

Literature Review

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The current landscape of university education in Australia is one of increasing complexity with a shrinking core of full-time academic staff and an ever-growing number of staff employed on casual and part-time contracts. The Department of Education, Science and Training (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% FTE of the academic workforce. This significant and growing group is referred to by Kimber (2003) as the 'tenuous periphery', and by Watters et al (1998) as 'occasional visitors'. The reasons behind such references are explored in this review.

Since the Dawkins reforms of the late eighties, and the consequent economic rationalization and corporatisation of universities, the concept and culture of universities have changed markedly. One of the outcomes of the application of market-based mechanisms to the university sector has been the huge increase in numbers of sessional staff undertaking teaching and teaching-related activities in Australian universities (Coaldrake, 1999; Kimber, 2003).

DEST figures suggest that 20 per cent of academics and 13 per cent of general staff are employed on hourly casual contracts. In head-count terms used in other industries, an estimated 40 per cent of academic staff are now casual employees (McAlpine, 2002). However, accurate numbers of sessional staff within and across Australian universities are not available, due to a lack of standardisation across universities in the way sessional staff are categorised (those paid hourly or on short-term contracts) and recorded by Human Resources units. To offer an example, it is estimated that at Macquarie University, one department has up to 85% of teaching staff casual (Harvey, 2007). Data for staff on successive contracts is limited, rendering these people invisible. Also invisible are a group of 'industry experts' (Kimber, 2003) who often directly invoice the faculty they are working for, resulting in them not being accounted for on Human Resources databases.

Sessional staff can be defined as 'any university lecturer not in a tenured or permanent position' (TEDI, 2003). This vast and various group includes postgraduate students, tutors, lecturers, lab demonstrators, clinical teachers and professionals, to name a few. Martinez et al (2007) describe the five main categories of sessional staff in Australian universities as 1. career sessionals, 2. aspirational academics, 3. study support sessional staff (eg: PhD students), 4. expert professionals and 5. the opportunistic (typically invited by convenors to solve a staffing gap). The most important finding is that the category of 'casual' does not

embody a norm curve in terms of experience, qualifications, career pathway, and as such is not a meaningful way of classifying the important work they are responsible for.

This review focuses on Australian literature from the last ten years and also examines the literature from other countries, to uncover what can be learnt from the university sector overseas.

Issues

Overwhelmingly, the greatest concerns revealed in the literature were:

- the lack of equity enjoyed by sessional staff,
- a lack of ongoing training and staff development, and
- their marginalisation within the universities.

The 2003 AUTC report found the main areas of concern to be 'professional development, employment stability, improving work conditions, the establishment of ongoing support mechanisms, as well as assisting supervisors to improve the training and management of sessional staff' (Herbert et al, 2002). This last comprehensive study of sessional teachers was completed by the University of Queensland and the Queensland University of Technology for the Australian Universities Teaching Committee (AUTC) in 2003: the breakdown of issues was as follows:

- Recruitment and Employment
- Training and Professional Development
- Evaluation and Recognition
- Integration and Communication

A similar breakdown of domains will be used in this review

- Systemic and Sustainable Policies and Practices
- Employment and Administrative Support
- Induction and Academic Management
- Professional and Career Development
- Rewards and Recognition

Systemic and Sustainable Policies and Practices

Much of the literature points to a need for practices that support sessional staff that are systemic and sustainable ie: embedded into the university/faculty/school culture and able to be maintained over time (Whelan et al, 2002; Harvey, 2007).

One significant development since the 2002-3 AUTC report is the introduction of Teaching and Learning Performance Funds. This has acted as a key driver for change, as universities are encouraged to develop the skills of *all* their teaching staff by way of professional development to ensure teaching performance and student satisfaction.

To fulfil requirements for these funds, DEST requires that universities submit evidence of systematic support for professional development in learning and teaching for sessional and full-time academic staff and provide documentation on professional development policies and practices for sessional and full-time staff (DEST, 2004). However, guidelines are more common than actual policies and there is little in the literature to suggest a significant shift across the sector as a whole.

