



A Departmental Approach to Employing, Developing and Supporting Sessional Staff

MACQUARIE UNIVERSITY

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Abstract

This case outlines one department's approach to employing, developing and supporting sessional staff through careful attention to recruitment and employment processes, induction and development opportunities and regular teaching team meetings. The keys to the success and sustainability of this program are the allocated role of the Department Manager to manage all employment and timetabling processes and the financial commitment of the department to these quality practices.

Context

The department has approximately 250 undergraduate and postgraduate classes a week per semester taught by 50 sessional staff. The majority of these staff are postgraduate students with a small number of external applicants and 3rd year undergraduate students. Sessional staff are employed to teach tutorials and practical sessions and a select few lectures.

Aims

To ensure sessional teachers are proficient in their subject area, are reliable and effective teachers and relate to their students.

To provide sessional teachers with both teaching and administrative support and opportunities for development.

Outcomes

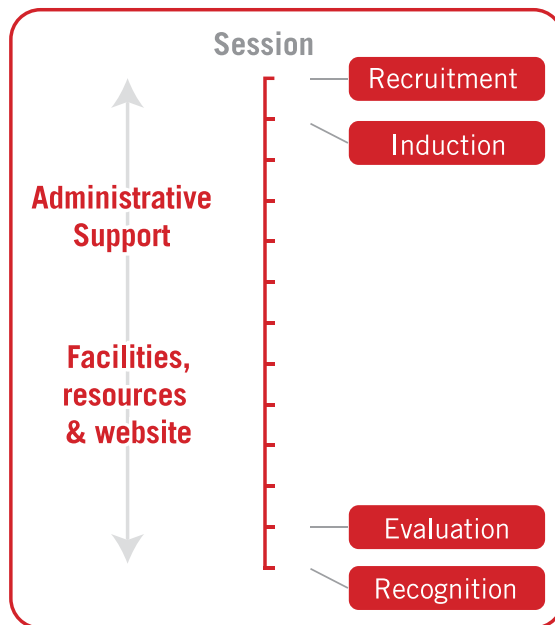
Timely, well-managed recruitment and employment procedures

Paid participation in induction and development programs

Quality practices at the teaching team level

Recognition of sessional teachers' contribution

What was done?



Recruitment Procedures

Recruitment is conducted twice per year, and the Department website is used to advertise positions.

The advertisement sets out the general selection criteria for tutors, markers, practical supervisors, unit specific selection criteria, an application form and instructions on how to apply.

A list of applicants with relevant details is compiled on a spreadsheet and sent to the Unit Convenors.

Selection is made by the Unit Convenor in collaboration with the Department Manager.

After all allocations are made, approval is obtained from the Head of Department.

Offers are then sent out via email within 15 days. The offer sets out the Terms and Conditions and a personal timetable of the classes being offered.

Administrative support

A database of applicants is maintained with contact details, employment history and comments on performance.

The Department Manager centrally controls hours, units, work allocation, pay claims and timesheets.

Timetabling is also managed centrally by the Department Manager for all teaching. Ongoing support with class management during the semester is also provided.

For each tutorial a tutor is expected to offer one hour of consultation time. A Help Desk is set up in the Computing Labs, one for each year, where Tutor Consultation Times are displayed. These are also listed on the web.

Induction and Development

A Development Day for sessional teachers in the Department is held at the beginning of each year. The program is developed and run in conjunction with the University's Centre for Professional Development. Sessional staff are paid to attend. The program covers staff expectations, support offered within the Department, and occupational health and safety.

A resource kit including The Casual Academic Staff Induction Booklet is distributed at the program.

The Department website supplements the university webpage for sessional staff with its own dedicated website (see Links and Resources).

Training in WebCT, which is used to input marks and attendance, is also provided.

Mentoring is provided by experienced sessional teachers.

Communication with groups of tutors is facilitated by the use of email aliases, eg. COMP115- tut@...

Large teaching teams meet 3-4 times during a semester. Attendance at meetings is paid for. Meeting discussions cover issues of tutorial content, practical exercises, assessment, assignments, marking, feedback strategies and student feedback.

Teacher Evaluation

Individual teaching evaluation is possible. This is initiated by the sessional teachers and the results are private and confidential. Sessional teachers are encouraged to have individual evaluations and some use these evaluations to build their employment portfolios.

Recognition

Individual tutors are emailed and congratulated on good work. (As an example click the following url for information on the 1st year Committee <http://www.comp.mq.edu.au/undergrad/info/liason/100-level/index.html>)

Review and Improvement

The success of the Department's approach was acknowledged by the presentation of the Macquarie University Excellence in Education Award in April 2007 by the VC.

Evaluation of the Program

At the Department level, a Student/Staff Liaison Committee comprises student representatives for each unit and the Unit Convenors and Lecturers. There is a Committee for each level; 1st, 2nd and 3rd year. Each Committee meets at least twice a semester to take feedback from students on all aspects of their course from the quality of teaching, including tutors and prac supervisors, texts, reading materials, assessments, right through to hygiene factors such as the condition of the labs, study venues, printers etc.

Feedback from these Committees is passed on to the sessional staff when they have their regular meetings with their Unit Convenor.

The Department also has a 3 year rolling evaluation of each unit in the Program.

Evaluation of the Development Day

Student feedback is used to improve the Induction/ Development Program. For example, over a three year period, the program has shifted the focus of the learning and teaching component:

in the first iteration, the teaching aspect of the Program focused on general teaching skills and small group learning. It was called 'Preparing to Teach'. There were opportunities for discussion and practice in a mock tutorial and practical session;

in the second iteration, the focus was on 'Inclusive Practice in Tutorials and Pracs for a Diverse Student Body' given the fact that a large number of Computing students were international; and

in the third iteration, the Department had learnt via student evaluations that students would appreciate better and more regular feedback on their progress. Thus strategies for giving feedback formed the focus for the third program which was called 'Feedback for Effective Learning within Computing'.

Critical Success Factors

The Department has built into its budget a provision for funds to support the development program.

The resource kit, the dedicated website and using email aliases has proven to be effective and efficient.

Assigning the Department Manager responsibility for timetabling and staffing for all postgraduate and undergraduate programs within the Department is a critical factor for the success of the program; for example, creating classes in the timetable necessitates recruitment to fill them. Another advantage is that offers of work are holistically considered and each successful applicant is assigned work across two units rather than piecemeal.

Challenges

It is difficult to find quality sessional teachers for some units. Not everyone has the required experience for the specialisation of the discipline.

Although the use of sessional teachers means flexibility, staff can resign suddenly which creates problems with staffing.

The Department Manager would like to see a computerised system for recruitment (submitting an application), work allocation (making class allocations) and remuneration (processing and approving pay claims), which would then feed back into the university's HR system.

Links and Resources

Supporting Sessional Staff at Macquarie University Website
www.mq.edu.au/staff/sessionalstaff/

Department of Computing Website, Casual Academic Staff
www.comp.mq.edu.au/casual_academics/