Enhancing the training, support and management of

sessional teaching staff (HER02448)

Debra Herbert, Rachel Hannam and Denise Chalmers

Teaching and Educational Development Institute, University of Queensland

Abstract

For several reasons, the number of staff who are employed as lecturers, tutors, demonstrators or lab assistants on a casual or sessional basis are increasing across the university sector (DETYA, 2001). These sessional staff typically include postgraduate students, industry-based professionals, and people regularly employed on a course by course basis to lecture, tutor or demonstrate. The management, training and support of these staff is not only varied across universities but also within universities, and often this group is overlooked when developing policy relating to teaching staff. This paper describes a national project commissioned by the Australian University Teaching Committee (AUTC) in 2002 that aims to enhance the quality of the management, support and training of sessional teachers in Australian universities. Particular focus will be given to issues involving policy, management and training, including a review of the current environment, what is needed, and possible models of good practice. The findings of the project and the resources developed as a result will be disseminated using a variety of mechanisms, including an existing network of academics around Australia and via a project web-site.

Introduction

The Australian higher education system is increasingly becoming a 'casualized' industry of professionals in teaching and research. Significant reductions in government funding, increased student diversity and expectations, burgeoning student numbers, and the accommodation of changing educational technologies and globalisation have led to substantial changes in the employment practices in the higher education system. Most notably, there has been a rapid growth in the number of non-tenured teaching staff who are employed as lecturers, tutors, demonstrators or lab assistants on a casual or sessional basis (DETYA, 2001). As class sizes have increased and permanent staff levels remain unchanged or even diminished, there has generally been a greater reliance on casual or sessional staff to conduct tutorials, problem-based classes, laboratory and practical classes. Previously, casual and sessional appointments were used only occasionally to supplement course offerings and to provide temporary replacements for tenure-track or tenured faculty. But more recently, universities have been increasing their dependence on sessional teachers in order to accommodate issues of reduced funding, diversity in the student population, changing employment conditions, changing educational technologies, internationalism and globalization (Coaldrake and Stedman, 1998; Gappa and Leslie, 1993; Tuckman and Pickerill, 1988).

The significant increase in the rate of casual employment has required universities to develop policy initiatives to deal with casualization, not only in relation to administrative or procedural management, but also to regulate a move towards a more principled appointment, training and support regime (Kift, 2002; McAlpine, 2002). However, while in many universities it would seem that the distinction between permanent and casual academics is becoming increasingly irrelevant in real terms, according to many researchers in the area (e.g. Kift, 2002; McAlpine 2002) the sector has dealt with the phenomenon of casualisation very poorly. For example, Coaldrake (1999) states:

> *Part-time academics (are) frequently overlooked in discussion of policy and institutional strategy. Potentially, the use of such staff can add enormous practical value to university teaching.... yet in practice, many casual and part-time staff complain of being isolated from the university, unable to participate in decision making (and) having no access to support facilities or development opportunities.*

There is clearly a need to put commitment and resources into the training, support and integration of this teaching cohort, upon whom such heavy reliance is placed to deliver programs that are frequently large and increasingly complex. The key areas of concern appear to be professional development, employment stability, improving working conditions, the establishment of on-going support mechanisms, as well as assisting supervisors to improve the training and management of sessional staff (AUTC Project, 2002).

In light of these issues, the focus of the current project was on establishing guidelines and support mechanisms at the university level for policy development purposes, and at the organisational unit level (school and subject level) for the purposes of supporting and training sessional teaching staff. A major aim of the project was to provide a range of models of good practice at each level in order to encourage institutions to work toward the enhancement of support mechanisms for sessional employees.

Aims and structure of the project

The project was conducted in 2002 by the Teaching and Educational Development Institute (TEDI) at the University of Queensland in collaboration with Teaching and Learning Support Services (TALSS) at the Queensland University of Technology. The main aims of the project were to: identify issues and implications related to sessional teaching staff; identify policies and models of best practice; develop guidelines at the university, school and course coordinator level for the management, support and training of sessional teachers; and disseminate guidelines and best practice to the higher education sector. The project was conducted in two phases; the review phase, and the development and dissemination phase.

(1) The **review phase** of the project was focussed on identifying and exploring;

- current practices adopted in the training, management and support of sessional teachers;
- the issues that emerge due to the sector's reliance on their employment;
- the strategies used to deal with problems arising from a reliance on sessional teachers; and,
- existing and potential institutional responses to the challenges involved in employing, training and supporting sessional teaching staff.