Good examples of universities implementing systemic policy and practice include the University of South Australia, which has comprehensive 'Guidelines for the Management and Administration of Casual Employment' (UniSA, 2007) and the University of New South Wales (UNSW), with their Sessional Teaching Staff Strategic Action Plan, 'incorporating policy and checklists to promote the inclusion of sessional teachers into UNSW's communities of practice' (UNSW, 2005). The Australian National University and the Universities of Adelaide, Melbourne and Queensland are acknowledged as other examples (UNSW, 2005).

A 2007 action research project on 'quality teaching and sessional staff' in one department at Macquarie University concluded that 'sharing between higher education organizations of the models, processes and strategies for learning about and supporting sessional staff can act as solid foundational resources for starting a sessional staff project. However, in order to achieve sustainable outcomes, it is necessary to contextualize the project' (Harvey, 2007). Some of the sustainable outcomes this project achieved were a sessional staff induction session, and a sessional staff orientation kit, the sustainability of which was enhanced by the creation of a Master Kit, allowing for easy updating and reproduction.

What the literature doesn't investigate is the question of sustainable ratios of sessional to full-time academic staff. A report for The University and College Lecturers' Union in England makes the recommendation that institutions 'transfer the majority of hourly-paid lecturers to salaried part- or full-time contracts of employment', in the evidence-based belief that this is the best policy option for delivery of 'appropriate quality standards, best value for money, as well as good employment practice... and the best solution to risk management issues' (Bryson, 2005).

The Vancouver Community College Faculty Association achieved a contract whereby sessional staff teaching a half-time load or more automatically went onto 'regular' or

continuing contracts after two years (Hoeller, 2007). Questions of such arrangements or recommendations are still to be addressed in Australia.

Another significant gap is the question of where responsibilities lie for policy development relating to sessional staff. There are responsibilities at an institutional level (and perhaps broader) as opposed to those at a more localised level of school or faculty. Given the lack of interest expressed by some sessional staff in generic training (Whelan et al, 2002), it may seem most appropriate that responsibility for most training and professional development lies at the more localised level.

Employment and Administrative Support

Recruitment itself is still often problematic. It is often ad hoc, last minute and informal (TEDI, 2003; Bryson, 2003). There also appears to be some 'dislocation and confusion over responsibilities between the institution and employing department' (Bryson, 2003). This can occur particularly in larger universities in which responsibility for different aspects of the recruitment process is divided.

Sessional staff, particularly tutors, are often paid only for teaching hours with other duties built into their hourly rate, but whether the paid workload covers all activities essential to the services university teachers now provide is in question (Junor, 2004; Brown, Goodman & Yasukawa, 2006). One example of this is the provision of student access outside teaching hours, often via email (Barrett, 2004; Bryson, 2003). Other aspects of their work which are often left unpaid include reading time, to ensure suitable preparation for classes, and use of facilities such as computers and copiers (TEDI, 2003). In a number of cases in this study, casual teachers were still unsure what their contract covered in detail.

Induction and Academic Management

One area in which significant progress since 2003 appears to have been made is in the induction of sessional staff. It is generally agreed, and is clear from a perusal of universities' strategic plans and policy guidelines, that across many (but by no means all) Australian universities, induction procedures are now being implemented (TEDI, 2003).

While it is acknowledged that effective management of sessional staff is crucial in the current staff make-up of Australian universities, there is a dearth of suggestions in the literature as to how to help those responsible for this management. Training for middle management, and resources for those academics new to such a role is perhaps an area to be researched in the future.

Marking is another task for which sessional staff are often employed, but this role is almost universally ignored, discounted or rendered invisible (Coombe and Clancy, 2002). For workers in isolation, particularly in the distance education environment, standardisation is difficult to secure if there are no measures taken to train the markers in what is expected and if criteria and standards are not made explicit in relation to assessment tasks (Coombe and Clancy, 2002).

