

Academic management of sessional staff

Professor Ian Macdonald, Director, Teaching and Learning Centre, University of New England

This is such a complex area. It's very difficult to give you a precise answer to any of these issues, including academic management of professional staff. What I'm going to do is draw on three projects I was involved in in the late '90's/early 2000's.

There was a three-year project at Monash University in Computing; three years I spent at Swinburne in Engineering, Science and Computing; and a one-year project at Victoria University, which was in Psychology.

Those projects were all intended as projects around the first-year experience in large-intake units. I could quickly see the connection - that meant that almost the entire staff teaching were sessional. In trawling back through those projects - which we were fortunate enough to be able to research quite thoroughly and write-up - there were some quite significant insights about the sessional teaching, and the academic support of... or the academic management of those sessional teachers.

What I've done is gone back through that work, and tried to draw out the common threads that might help us understand what was done in what was a very successful set of projects. The outcomes were very good - quite a dramatic improvement in the student learning; a dramatic improvement in the teaching measures that we had in those projects... and they were quite structured projects.

These were more at a program-level - or perhaps even at a unit level.... It wouldn't apply to everybody. There will be contexts where these sorts of things can't be done, but I want to put them forward as just something that might get you thinking.

The first thing is, when people talk about sessional staff - it's, oh no, we've got to stop all this sessional stuff. In fact, we found that the sessional teachers were quite outstanding - when they were supported properly. The previous bit of research leading up to that showed they were quite terrible when they weren't supported properly. The difference was quite significant. So, success is not an accident. You've got to deal with these things - you've got to engage with the key leaders; you do need training. These are experiences from our projects. We have these things called teaching communities, which I'll deal with in a minute.

You need to reward success, and you need to build a culture throughout that department. It's not just about the sessionals. I'd like to deal with those one after another.

The people who are managing the program have to believe in what they're doing. You can't just come in over the top and impose a system. That was the thing we absolutely found out. We knew that, but we proved it again. In every one of these projects, we actually had a research base. I was very interested by experiences at Wollongong, because that's precisely what they did. Surprise, surprise - it was successful.

So, you do need a research base where you get the key leaders in the program involved in understanding what the issues are. You might know what the answers are going to be. If you're a good ED-developer, you should.

Academic management of sessional staff

Professor Ian Macdonald, Director, Teaching and Learning Centre, University of New England

But you still need to go in there – work with those staff; understand the environment, so that they own the problem. If you come in and tell them they've got a problem, you're not going to get a good response.

You have to jointly develop solutions around principles of good learning – and there are some quite fundamental principles that apply in almost every context. There are some people around with knowledge about education who can be tapped on these things; but they must be jointly-developed, so the leaders own the solution. Then, it's up to the existing leaders - who've gone through the process of identifying the problem, worked with you in identifying solutions... they're the ones who lead it.

So, as an ED-developer – such as myself – you're just a resource. You're not in charge. You're not making it happen. You're just there to help. If it's not like that, you're going to get resistance and it's just not going to happen. It's got to be quite open. People have to know what's going on. Exchange information - share the knowledge that comes out - because everybody's got to participate.

The essential part was a training workshop. The first project... it was a three-day project, we managed to refine it down to a two-day project – but it wasn't just for the sessionals. These training meetings were preparation training for the teaching of that particular unit, or that program. The sessionals were absolutely vital, but so were the ongoing staff. It's not about train-and-release. It's about - let's prepare for the teaching.

First thing is to acknowledge it's very difficult to teach well consistently. There's a lot of view around that... teaching's pretty straight-forward as long as you know your stuff. If you're not much good – sack them; get someone who can teach. It is, in fact, a complex and difficult task. When you start to unpack it, people realise that it does take preparation to do it properly – a recognition of a difficult... Everybody brings something. Drawing that out, and acknowledging what everybody brings – sessionals and the full-time people – is important. The workshop can do that.

All of these things I'm raising... because, in the instances where we didn't do this properly, it damaged the outcome. These were all things that were important. If you missed it, things went bad.

We had to introduce the key principles of good learning – gradually, in context – by building on the ideas. You can't give these people Education 101/Teaching 101 lecture. It doesn't work. They don't want to hear it. But if you're trying to understand the experiences they've had - provide frame-works to make sense of things that have happened to them in the past - those teaching principles are very valuable, because they need to recognise that this is going to help them in their teaching.

Everything's got to be in context. Sessional staff are worried about the first class they're going to run in a week's time. They're not too interested in the broader theories of education. Everything's got to be contextual, which is why you need a person leading the program; or you need the ongoing staff all in together, talking about how they collectively are going to work this.

The role-plays are fantastic. Role-plays and fish-bowling, where you're watching other people engaged in activity – very powerful. The feedback we got later – at the end of the semester – was they were the things that had impact; they were the things that they could draw on when things got tough.

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.

Academic management of sessional staff

Professor Ian Macdonald, Director, Teaching and Learning Centre, University of New England

The last stage of the workshop was to plan the first teaching session, so you went out with a plan ready to go. So, the teaching communities... is the jargon we used... Every fortnight, we had a meeting. The meeting had a very clear structure to it, and this was absolutely essential. You'll see a much broader issue of professional development in all of this; but as far as dealing with sessional staff, it was invaluable. Again, this came up with the Wollongong experience, too; where you shared your experiences with the previous teaching.

