Abstract: Sessional staff make significant contributions as members of the teaching communities at Australian and international universities. These staff are diverse in their backgrounds, their career paths and their skills. New frameworks are needed to firstly acknowledge the diversity of sessional staff and then to determine the policies, processes and structures that support sessional staff and their universities in achieving quality in teaching.

One Sydney metropolitan university has undertaken an action research project focusing on supporting quality teaching through professional development for sessional teaching staff. This paper reports on the first stage of that project, piloted within one department of the university.

The pivotal role of the departmental working party and the university wide steering committee to this project will be outlined. Methodology for data collection about sessional staff including journals, focus groups and surveys is also presented. Outcomes are summarised with an emphasis on the need to initiate processes that are self-sustaining at the departmental level and that can be transferred and disseminated to other academic divisions.

Keywords: sessional staff, quality teaching, casual academic

Introduction

The quality teaching: professional and organisational development supporting sessional staff project, currently being conducted at Macquarie University, a metropolitan university in Sydney, was funded by the Vice Chancellor's Development Fund and focuses upon sessional staff who are in teaching positions. Sessional teachers are employed on a casual or contract basis. Part-time teachers are not classified as sessional (Appendix A provides a glossary of the terms).

Sessional staff make significant contributions as members of the teaching community at Australian universities. These staff are diverse in their backgrounds, their career paths and their skills. Our knowledge about sessional staff is limited, yet they make up the pool of future academics for our universities. To ensure quality in teaching in our universities we need to also support the career and professional development pathways of sessional staff. New frameworks are needed to firstly acknowledge the diversity of sessional staff and then to determine the policies, processes and structures that support sessional staff and their universities in achieving quality in teaching.

There has been a growth in part-time employment in Australia (Australian Department of Family and Community Services and Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, 2002) with Australia boasting the second highest rate of part-time workers among the OECD countries (OECD, 2004) with about 25 percent of all employees being sessional (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2003). This trend is reflected in the higher education sector where the actual number of casual staff has continued to grow over the past decade from 9,249 in 1995 to 13,716 in 2004 (DEST, 2004).
Little research has been conducted on casual or sessional academics in Australia (Kimber, 2003) although there is a growing body of literature emerging from America (AFT Higher Education, 2003; Charfauros, and Tierney, 1999; Leslie, 1998, Leslie and Zimbler, 2002; US Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2002a, 2002b) and Great Britain (Bryson, Rice and Scurry, 2000; Bryson and Scurry, 2001, Husbands and Davies, 2000; Pearson, 2002). In contrast the Australian Department of Education, Science and Training only collects data (on staff numbers) for full-time and fractional full-time staff, using estimates for casual staff (DEST, 2004). Research into sessional staff to date has focused on workers’ employment conditions (for example, Fine, Graham and Paxman, 1992), with fewer investigating the theme of quality in teaching (Watters, Christensen, Ryan, Weeks and Arcodia, 1996). Currently the Training, Managing and Supporting Sessional Teaching Staff Project, formerly funded by the Australian Universities Teaching Committee (AUTC, 2004a) and now the Carrick Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education, is investigating the training, support and management of sessional teaching staff.

The project

At Macquarie University sessional staff can be found as tutors, leading practicals, providing lectures and in adjunct teaching roles. In some divisions of the university there is a high rate of use of sessional staff. For example, up to 85% of teaching staff are sessional in one department. Sessional staff are often used to teach at the undergraduate level, although in some divisions they also teach at a postgraduate level. Turnover of sessional staff from one semester to the next can also be high, up to 30% in one department. Conversely, some departments have sessional staff who have been teaching for that department for over a decade.

Given the diversity of use of sessional staff within the one university, the Quality Teaching: Professional and Organisational Development Supporting Sessional Staff project aims to support quality teaching through professional development for sessional teaching staff. This paper reports on the first stage of the project which is a pilot within one department of the university, the Institute of Early Childhood. The pilot has run over a twelve month period (2004-2005).

A central tenet of the quality teaching: professional and organisational development supporting sessional staff project is the need for sustainable outcomes. It is believed that these can be achieved through organisational development and cultural change. An emphasis on capacity building for both sessional and continuing staff within the pilot department differentiates this project from others. Another differentiating feature of the project is the aim to eventually embed the emerging policies, procedures and processes into the departmental culture.

Aims of the project include raising the level of awareness of the needs and importance of sessional staff in a quality learning environment; developing a professional development framework for sessional teaching staff, contextualised to suit individual department needs; developing resources to support sessional teaching staff and creating an administrative process that builds a profile for sessional staff within departments. The final aim is to disseminate a framework for professional and organisational development policies, processes and structures that support sessional staff in academic divisions. There are several steps to achieving these aims.

