

Sustainability – challenges of the current model

Dr Keiko Yasukawa, Educational Developer and Lecturer, University of Technology, Sydney

I don't know many of you in the audience, so I should say something about what perspective I bring to this conference. And I think a quick outline of my academic career might be the easiest and quickest way to do it. Like many academics in Australia I was a casual academic during a couple of stages during my career, the first time when I commenced my PhD in the early 1980's. And back then there was fixed term academic employment for tutors and senior tutors that Rob Castle mentioned earlier today.

So after a couple of years of doing casual tutoring, I obtained a five – or maybe it was a six year tutorship and finished my PhD. I got involved along the way in the academic award restructuring campaign in 1988, and with many of our FAUSA comrades fought for the abolition of the fixed term tutorships that didn't lead to a career path. And we won the establishment of what we've got now, which is the Level A associate lectureship positions for the sector.

I started off at UTS in the early 1990's as a fractional associate lecturer in one faculty, and at the same time picked up some casual lecturing in another faculty. After a couple of iterations of fixed term contracts and a promotion I obtained a continuing lectureship at UTS, where I am at now.

So for me, the casual academic position I held in the mid 1980's, coupled with the career path structure that was put in place at the time of the award restructuring, worked for me. The casual position did give me a foot in the door to an academic career, and it's therefore quite concerning for me to see that over the last decade or perhaps even longer, there appears to be the sense that for many casuals, academic work has become almost a career in itself that doesn't lead to anything except maybe more casual work.

At UTS now I hold a split appointment between two faculties, engineering and education and in both areas, as a full-time academic, I've had a lot of experience working with casuals. In education I coordinate the adult education programme and I have several casuals working in that programme, including one who has been a casual for some 23 years.

In engineering until this year I coordinated a large first year subject where each semester I would have to find between eight to ten casual tutors with subject expertise, , but also expertise in teaching academic literacy. The full-time staff somehow always had something to do, so they weren't available for teaching in the subject. And it got to a point where I decided that the subject was not sustainable, and I had to support the abolition of the subject, which for a long time had been promoted as the flagship subject for an innovative course. Ironically the name of the subject was Engineering for Sustainability.

I've also been an active member of the National Tertiary Education Union, the NTEU, and I'm currently acting New South Wales President. So through my union I've also been involved in a lot of issues to do with casual academic employment, including being part of the union negotiations with management about conditions and pay for casuals for, I think, three or four rounds of enterprise bargaining.

I've also assisted individuals and groups of casual academic members in the NTEU who have brought concerns about underpayment, lack of access to resources entitlements and so forth.

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In 2004 my colleagues Tony Brown and James Goodman and I undertook a qualitative research project to look at the experiences of academic casuals in one university in New South Wales, and I will draw on this research in my presentation.

When I was asked to talk about sustainability at this conference by Lynn, at first it seemed like an oxymoron to mention sustainability in relation to casual academic employment.

As I mentioned before, I used to teach a subject called Engineering for Sustainability until it became unsustainable, because I had to keep recruiting and managing large teams of casual academics semester after semester. But we all know that all universities rely on a certain proportion of the labour force being composed of casual academics. So what does sustainability mean in this context? To prepare for this presentation I went back to the definition and core principles of sustainability used by the UN World Commission on Environment and Development, and surprisingly I found them to be a helpful way to think about casual employment.

They say that humanity has to make development sustainable to ensure that it meets the needs of the present, without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. So sustainability has to do with two types of equity. One is intragenerational equity and the other is intergenerational equity. Intragenerational equity is about equity amongst people of the same generation. So in this context, we can focus on equity, for example, between casual academic staff and full-time academic staff, and ask if there is an equitable relationship between those two groups of staff.

Intergenerational equity is about equity across generations. So here we can perhaps think about what implications there are for future academics and their careers, if we continue to increase the level of casualisation in our sector.

So, let's look at some of the ways in which casual academics in our research talked about how they experienced their workplace. So this is drawing on the work that I did with Tony Brown and James Goodman. There are a few quotes from the people we interviewed.

