

# Executive Summary

This large-scale study into the recognition, enhancement and development of sessional teaching in higher education builds on the Australian Universities Teaching Committee Report (2003a) *Training, Support and Management of Sessional Teaching Staff*. The aim of the current Project was to identify and analyse current national practice and refocus attention on the issues surrounding sessional teachers in the university sector.

The Project had three objectives: to establish the full extent of the contribution that sessional teachers make to teaching and learning in higher education; to identify and analyse good practice examples for dissemination; and to consider the possible developments for institutional and sector-wide improvements to the quality enhancement of sessional teaching.

Sixteen Australian universities were involved in the Project, representing the 'Group of 8' (Go8), regional, Australian Technology Network (ATN), transnational and multi-campus institutions in all states and territories. At each of the participating universities, the number and typology of sessional teachers was audited across the institution and sixty interviews were conducted with the full range of participants, from sessional teachers to university executive staff.

## Recognition

The project investigated the contribution sessional teachers make to higher education. The Project found that:

**All universities depend heavily on sessional teachers;**

**Universities are unable to report comprehensive and accurate data on the number of sessional teachers and their conditions of employment;**

**The DEEWR (formerly DEST) FTE<sup>1</sup> figures do not represent the magnitude of the contribution of sessional teachers to higher education;**

**The FTE disguises the supervisory load on permanent staff;**

**Sessional teachers are responsible for much of the teaching load, estimates suggest this could be as high as half the teaching load; and**

**Sessional teachers perform the full range of teaching-related duties, from casual marker to subject designer and coordinator.**

In summary, sessional teachers make a significant but largely invisible contribution to the quality of teaching and learning in higher education. Both the quantitative and qualitative dimensions of this contribution need to be investigated and accounted for at an institutional level if risk management and quality enhancement policy and practice are to be effective.

<sup>1</sup> The Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR formerly DEST) Full-time Equivalence (FTE) calculation is the Government required formula for calculating and reporting on the employment of all academic staff including sessionals.

## Enhancement

The analysis of current policy and practice across the participating institutions found that:

**Evidence of systemic sustainable policy and practice is rare;**

**There is a general lack of formal policy and procedure in relation to the employment and administrative support of sessional teachers;**

**While induction is considered important in all universities, the ongoing academic management of sessional teachers is not as well understood or articulated;**

**Paid participation in compulsory professional development for sessional teachers is atypical; and**

**Despite various national and institutional recognition and reward initiatives, many sessional teachers continue to feel their contribution is undervalued.**

In summary, systematic attention to assuring the quality of sessional teaching in many institutions is inadequate; however, good practice does exist and may be widely adopted across the sector.

## Development

Institutional developments for the quality enhancement of sessional teaching have been categorised under the five domains that emerged from the study:

**Systemic and sustainable policy and practice;**

**Employment and administrative support;**

**Induction and academic management;**

**Career and professional development; and**

**Reward and recognition.**

Further detail of these domains and a selection of good practice examples have been put together here in the RED Resource.

## Sector-wide Improvement

Sector-wide improvement will rely on the leadership of individual universities and their capacity to promote sustainable initiatives at the faculty, school and program level.

This will require ongoing support from The Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) through the promotion of scholarly research in the area, further exploration into the qualitative dimensions of the contribution of sessional teachers, the development and dissemination of creative solutions, and the inclusion of the academic management of sessional teachers in institutional benchmarking projects.

The ALTC might also consider the creation of links to their project on the Quality Indicators of Teaching and other leadership projects.

