CADAD welcome and project background
Associate Professor Sharon Parry, President of the Council of Australian Directors of Academic Development (CADAD)

I am currently the president of a group called the Council of Australian Directors of Academic Development (CADAD) and we have been a group for a long, long time but we became a formally constituted association a bit over a year ago.

Last year when we were discussing what are the big agendas in teaching and learning in higher education, what are the things that we’re most concerned about? The topic that came up of induction and professional development of sessional staff for teaching in universities. Everybody agreed across the sector that we really need to do something about it - we need to think about it, we need to know what are the complexities involved in it, how can we change it, how can we improve the situation that sessional staff find themselves in universities.

Sessional teaching staff are usually fairly isolated. They’re on very short term contracts, they come and they go. There are issues of induction, professional development, connectedness and so on. There was a realisation amongst us that our sessional staff are doing a wide range of jobs - teaching related jobs - in universities and that they’re not getting a great deal of support.

I think it’s interesting to consider the figure of an estimated 40 per cent of staff teaching undergraduate curriculum being sessionally appointed. McAlpine’s study was published in 2003. I think that, from anecdotes across the sector, we believe that the figure by now would be much greater.

I disagree of Professor Robert Castle’s view of sessional staff being ‘a proletariat’. I think they’re actually the mainstream deliverers of our undergraduate education in higher education. I know it’s very different across different universities but I still believe that these are the people who are carrying most of the weight for delivering all the forms of learning support that make up teaching in higher education.

So CADAD decided to develop an application into the Carrick Institute to ask for funding in support of a project that would look at what sort of resources we now have to support sessional staff induction and professional development, and how can we better develop our sessional staff in the wide range of teaching-related roles that they have in higher education.

The Carrick Institute was very keen that we look at sessional staff as teachers because they do take such a big part in the delivery of the undergraduate curriculum. Ro’s McCullough from QUT did most of the writing on that application and we’re very, very thankful to her for her efforts. She brought an international perspective to the application.

There was a lot of input from the CADAD Executive and those people are Professor Yoni Ryan from the University of Canberra, Associate Professor Margaret Hicks from the University of South Australia, Dr Alan Goody who was at the University of Western Australia, Associate Professor Michelle Scoufis from the University of New South Wales and myself, from the Southern Cross University.

We were then joined by Professor Sandra Wills from Wollongong and by Professor Ian Macdonald from the University of New England. So we’ve been a team, we’ve been meeting, we’ve been building up the project and now we want to share the findings with you and learn more from you. Lyn Sheridan, the Project Officer, will give you an overview of the project and its outcomes in a minute.

Transcript from the National Colloquium on Sessional Teaching in Higher Education: Recognition, Development and Enhancement, Australian National University, Canberra, 28th November 2007. Carrick Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education.
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I want to draw your attention to a noteworthy finding by Jennifer Weir from Murdoch University. In the review of the first round of [Australian Universities’ Quality Agency (AUQA)] reports of the 38 universities, over 70 per cent of institutional review reports mentioned the issue of induction and professional development for sessional staff. In 37 per cent of cases, there were simply notes made, but only in less than 30 per cent was nothing said about sessional staff.

It’s very interesting to examine the commendations or affirmations made about how universities induct and provide professional development for sessional teaching staff. The reports do not give clear examples of good practice, and in the main, the reports question whether there is any systematic induction and professional development being provided. So there is quite a big issue about how we’re training our sessional staff for the wide range of roles related to teaching that they undertake.

One of the problems we had with his project was the inability to collect get transparent data on the exact numbers of sessional staff from universities. They either didn’t have it or they were not able to give it to us. So we were really only able to make estimates of the total numbers and proportions of teaching staff in individual universities. I find it astonishing that we can’t identify exactly who the people are who are teaching our undergraduate curriculum across the sector.

We did find, and this is consistent with some earlier studies, that sessional staff adopt a wide range of teaching-related roles. For example, they can vary by field of study; they can be professional supervisors, clinical supervisors, school supervisors, field supervisors, for example. But they can also vary by profile. They can be doctoral students; they can be people who just want to get their foot in the door of university teaching, or they might already have a doctorate and it’s a way to become a continuing member of staff. For other people it’s just a part time income, doing a little bit of extra marking or a bit of tutoring or whatever. Then there are what we might call professional sessional teachers; they are people who take sessional contracts in a number of universities and that's how they make up their income.

So we think that there are many, many issues to address and we’re hoping that you’ll be able to give us lots of information about advancing sessional staff as university teachers as well. CADAD has just met here in Canberra for two days and we talked about how academic life and academic careers are dramatically changing. We agreed that the change includes the increase in sessional staff appointments, so their capacity to deliver good teaching is a very important issue for the sector. The world of work in academia is really changing and we’ve got to look at that dynamic, fragmented world of work for academics because that’s where our sessional staff increasingly are. It’s a huge challenge for us to address but we need to address it. There are economic, political and standards-based considerations, perhaps even ethical considerations to be considered. I don’t think there are any easy answers but I think if we acknowledge that this is the world of work in the academy that we’re dealing with, with an increasingly itinerant teaching population, we can go forward positively and try and make a difference.