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## Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice Editorial 10.3

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## Abstract

This marks my final issue as Senior Editor of JUTLP and I would like to congratulate the new senior editorial team: Romy Lawson, Alisa Percy and Dominique Parrish. I know I leave the journal in very good hands and the leadership team will ensure that JUTLP will continue to champion teaching and learning in higher education. I would like to also thank all the people who have contributed to the success of this journal: the authors, the reviewers, the members of the editorial board, and those who have contributed to the editing and desktop publishing processes. I would also like to thank you, the reader – without you there is no purpose for our writing.

I feel very privileged to introduce the editorial for this special issue of JUTLP as improving opportunities for sessional staff has been a passion throughout my academic career. I would particularly like to thank all who have contributed to the reviewing for this edition and wish to congratulate Marina and Karina for their hard work in producing this edition and in exciting outcomes from the *Benchmarking leadership and advancement of standards for sessional teaching* project.

Geraldine Lefoe, Senior Editor

## Editorial

### Marina Harvey & Karina Luzia

#### How do you measure up? Standards for sessional staff teaching: moving from periphery to core.

*Sess•ion•al Staff /sessional staf/ noun. Any teachers in higher education employed on a casual or contract or sessional basis. This includes lecturers, tutors, online course facilitators and moderators, markers and demonstrators. [BLASST.edu.au]*

Sessional staff provide the majority of teaching in Australian universities (May, Strachan, Broadbent & Peetz 2011; Percy et al. 2008). They are important, yet have been on the 'periphery' (Kimber 2003) of learning and teaching plans. The time has come to ensure that sessional staff are now acknowledged and actively included as 'core' to quality learning and teaching.

This special issue of the Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice is an outcome of the national BLASST (Benchmarking leadership and advancement of standards for sessional teaching) project. A key motivator for the project was to systematise good practice through the establishment of a national standards framework. The result is the BLASST framework which is underpinned by three key principles: quality learning and teaching, support for sessional staff and sustainability. This framework is a truly collaborative product: the result of years of research and commitment by a large number of people who shared a vision for quality learning and teaching with sessional staff. In the true sense of distributed leadership, these people included academics, professional staff, sessional staff and students from all levels and disciplines of several universities. Their engagement and research generated new insights, learning and knowledge about sessional staff.

## Keywords

editorial, sessional staff, special edition

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We are proud to bring together this collection of papers, contributed by many of the BLASST project’s collaborators and critical friends. The collection begins by contextualising learning and teaching and sessional staff: internationally and nationally. The rationale underpinning the need for national standards is then presented, followed by case studies that outline how these standards were piloted. Then, a series of papers that share good practice for working with sessional staff: at

subject, departmental and whole-of-organisational levels. There are multiple examples of the use of both Action Research and Distributed Leadership as approaches to frame the learning and teaching projects reported here, suggesting a good fit between these approaches and successful project outcomes. In short, these papers present a strong body of research into quality learning and teaching and sessional staff and we consider them key references for the sector.

In writing this editorial we began by asking ourselves ‘what do we mean by systemising good practice?’ Yes - BLASST is about embedding good practice for working with sessional staff, individually and at all levels of the organisation, but that’s not all. BLASST is also about embedding good practice across the higher education sector. It is about systematising good professional, pedagogical, academic and managerial practice for what is now the majority of the teaching workforce in higher education. It is about moving sessional staff from the periphery to the core of learning and teaching by acknowledging and supporting their major contribution. It is about inclusion: raising visibility of the contribution made by sessional staff, raising awareness of sessional staff issues, and of what constitutes good practice for addressing these issues across all organisational levels.

While all of us involved in this project entered with some understanding and experience of what it is to be a sessional teacher, through BLASST we have learnt anew that sessional staff are a diverse cohort. The BLASST definition of sessional staff is wide and encompassing: if you teach (lecture, tutor, demonstrate, moderate, mark *inter alia*) on a contract or casual or sessional basis, you are a sessional staff member. Accordingly, the papers presented here make reference to sessional staff with slightly different variations according to their individual institution.

An international perspective to sessional staff issues is provided by Bryson with a focus on the United Kingdom. Drawing on his long-term research into sessional staff he provides a synthesis of his and colleagues’ key research findings. Bryson critiques a range of learning and teaching initiatives and programs that had been launched at the beginning of the century and explores their role in supporting and developing sessional staff. The key question posed: ‘is there any evidence of some long term success, or impact, of these projects?’ While dismayed that most initiatives have had limited or no lasting impact on the sector, Bryson identifies catalysts for supporting change to enhance the role of sessional teachers. He concludes that institutional change, together with the emergence of drivers such as student engagement, partnerships, diversity and a valuing of sessional teachers offer hope for sessional staff becoming fully recognised as colleagues in the communities of practice that make up our universities. We add that this change is of equal importance for the Australian academy.

