Abstract

In 2005 the employment, induction and professional development of sessional teachers was ad hoc. Recognising the need for a whole of institution approach to improvements in this area, in 2006 the University implemented its Sessional Teaching Staff Strategic Action Plan.

The Plan is linked to performance indicators and funding for the faculties, and is supported by the Sessional Staff Coordinator located in the Learning and Teaching Unit. Through a facilitated implementation process, all schools in 2008 have a nominated staff member who is responsible for the overall support of sessional staff.

Context

At UNSW, 40-60% of undergraduate teaching is provided by sessional staff.

The UNSW Sessional Teaching Staff Strategic Action Plan:

- was developed by the Learning and Teaching Unit after an extensive consultation process;
- was formally approved by Committee on Education in March 2006;
- drew upon the AUTC Sessional Staff Teaching Project, the UNSW Guidelines on Learning that Inform Teaching (see Links and Resources) and international best practice; and
- recognises the diversity of employment of sessional teachers across disciplines/faculties.

The University recognises that faculties and schools require assistance in interpreting and implementing the Plan in their own context.

Implementation is supported through the Sessional Teaching Staff Coordinator, based in Learning and Teaching @ UNSW, and through the UNSW Faculty Learning and Teaching Performance Indicators.

Aims

The Sessional Teaching Staff Strategic Action Plan sought to:

- highlight and acknowledge the key roles played by sessional staff in the student learning experience;
- acknowledge and articulate the roles of all responsible for sessional staff and the quality of the learning and teaching experience;
- provide a basis for benchmarking, sharing and reporting on all aspects of the employment, induction, professional development and recognition of sessional staff; and
- establish a baseline of acceptable support for sessional staff against which improvement could be measured.
Outcomes

All schools have a nominated academic staff member who is responsible for the overall support of sessional teachers.

Most faculties have a Human Resources person whose role explicitly includes the employment and induction of sessional staff.

With the appointment of a Sessional Teaching Staff Coordinator within the central Learning and Teaching Unit, ongoing support has been provided through close collaboration with the faculties/schools.

Focus has been placed on key learning and teaching issues such as assessment and feedback. The coordinator ensures that useful practices are shared across the university.

Most faculties now provide at least 3 workshops for sessional staff (although the form varies greatly depending on the context).

There are 2 Vice Chancellor’s Teaching Excellence Awards for sessional staff, and most faculties have sessional staff teaching awards.

The UNSW Sessional Teaching Staff Strategic Action Plan framework
What was done?

Sessional Teaching Strategic Action Plan: Policy and Checklists

A university-wide investigation into faculty policy and practice was instigated by the Pro Vice Chancellor and the Director of the Learning and Teaching Unit. Building on the work of the 2003 AUTC Guidelines for Training, Managing and Supporting Sessional Teachers (see Links and Resources), the University's Sessional Teaching Strategic Action Plan: Policy and Checklists for the Employment, Management and Development of Sessional Teaching Staff was then developed. Using a similar framework to the AUTC Guidelines, the Strategic Action Plan sets out faculty, school and course responsibilities according to recruitment, employment, integration and communication, opportunities for development in learning and teaching, and evaluation and recognition.

The Plan also provides a series of checklists to guide the implementation of those stated responsibilities. From 2005 the Strategic Action Plan was linked to Faculty Learning and Teaching Performance Indicators. This strategy was considered to be critical to ensure engagement with the Policy.

The process meant that Faculties received remuneration in part based on provision of professional development for sessional staff. From 2006 onwards the value and weighting of this indicator, relative to other indicators, has progressively increased to reflect and acknowledge the importance of providing induction, orientation and professional development for all sessional staff at UNSW.

Sessional Teaching Staff Coordinator

In 2003, a part-time Sessional Teaching Staff Coordinator was employed in the Teaching and Learning Unit to investigate the needs of sessional staff and develop strategies to support them. In 2006, the role of the Sessional Teaching Staff Coordinator became a full-time position. The role is intended to:

- improve student learning as an outcome;
- foster a culture that values and rewards the contribution of sessional staff and encourages their engagement in course and program development;
- ensure that sessional teachers are supported and aware of the influence they have on students’ learning and choice of career;
- assist in making the experience of teaching a positive one for new teachers as well as students. This could in turn influence their career paths;
- encourage faculties to take ownership of their professional development programs for sessional teachers;
- maintain a comprehensive website for sessional teachers;
- evaluate and monitor the effectiveness of the support provided for sessional teaching staff and make recommendations for improvement;
- report annually to the Committee of Education.

Human Resources

The Sessional Teaching Staff Coordinator worked with faculty Human Resources staff to improve processes relating to employment contracts, induction, access to IT and email accounts and access to the Library.

Professional Development

The Sessional Teaching Staff Coordinator works closely with faculties to design, develop and implement professional development programs for their sessional teachers.

These programs are contextualised, acknowledge specific disciplinary needs, and are facilitated by the UNSW Sessional Teaching Staff Coordinator and faculty staff.

Some faculties have initiated and developed their own programs for sessional teachers:

- The Australian School of Business has its own Education Development Unit and has an embedded program for new tutors (see Case 4 in this resource);
- The Science Faculty EdSquad has also developed its own program for tutors and lab demonstrators.

It is envisaged that embedded programs will change the university culture, with Learning and Teaching providing more of a resource position in the future.

In February 2007 a Compendium of Good Practice in Learning and Teaching focussing on sessional staff was published (see Links and Resources). This includes case studies of contextualised programs for sessional teachers across UNSW.
Improved communication

A contact list is available on the Support for Sessional Staff website (see Links and Resources) to identify those responsible for the overall support of sessional staff in each faculty. This list includes both administrative and academic staff contacts in each Faculty.

Recognition

In 2006, recognition of the contribution of sessional staff to the students’ learning experience was achieved through the Vice-Chancellors Teaching Award for sessional staff and through various faculty-based awards.

Critical Success Factors

This model of practice is dependent on the central role of the Sessional Teaching Staff Coordinator, financial drivers and faculty performance indicators.

The use of performance indicators and faculty funding is critical to engagement with the policies.

The online environment is helpful in terms of support.

Review and Improvement

The model of having faculty-based learning and teaching support with central support for wider framing and the sharing of good practice is excellent.

Ideally, sessional staff would be paid to attend PD sessions. Often they are not.

There needs to be greater recognition that in a number of instances a teaching team (which may include sessional staff) is responsible for the quality of learning and teaching in any given course/subject/unit and this has implications for subject coordinators, especially in terms of assessment moderation.

There needs to be better recognition for sessional staff as part of the university’s fabric.

Challenges

It is difficult to encourage sessional staff to voluntarily attend non-paid professional development.

It is challenging in a large research intensive university to change recruitment practices to ensure greater equity and fairness of employment.

Effective curriculum development, implementation, review and improvement processes must be tied to effective professional development processes for all staff, including sessional staff.

Key leadership roles in learning and teaching at all levels, including that of the course and program coordinator, need to be recognised, supported and valued.

Links and Resources

UNSW Sessional Teaching Staff Strategic Action Plan
www.unsw.edu.au/learning/pwe/sessional.html

Support for Sessional Staff website
www.learningandteaching.unsw.edu.au/content/LT/sessional_staff/sessional_home.cfm?ss=2

UNSW Compendium of Good Practice
www.ltu.unsw.edu.au/content/userDocs/Compendium_Issue4_Feb07.pdf

AUTC (2003) Guidelines for Managing, Supporting and Training Sessional Teaching Staff at University
www.tedi.uq.edu.au/sessionalteaching