Abstract

This case provides an overview of a comprehensive school level framework for supporting sessional teaching staff. The framework includes formalised procedures, clear roles and responsibilities, well-developed resources, and thorough recruitment, induction, evaluation and development processes.

Context

The school employs 40–50 sessional staff as tutors each year, most of whom are postgraduate students. Sessional staff conduct tutorials, laboratory classes and workshops in a wide range of skill-based, disciplinary knowledge-based and methodological courses in the undergraduate and honours degree programs.

Aims

To implement a school-level systems-based strategy for assuring the teaching effectiveness of sessional staff and the quality of school management and support processes.

Outcomes

The implementation of this system has resulted in a related set of outcomes:

- a sustainable and effective approach to the development of sessional staff;
- improvement in the quality of tutorial teaching and engagement of sessional staff in the quality improvement process;
- a transparent, fair and predictable management process for the management of sessional staff in the School;
- explicit recognition and reward of excellence in sessional teaching practice; and
- increased satisfaction of students, sessional and academic staff.
What was done?

The systems-oriented approach to the development and support of tutors involves clear sets of roles and responsibilities within the school to manage the development and evaluation of activities and resources.

Roles

The Tutor Development Coordinator (TDC) is an academic staff member who manages the tutor system which involves: the training and development of all new sessional staff; providing peer feedback and review of all first year tutors in their practice; updating the system to support tutors in their practice, for example, offering more support and intensive training of first year staff given the University focus on orientation, engagement and retention; and creating and updating the tutor support resources.

The Sessional Coordinator recruits tutors and manages the allocation process to courses in collaboration with the Tutor Development Coordinator; draws up the contracts for tutors; organises the payment of tutors; and is involved in the tutor training program as a co-trainer.

The Head Tutor is an experienced tutor who takes a leadership role in large 1st year courses by coordinating and supporting the tutors in their course.

Resources

The Tutors Guidebook outlines roles for tutors and convenors including rights and responsibilities which have been negotiated with academic staff and tutors. This guidebook is updated and distributed at the beginning of each year. This booklet also contains a grievance process for tutors to settle disputes or conflicts with convenors.

The Tutor Training and Development Manual provides information and guidelines for effective learning, teaching and assessment practice. This includes detailed guidelines for the first tutorial to establish an effective working relationship between students, and between staff and students.

The Tutor Evaluation – Guidelines for Effective Practice booklet outlines: a formal School policy for sessional staff to review their practice; guidelines for mandatory formative and summative reviews; and formative and summative instruments for sessional staff to evaluate their practice each semester.

Core Processes

Matching Tutors to Courses and Cohorts

There is a culture and formal policy to employ and support postgraduate students as sessional staff as a way of maintaining postgraduate students by offering them paid employment.

Tutors are expected to be well prepared and capable, with both academic and interpersonal skills.

The Sessional Coordinator organises the matching and allocation of tutors to courses.

Recognition • Enhancement • Development
Pre-semester Training

New tutors are offered an annual training program conducted at the beginning of the year and are paid for their participation. 1st year tutors receive additional intensive training on tutorial teaching, and receive an intensive intervention for at-risk first year students with their first assessment item in semesters 1 and 2 and are paid for this training.

Peer Review

The Tutor Development Coordinator peer reviews the practice of all first year tutors in first semester by participating in tutorials and providing comprehensive feedback to individual tutors to assist the development of their learning and teaching practice.

Evaluation of Teaching

Sessional staff are required to evaluate their practice.

In 2007 the School implemented a formal policy including guidelines and review instruments for sessional staff to evaluate their practice each semester.

Using the Tutor Evaluation – Guidelines for Effective Practice, all new tutors and first year tutors are required to engage in formative evaluation of their first tutorials and to provide copies of these evaluations to the Tutor Development Coordinator.

The Coordinator also provides feedback to tutors and follows up on any negative feedback using a developmental approach.

