Abstract

This case reports on the process undertaken by one university to develop an institutional policy framework for managing, supporting and enhancing the contribution of sessional teaching staff. Building on a history of research and reporting on the issues of sessional teaching at the University of Wollongong, in 2006, the Sessional Teaching Project was established to develop a strategic approach to the quality enhancement of sessional teaching.

The Project Coordinator conducted various scoping activities, convened a university-wide Sessional Teaching Steering Committee, engaged in wide consultation across all of the faculties and led the development of a university-wide framework.

Aims

The Sessional Teaching Project sought to:

- develop a deeper understanding of the breadth and complexity of the casual teaching sector at UOW;
- explore the professional needs of casual teaching staff;
- develop a university-wide framework to facilitate sustainable and systemic improvements to the management, preparation and recognition of casual teaching staff; and
- explore implementation issues by working with the Faculty of Commerce.

Context

The University of Wollongong is a medium-sized regional university that delivers its degree programs across multiple campuses as well as offshore. The local teachers at all 5 satellite campuses are in the main employed on a sessional basis. Approximately 25% FTE of all academic teaching staff are employed on a sessional basis. At the end of 2006, University Teaching and Learning Performance Funding was successfully sought to establish the UOW Sessional Teaching Project to scope the issues and develop a university-wide approach to adequately preparing and supporting casual teachers in their various roles.

Outcomes

A university-wide framework for improving the management, support and enhancement of the contribution of sessional teachers was developed. The framework has three layers as illustrated on page 22.
At the University level

The *Code of Practice - Casual Academic Teaching* articulates university, faculty and casual teachers’ responsibilities. For the most part, it locates responsibility for interpreting and implementing the Code with faculties. The faculty responsibilities include recruitment, employment, induction, management, communication, professional development and recognition.

The *Good Practice Guidelines - Casual Academic Teaching* (in development) is designed to assist faculties and schools with implementation by elaborating on each of the faculty responsibilities and providing a range of contextualised examples.

The Academic Services Division, comprising Learning Development, the Library, and the Centre for Educational Resources and Interactive Resources (CEDIR), is an educational service/resource provided at the university level to assist all faculties with implementation. Staff in these units work in cross-unit, and cross-disciplinary teams to assist faculties with the implementation of a wide range of teaching and learning projects.

In addition to the above service, the University Professional and Organisational Development Service (PODS) run a mandatory induction for all sessional staff which covers compulsory policy and related issues (e.g., OHS, EED, Privacy, Services for staff and students).

Faculties and schools are required to report on their implementation of the Code through their annual Learning and Teaching Strategic Plans.

At the faculty level

Faculties are expected to formalise their implementation of the Code through the development of *Faculty Standard Operating Procedures – Casual Academic Teaching*.

In line with existing university policy and the Code, faculties and/or schools are expected to appropriately recruit, employ and induct their sessional teaching staff.

They are expected to improve procedures for communication, resourcing and integration of sessional staff into their communities of practice.

They are expected to provide contextualised and relevant training and professional development opportunities.

At the Program and teaching team level

Emphasis is placed on developing improved systems of communication, providing guidance on teaching and marking, and establishing evaluation and feedback mechanisms.

Faculties and schools are required to report on their implementation of the Code through their annual Learning and Teaching Strategic Plans.
What was done?

Scoping activities
To develop a deeper understanding of the breadth and complexity of the casual teaching sector at UOW, the Project implemented:

- surveys and interviews with Heads of School and Associate Deans across all faculties; and
- a collection of National and UOW statistics (ARD).

To explore the professional needs of casual teaching staff, the Project:
- conducted focus groups and interviews with sessional teaching staff;
- developed and trialled the Tutor Engagement Survey; and
- conducted an extensive review of the literature and national and international practice.

Development of university-wide framework
To develop a university-wide framework, the UEC/ASDC Sessional Teaching Steering Committee was convened to:

- review current policy and practice as it pertains to sessional teaching staff to identify good practice and areas for improvement;
- establish a benchmark of current faculty policy and practice to measure future improvements;
- develop the Code of Practice and Good Practice Guidelines - Casual Academic Teaching that can be interpreted and implemented at the Faculty, School and program level; and
- engage faculty in the development of the Code and Guidelines.

Exploring implementation
To explore implementation issues, a Sessional Teaching Working Group in the Faculty of Commerce was convened to:

- establish a model for the induction and development of sessional teaching staff in the faculty;
- develop a faculty-wide website for Sessional Teachers; and
- foster practices that recognise, include and engage sessional teaching staff as key contributors to a quality learning experience for students.
Critical Success Factors

The leadership of the Project Coordinator

The assistance of the Steering Committee with extensive faculty representation

The initial scoping activities and wide ongoing consultation

The development of a clearly articulated framework

University policy and procedure

Monitoring and reporting mechanisms

Review and Improvement

Refinement and consolidation of the policy, monitoring and reporting framework needs to be ongoing.

Focused work with other faculties will be required for implementation issues.

Development of tools, templates, examples and models for faculties and schools to adapt would be useful.

The scope needs to be expanded to investigate the professional needs of subject coordinators leading large teaching teams.

Further research into appropriate formal and non-formal professional learning opportunities for sessional teaching staff would help to provide sound advice on sustainable practice at the Faculty/ School or teaching team level.

Challenges

At this early stage, the greatest challenge will be facilitating Faculty and School implementation with limited resources.

Links and Resources

Code of Practice - Casual Academic Teaching