

**WHE02569**

**Teaching and Learning Development of Casual Academic Staff: an  
Institutional Approach**

**Karen Whelan<sup>1</sup>, Georgia Smeal<sup>1</sup> & Jane Grealy<sup>2</sup>**

**Teaching and Learning Support Services<sup>1</sup>**

**School of Design and Built Environment<sup>2</sup>**

**Queensland University of Technology**

**Abstract**

In 2002, Queensland University of Technology has once again offered the Casual Academic Staff Teaching and Learning Development Program. The program, which is sponsored by the University Teaching and Learning Committee, is unique in a number of ways including:

- Casual academic staff are paid for their attendance at the program;
- Organisation of the program is coordinated by Teaching and Learning Support Services Department (TALSS) but is conducted in consultation with the Professional Association of Part Time Academics (PAPTA);
- The program has grown and evolved over a number of years such that the 2002 program includes up to eight parallel sessions of both seminars and workshops and has attracted an attendance of around 300 staff in each semester.

This paper will discuss the program and the processes that have been embedded to continuously improve the offerings to meet the needs of a diverse range of casual academics across QUT. The feedback from casual academics is overwhelmingly positive about the program and in particular, many feel that it gives them a sense of belonging to the institution, the lack of which is often a criticism of the increasing casualisation of the university workforce.

**Paper presented at the AARE Annual International Conference, The University of  
Queensland, December 2-5, 2002.**

## **Teaching and Learning Development of Casual Academic Staff: an Institutional Approach**

### **Introduction**

A number of papers have reported the increase in the number of casual or sessional academic positions at Australian universities (Kift, 2002a & 2002b, Bassett, 1998) Queensland University of Technology, like many others has steadily increased the proportion and number of casual academic staff employed in a range of teaching settings. This increase in casualisation has resulted in a range of issues being raised by both the casuals themselves and others at the University who work to support them or to provide professional development opportunities to academic staff. This paper describes a teaching and learning development program offered by QUT since 1995 to support the professional development of casual academics. It describes the context and the issues, the program itself and then reports on future aspirations for the program and for other developments to support casual academics.

In the QUT context academic staff who are employed on an hourly basis are referred to under the Enterprise Bargaining Agreement as Casual Academic staff. This term in itself has proved problematic in that for many of these staff who are committed to the University and their role, the term "casual" is somewhat offensive. Some of these staff prefer to refer to themselves as part time staff and in some cases ongoing part timers have similar issues. The program here described is entitled the Casual Academic Staff Teaching and Learning Development Program. Throughout this paper, as much as possible these staff are referred to as "casual academics" but because of previous usage of the term "part time academic staff" this is also occasionally used when appropriate.

### **Context**

In 1995, with the support of a Queensland University of Technology (QUT) Teaching and Learning Development Large Grant, an action research project was undertaken into the experiences of part-time teachers at QUT and to support improvements in teaching and learning effectiveness (Watters, et al, 1996, Watters & Weeks, 1998). Around 850 part-time academic staff, two Deans and five Heads of Schools participated in this project which resulted in the following two key outcomes:

1. An understanding of who were the casual or part-time academics at QUT including their demographics, their primary roles, relative incomes, dependence on part-time teaching and their feelings of belonging and aspirations;
2. The facilitation of part-time academics working together to raise their claims, concerns and issues and just as importantly facilitation of their participation in "formulation and implementation of processes for change" to address those issues and concerns (Watters & Weeks, 1998).

The preceding outcomes have led to and informed the establishment of QUT's Casual Academic Staff Teaching and Learning Development Program which has been offered since 1995 and the formation of the Professional Association for Part Time Academics (PAPTA). This association, supported by University management continues to advocate for casual and part-time academics by working in partnership with Teaching and Learning Support Services (TALSS) to identify staff development needs and plan for meeting some of those through the Casual Academic Staff Teaching and Learning Development Program. PAPTA provides support by:

- representing the professional interests of part-time academic staff to QUT management;
- improving communication between QUT administration and part-time academic staff;
- providing information to part-time academic staff re: QUT services and processes;
- working for more formal processes to support part-time academics, eg induction handbooks, professional development opportunities;
- facilitating networking amongst part-time academic staff.

The Casual Academic Staff Teaching and Learning Development Program, which has evolved from two workshops offered originally during the 1995 project, aims to bring together casual academics from across the university to support their teaching and learning development needs.

The issues that were raised in the original project by part-time academics included:

- pay and conditions
- facilities and resources
- communication
- support and recognition
- quality of teaching.