Steps that make up Stage 1

Personnel play a pivotal role in working towards achieving the aims of the project. After the appointment of a project coordinator (3 days a week for the project’s duration) it was necessary to form committees capable of providing both a contextual framework for the project and input based on experience in their own departments. Committee members could then work with the project coordinator to develop appropriate methodologies for data collection. The data collected on sessional staff would be used to inform each step of the project. All processes in the project are documented and linked to outcomes. An emphasis has been on achieving sustainable outcomes, that is, outcomes that can continue to be achieved after the project is complete. These steps are outlined in Figure 1.
Step 1. Project Personnel

Project coordinator

The project coordinator is located within the department. This is consistent with an action research framework and has resulted in several benefits to the project. As a change agent, the project coordinator has been able to attend department and divisional meetings to disseminate information about the project to all stakeholders as well as identify and work with the key players who hold decision making roles related to sessional staff. The project coordinator has also had easy access to key personnel who have provided input into the project in the form of information and policy development. Having a physical presence in the department has provided a shopfront for the project and acted as reminder to staff in the department that the project is valued and in progress. One unanticipated benefit of having the project coordinator located in the department is that it has allowed for the opportunity of ad hoc data collection as staff members feel free to "drop in" and share their experiences surrounding sessional staff issues. Embedding the project coordinator within the department is one effective strategy for supporting a change in workplace culture around sessional staff.

Departmental working party

A sense of ownership of the sessional staff project by all members of the department is essential to the project's success and to ensure that changes to policy occur based upon a needs analysis and collegial decision-making. This rationale supported the establishment of a departmental working party. The departmental working party on sessional staff was made up of seven members, including one academic sessional staff member who was paid for.
Figure 1: Steps in Stage 1.

Step 1. Project personnel
- Team leaders appoint project coordinator.
- A departmental working party, to meet monthly, is formed.
- A university wide steering committee, to meet every 4 months, is formed.

Step 2. Data Collection
- The working party and the steering committee identify sessional staff issues and possible strategies to support sessional staff.
- Literature on sessional staff is collected for an annotated bibliography.
- A focus group is conducted for sessional staff within the department. A content analysis of the transcription results in a report "A room with a view".

Step 3. Sustainable Outcomes
- Implementation of new processes and policies.
- Development and distribution of a sessional staff orientation kit.
- Convening a sessional staff induction and orientation session.
- Development of master files for the orientation kit, the sessional staff induction session and for OH&S induction.

Stage 2
The project expands to other departments and divisions across the university.
attendance, and it met monthly. Terms of reference were developed for the working party to provide guidance and direction for the monthly meetings. Members were requested to maintain diaries to record sessional staff issues that arise between meetings, for discussion at the subsequent meeting.

In the first stage of the project the working party meetings have proved to be an integral component of the project. Working party committee members have made a significant contribution to the development of resources through their input at the monthly meetings, actively reviewing and editing resources. The brainstorming of possible strategies, policies and general recommendations for processes has resulted in the generation of many recommendations at each meeting. These recommendations have been summarised in a document and coded as to whether further discussion was required, for example, at a departmental level, before any decision was made, whether they had been implemented or whether policy development and writing was required.

**University steering committee**

The University Steering Committee consisted of eleven academic members, made up of one representative from each Division within the university. Meetings are held three times a year. As for the working party, terms of reference have been developed and act to provide a focus to the meetings.

Like the Working Party meetings, the steering committee has also been a central part of this project. Having a member from each Division of the university allows Stage 1 of the project to be placed within the wider university context, comparing and contrasting sessional staff issues across divisions. The lively interactions and enthusiasm of committee members has allowed for a rich exchange of ideas, resources and strategies targeted at sessional staff. Several of the resources developed for sessional staff at the departmental pilot level have had their origins in other university departments. For example, the Sessional Staff Orientation Kit and the Tutor Feedback Sheet were both based on resources used in other university departments.

**Step 2. Data Collection**

It was necessary to develop project methodologies that were appropriate to each step of the project, yet flexible enough to accommodate emerging project needs. A multi-method approach was needed with an emphasis on an action research framework. In addition to the input from committee members, ideas were generated by both sessional and continuing staff who, as previously mentioned, would "drop in" to the office of the project coordinator to share issues they had identified. A record of these issues was maintained and they were then forwarded to the committees for further examination and action. Each committee member was given a diary in which to record any issues or observations that arose between meetings. These diaries could then be used as a reminder of the issues and a stimulus for discussion at the next meeting. Committee members were reminded to bring their diaries to each meeting and time was allocated at each meeting for the sharing of diary entries, which was voluntary. Actual use of this methodology ranges greatly between committee members, with some contributing long written entries, but with many members not contributing entries.

**Focus group**

Literature on sessional staff in Australian universities is limited, as is our knowledge base on sessional staff within Macquarie University. Hence, it was always an integral component of the project to gather additional data on sessional staff that would inform and direct the project.

