

Sessional Staff Traversing Diverse Learning Spaces: A Review

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Abstract

Sessional academic staff are employed in a number of academic roles, from lecturing to field trips to course improvement. What distinguishes them from other academic staff is that they are employed on a short-term, contract basis, much like adjunct faculty in the United States. Today they are a dominant feature of the global higher education workforce whose contributions over the past 20 years have been significant. It is conservatively estimated that sessional academics deliver more than 40% of university teaching in Australia, where the authors live and teach. While the higher education sector's reliance upon these staff is expected to increase, our knowledge and understanding of these staff is poor. This compromises the development of policies, strategies and programs designed to engage, support and improve the high quality contributions of the sessional academic workforce over a sustained period. A more informed approach to sessional academic engagement, support and quality improvement is an essential component to operating effectively in a modern higher education sector. This paper reviews the challenges associated with the effective and sustainable engagement of the Australian sessional academic workforce.

Keywords:

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Introduction

Sessional academic staff in Australia are employed in a number of academic roles, from lecturing and grading to supervising field trips and implementing course improvement. However, unlike other academic staff, they are employed only on a short-term, contract basis, much like adjunct faculty in the United States. The higher education sector operates in an increasingly complex global environment (Jones & Harvey, 2017). Internationally, sessional academic staff are similarly relied upon to provide core learning and assessment support in higher education (Anderson, 2007; Bryson, 2013; Percy et al., 2008). Over the past 20 years, the Australian higher education sector has seen a significant rise in the number of sessional academic staff employed in teaching. Sessional academic staff are employed across the full spectrum of academic activities and in diverse learning spaces: face-to-face, online/distance, work integrated learning, residential schools/intensives, and field trips. Sessional employment can vary from a few hours to full-time for a semester. Current estimates suggest that more than half the university teaching in Australia is undertaken by this “contingent” workforce (May, Strachan, & Peetz, 2013). Yet specific numbers of sessional academic staff remain unclear (Savage & Pollard, 2016).

The authors both teach at an institution with heavy reliance on sessional staff — similar to many other higher education institutions globally. One author (Gonzalez) had been a sessional academic staff member for more than seven years prior to gaining ongoing employment in higher education, thus having first-hand experience of the challenges of being a sessional staff member. The second author (Ebbs) came to the

higher education sector with experience in public sector health services, with strong involvement in sustainable performance improvement and the imperative to support staff.

In the paper that follows, we explore the sessional academic staff environment in higher education and consider challenges involved in traversing a way forward.

Setting the Scene

The increased reliance on sessional staff is a global trend that is predicted to continue, and even increase, in the future (Jaschik & Lederman, 2015). The reason for the current model of the higher education sector is grounded in fiscal constraints arising from limited government funding, and rising student numbers; universities must comply with the imperative to cut budgets, remain flexible while also providing quality learning outcomes for students (Percy & Beaumont, 2008; Ryan, Burgess, Connell, & Groen, 2013; Savage & Pollard, 2016). Despite the reliance on sessional staff in higher education, universities find it difficult to change how they support sessional teaching (Harvey, 2014)

Sessional staff have been called the “tenuous periphery” (Kimber, 2003), the academic “proletariat” (Percy et al., 2008), the “precariat” (Standing, 2011), and “invisible” (Ryan et al., 2013)—experiencing a high level of job insecurity, low wages and poor working conditions (Kimber, 2003). It has been recognized that this periphery of sessional academic staff results in a highly segmented university workforce (Ryan et al., 2013). Although fulfilling the need for flexibility in higher education, sessional academic staff often are not afforded recognition and opportunity, highlighting the tension between the goals of flexibility and quality (Kimber, 2003; Percy et al., 2008).

The literature suggests that, worldwide, females make up a larger portion of sessional academic staff than males (Bryson, 2004, 2013; Crimmins, 2017; May et al., 2013). This is certainly mirrored in Australia at the national level (Table 3). According to data from the Department of Education and Training (2017) the proportion of females employed as sessional academic staff in Australian universities, 2010-2016, remained consistent at an average of 57.99%. The proportion of males employed as sessional academic staff during the same time period remained consistent at an average of 42.01%. This is comparable with the national ongoing staff gender differentiation for the same time period (females: 55.35%, males: 44.65%).