That's Stage One – you always start by saying, how did it go last week? What happened? Tell me your stories. You also find out then, where the students went wrong. What didn't happen? Hear about the practice of others. Hear that other people fail, including the most experienced people, who come in and say – it didn't work very well. That's very important for people who are new to the role. Sharing that experience; starting where the students are at; discussing the concepts to be taught...

It's surprising how often sessional teaching staff - who are meant to have the knowledge - have a completely different idea about the concept. Particularly in the computing area, where ideas evolve quickly, you can get some quite vigorous discussion in our meetings about what exactly we mean by an array; or what exactly do we mean by some other concept.

It's good to get that sorted out before you start teaching the students. The sessional staff really valued that, because they got clear what it was that was meant to be taught. There was discussion around contexts - how it linked to the course objectives. Everyone went away feeling like they at least knew what we were trying to teach.

Then you collaborate to plan the teaching method, so we start with - where is the student at; what do we want to teach them; then how are we going to do that based on where the students were at last time. We sat down and planned out those teaching strategies. All of this was supported by someone who did have knowledge about education - who was an ED-developer – in the first stages. These projects...

Over time, the senior people got good at running these meetings, and using those frameworks. They didn't need the support in the long-run. They did take a couple of years to develop that sort of independence, and that was the development of the whole department – to understand these concepts. But by the end of that hour-and-a-half meeting, everyone went away knowing exactly what they were going to do in the next session. The usual response you get from sessionals when you suggest there be a meeting is – oh, more time; I can't afford to do that.

But in the end, they realised... quite quickly, they realised, this was very efficient preparation time, because they have the rest of the senior people there; the concepts were quickly articulated, and by the end of it they knew what they were doing for the next two weeks – all done in an hour-and-a-half. For most of them, it would have taken a lot longer to go away and dig up the textbook – go through all the background stuff – and prepare properly. So, the meetings were very popular, and generally very well-attended. But if they weren't structured well, you didn't get the...

If you didn't have the supporting person framing it and keeping it sticking to the right agenda, you very quickly got complaints about the students – aren't they hopeless? – and the usual sort of thing that happens.

Academic management of sessional staff

Professor Ian Macdonald, Director, Teaching and Learning Centre, University of New England

We also need some sort of reward for success along the way, and continuous leadership opportunities. We'd have that discussed as well. One way we got around this... or one way that we engaged in this – this was at Swinburne, actually – we had a Certificate of Undergraduate Teaching, which really had no academic standing whatsoever. It was just a bit of paper. But in order to earn it, the sessional staff member had to attend the workshop, sign-off; had to participate in one of these teaching communities consistently for two semesters; and then get recommended by the leader of that community as being someone who had engaged with the whole process - thought about their teaching, reflected on it, participated.

Those certificates of Undergraduate Teaching were highly valued by those sessional staff. They really got a lot out of getting some sort of recognition that articulated what they were being recognised for. They took that away as part of their portfolio. They saw that as valuable – even the ones who weren't... had no intention of going into teaching – who were going off into industry, in some form – saw that as a valuable thing to take with them. There are many ways you can achieve that, but that was just one particular model...

The culture in the entire department... the sessional teaching staff had to be recognised and supported as an integral part of the teaching team. That is inevitable. In order to do that, of course, everybody's got to participate in the teaching community. It's not just for the sessional staff. The design was to improve the overall quality of teaching and learning. The outcome was that the sessional staff became integrated into a team that involved all the people who taught - including the unit coordinators, the course coordinators - attended those meetings.

Some of those groups... at Monash we were teaching eight hundred to a thousand students, so those meetings were big meetings – big groups of people. The good part was, what was reported back to us was we'd have our meeting, and then those conversations would spill over. They'd keep going. You start to develop a culture, which is one of reflecting on teaching, talking about the principles, engaging with each other. Again, that's really important for those sessional staff, who are often just postgraduate students who shared a room down the.... But they could talk then with other staff members about issues that had arisen. That changes the culture through the whole department.

We did eventually [unclear] get those people reflecting and writing about their experiences, and starting to develop a different strand to their research. In fact, at Monash, there's now a Computing Education Research Group – CERG - that started as a direct spin-off from this project; because we started researching what we were doing and writing about it, and that then became a recognised research group within that department; which is quite a breakthrough for a computing area – to consider education research as part of it. All that helps do is embed a culture. Of course, that culture is one that the sessional staff can participate in.

One of the complaints you get is there's no way of engaging in research, if you're a sessional staff member. If you're researching your practice, and writing about it with your full-time colleagues, that's a way in. They value that.

Of course, there are so many funding options now with Carrick. There's much more opportunity now, so this is an opportunity for people who are early in their careers to get a foot in the door. Any funding, any research, is good at that level. It's a way that a lot of people can participate in a research project. This is our reflections here. I've got to quickly race to the end of this.

Academic management of sessional staff

Professor Ian Macdonald, Director, Teaching and learning Centre, University of New England

What I'm trying to put forward here, though, is that's one model. That's one stimulus. These are some issues that came out of our research project that seemed to reflect on the academic management.

The question is, how much of that is relevant, or could be used in your context? Is this something... are there things in there that you can draw from? Are there experiences you have that can build on that?