More recently Kift (2002a & 2002b) has reported on the issues of most concern for casual academics in the Faculty of Law at QUT, which were raised in the context of a Faculty-based teaching and learning induction process. These issues can be characterised by:

- issues of quality including:
  - a principled appointment process
  - mutual agreement on expectations and obligations between casual academic and the institution
  - embedding of ongoing quality improvement through encouragement and support for casual academics to evaluate and reflect on their teaching and to engage in development to improve.
- "standard" teaching and learning support including the provision of basic support for teaching capability development as well as resources to support teaching and interaction with students
- "new agenda" teaching and learning imperatives such as the increase in use of technology to support the teaching and learning process and the increased focus on generic skills development which has brought about a fundamental shift in curriculum design and teaching and learning practice in a rapid change process
- paradigm shifts towards institutional assimilation and a sense of belonging which recognises "issues around creating an environment that nurtures, values and includes casual staff" (Kift, 2002a & 2002b).

Unpacking, at an institutional level, each of the issues raised in both the 1995 study and in more recent papers about the experiences of casual academics is a challenging task. Further the nature of the resulting experiences for casual academics and indeed for the students that they teach moves through phases as casuals engage with the university and, as we increasingly see, continue their employment relationship over a period of time. To characterise the changing nature of that engagement, it is useful to highlight the phases in the employment relationship:

- recruitment and selection, which in many cases has been ad hoc and based on a level of personal knowledge and networks (Watters, et al 1996)
- induction to the administrative and resource allocation processes of the university and to general issues of employee responsibility (processes for payment, access to technology, workplace health and safety and equity policies and responsibilities)
- induction to the basic teaching and learning aspects of casual academic roles (timetabling, unit or course learning outcomes, standard means of interacting with students, marking and assessment processes, extent of support that is provided to students and awareness of other learning and general student support that is available)
- ongoing support during employment both in terms of:
  - provision of resources
  - opportunities for professional development.
- an embedded and supported process for evaluation and review which links to development opportunities.

This paper concentrates primarily on opportunities for professional development in the form of the central Casual Academic Staff Teaching and Learning Development Program. The primary focus of this program is the induction of casual academics to basic teaching and learning issues at an institutional level and on professional development for more experienced casual academics but once again focused on teaching and learning. It does have an allied aim of connecting casual academics with each other and with the bigger picture of institutional directions in teaching and learning.

It should be noted, however, that this initiative could never on its own address all the issues that both casual academics and University management might raise about the nature of casual academic employment and its impact on both the casual academics themselves and student learning outcomes.

In the time period that the Program has been offered, other developments have occurred across the University that complement this initiative including:

- the development in some faculties of policies and procedures for recruitment, selection and support of casual academics which clearly outline roles and responsibilities for both the casual academic and the faculty;
- an increase in the number of faculties and schools that advertise casual academic positions;
- an increase in the number of faculties and schools providing a structured induction process or induction information;
- an increase in the number of faculties and schools providing their own training and support in the area of teaching for casual academics (including the Faculties of Law and Information Technology and the Schools of Physical and Chemical Sciences and Electrical and Electronic Systems Engineering);
- a program for Coordinators of Large Units (CLUs) which resulted in a number of workshops focused on the teaching team as a whole and a grant scheme. One of the projects funded under this scheme involved the CLU and the tutoring team using an action research methodology, exploring and developing appropriate teaching and learning support for tutors within their unit;
- the offering of a day-long development program specifically for tutors, which also aimed to create a QUT Tutor's Resource Kit;
- the continued inclusion of objectives and strategies related to the support of casual academics in the University's Teaching and Learning Plan.

## **Issues of professional development in teaching and learning**

Casual academic staff at QUT, like other universities, are involved in a range of teaching roles:

- teachers with primary responsibility for lecturing in units
- tutors
- lab demonstrators
- markers
- clinical facilitators in Health related disciplines
- practical teaching supervisors.

Thus casual academics range from working professionals who engage with students in their own workplace through to postgraduate students tutoring or demonstrating. Added to this their period of employment varies considerably. As a consequence the Casual Academic Staff Teaching and Learning Development Program has evolved in such a way to attempt to meet these diverse needs.

The Program team includes staff from TALSS and representatives from PAPTA. Some part-time academics have attended the program up to three times over the years that it has been offered. There is the need therefore to continuously revisit the program to ensure it is meeting the needs of all participants both new and more long standing casual staff. Session presenters are drawn from across the University and many full-time academic staff willingly commit to facilitate sessions. A variety of parallel sessions are offered throughout the day long program.

### **The Program**

The Program aims to provide casual academics with an opportunity to:

- refine and develop their teaching skills
- enhance their understanding of teaching and learning in the University environment
- learn strategies to meet the changing needs of students and the University environment
- better understand and use relevant technology
- contribute to their career development.

A letter of invitation from the Deputy Vice Chancellor is mailed to the home address of all casual academic employees a few weeks before the program is scheduled. In 2002, over 1900 letters were posted in each semester. The event is also publicised via internal e-mail lists that advertise staff development and full time staff are encouraged to pass on the information to their casual colleagues. The program is promoted to Deans and Assistant Deans, Teaching and Learning.

Participants are paid for their attendance at one day of development for the year but are welcome to come to both offerings if they wish.