The lack of data on sessional staff is raised by Bryson and is a recurring theme across many of the papers in this issue. We acknowledge the possible implications of this lack of data in that universities may be limited in how they can support sessional staff if they do not know: how many there are, where they are, and what their roles are. The BLASST framework establishes standards that require universities to collect this data as part of good practice. May, Strachan and Peetz have accepted the challenge of gathering and collating extensive data on sessional staff. The outcome is the largest and most comprehensive data set on sessional staff in Australia. May and her colleagues, answer Bryson’s call for considering ‘local context and practice’ (p. 18) by sharing findings of the Work and Careers in Australian Universities survey. Their paper reports on the ground-breaking findings of a large national survey of sessional staff focusing on: work conditions; motivations for (sessional) casual work; access to support; and career satisfaction and intentions. The survey items were informed by previous research such as work undertaken by Anne Junor (2003).

The paper speaks to the third key principle of the BLASST framework: sustainability, as May and her colleagues provide an industrial relations perspective on academic workforce planning. Key issues and challenges around sessional staff research are presented including the lack of data available and issues with the collection of data. A major contribution of this paper is that '(t)his new data is the first time that the proportion of academic staff employed on a casual basis has been calculated on a headcount basis' (p.10). Their survey results indicate higher numbers of sessional staff are teaching and researching in our universities than had previously been reported. Across Australia and internationally, academics along with other sectors of the workforce are increasingly casualised. May et al, argue a distinction with the 'low paid, low skilled' sectors, namely that casual academics are 'amongst the highest qualified' members of the workforce. Revisiting the issues of access to induction and professional development, meeting space, research support and more, May's research also gives new insights into gender differences in perceived support. The revelations are indicative of the many variables that make up the sessional staff experience and the need to systematise those practices that contribute positively to the capacity of what is now the majority of teachers in Australian higher education to enable and support them to continue to contribute to quality learning and teaching.

The importance and recognition of the ongoing contribution of sessional staff as teachers in higher education in Australia (May et al), and internationally (Bryson), requires a mechanism that identifies, assures and enhances good practice. One strategy for supporting sessional staff is that of a standards framework, and Harvey proposes the BLASST framework. With May's paper indicating the need for real support for sessional staff, for example, for professional, academic and career development or access to basic infrastructure, a strategic and sustainable approach is needed to redress the systemic inequities and scarcity that is apparent across the sector. Policy and short-term initiatives have been judged to be inadequate and non-sustainable (Bryson) as are one-size-fits-all approaches that do not account for institutional differences. The diversity of sessional staff, the roles they perform and their contribution to learning and teaching in higher education, means that a successful approach needs to be multi-level, multi-disciplinary and cross-institutional. A result of the active, passionate and enthusiastic discussion of working parties was the creation and development of an evidenced based standards framework. The approach of a standards framework provides the flexibility to accommodate diverse roles, practices and institutions while at the same time offering an educative function about good practice with sessional staff.

The BLASST standards took time to develop. They had their genesis in a series of four Macquarie University internal projects over an eight-year period that conceptualised and drafted a standards framework. The standards were also informed by the outcomes and recommendations of foundational projects including the Australian Universities Teaching Committee (AUTC) project on Training, Support and Management of Sessional Teaching Staff (2003); the ALTC commissioned RED Report (2008); Subject Coordinators: Leading Professional Development for Sessional Staff, known as the CLASS project (LE9-1212). A rationale to support this need for standards is presented in the paper, the process of refining the standards outlined and the standards framework in its final form.

A validation process was needed to test the BLASST framework for its usability, transferability across institutions, and the benchmarking process. Luzia, Harvey, Parker, McCormack, Brown and McKenzie led this validation process through pilot benchmarking workshops across four universities. The case studies further our understanding about sessional staff and learning and teaching issues. The benchmarking case studies presented here validate the BLASST framework not only in reference to its usability and transferability to a range of disciplinary, institutional and intra-institutional contexts, but also for generating productive dialogue around sessional staff

issues. Benchmarking through a workshop format particularly enabled rich, open and honest discussion about strengths and challenges faced by sessional teachers within their universities, furthering understanding about sessional staff and learning and teaching issues in specific institutional contexts.

Sessional staff are often excluded from learning and teaching plans and processes, including the benchmarking that is increasingly being used to assure and enhance quality teaching. Epping (1999) has pointed to benchmarking as a knowledge sharing process around good practice. The BLASST standards framework actively engages sessional staff in these processes. Through the benchmarking workshops, sessional staff were able to use the framework as a catalyst for stating, highlighting, explaining and affirming their experiences. This paper highlights the potential for using the framework as a knowledge production and knowledge sharing mechanism.