This phase was carried out using email questionnaires distributed across the Australian University sector to sessional teachers themselves as well as their supervisors and

mangers, and also via a review of existing research literature and other written materials related to the topic. The main findings of this review are discussed in the second section of this paper.

(2) The aim of the **development and dissemination phase** of the project was to apply the findings of the review phase to the development of resources designed to promote better support for sessional teachers at all levels. These resources include the development of guidelines for best practice at the institutional, school/departmental and supervisor levels, as well as case studies that exemplify particular guidelines and other relevant resources. A project website has been created to bring together the guidelines, case studies and other new resources, with existing resources on sessional teaching. The development and dissemination of these resources is discussed in more detail in the third section of this report.

Review Phase

Definition: who are sessional teachers?

The employment of casual teaching staff varies substantially between higher education institutions (Gappa and Leslie, 1993), and even within the schools and disciplines of those institutions (Benjamin, 1998). So, before turning to a discussion of the review phase of the project, it is important to briefly outline the meaning of 'sessional teacher' as applied during this project

> "*I am certain of one thing, however..... If one considers the very different categories (of) graduate teaching assistants, postdoctoral fellows, adjunct faculty, and part-time faculty and asks what the individuals in them have in common, the answer is not much-except for one thing-they are all defined by what they are not: they are not 'regular' faculty. That would simply be a fact of life, not a problem, were it not for the propensity of our status-conscious regular faculty, and hence our institutions, to think of them and to treat them as if they were lesser species.*" (Langenberg, 1998, p43).

For the purposes of this project, sessional teachers were defined as any university instructors who are not in tenured or permanent positions. The term commonly applies to postgraduate students, research fellows, external people from industry or professions, casual tutors and clinical tutors and people who are regularly employed on a course-by-course basis (often on a regular basis over a number of years). The types of appointments held by sessional teachers include teaching, research and administrative work. Sessional lecturing staff often hold academic positions, generally at A or B level and may be contracted to teach on a per course basis. Academic appointments also include tutors who work under the supervision of a senior tutor or academic. Demonstrators, clinical teachers, practical or field demonstrators may either be appointed on academic or general staff awards. Sessional teaching staff may also hold research positions as research fellows or post-doctoral researchers who are responsible for limited teaching of a particular aspect of a course.

Major issues

The project focussed on identifying the issues related to sessional teaching staff, and examples of policies and models of best practice. In doing so, it was considered important to conduct a comprehensive 'needs analysis', examining what supervisors/employers of sessional staff and sessional teachers themselves saw as important issues for the

management, training and support of sessional teachers. A survey was conducted to address this, in conjunction with a review of literature.

In the decade between 1988 and 1998 there was a 69.9% growth in the employment of casual academics (Richards 1998), but because institutions' employment practices differ in terms of types of sessional staff and levels, the extent of sessional employment is not always recognised. Along with widespread use of casual teaching staff, there is also widespread lack of formal, systematic, or centralised policies and procedures relating to the recruiting, managing, training and support of these staff. Indeed, we could find no examples of a 'whole university' approach on the management, support and training of sessional teachers. Sessional staff are often employed on an 'ad hoc' basis, outside the stringent selection procedures applied to other academic staff (Castleman et al. 1995; Fine et al. 1992). They are usually paid on an hourly rate and often have few of the rights or privileges of tenured staff, including paid leave, access to research funding and office facilities. Studies have even shown that in some institutions, access to basic support services, such as offices, telephones and email is severely limited (Kogan et al. 1994; Lundy & Warme, 1990).

These sessional academics (who include both short-term contract and casual staff) have been described as 'hidden careerists' (Rajagopal & Lin 1996), 'throw away academics' (Kogan et al. 1994) 'the invisible faculty (Gappa & Leslie 1993), 'hidden academics' (Rajagopal & Farr 1992) and the 'reserve army of adjuncts' (Scott, 1993). Such concepts refer to the cultures in which sessional staff work, that often deny (not explicitiy, but through lack of formal policy and practices) full participation in, or involvement with, their academic contexts. They also refer to the uncertainty and insecurity that characterises continued employment as a sessional staff member.

It is also important to note that with the increase in employment of sessional teaching staff, there is also an increase in the likelihood that the only contact students will have with teaching staff, is with casual/part-time staff. This poses difficulties in developing and maintaining good student-staff communication, and students are also at risk of feeling a lack of inclusion in the university community. Leatherman (1997) for example, suggests that the increasing number of part-time staff has produced 'faceless departments' where students see a succession of part-timers and it is only in the later stages of their courses that they encounter full-time members of staff.