Sessional staff are employed in a broad variety of academic roles. These include course planning and design, course delivery, lecturing, grading, tutoring, laboratory supervision, overseeing field trips, and research. Despite the crucial importance of sessional academic staff to successful teaching and learning in higher education institutions, little is known about the impact that they may have on student outcomes and teaching quality (Anderson, 2007; Byers & Tani, 2014; Grainger, Adie, & Weir, 2015; May et al., 2013; Percy & Beaumont, 2008).

Emphasizing the Imperative

Research on sessional staff in higher education has been evident for some time, both in Australia and internationally. Much of it has focused on topics such as inherent workplace inequity (Junor, 2004; Kimber, 2003; Percy et al., 2008), access to professional development opportunities (Anderson, 2007; Banks, 2016; Beaton, 2017; Brown, Kelder, Freeman, & Carr, 2013; Byers & Tani, 2014; Fredericks & Bosanquet, 2017; Higgins & Harreveld, 2013; Hitch, Mahoney, & Macfarlane, 2017), the risks posed by a flexible workforce (Junor, 2004; Percy & Beaumont, 2008; Savage & Pollard, 2016),

and the quality agenda (Grainger, Adie, & Weir, 2015; Harvey, 2013, 2017; Kift, 2002; Lekkas & Winning, 2017).

Risk and quality are the two themes that have received the most attention in the literature. The increase in sessional staff numbers has not been matched by a similar increase in systematic approaches to teacher training with and for sessional staff. This is considered a key strategy for the assurance of quality learning and teaching with sessional staff (Harvey, 2017). In 2012, the Australian Tertiary Education Quality Standards Agency (TEQSA) recognized “the significant reliance” on sessional staff within the higher education sector, and identified this as a risk indicator in assuring the quality of Australia’s higher education sector (TEQSA, 2012). In 2016, TEQSA again identified sessional staff as a risk indicator, stating: “A significantly high proportion of casual staff increases the risk of these staff not being appropriately supported and resourced to provide a continuity of support for students, anchor academic activities, engage in scholarly activities, and be active contributing members in a community of scholarship” (p. 13). This description of risk was met with the qualifier that the “indicator does not propose that staff on casual contracts are less qualified or less able to deliver quality teaching than permanent staff, but rather reflects inherent risks around mechanisms for effective integration and engagement.”

In response to TEQSA’s emphasis on the risk imposed by a significant reliance on sessional academic staff, there has been a wealth of recent research looking at ways forward. These include distributed leadership models (Hamilton, Fox, & McEwan, 2013; Jones & Harvey, 2017; Jones et al., 2017; Lefoe, Parrish, Keevers, Yoni, & McKenzie, 2013), staff development programs (Gilbert, 2017; Hamilton et al., 2013; Matthews, Duck, & Bartle, 2017), quality benchmarking (Harvey, 2014; Harvey et al., 2012; Lekkas & Winning, 2017; Luzia, Harvey, Parker, McCormack, & Brown, 2013), and the need for

systematic and sustainable praxis surrounding support for sessional academic staff within the higher education sector (Harvey et al., 2012; Jones & Harvey, 2017; Lekkas & Winning, 2017).

Historically, the higher education sector has responded to the lack of sessional staff academic and professional development in an ad hoc, reactive way and with limited thought toward developing systematic approaches to addressing the key issues (Harvey, 2017). This response has not kept pace with the burgeoning reliance on sessional academic staff, and is compounded by a lack of data about the sessional academic workforce. In short, we do not know who they are, where they are located, why they work as sessional academic staff, and what professional development they need (Harvey, 2017; May et al., 2013; Percy & Beaumont, 2008). With the majority of teaching being undertaken by sessional academic staff, a quality student learning experience is reliant on these teachers, yet this is difficult to ensure when we not only lack data about this cohort, but also lack systematized development opportunities for these staff across many institutions (Harvey, 2017; Percy et al., 2008).

