

Project framework

Lyn Sheridan, Project Manager

I have actually written quite a few things and there's quite a bit of literature in your folder which I'm going to point to rather than give you a long spiel about the project. One of the first things that I just wanted to draw your attention to, is there's a final report summary and that gives you a bit sense of what the brief of the project was which was support, recognition and enhancement of sessional staff, what were the universities in the sector doing in terms of that brief? What we were able to achieve and then what we see as the opportunities in terms of both this colloquium and the long term opportunities.

It involves 16 universities which was an amazing feat in itself to get 16 universities involved in a project that only ran for 12 months. There were basically two phases. The first one, as Sharon has mentioned, was about collecting numbers and collecting topology. What were sessional staff doing? The summary talks a little bit about that and Sharon has spoken a little bit about the complexity of actually pinning down those numbers.

Knowing what they did, they did everything and they did it across the board depending on different contexts. That was one of the main things that came through quite early in the project that the work that sessional staff did, the numbers of sessional staff, the percentages of sessional staff was very contextual. It was very different from university to university, from G8s to regional, to remote, it was very different. This had a major impact on the scoping exercise. The project represented all of the states and territories from Western Australia, Darwin right down to Tasmania and the universities in between and the whole range of universities.

Rather than talk a lot about the issues which I know we were going to discuss a lot today, I want to present the successes of the project because there really were some highlights of this project. The highlights for me were the actual interviews. What the team did for me and this was the 16 universities and the team members from the 16, was they actually found in their universities what we referred to as case studies of good practice, where they thought there was good practice. And, in some cases, where there wasn't such good practice but I was open to that when I went in for the interviews.

It was through those interviews that we were able to work out what was working within that particular context. We found some brilliant examples. They were ad hoc, a lot of them were really done on the basis of individuals' passion and individuals' energy in terms of supporting sessional staff.

The ones that we tried to label as good practice were the ones that we felt were a bit more sustainable, were a little bit more systemic, that covered a more holistic approach. They didn't just look at PD or induction or rewards, they tried to incorporate all of these five domains so we came up with the five domains. In your little pack you've got a little flowchart which is kind of our thinking in terms of the broader overarching issues, the underlying factors and then we came up with these five different domains.

It was through the good practice examples which we've got in the back that we came up with a list of what we felt was some of the guidelines. If this was good practice these were the things that we felt should be included and they weren't included across the board. Even in the good case studies they weren't necessarily covering every single domain in a perfect way but they were good examples.

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The other thing that came up from the case studies, from the interviews and on the website for this project there are stories from the sector and there are ones that we identified as the good practice. You will see that issues have come up so we had some guidelines and we had some issues. In terms of where we're going from here I think this colloquium and the group of people here, there are two main opportunities.

We have over 100 people, participants registered today, and they're representing 33 of the 35 universities across Australia and Catherine from New Zealand so we have an international person as well. What I'm hoping is that the combined group can actually help to develop these domains further, can have a look at them, can contribute to them, add/delete, to really own them and to actually at the end of the colloquium, hopefully have some broad guidelines on where we go in terms of PD, induction, HR, rewards, recognition so all of those five areas.

That to me is the short term opportunity. The larger opportunity is in terms of thinking about what is sustainable in terms of sustainable practices and this is where we're looking at the balance of permanent and sessional staff, the ratios across the board.

As Sharon mentioned in her talk, we don't have a firm number or a firm percentage in terms of how many sessionals there are across Australia but we know that it is far greater than 40 per cent. In some universities it's 60, 70. In some schools it could be up to 80 per cent so, again, very contextual. But we do know that in order for things to be sustainable we have to think big picture. We have to think about really as a group what we actually want in terms of teaching. Who do we want to do our teaching? How can we support those sessional people that are doing the teaching?

One of the things that Colin Bryson patent quite a few years ago, he talked about sessional staff being gap fillers. That analogy is wrong in terms of Australian universities today. They're not the gap fillers. In a lot of cases they're actually the bricks and mortar. They're actually doing the majority of the teaching.

In terms of the other sustainability that I'd like to talk about is sustainable cultures. This is where I think we need to enter into the discourse about not just opportunities for sessional staff but rights for sessional staff - rights to timely contracts, adequate pay, academic support in terms of their teaching, career formation opportunities, professional development and recognition and reward to actually feel as staff members not as gap fillers.

I'm going to stop there because I don't want to talk too much. I want the conversation to be with the participants today and just leave it there, thank you.