“Students want a seamless education. They do not want to know that their tutor or lecturer is sessional or permanent. They want high quality teaching and high quality subjects.”

Kurt Steel, University of Canberra Student Association, at the National Colloquium on Sessional Teaching, November 2007.

The nature of the teaching workforce in Australian universities is changing. Concurrently, the operational environment of universities has become more flexible, dynamic and complex to manage. The combination of these factors poses a significant challenge to universities seeking to monitor and refine the student learning environment.

The RED Report, Recognition - Enhancement - Development: The contribution of sessional teachers to higher education raises the question of how well universities are able to report on the nature of their teaching workforce and enhance the quality of the learning environment where the proportion of sessional teachers in the sector is high and growing.

The Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR formerly DEST) reported that between 1996 and 2005, the number of casual staff calculated in terms of Full-Time Equivalence (FTE) in the higher education sector grew from 10,396 to 13,530 (DEST, 2006), representing just under 15 per cent\(^2\) FTE of the academic workforce. In this context, some universities have begun the process of reviewing the diversity of academic roles to consider appropriate ways forward (see Rix et al, 2007).

Over time, the operational requirements of universities have also changed, with increased vocational orientations in academic programs combined with off-shore, multi-campus, distance and flexible delivery challenges. Add to this the diversification of the student body, evolving pedagogical paradigms and new teaching technologies, and the professionalisation of teaching can be seen as an imperative.

Yet this comes at a time when these contextual and dynamic factors pose significant challenges to the quality enhancement of sessional teaching within existing information gathering and policy frameworks.

Sessional teachers’ contribution to teaching and learning in higher education is substantial, and in many cases, vital to the professional quality and relevance of the degree program. Further, their professionalism and commitment to student learning is highly regarded. However, despite the publication of the Guidelines for Managing, Supporting and Training Sessional Teaching Staff at University by the Australian Universities Teaching Committee (AUTC) in 2003, evidence of improvement is scant.

An analysis of the AUQA reports from 2003 to 2006 indicates that while there have been some improvements in the sector, few universities adequately integrate and support sessional teachers in a systemic way. The AUQA recommendations have highlighted the need for improved strategic workforce planning and the development of systems, policies and practices for the induction, management, integration and support of sessional teachers.

In 2007, the Carrick Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education commissioned the Council of Australian Directors of Academic Development (CADAD) to analyse different approaches to the support of sessional teachers in Australian higher education with a view to disseminating successful practice and identifying areas for further development.

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\(^2\) This figure is rendered problematic by the findings of this Project.
For the purpose of the project, sessional teachers were to be defined in the same way as in the earlier AUTC project; that is, sessional teachers include any higher education instructors not in tenured or permanent positions. This includes part-time tutors or demonstrators, postgraduate students or research fellows involved in part-time teaching, external people from industry or professions, clinical tutors, casually employed lecturers or any other teachers employed on a course-by-course basis.

A diagrammatic representation of the Project Context is presented in Figure 1.

**Aim**

The aim of this Project was to identify and analyse current national practice and refocus attention on the issues surrounding sessional teachers in the university sector four years after the release of the comprehensive and influential AUTC (2003) *Guidelines for Managing, Supporting and Training Sessional Teaching Staff at University*.

**Objectives**

The Project sought to answer the following questions:

- To what extent do we recognise the contribution sessional teachers make to higher education?
- What policies and practices do universities have in place to manage the contribution of sessional teaching staff?
- How can sector-wide improvements be made?