The focus on delivering professional development and training programs for sessional academic staff is evident at many universities. Some programs take a holistic, institutional approach to professional development (e.g. Griffith University, 2017; University of Queensland, 2017), incorporating online resources (e.g. assessment toolkits, teaching guidelines, “how to” documents) and face-to-face/virtual workshops (e.g. teaching pedagogies, university direction, guiding policies, student population, technology and platforms, and support). Although filling a perceived gap in teacher development, this focus on formal provision of teacher training can be seen as an “old solution to a new problem” (Percy & Beaumont, 2008, p.151), part of the higher education sector’s imperative to “perform quality” (McWilliam, 2002).

Despite the lack of systematized approaches to professional development, there are examples of good practice occurring at universities across Australia. Benchmarking as a type of knowledge-sharing around good practice within and between institutions is increasingly common in the higher education sector (Luzia et al., 2013). The Benchmarking Leadership and Advancement of Standards for Sessional Teaching (BLASST) framework was developed over 10 years of research in Australian universities (Harvey, 2017). The BLASST framework is grounded in the knowledge that sessional staff have long been excluded from quality enhancement processes, learning and teaching plans, professional development opportunities, and integration into workforce planning (Luzia et al., 2013).

At each level of the benchmarking framework, there are three sections with sets of statements that correspond to the framework's three key principles: (1) Quality Learning and Teaching, (2) Support for Sessional Staff and (3) Sustainability. The overall purpose of the BLASST framework is to improve quality assurance and enhancement of learning and teaching among sessional staff; therefore its points of reference are examples of good practice. The development of statements of good practice, together with the standards that serve as performance indicators, was informed by a meta-analysis of data on sessional staff in Australian higher education (refer to Harvey, 2013; Luzia et al., 2013). The BLASST framework provides benchmarked standards of practice, articulating the outcomes universities need to address in relation to sessional staff support (Savage & Pollard, 2016).

However, Savage & Pollard (2016) suggest that policy and standards may not be enough to initiate change to what is now an institutionalized trend in higher education. While there are many examples of policies and initiatives for sessional staff support occurring within the Australian higher education sector, Hitch et al (2017) contend that

they are yet to be rigorously evaluated, and systemic and sustained good practice has yet to become a reality. New approaches are needed that facilitate local support and development of sessional staff, harnessing the individual and collective capacity of sessional academic staff to contribute to university life (Hamilton et al., 2013).

An alternative approach to building teacher development is to include sessional staff in broader notions of professional formation (Harvey, 2013; Percy & Beaumont, 2008). A community of practice, according to Green & Ruutz (2008) is “a group of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better.” A group might be formed by sessional staff belonging to a faculty, school, discipline group, or teaching team. Viskovic (2006, p.323) argues that “it is in those contexts that their working knowledge and identities as teachers develop.” Recent studies have in fact looked at the important role that communities of practice can play in sessional staff development (Dean, Harden-Thew, & Thomas, 2017; Green & Ruutz, 2008; Hamilton et al., 2013; Jones, Harvey, Lefoe, & Ryland, 2014).

One such concept that has received a great deal of recent attention in the field of higher education is the distributed leadership approach (see for example Hamilton et al., 2013; Jones & Harvey, 2017; Jones et al., 2017; Lefoe et al., 2013). A distributed leadership approach is anchored in collaborative relationships, where participants champion the implementation of decisions to which they have contributed (Jones & Harvey, 2017; Jones et al., 2014). Distributed leadership redefines the concepts of leadership and community-building; recognizing that “leadership” is not only located in formally designated leadership roles, but can also be found in local innovators as a quality, attribute, and capacity (Hamilton et al., 2013; Macbeath, 2005).