Professional and Career Development

There is a widespread lack of formal, systematic or centralised policies or approaches to the support, training or management of sessional teachers.' (AUTC, 2003).

A suggestion raised by many is that sessional staff should be paid for attending training and professional development sessions, as are permanent staff (Whelan et al, 2002; Chan et al, 2007).

Teaching circles are one form of professional development which have been common in North America since the mid 1990s, and which have been introduced in the UK more recently. An example of this model being implemented in Australia is given later.

Although a minority of these TCs focus on particular courses or topics, the main purposes of TCs are normally more general, such as to promote dialogue and scholarship about teaching, to enhance teaching practice and to provide a forum for professional development. (Blackwell et al, 2002).

A teaching team of sessional tutors and their unit coordinator at Sydney University found collaboration valuable and asserted that 'the ups-and-downs of tutoring cannot be negotiated alone. However we are frequently expected to do so with minimal structural support and fewer resources.' (Chan et al, 2007). This team also decided that each tutor would be given the opportunity to give a 15-20 minute guest lecture as part of their professional development.

As technology continues to change the face of much university teaching, staff have the challenge of keeping up-to-date with the most recent trends as well as student expectations. These challenges are all the greater for sessional staff who do not have the advantage of access to frequent collegial discussion and 'in-house' resources. A need for training in online-enhanced teaching has been expressed by many university tutors (Rice, 2004). 'Tutors are eager to improve their practice across a range of areas, but they need assistance to enable them to feel more comfortable about teaching in new environments.'

A further challenge is the diversity of types of sessional staff who are often grouped together. As a consequence, those who are long-term, experienced sessional teachers are not given

career opportunities they may well qualify for, because they are not part of the 'tenured academic body.'

Anderson (2007) suggests occasional conferences and an online 'virtual staffroom' as two ways of providing professional development opportunities and support to sessional staff who may not be available for, or interested in, other formal approaches.

Academic career opportunities for postgraduate students are slim and even in America where the postgraduate cohort tend to be better supported, 'there are too few tenure-track jobs for all the PhDs in some disciplines because graduate students or faculty on fixed-term or part-time appointments teach so many courses. If full-time tenure track faculty taught most courses, there might not be a job shortage' (Hoeller, 2007).

Knight et al (2006) assert that professional formation occurs in the normal daily course of things, and that professional learning can be seen as an outcome of the connections between people and other affordances (ie the resources and opportunities at hand) in the workplace. Accordingly, informal integration of sessional staff is as important as formally established opportunities for professional development. Sharing staff space and involvement in discussions and planning are some ways to move towards achieving this integration. Percy (2007) also challenges the dominant focus on formal professional development, asserting that a 'focus on peer learning opportunities in situated learning communities (Boud, 1999) are expected to result in more powerful outcomes,' but acknowledges that such informal structures are more difficult to measure.

Rewards and Recognition

The contribution of sessional teaching staff is now so vital most universities could not function without them. The majority of university teaching, the first and second year undergraduate teaching and marking, described as emotionally draining hack work (Barrett, 2004) is increasingly being conducted by sessional staff (Barrett, 2004; Kift, 2003; Kimber, 2003; Coaldrake, 1999). Sessional teachers are often the main point of contact between students and the teaching body and

tutors have to be able to operate seamlessly between both face to face and online activities and mediate between lecturers teaching face to face and/or online and students learning in both situations (Rice, 2004).

Despite the integral role sessional staff play in university life and the impact they make on the student learning experience in Australian universities, they are still, overall, 'overlooked' and 'undervalued' (Kimber, 2003; Kift, 2003; Coaldrake, 1999). Within English universities, Bryson (2003) claims there are 'no systems to recognise and reward' sessional staff, a lack also seen

in Australian universities with a few notable exceptions: for example, Carrick citations include sessional staff and at UNSW there are teaching awards for sessional staff.