All tutors are required to engage in independent, summative, end of semester evaluation of their teaching effectiveness, which is monitored by the Head of School and the Tutor Development Coordinator.

A Community of Practice

CoPs for the tutors have evolved out of challenging systems issues such as the first year experience, and Research Methods and Statistics which is often the most difficult stream for psychology students. There is now a First Year COP and an emerging Research Methods COP within the School.

Tutors are paid for meetings which are facilitated by senior staff in the School.

Recognition and Reward

A “sessional teacher of the year” award based on student votes, is made each year in the School.

Critical Success Factors

The Dedicated Position of the Tutor Development Coordinator

The roles and activities of the Tutor Development Coordinator have ensured the sustainability of the system by: defining roles, rights and responsibilities for tutors and convenors; training tutors in effective learning and teaching, and assessment practice; providing quality assurance through formative and summative evaluation of practice; and providing leadership for improvements policy, procedure and process.

Sponsorship by School Leadership

While there is central tutor training offered in the University, all Heads of School of Psychology have supported School based training. Senior staff in the School, including Heads of School, have participated regularly as trainers in the annual Tutor Training program since 2001.

This support from senior staff in the School ensures the ongoing sustainability of the system for developing and training tutors.

Review and Improvement

In 2006, the Tutor Development Coordinator negotiated a School policy on tutor formative evaluation of all first tutorials for new tutors and first year tutors, and summative evaluation at the end of semester for all tutors, with the aim of providing a quality assurance mechanism for the School.

This policy was negotiated collaboratively with the School leadership (Head and Deputy Heads of School and Undergraduate Program Convenors).

This is documented in the Tutor Evaluation Guidelines and is sustainable without the Tutor Development Coordinator, as the School has agreed to the implementation of this policy within the School from 2007 onwards.

The effectiveness of this process in terms of providing evidence of teaching quality this year has added to the sustainability of the evaluation practices.
Evidence Base for Success

The success of this strategy is indicated in a number of ways:

Evaluation of Tutor Training

“The training was so practical and useful. I loved that you gave us a model for the first tutorial, and detailed guidelines for giving feedback on assignments - these were the most difficult things for me as a tutor.” (Tutor quote, 2007)

“The School has appropriate policies in place with regard to tutors’ roles and responsibilities” (means = 6.0, 6.2 and 6.4/7 for 2006, 2007 and 2008 respectively)

“The School is providing an appropriate level of practical support for tutors” (means = 6.1, 6.3 and 6.4/7 for 2006, 2007 and 2008 respectively)

Formative Tutor Evaluation*

“Tutors establish a good working relationship with students” (mean = 6.01/7, range of 5.6-6.5)

“Tutors are clear about goals and processes for subsequent sessions” (mean = 5.9, range 5.7-6.3)

Summative Tutor Evaluations*

“Staff explain relevance of material” 84% (up from 66% in 2006)

“Staff interested & enthusiastic about their teaching” 86% (up from 81% in 2006)

“Staff actively check whether students understand what is being taught” 67% (up from 38% in 2006)

“Staff make it clear right from the start what they expect of students” 77% (up from 61% in 2006)

“It is hard to know what is expected of me in this program” 20% (down from 36% in 2006)

“I have a clear idea of where I am going & what is expected of me” 73% (up from 46% in 2006)

“I know the names of key staff in my program” 88% (up from 52% in 2006)

End of semester Student Evaluation of Teaching for tutors for 2007 were also high (mean = 5.8, range 5.5 - 6.2/7)

Institutional Recognition

In 2007, one of our tutors won the Griffith Sessional Award for Excellence in Teaching.

The value of this systems approach has been recognised through its dissemination to other elements within the University.

Challenges

The program will evolve in a positive direction if the School continues to position sessional staff as leaders and partners in the creation of the School's learning environment.

The content and process of the training and support system needs to be responsive and flexible in the face of changing demands and characteristics.

Links and Resources

Casual Staff @ Griffith