The distributed leadership approach to sessional staff support has been or is currently being utilized at a number of universities in Australia (Hamilton, 2015;

Hamilton et al., 2013; Lefoe et al., 2013; Lefoe, Parrish, Malfroy, & McKenzie, 2011). Leadership is structurally dispersed and embedded within communities of practice; rather than being reliant on a single leader, such communities are contingent upon the strength of relationship between people (Macbeath, 2005). Hamilton et al (2013) describe the approach as an emergent framework for providing local, contextually specific, ongoing and sustainable mechanisms for enabling academic development, timely support and communities of teaching practice.

Resistance to Resolution

With clear acknowledgement of the pivotal role that sessional academic staff play in supporting quality learning across the higher education sector, Harvey (2017) acknowledges that there is no one model, approach, or answer that provides the best professional development for sessional teachers. Increasingly, the increasing employment of sessional staff in Australian higher education has come to be seen as a risk to the quality of teaching and learning (Percy & Beaumont, 2008). Others have termed it a “wicked problem’,” too difficult or impossible to solve because of incomplete knowledge, complexities, and changing requirements that are often difficult to recognize (Hamilton, 2015; Rittel & Webber, 1973). As suggested by Percy & Beaumont (2008), however, it is not clear just where the potential and location of risk might lie. After all, sessional academic staff are not a new phenomenon, and the effects of their teaching are not necessarily negative.

There are still gaps in the literature, and much research to be undertaken if we are to unravel this “wicked problem.” The truth is that we know far too little about sessional academic staff in Australia. The lack of systematic reporting in higher education means that we not only have difficulty in establishing accurate numbers for

the sessional workforce (Percy & Beaumont, 2008); we also have little awareness and understanding of these staff and their concerns (May et al., 2013; Percy et al., 2008). This limited knowledge also extends to how sessional staff are trained and supported in university teaching (Dean et al., 2017).

There is a clear disparity between the volume of research undertaken on professional development for sessional staff for face-to-face teaching, as opposed to online teaching. In one study, Higgins & Harreveld (2013) conclude that as long as demographics of the casual distance education academic remain elusive, implications for developing as a professional are difficult to discern. New teaching spaces require the adoption of new pedagogical practices (Redmond, 2011). Australia is currently experiencing a growth in online education, requiring the skills and experiences of sessional academic staff. This is an emergent area of importance to the sector.

Conclusion

Despite the research that exists in relation to preparing and supporting sessional academic staff in higher education, there are few clear, precise answers or ways forward. Perhaps this reflects the “wicked” nature of the problem, and the struggle the sector is currently facing. In the pursuit of a wicked problem, there may be no good solution, or perhaps a host of potential solutions (Rittel & Webber, 1973). And yet whatever the solutions are found, they must be adoptable, adaptable, and contextually specific.

The massification of the higher education sector in Australia has seen student numbers increase dramatically without an associated increase in continuing academic positions (Matthews et al., 2017). This has led to a heavy reliance on sessional academic

staff, to the point that without sessional teachers, Australia would not have a functioning higher education system (Harvey, 2017). This reliance has been met with debate surrounding the risk that a highly mobile workforce poses to the quality of student learning (Percy & Beaumont, 2008; Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency, 2016). Percy & Beaumont (2008) suggest, however, that the linked issues of the potential risk and where it might reside require further investigation at the university level if appropriate institutional intervention is to occur.

So how do we tackle this wicked problem? We must transform our practices using innovative, reflective, creative solutions that involve all people in the process: students, academic staff, professional staff, management, and support staff. This in turn will require us to conduct more research, to use different lenses, different approaches and different methodologies. We not only need to identify examples of good practice, but share these examples more widely—celebrating the initiatives that work well, and learning from each other. What is required is a reconceptualization of the nature of sessional academic staff and the support the university provides them. *We* are the university: *we* need to support our colleagues as we collectively traverse the dynamic, ever-changing environment of higher education.

Note:

Sessional academic staff are those teaching in higher education while not employed in an ongoing position, including lecturers, tutors, demonstrators, markers and those from industry (Percy & Beaumont, 2008). Sessional employment can vary from a few hours to full-time for a semester.

Ongoing academic staff are those teaching in higher education while employed in an ongoing position.

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