	52.
Education	4.2	6.7	4.5	11.4	10.3	10.9	69.
Health and community services	3.8	5.8	4.1	18.0	19.4	18.7	81.
Cultural and recreational services	2.0	4.9	2.4	2.8	3.8	3.2	56.
Personal and other services	3.3	3.0	3.3	4.4	4.1	4.3	55.
Total all industries	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	48.
All industries	44.1	7.2	51.3	26.8	21.9	48.7	

Source: ABS 6291.0.55.003 data cubes.

Table II: Changes in employment and nominal earnings: 1994–2006/07

		nployment grov 1994 – May 2007		l earnings 1994–2006)	
	Full-time (%)	Part-time (%)	Total (%)	Men (%)	Women (%)
Agriculture, forestry and fishing	102.8	101.1	102	-	-
Mining	167.1	107.7	165	75.9	96.8
Manufacturing	95.3	113.5	97	71.5	71.1
Electricity, gas and water supply	94.6	164.0	97	91.1	87.7
Construction	193.1	156.0	187	62.3	71.6
Wholesale trade	95.8	118.2	99	66.3	73.1
Retail trade	128.1	146.4	136	61.1	68.8
Accommodation, cafes and restaurants	148.0	154.1	151	47.1	60.7
Transport and storage	127.9	214.4	138	64.1	54.7
Communication services	140.9	227.9	150	74.1	74.3
Finance and insurance	125.0	155.8	130	97.0	89.9
Property and business services	183.0	187.2	184	59.5	71.7
Government administration and defence	130.7	220.7	140	80.9	77.8
Education	123.8	156.9	134	63.0	67.4
Health and community services	152.3	167.8	158	76.2	52.8
Cultural and recreational services	161.3	178.9	168	54.9	53.8
Personal and other services	132.1	158.5	139	60.1	70.2
Total all industries	131.0	155.6	137	69.1	68.8

Source: ABS 6291.0.55.003 and 6302.0. Note: (a) part-time employment is defined in Australia as employment of 35 hours or less per week; (b) nominal earnings measures average weekly ordinary time earnings (AWOTE) of persons employed full-time. It includes managerial and non-managerial employees

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