

Keynote Address

Professor Rob Castle, Deputy Vice Chancellor (Academic and International), University of Wollongong

I was very pleased to be asked to say a few words at the opening of this sessional teacher's colloquial because I do think it's an important issue. But it does worry me when we get to talk about an issue about this. I think sessional teachers are very much the hidden part of the massification that has taken place in higher education in Australia over the last 30 years.

I think one of the things I have been proudest of to be part of is part of the system over that period is to see the growth of access for so many students from backgrounds who could not have got into university, the transition that we've gone from an elite to a mass system. But we could not have done that without the massive contribution of sessional staff.

It's up on there that some 40 per cent but if we're going to say, let's say half of our teaching is currently done by sessional staff. It is usually been unacknowledged, although over time there are a number of ways in which we have moved forward in terms of standardising pay rates. But there are a whole range of other issues which have not been tackled and which I think as a university system, we very badly need to do it.

The analogy I've always made with sessional staff is to describe them as proletariat of the academic profession and that Victorian description of an industrial working class just doesn't fit as well as that other part of Victorian life, the domestic servant.

In many ways the lifestyle of traditional teaching research academics is totally dependent on the contribution of sessional staff in the way that Victorian middle class lifestyles were dependent on the domestic servant. They were tucked up in the attic or other places, they ate in the kitchen and you grumbled constantly that what they did was actually not quite what you wanted. But nonetheless, they were absolutely essential to your being and to your lifestyle. I think that applies equally to many sessional staff today.

In fact it reminds me of a colleague who worked for the World Bank on a project for many years in Indonesia who, while they had a number of servants and said they constantly complained that the servants simply could not do the ironing properly. It didn't matter what happened, you couldn't train them to get the creases out or not iron over buttons. They constantly grumbled until they came back to Australia, had to do the ironing themselves and the first comment was, where's the girl to do the ironing?

I think sessional staff are in exactly that position in terms of academic life. We've tried to maintain, for full time staff, the position of being teaching and research academics. Very few cases have we made even the movement towards having teaching only or teaching intensive academics. We've tried to keep up that what I think is in some ways a fiction, it certainly doesn't apply to all staff, that they are able to do all of this unsupported, virtually, except by this hidden workforce.

One of the challenges I think we've got is essentially to look not just at the role of the sessional staff, but to ask ourselves the questions, literally, who is to do the teaching and what sort of teaching are we to do. How can we organise teaching in a way that not only provides a meaningful experience for sessional staff as well as providing teaching and research staff who I think have come under increasing pressure during this last 30 years? How can we optimise what they are doing?

I think that it's no longer enough simply to take contradictory positions that we deplore casualisation – but of course I've got my research grand and I need teaching relief for it so therefore I have to be bought out of teaching. I particularly like that when there's a carrick

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.

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grant involved but in order to obtain teaching excellence, I need to be bought out of teaching. I think that's one of the modern ironies of modern life.

How in fact can we work this because many of the things which are being discussed here today, have obvious budget implications and that university budgets are not a magic pudding. The amount of resourcing that is going to go into here is not going to increase in the next few years dramatically, I mean we're about to enter an education revolution without a cent being promised for higher education.

So what we've got to do is in fact to think smarter. To work out how in modern periods with things like blended learning, with things like e-teaching available, what combinations we need to optimise both the contribution of sessional staff and of full time staff. They are some of the challenges that I think you have today.

Teaching in a university, in my view, has to be made more professional. Whether it is coming from sessional staff or full time staff, we can no longer afford again a 19th century attitude of amateurism to operate in terms of tertiary teaching. Working out where sessional staff fit into that, how to ensure that they are not exploited is a real challenge.

But I think to do so, we're going to have to challenge some of the ways in which we traditionally teach. To ask ourselves just what full time academics should be doing. What the people like learning developers or academic developers or website developers should be doing. Where sessional staff fit in, what sort of face to face experience we expect students to have, if in fact we're to provide quality education in Australia as the 21st century progresses.

I think this is a really important topic. It's something, in a sense, over my long working life – I started as a sessional teacher in 1969 – so I've seen this in a variety of ways in the 1970s through the debate about the conditions of what were then tutors and senior tutors who were staff usually on contract, much better conditions than most sessionals, but did not have career paths. How did they fit in, I was part of the 1000 working party on this that in fact led ultimately to the current integrated set of conditions or lecturer A, B and C etcetera that we now have.

But the thing that always reminded me of the contradictions on this is in the academic union. There was a very long debate which took place, starting in the late afternoon, continuing into the evening. After a while, at least one person there got a little weary, closed his eyes, woke up again after an hour or so and looked around, began to take in what the debate was actually about. As he realised this was about improving conditions of people who were then tutors and so on, he looked around and made his one contribution to the debate which was, but who will do the teaching. That, I think, is our challenge. To work out who is doing the teaching and what are the conditions.

I certainly wish the organisers well for today. I think there are some really controversial and challenging things which you are doing and I think it is a really important issue for the future of higher education. Thank you.