One variation on the BLASST framework's potential as a knowledge production mechanism is the basis of the Brown, Kelder, Freeman and Carr paper. Here the framework was used by a university to shape an organisational sessional staff survey and map the results. In describing the university's systemic approach to identifying sessional staff learning and teaching needs, Brown et al, remind us that such initiatives take time - in their case, over four years. Using surveys to collect data on practice and needs, they also asked questions and actively listened to sessional staff and in doing so, uncovered evidence of good practice in the institution. As stated in the paper, however, the challenge was to make good practice consistent across the organisation.

The BLASST framework assisted with the process of identifying good practice, particularly at individual and department level. A deliberate alignment of their survey with the BLASST framework allowed a mapping, or self-assessment, against national standards and their results reported against the BLASST key principles. Brown and colleagues report that good practice for the principles of quality learning and teaching and sessional staff support, were achieved against certain criteria. However, there were fewer examples of good or minimal practice for the principle of sustainability. They also encountered a familiar scenario – a lack of data collection, management and policy.

This paper provides a good example of how the BLASST framework's key principles may be used as meta-themes for research data analysis. The processes, followed by one university, also provide further validity for the BLASST framework including as a knowledge production mechanism. Tutors, as a sessional staff cohort in the academy, are the focus of the paper by Sutherland and Gilbert. The authors contribute their insights developed through the analysis of longitudinal data sets, collected over a decade. The paper shares results of a recent survey of tutors and explores the career aspirations of this sessional group. It also raises awareness about the practice of using undergraduate students as tutors.

A common theme emerging through the papers of this special issue, is reiterated here: the difficulty in identifying sessional staff within an organisation, for example, to be able to invite their participation in surveys, and other data collection methods. Sutherland and Gilbert also counter the idea that sessional academics are not reliant on their sessional employment for either their income or for establishing an academic career. They then present some good practice strategies for individual sessional staff members to develop quality learning and teaching. A strong argument is made that regardless of whether sessional staff aspire to an academic career or otherwise, supporting them to achieve quality scholarly outcomes in their teaching is important.

With a reliance on sessional staff to teach in our universities, subject coordinators are presented with the task of managing, developing and working with increasing numbers of these staff. The

literature indicates that while they are at the frontline of working with sessional staff, they are themselves not supported for this role. Lefoe and her colleagues report on a recently completed project that had as its focus the subject coordinators who support sessional staff. Their CLASS project (Coordinators Leading the Advancement of Sessional Staff) developed a framework for supporting subject coordinators through action learning projects. An advantage of the CLASS framework is its adaptability to differing university contexts. The framework enables subject coordinators, together with their sessional teaching teams, to learn and lead together to develop and enhance learning and teaching. Again we see distributed leadership as an approach that provides the best fit with the culture of the academy. Subject coordinators may not view themselves as leaders, nor likewise the sessional staff on the teaching teams, and distributed leadership enables each member of a teaching team to lead part of their action learning project. Enacting this leadership role has the benefit of developing each teaching team member's capacity throughout the project. This capacity development was achieved in multiple areas: professional development, team cohesion and communication, and development of new, or refinement of existing, strategies, systems and processes.

One of the best examples of systematic, embedded, cross-level good practice in working with sessional staff is presented in the paper by Hamilton, Fox and McEwan, attesting to why their university won the BLASST national good practice awards. The commendation for their award cites the university's creation of a dedicated and central role of an associate director academic: sessional staff, and for two programs dedicated to sessional staff learning and teaching, support and sustainability. Both of the programs are specifically directed towards sessional career advancement development and progression. In their paper, the authors discuss one of these programs, the Sessional Academic Success (SAS) program.

The approach of the SAS program aligns with the flexibility intended by the BLASST framework. The SAS program enables sessional staff to develop leadership capacity as they assume the role of the Sessional Academic Success Advisors, another example of distributed leadership in practice. This has been applied in a range of intra-institutional contexts, with the tandem approach of centrally-delivered 'bespoke programs to provide sessional academics ... with contextually specific, needs-based, peer to peer development opportunities'.

Reading through the papers of this special issue will provide you with the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of the contemporary learning and teaching context and issues of sessional staff. This compilation was supported by many national and international reviewers and we would like to express our appreciation for their considered and constructive reviews. Each reviewer was invited in recognition of their expertise, publications and research on sessional staff issues, including, for some, their membership of the original sessional staff project team at Macquarie University who developed the draft standards framework.

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