Despite such a bleak picture, good practices can be identified in most universities, albeit localised and isolated and relying heavily on individuals (e.g., Head of School/Department or subject coordinator), rarely being embedded in a wider system. Once recruited and employed, induction procedures, including some kind of formal orientation, are often provided to a good standard, but subsequent training and support are the areas where there is a great need for growth and change in policies and practices. From our survey across 10 Australian universities, the major issues identified by both sessional staff and supervisors included:

- Payment for extra activities (e.g., attending training, planning and preparation vs. teaching contact time, student consultation time);
- Provision of training in the use of teaching tools (e.g., ICTs, online course resources, lecture room audio-visuals etc);
- Provision of, and encouragement in, professional development activities;
- Opportunities to get to know other staff (both full-time and part-time) in their School or Department;
- Access to facilities (such as computers, internet, email, printers, phone, photocopier, stationary etc);

- Recognition for good performance, and feedback on performance (from supervisor and/or peers);
- Awareness or relevant policies and institutional documents/procedures for sessional staff.

The points contained in this list are certainly not peripheral to the nature and importance of sessional teachers work, and if such things were lacking for full-time academic staff, the everyday workings of a university would probably come to a standstill. Indeed, the findings from the literature review and survey strongly support the need for a National project such as this.

Development and Dissemination Phase

Although some universities and university departments seem to have acknowledged the problems associated with inadequate training and support of sessional staff, it seems that very few have invested time and resources to formulate policies and guidelines for good practice to ensure the long-term quality of sessional teaching. That was a major aim of the development and dissemination phase of this project.

The development of resources during this phase put to use the information gathered during the review phase. In developing these resources, the project team endeavoured to distil this information in ways that make it more accessible and useful to university managers and teaching staff at various levels. The resources developed will soon be available on the project web site, and include:

1. **Guidelines** for managing and supporting sessionals at various levels (i.e. institutional, school/program and supervisor levels).
2. **Checklists** at the school and subject levels, designed to abbreviate and distil the guidelines into a shorter, more useable format
3. A **checklist for sessional teachers** designed to give them an opportunity to verify that their needs as staff members are being properly met;
4. **Case studies** show-casing examples of best practice;
5. A collection of existing **web-based resources** on sessional teaching issues.

During the development of these resources, various audiences at different institutional levels were targeted in order to ensure that the causes of problems, as well as the sources of support, for sessional teachers were thoroughly addressed. Each resource makes it clear which audience it is designed to assist. These audiences include people concerned with the support, training or management of sessional teachers at the: university level; school or department level; course/subject coordinator level; and sessional teacher level.

The project team will be attempting to reach all of the intended audiences via the project web site, the principal purpose of which is to disseminate the resources. The web site will be promoted through a variety of forums (discussed later) and it is hoped that each type of audience will make use of it. The following section will briefly describe in more detail the development of the web-site and of the guidelines - the major resource found on the site.

The project web-site

The aim of the website is to make publicly available the resources developed during the project for the various audiences discussed above. Users are expected to be university administrators and managers, heads of school, program and course coordinators, and sessional teachers. The *Sessional Teaching* website is a sister site to the *Teaching Large Classes* website, which can be found atwww.tedi.uq.edu.au/largeclasses. The *Sessional Teaching* site will supplement the *Teaching Large Classes* site with information focusing on the particular concerns of sessional teaching. The site is a public access web site and will be accessed viahttp://www.tedi.uq.edu.au/sessionalteaching. Each user type will have a particular focus in accessing the site. Visitors will be able to find information for managers at university level, school level, course coordinator level, or for teachers. Managers will be able to gain information on recruitment, training, evaluation, and integration. Teachers will be able to access teaching tips from a 'Teaching Ideas' area. The following section will briefly describe the various resources found on the site.

Case studies

There are links to 14 different case studies on the site, including 6 cases written specifically for this web site and 8 that link to existing case studies on other sites around the world, including the University of Adelaide and Oxford Brookes University in the UK. The case studies cover a variety of topics and examples of good practice, including a Queensland University of Technology policy on the hiring and support of casual academics from the Faculty of Law, ideas on how to hold a marking meeting for casual markers (from Griffith University),and a case study on tutor training in the School of Psychology at the University of Queensland.

Teaching Ideas page

This page is designed for sessional teachers and their supervisors. It contains a comprehensive list of annotated links to external sites grouped under eight headings: *Getting Started*, *Understanding Adult Learning*, *Helping Your Students to Learn*, *Teaching Small Groups*,*Using IT*, *Assessment and Marking*, *Evaluation and Feedback*, and *Directing Students to Support*. The last category of links also contains advice formulated by the project team as it was deemed necessary for a list of issues that might confront sessional teachers or their students. However, not a great deal of information about directing students to support services exists on other sites that are designed explicitly for sessional teachers, so brief advice, as well as eternal links, are included in this last category.