It is generally accepted that while more and more teaching is being conducted by sessional staff, the same staff are not being included in the planning of what they teach (Coaldrake, 1999; Kift, 2003; Chan et al, 2007). Sessional staff are routinely left out of curriculum decision-making and future subject planning. It is ironic that this is occurring in an environment in which sessional staff are often recruited for their expertise in a particular field. As the gap between university study and professional work decreases, this kind of liaison between the two worlds is increasingly sought after, and 'industry experts' (Kimber, 2003) are recruited for this very role. The exclusion of sessional staff from planning meetings also has the consequence of further alienating a group of people already marginalized.

The lack of integration into the general teaching body within the universities is the most cited area of concern for sessional staff. There is a lack of infrastructural support, with little access to facilities, supplies and communications technology. 'PTT [part-time teachers] have been neglected... in terms of policy, support and infrastructure. The effect on the 'invisible faculty' is to feel excluded and experience marginalisation in the organisation' (Bryson and Scurry, 2002). There is need for more collegial collaboration and inclusion in program planning (Rice, 2004; Chan et al, 2007) as well as the organisational structure (TEDI, 2003).

Possible Options

Successful implementation of an on-site, low-cost integration model has occurred at Monash and Swinburne Universities in Melbourne. Over several years, Drs Ian Mitchell and Ian Macdonald introduced 'a model of guided reflection on practice through regular meetings of teaching groups', which consisted mostly of sessionally employed tutors. For such a Teaching Community model to be effective, Macdonald (2001) sets out certain criteria. Members (staff) are viewed as learners, meeting to improve their own skills as well as the learning of their students. Management must support the groups, and view the regular meetings as valuable preparation time for all staff, including sessionals. In the faculties where the teaching communities were established, not only did teacher motivation improve, but the learning outcomes of students also improved.

Below are some further examples already implemented and suggestions found in the literature:

- At Deakin University an online discussion space was created to enable tutors to communicate with and support each other (Rice, 2004). Online connectors are particularly important for staff involved with distance education (Coombe and Clancy, 2002).

- In the AUTC Report of 2003, resourcing sessional staff was prioritised, with policies, handbooks and feedback procedures being made available to sessional staff.
- An incremental salary structure was encouraged (AUTC, 2003) to facilitate fairness as well as reward.
- The introduction of teaching circles were seen as crucial to the quality enhancement of sessional teaching (Bryson, 2003; Coombe and Clancy, 2002; Macdonald, 2001).
- Peer observation of teaching by departmental colleagues as opposed to generic training were understood as more powerful professional development opportunities (Bryson, 2003).

Conclusion

In this year-long project 'Recognition, Enhancement, Development of Sessional Teaching', it is important to note that the overarching issue is the increasing complexity of the University workforce, particularly in teaching, and the effect this has on maintaining sustainable practices and cultures and the quality of learning and teaching. As permanent staff assume ever greater responsibility for managing sessional staff, their administrative and interpersonal skills become more critical, a role for which systemic training has barely been recognised or formalised. It is clear that it is not merely the professional development needs of sessionals themselves that is important for universities, but the professional development of their managers as well. This emerges at a time when universities and their permanent staff are under pressure to meet a range of multiple and often competing priorities, such as maintaining research output while assuring the quality of the learning environment.

It is recommended that in order to fully recognise, enhance and develop the contribution of sessional teachers, the sector needs to develop and implement a broad range of guiding practices, which can be adopted and contextualised to suit the needs of Australia's diverse range of universities, faculties and schools. The sector must look beyond a short term view of more policies and procedures, and generate a long term view on sustainable ratios of permanent and sessional staff while generating a culture where sessional staff are considered as integral to the quality of learning and teaching rather than just 'gap fillers'. The sector needs to engage with not just the 'opportunities' for sessional staff support, but with the broader view of recognition and integration in terms of recognition, employment, induction, academic support, professional development and career formation.

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