Well, you're not a real staff member, you're not at staff meetings, you're not aware of what is happening at the university in a broader sense. You have no idea what different direction things are going. You're just picked up the week before the semester starts...semester ends.

There's a...class system I think at the moment that the people that have a say in and no background to why decisions are made are permanent staff. It's almost that we're incidental to those sort of processes.

As far as the full-time academics, you're most definitely a second class citizen on the whole. There is most definitely a hierarchy and some people, as in any environment, their position in that hierarchy is extremely important to them and they enforce it.

So these are some of the views that we came across in our interviews, and I acknowledge that there's a great diversity of casuals in the sector with diverse experiences. But these are some of the experiences, and I think we need to listen to them.

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So, these people don't experience their workplace as a democratic workplace where their voices are being heard. We had a number of casuals who talked about how they saw their future and their place in the sector. I think casuals have a lot to offer in terms of inputting about the way courses are run or issues of the process of teaching. They're used to the structure of the course, and they understand the educational principles, so they have a lot to offer, and I think this is the experience that many of you have also had in talking to casuals or working with casuals or being casuals yourselves.

Maybe I'll just have to figure out another career option. I'm just like really disillusioned actually. I don't see myself as working for the university. I think that's important. I work for the subject coordinators. I don't have any contact with the university at all, because I have learnt from experience that it's just not valuable.

So I think this raises some questions about the nature of the employment relationships that casuals have with the institution, and I think it throws up a lot of questions about the future of academia, when casuals relationship with the institution is so tenuous. They don't feel valued. They don't feel that the knowledge they bring and build through the employment relationships with the university is being heard, valued, built upon. And I wonder how much of their experience and knowledge is being wasted, through the sort of experiences that we've currently got.

And so when we talk about sustainability, who are we actually talking about? Are we talking about sustainability from the perspective of casual academics? In our research we drew upon two recent studies of casual work. One is the work by Barbara Pocock, about casual work generally in Australia, and the other study that we drew a lot on is Anne Junor's work about casual university work.

And there were three key themes that emerged from both of their studies, that we used to frame our own study. One is to do with income security and job satisfaction. Surprisingly, considering the sort of experiences that casual academics had, many of them talked about job satisfaction, that they found it a rewarding experience because they were committed to their students, to doing a good job. For them it was a vocation. So they knew they were being underpaid. They knew that they weren't being rewarded adequately for the work that they put into it, but they were getting job satisfaction out of it and they felt that they were being exploited as a result of that.

There was a lot of comments about unpaid labour, particularly about marking, that the contracts were opaque and the marking allocations were quite arbitrary. That they would be told okay, you're going to have 20 minutes per student for the duration of the semester, or 40 minutes or 30 minutes or 10 minutes. And it's never clear where those figures came from, and they felt that there was no recourse if the 20 minutes or 40 minutes or 10 minutes, whatever it might have been, was inadequate.

And I've had a recent experience where we had a group of casuals who actually kept a log of how much time they were spending on marking, on preparation, on student consultation throughout the semester. And there were about eight of them all tutoring in the same subject, and they came to roughly the same figures for all of the components of the work. And we calculated that they were being grossly underpaid in relation to the contract they had.

So we took that to HR. The first response from HR was well, this is the contract they got. They could take it or leave it. If they spent more time, well, there's nothing we can do about it because that's the contract. And I think as a sector we need to think differently. Yes, we give

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them a contract, they take it because for many of them, that's their income, that's their livelihood. But, if we realised that the contract is incorrect or inadequate, then I think we need to be prepared to renegotiate that contract. As full-timers we re-negotiate our workload, and I think we owe that same sort of respect to casual academics as well.

We had a lot of views expressed also about the preparation that casual academics do for their teaching, that they are conscious of the fact that in university teaching, their teaching has to be informed by research and scholarship. And yet the time that they are given for preparation is minimalist.