In 2002, the program was offered on a Saturday once in each semester on Kelvin Grove campus in semester one and Gardens Point campus in semester two. In each semester the program offered was broadly:

- introduction and welcome by the Deputy Vice-Chancellor
- two one and a half hour workshop sessions with up to nine different offerings in each timeslot (with morning tea in between)

- a panel discussion facilitated by the Pro Vice-Chancellor, Information and Academic Services with Assistant Deans, Teaching and Learning from most of the University's nine Faculties;
- a networking lunch
- an optional afternoon session with two workshop offerings related to more advanced use of QUT's On Line Teaching (OLT) systems. .

As noted earlier for some casual academics attending the program it is their first semester in such a role whilst others may have taught for years in a part-time capacity. Thus the range of workshop offerings includes both introductory and advanced sessions such as:

- Supporting learning in small group tutorials
- Introduction to teaching technologies
- Assessment and feedback in tutorials
- Basic lecturing in large classes
- Teaching towards graduate attributes
- Work integrated learning
- Professional and personal development - developing a teaching portfolio
- Teaching with sensitivity to cultural diversity.

In the main, the sessions are interactive and participants are encouraged to share their own experiences and strategies. Some sessions have a single facilitator, while others will have a panel of presenters presenting views from different areas of the University. Most presenters are full-time academic or general staff who willingly share their experiences with casual academics. At the request of participants, updates on University teaching and learning priorities (such as graduate attributes and work integrated learning), have been included in the program along with basic teaching strategies.

### **Participant Feedback**

Nearly 300 people attended each of the program offerings in 2002 (a total of approximately 600). Of these only about 25 people attended both the first and second semester programs, although approximately 45% of attendees overall had been to programs offered in previous years. Approximately 45% of those attending reported that they were part-time academics as well as being postgraduate students. The most popular sessions in terms of attendance were:

- Communicating
- Professional and personal development - developing a teaching portfolio
- Supporting learning in small group tutorials
- Effective presentation skills
- Assessment and feedback in tutorials
- Various on-line teaching sessions in computer laboratories.

Overwhelmingly, casual academic staff are positive about the program. An example of comments provided on feedback forms:

*Thanks for this, it made me feel like a worthwhile part of QUT and that the quality of my teaching is important to QUT.*

Suggestions for improvement often focus around having more time, being given the opportunity to attend more sessions and the need for some faculty or discipline specific content.

## Future Aspirations

As stated earlier, the program described here could never address all the issues and concerns of casual academic staff and those who work to support them. Future aspirations at QUT include an increased focus on other initiatives that might further complement the current program. This may involve staff from TALSS and the Human Resources Department working with faculties and schools. Some ideas that are being explored include:

- Support for the development of systemic induction programs at faculty level
- Addressing the guideline issues as presented in the AUTC Sessional staff project (see Herbert, et al, 2002)
- Better support for casual academic staff through better support and development for Coordinators of Large Units (CLUs)
- More targeted development opportunities for particular cohorts such as tutors
- Recognition and reward for casual academics and part-timers - some faculties already incorporate teaching and learning awards for tutors (for example the Faculty of Information Technology) but there are currently no university wide awards.

## Conclusion

This paper has described a teaching and learning development program that has been offered at QUT since 1995. While the program has been successful in meeting some of the needs of casual academic staff, it must be considered within the broader context of issues. Casual academic staff, as they continue to increase in numbers will be a targeted cohort for professional development needs at QUT both presently and in the future because of their key role in supporting effective student learning outcomes.

## References

- Bassett, P. (1998) *Sessional Academics: A Marginalised Workforce*. Paper presented at the HERDSA Annual International Conference, University of Auckland, New Zealand, July.
- Herbert, D., Chalmers, D. & Hannam, R. (2002) *Enhancing the training, support and management of sessional teaching staff*. Paper to be presented at the Australian Association for Research in Education Forum (Problematic Futures: Education Research in and Era of ...Uncertainty), Brisbane, 1 - 5 December.
- Kift, S. (2002a) *Assuring Quality in the Casualisation of Teaching, Learning and Assessment: Towards Best Practice for the First Year Experience*. Paper presented at the 6<sup>th</sup> Pacific Rim First Year in Higher Education Conference, University of Canterbury, New Zealand, July.
- Kift, S. (2002b) *Assuring the Quality of Assessment: What are the Professional Development Opportunities for Casual Staff*. Paper presented at Evaluations and Assessment: Closing the Loop, Brisbane, 14 - 15 November.
- Watters, J. , Christensen, C., Ryan, Y., Weeks, P. & Arcodia, C. (1996) *Petpar Project: Part-time teachers improving the effectiveness of teaching and learning through participatory action research*. Brisbane, Queensland: Queensland University of Technology.
- Watters, J. & Weeks, P. (1998) *Part-time academic staff: Creating a voice*. Paper presented at the HERDSA Annual International Conference, University of Auckland, New Zealand, July.