Resources

The resources section of the site includes a downloadable version of the literature review, a copy of the report summarising the findings of the email survey, related reports from various academics concerned with supporting sessional staff and another page of useful general links (discussed next) aimed at all and any audiences using the site.

Useful links

This section of the site represents a collection of external sites that the project team considered valuable and helpful to the various audiences such as School administrators, supervisors and sessional teachers. The page containing these links briefly summarises each site in order to facilitate the user's choice about which ones to visit.

Guidelines

The guidelines have three main audiences: 1) university administrators or managers, 2) heads of schools/departments and 3) subject/course coordinators. An abridged version of the guidelines is also available in the form of checklists for heads of school, subject coordinators and sessional teachers.

In developing these guidelines, the project team attempted to draw together the main issues in the management, training and support of sessional teachers, as identified during the review phase. As many issues inevitability overlap, four main categories were constructed (see table below). Guidelines were developed within these four categories for each the three audience levels. In accessing the guidelines via the web site, clicking on *Guidelines* will open a page with explanatory text. The left-hand navigation bar will display the above groupings and clicking on each of these will drop down a second level menu each containing the three audience levels.

1. Recruitment and employment practices

- o University level
- o School level
- o Subject level.

2. Training and professional development

- o University level
- o School level
- o Subject level.

3. Recognition and evaluation

- o University level
- o School level
- o Subject level.

4. Integration and communication

- o University level
- o School level
- o Subject level.

This will allow the user to find the guidelines most appropriate to their interests and position. Within each group of guidelines, questions are asked of the reader in order to examine their own practices as a university, school or supervisor. For example:

- Is there a limit on the number or percentage of sessional teachers that Faculties or Schools should employ at any one time? (*Recruitment and employment practices, university level*)
- Is there a policy about having a formal induction process for sessional teachers - including administrative tasks and facilities, etc.? (*Training and professional development, school level*)
- Do you encourage your sessional teachers to conduct student evaluations? (*Recognition and evaluation, supervisors level*).

Related examples or links accompany many of the questions in the guidelines. The user clicks to link to related web-pages or pop-up boxes which provide extra relevant information or models of good practice when deficiencies are detected.

It is hoped that universities, schools and supervisors around Australia will use these guidelines and resources as a basis for reviewing current policies and practices, and in creating improved support mechanisms for sessional teachers. Therefore is seen as imperative that these resources as especially the guidelines, are disseminated widely and appropriately on a national level.

Dissemination strategies

Dissemination of these resources is primarily via the project web site, which is currently under development by the Teaching and Educational Development Institute (TEDI) at the University of Queensland. TEDI has committed to maintaining and updating the site for three years. The web site will be promoted at various conferences and teaching and learning forums around Australia. Promotional cards will also be sent to all universities and academic development units around Australia, to the existing *Teaching Large Classes Project* network of academics and distributed at staff development days at both University of Queensland and the Queensland University of Technology. In addition, approximately 500 printed, hardcover copies of the guidelines have been commissioned for distribution to university administrators throughout Australia.

Conclusion and Future Directions

The findings of this project indicate that in order to improve the environment for employment of sessional staff, and the environment for working as a sessional staff member, institutions need to adopt a more systematic and systemic approach to ensure they appropriately manage, support and train their sessional teaching staff. However, it is important to note that "Uniformity of practice may be administratively efficient but [it is] educationally unsound" (Jacobs, 1998, p14), and in their efforts to apply consistent policy to all circumstances involving sessional teaching staff, many schools and faculties are hampered by over-regulation at the institutional level (Jacobs, 1998). Therefore, responsibility needs to be delegated to the most appropriate level, while existing within a framework of clear policies, processes and practices.

However, such a move can only be supported by an awareness of both staff and employers perspectives about the issues and implications surrounding the use of sessional teaching staff at all levels of responsibility; institutional, school, and course coordinator. More practically, resources need to be allocated (and be specifically identified for this purpose) to ensure that sessional teaching staff are appropriately managed, supported and trained.

This project aims to facilitate the raising of awareness at all levels through it's dissemination initiatives, and to provide clear guidelines to assist those people in areas of responsibility to review the practices in their unit or institution and work to improve management, training and support for sessional teaching staff. The provision of case studies and resources, that relate to particular areas of concern, show that the development and implementation of policies and practices can be achieved successfully. What we encourage is that such examples are taken up with the development of a more systematic and institutionalised approach to the management, training and support of sessional teaching staff across Australia.

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