Life course. With the sort of lack of security in their employment, there's a big impact on their ability to plan. A lot of young women or not so young women commented on how they can't even make plans about starting a family, because they don't know if they're going to have continued income of any sort. They don't have access to finance or mortgage. They can't plan their career. They can't get meaningful professional development. For example, if they want to become an academic as a career, they have to pay for their own professional development to support them through a higher degree.

Voice and identity in the workplace is something that's come up throughout the day. They have a wealth of knowledge about student's experiences. Many of them bring a lot of teaching experiences and skills like my colleague, who's been teaching for 23 years as a casual. But a lot of that is wasted, because there's no systematic way of acknowledging it, recognising it, sharing, learning from all of that.

There's an assumption, I think, when we talk about induction or training that casuals are lacking in teaching experience and skills. But in fact, many of the casuals have more teaching experience and skills than many of us full-timers.

So, when we talk about sustainability, what does sustainability mean from the perspective of casual academics? What about for programmes and the faculty? I think the AUQA audit was mentioned earlier today, and I've looked at some of the more recent ones. They talk about the issue of professional development, and they also talk about the issue of supervision of sessional staff and that was mentioned before lunch as well.

And yes, I think it's important that casual staff do get feedback, and that we don't condone poor performance. We shouldn't be condoning poor performance amongst full-time staff either. I think all staff need feedback and development. But when we look at the way casual staff are employed in a lot of places, they get a contract and on their contract it says that the supervisor is quite often the subject coordinator.

In many places the subject coordinator, especially for first year subjects, are Level A or B academics themselves. And when we look at the sector, supervision of full-time academics is very uneven. Some people get very good supervision and mentoring and professional advice and development. There are many academics in the sector who just get their supervisor to sign off a work plan or sign off their leave form, without a lot of mentoring or professional development advice.

And so to say that yes, we need to have more systemic supervision of casual staff, but the reality is that in their contract it says that their supervisor is just their subject coordinator. - who may or may not have any training or role modelling of how to be an academic supervisor. I wonder how workable that sort of situation is? Why don't the casual academics deserve

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supervision, support, mentoring from experienced senior academics like the rest of us - because many of them are also interested in developing an academic career.

For the institutions, what does it mean to continue the sort of casual employment practices and the level of casual employment that we have in the sector? What does it say about the face of the university? Who is the university if we keep on growing our casual academic staffing levels? What does that represent in terms of what a university stands for? How are we going to continue to have any accountability about the quality of teaching and learning, when the people who are at the coal face are casuals who come and go? And so we have no way of retaining the knowledge and experiences that they have in the classrooms.

How can the organisation, the institutions, grow and change with confidence? Earlier this year, or maybe it was late last year, I was involved in a research project with some colleagues about adaptive ACE organisations, Australian Community Education colleges. Now, that is a very casualised sector, and what the people who commissioned us to do the research were interested in, was how these community colleges were adapting to change. And what we found was that because of the sort of highly casualised nature, the insecurity about funding, their reaction to change was exactly that, it was reacting. They weren't able to plan for change, they weren't able to strategise for change. And they weren't able to plan – they weren't able to do any workforce planning or plan for organisational development, because they didn't know who they were going to have in the next term.

And I think they're some of the big issues that face us in the higher education sector, if we don't tackle this issue about growing casualisation of the academic workforce. I think it's easy to hide behind this notion of diversity to say "oh well, the casual workforce is diverse". We have the guest lecturer from the law firm and from the engineering firm. We also have the PhD students and then we have the experienced casuals. We have the retirees. So we can't just say that that's bad. We can't just say we need to lower the level of casualisation.

I think we want that diversity, but rather than saying because it's a diverse workforce we don't have a solution, or because we can't have a single solution we're not going to do anything., I think we have to actually tackle, acknowledge the diversity and respond to these needs and aspirations of these different groups, and have different strategies for these different groups, their needs, what the institution wants from these different types of casuals. It's not easy, but sustainability isn't easy to achieve....