One such method is the focus group. The Working Party generated semi-structured questions for use in a sessional staff focus group. An independent facilitator (a requirement of the university's human ethics committee) led the focus group held in September, 2004. A transcript of the focus group was generated and used as the basis for a thematic analysis. This analysis is summarised in Table 1 and reflects the findings of the sessional teaching survey conducted by the Australian Universities Teaching Committee's "Sessional Teaching" project (AURC, 2004b).
**Step 3. Sustainable outcomes**

There have been a number of outcomes generated by the project in its first stage. A sessional staff orientation kit was developed and is being distributed to all new sessional staff in the department. A sessional staff induction program has been further refined and conducted at the departmental level. As sessional staff had not been inducted for Occupational Health and Safety (OH&S) an induction kit was developed for all supervisors of sessional staff. Each outcome generated by the project needs to be sustainable to ensure its ongoing viability as a support resource for sessional staff.

**Sessional staff orientation kit**

Induction for sessional staff at the departmental level had in the past been ad hoc, relying upon the goodwill of unit coordinators to fulfill the orientation needs of their sessional staff. At a Steering Committee meeting one member shared an orientation kit that had been developed for their division and this was used as a foundational template for the development of an orientation kit for sessional staff.

The orientation kit development process included the working party systematically reviewing each item included in the template kit and deciding which items were relevant at the departmental level, which items required additional information, and which could be omitted. The party also brainstormed additional items to be included in the kit. Input was also invited and received from interested department staff. Meetings were then held with key department staff (academic and administrative) to determine policy regarding all processes for which information was to be included in the kits. Much of this detail such as processes involving office keys, access swipe cards, photocopying and printing guidelines had not been recorded previously. Meetings were also held with university staff to obtain additional support information, for example, with the Academic Outreach Librarian and the NTEU.

Following these consultative steps a draft version of a kit was developed and then reviewed by the Working Party. The final writing up process included maintaining an itemised list of inclusions for the kit. The Sessional Staff Orientation Kits were then assembled and an email notification alerted all sessional staff to collect their copy. A record was also kept of kit distribution (with 33 kits being distributed in semester 2, 2004). Any kits not personally collected were mailed to the home addresses of sessional staff (4 kits were mailed out). This process is outlined in Figure 2.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject of focus group question</th>
<th>Themes emerging</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1. Reasons for working sessionally | It suits me  
All that was on offer  
Do not wish to work full time |
| 2. Advantages to working sessionally | Allows control  
Can focus on teaching |
| 3. Disadvantages to working sessionally | Limitation on professional growth & development  
Job insecurity  
Sense of isolation and lack of collegiality  
Lack of access to information |
| 4. Needs of sessional workers | Information and communication  
Sense of job security  
Collegiality & mentoring |
| 5. Identifying support available for sessional staff at the IEC | Able to identify:  
Access to office space  
Eligibility to apply for a parking permit  
Library card  
Centre for Professional Development |
| 6. What sessional staff would liked to have known about… | The orientation kit  
Photocopier use |
| 7. Suggestions for how the IEC and Macquarie University could support sessional staff. | Communication Strategy  
Perception of professional respect  
Access to office space  
Mentoring  
Need for training as a teacher |
| 8. A sense of "feeling less" | Less likely to be as involved as possible - to speak up, to act, to participate  
A feeling of being temporary & removed  
No email account = no idea!  
Lack of clarity around marking  
Learning how to complete a timesheet  
Course texts  
Unpaid hours  
Telephone access |
| 9. Improving support | Career development and mentoring  
Establishing a protocol for sessional staff recruitment  
Sessional staff liaison officer  
Improved communication |
Figure 2: Development of a sessional staff orientation kit

IEC Working party:
- Use of a current orientation kit (from another Division) as a starting point - decide upon items that are relevant to the department, that need additional information, that can be omitted.
- Brainstorm additional information to be included in the kit.
- Review draft version.

Input from interested staff e.g., a diary log
Potential input:
- Focus group
- Survey data
- Evaluation data

Writing Up:
- Itemise list of kit inclusions
- Draft information for inclusion into kit.

Kit Assembly & Distribution
- Email notification to all sessional staff to collect a kit.

Master Kit
- Development of a checklist of inclusions
- Hard copies
- Soft copies
- Source information
- Suggestions for next draft

Meet with department staff to determine policy regarding all processes to be included in the kit.
Meet with university staff to obtain additional support information.
To enhance the sustainability of the orientation kit a Master Kit has also been created to allow for the ease of updating the kit information and kit reproduction. This master kit consists of

- the itemised checklist of inclusions;
- hard copies of each item;
- soft copies (on CD rom);
- source information (for each item) and
- evaluations of the kit, including suggestions for next draft.

**Sessional staff induction session**

An induction session was conducted for new sessional staff members in March, 2005. The program included a wide variety of speakers who provided an overview of the department and all the courses offered. This provided the sessional staff members with an opportunity to contextualise the course on which they were teaching within the wider context of the degree that their students were undertaking.

The next session was conducted by the university's professional development unit and focussed on professional development and career development for sessional staff members at the university. This was offered in response to the feedback received from the first induction session where a need for these topics was clearly expressed.

Staff attending were paid for their time and provided with lunch. Their evaluation of the induction session was very positive with all participants in agreement that they were very satisfied with the organisation, content and delivery of the session.

**Occupational Health and Safety (OH&S) Induction Kit**

Although the university had requirements that all staff be inducted into Occupational Health and Safety (OH&S) and had provided the paperwork for this, most supervisors in the department were unaware of the necessary processes and lacked the knowledge about OH&S with which to induct sessional staff. In order to support supervisors, that is unit and course coordinators, an Occupational Health and Safety (OH&S) Induction Kit was produced. The kit contains all the paperwork and information needed to induct any new staff member into OH&S. The project coordinator modeled the use of the kit by inducting continuing staff at a department meeting and then provided each of them with the kit to enable them to then induct any sessional staff teaching on their courses. As for the sessional staff orientation kit, a master kit was produced to allow for easy updating and reproduction of the kit materials.

**Conclusion**

With the growth in sessional staff within the higher education sector it is timely for universities to take an active role in identifying the needs of their sessional staff and developing processes, policies and resources that support both their sessional staff and the continuing staff who work with them. Universities need to actively work towards a change in workplace culture that promotes a culture of inclusivity towards all sessional staff while maintaining their standards for quality in teaching and supporting their next generation of academics.

Sharing between higher education organisations of the models, processes and strategies (for example in AUTC, 2004a; Kift, 2002) 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 contextualise the project. The quality teaching: professional and organisational development supporting sessional staff project at Macquarie University committed to undergo a process that was multimethod in its approach and contextualised not just at an organisational level, but at the departmental level of the Institute of Early Childhood. The adoption of an action research framework involved a departmental working party, a university wide steering committee and a project coordinator working within the department. This range and involvement of participants resulted in the identification of
sessional staff issues and the generation of recommendations that would take the project to the next stage, beyond one department and out to the wider university community.

This paper outlines examples of some of sustainable outcomes achieved by the first stage of the project. The project has achieved several of its original aims in that supportive resources for sessional staff have been developed, new administrative processes have also been initiated (not reported in this paper), and contextualised professional development for sessional staff has been conducted. Yet, more is needed.

Supporting quality teaching with sessional staff is a management issue (Kift, 2002). The key to the management of any issue, including sessional staff, is communication. Although Macquarie University offers most of its professional development workshops and courses to sessional staff, unlike other organisations where sessional staff are excluded from professional development, most sessional staff were unaware of this opportunity. The quality teaching: professional and organisational development supporting sessional staff project has addressed the need for communication directly through the orientation kit, the induction session and including sessionals on the distribution list for the weekly departmental e-news. Communication’s pivotal role in the management of sessional staff also offers the outcome of increasing the perception of inclusivity of sessional staff.

More data collection within the department is still needed and then new policies for sessional staff can be written. The project has generated a comprehensive listing of recommendations to the vice-chancellor which should provide direction and focus for the continuation of the project to the next stage. Stage 2 of the project would allow for the transfer and application of resources, policies and processes that have been developed in the pilot phase to other departments and divisions throughout the university.

References


Australian Bureau of Statistics (2003) Employee Earnings, Benefits and Trade Union Membership Australia, August, Catalogue Number 6310.0


### Appendix A: Glossary of terms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Casual</td>
<td>Employment without leave entitlements. More frequently an employer will offer you hours to fit in with the operational requirements of the organisation, e.g., the days and hours when tutorials are held. There is no expectation of regular or continuing employment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contract</td>
<td>Set as a fixed term period of work or for the duration of a specific task or project, e.g., teaching a unit over one semester.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part-time</td>
<td>You work a proportion of a “normal” working week with pro-rata benefits and job security, e.g., if you work a 50% load, you are entitled to 50% holiday pay. A pre-arranged regularity of the hours of work exists.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Copyright © 2005 Harvey, M; Fraser, S. and Bowes, J: The authors assign to HERDSA and educational non-profit institutions a non-exclusive licence to use this document for personal use and in courses of instruction provided that the article is used in full and this copyright statement is reproduced. The authors also grant non-exclusive licence to HERDSA to publish this document in full on the World Wide Web (prime sites and mirrors) on CD-ROM and in printed form within the HERDSA 2004 conference proceedings. Any other usage is prohibited without the express permission of the authors.