



Quality learning and teaching with sessional staff: systematising good practice for academic development

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EDITORIAL

Quality learning and teaching with sessional staff: systematising good practice for academic development

Introduction

An issue raised repeatedly in the literature on sessional teachers (adjuncts, casuals, contract, contingent, non-tenured track) is the role of academic development and professional learning for assuring and enhancing quality learning and teaching. Specifically, the lack of, or limited access to, professional learning opportunities has been a feature of research findings. The higher education sector, in general, has responded to these findings in an ad hoc, reactive way and with limited attention towards developing systematic and strategic approaches for addressing this key issue.

Why is professional development for sessional staff an issue? Internationally, a reliance on sessional staff to undertake the teaching across higher education organisations has become institutionalised (Coates & Goedegebuure, 2010; Parker, 2012). In Australia, the majority of university teaching is now undertaken by sessional staff (May, Strachan, & Peetz, 2013). The numbers of sessional staff are increasing in New Zealand (Sutherland & Gilbert, 2013) and across the EU (Sursock, 2015), while across the United Kingdom ‘zero-hours’ contracts (Hopkins & Fairfoul, 2014) have appeared and ‘Atypical contracts’ (Bryson, 2013) are growing. An increased reliance can also be found for the United States (Dolinsky, 2013) Canada, France, Germany and Japan (Bryson, 2013). The increased reliance on sessional staff is a global trend that is predicted to continue and even increase (Jaschik & Lederman, 2015). Sessional staff will therefore remain as a constant feature of the tertiary education workforce. The increase in sessional staff has not been accompanied by a similar increase in systematic approaches to academic development with and for sessional staff, as a strategy for the enhancement and assurance of quality learning and teaching with sessional staff. As such, this ‘significant reliance’ on sessional staff has been identified as a risk indicator (Tertiary Education Quality Standards Agency [TEQSA], 2012, p. 5).

Sessional university staff are part of the ‘precarariat’ (Standing, 2011) with the associated danger of limited or negligible access to academic development. While we recognise that sessional staff are a diverse cohort and that they will remain a constant feature of the higher education workforce, our data on sessional staff are limited. This makes it more challenging to develop systematic approaches to recognising and supporting these staff if we do not know who they are, where they are located, and what professional development needs they have. A quality student learning experience is dependent upon these teachers, yet we need to question how quality can be both assured and enhanced if resourcing and professional development opportunities for sessional staff are not systematised.

While systematised approaches to professional development for sessional staff have not yet been realised across the higher education sector, there are increasing examples of good practice at institutional, faculty, and department levels. The aims and scope of the *International Journal of Academic Development* sees this journal as being a good fit for contributions on this topic. This special issue aims to highlight the role, and potential, of academic development in ensuring and enhancing quality learning and teaching with sessional staff. It presents scholarly contributions from across the higher education sector that focus on academic development initiatives

targeting sessionals and are: formalised; embedded institutionally, nationally, or regionally; and sustainable.

Good practice with sessional staff

Australia is taking the lead in good practice (as recognised by Brown, 2015) and in the scholarship of teaching and learning with sessional staff. I am proud to claim that one contributor to this has been the Benchmarking Leadership and Advancement of Standards for Sessional Teaching (BLASST) framework, as I was a national grant recipient and awarded a national teaching fellowship to undertake BLASST activities (BLASST.edu.au). The BLASST standards framework was developed over 10 years of research in Australian universities to provide a systematic approach to quality learning and teaching with sessional staff.

The BLASST sessional staff standards framework established national, evidence-based and validated criteria and standards for evaluating current practice in (1) quality learning and teaching, (2) support such as management and administrative policy, and (3) sustainability of procedures and systems affecting sessional staff (Harvey, 2013a). It was designed to stimulate reflection and action, and enable institutions, faculties, departments and individuals to evaluate and lead good practice with sessional staff. From its inception, the BLASST framework also intended to act as an educational tool, to stimulate ‘*professional development* about quality learning and teaching, and about supporting and sustaining good practice when working with sessional teachers in higher education’ (Harvey & Luzia, 2013, emphasis added).

Although developed within an Australian context, the BLASST sessional staff standards framework has been workshopped in international contexts, which indicates the transferability of the standards beyond the Australian context. A commissioned report to the Irish National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching & Learning in Higher Education states that the international higher education sector can ‘learn most’ (Educational Developers in Ireland Network [EDIN] & Higher Education Colleges Association [HECA], 2015, p. 28) from Australia as ‘Australia gives most cause for hope’ (p. 29) and recommends that Ireland develop their own standards informed by the BLASST standards (p. 96). It is not surprising therefore to see a strong representation of papers from Australia for this special issue.

Multi-faceted approaches

With key criteria of scholarship and international interest for all papers that make up this special issue, each contributes to the knowledge and practice of quality learning and teaching with sessional staff, and each has international transferability. It is anticipated that these contributions will provide an important scholarly foundation for informing and inspiring the academic development of sessional staff globally.

There is no one model, approach, or answer to providing the best professional development for sessional teachers. Indeed, the reader will note that each of the papers that make up this special issue adopts a different theoretical approach to the design, enactment, and evaluation of the professional development initiatives that are introduced. This acts as an important reminder that managing quality assurance and enhancement through professional development of sessional staff is context specific.

The first paper in this special issue outlines an innovative approach to, and application of, narrative inquiry methodology, resulting in verbatim theatre artefacts, that informs a whole of institution approach to human resources and academic development for sessional academics. In ‘How Human Resource and Academic Development policy and practice can be informed by the lived experience of women casual academics,’ Crimmins (2017) acknowledges that women make up the majority of sessional teaching academics in Australia, and draws on rich interview

data with female academics to identify key ‘preoccupations’ or issues. The findings not only affirm those established in the literature, such as the important roles performed by professional development, but raise some negative, even contentious, risks related to the lack of engagement by sessionals in professional development. Emerging from this research, a series of recommendations is presented for human resources and higher education policy development.

The theme of the lack of systematic opportunities for professional development is continued in the second paper, ‘Just in time and future-proofing? Policy, challenges and opportunities in the professional development of part-time teachers,’ which draws on data from three institutions across the United Kingdom. Beaton (2017) reveals how engagement with professional development can enhance – and conversely how a lack of professional development can inhibit – professional identity and development, a theme also identified in the first paper. Beaton synthesises her findings into institutional-level implications, with the caveat that as sessional staff are a diverse group of teachers then a diverse range of strategies also need to be considered.

Indeed, traditional approaches to academic development may not offer the best fit for the needs of sessional staff and alternative modes may be needed. Online support for sessional teachers is one strategy that responds to challenges such as multi-campus institutions, where it is often not possible for staff to engage with professional development in face-to-face mode at one site, and to the proliferation of online modes of teaching delivery that employ sessionals who may never physically step on to a campus, but still require professional development. One strategy to meet this need is described in the third article, ‘Building an online community to support the professional development of casual teachers.’ Dean, Harden-Thew, and Thomas (2017) describe a Community of Practice approach that frames the design of an institutional and online programme for sessional staff at one university where staff were located across seven sites. In turn, they also analyse the evaluation data for this online programme through the lens of the key elements, or characteristics, of Communities of Practice. Programme impact includes a self-reported increase in ‘confidence’. The authors discuss the implications of such a programme and share lessons learned with the academic developer community.

The tension that exists in balancing learning and teaching with increasing research demands exists in many universities, and is exacerbated in research-intensive institutions. This tension is one challenge that needs to be managed when aiming to provide professional development opportunities that focus on learning and teaching for sessional staff. If development is offered, the question of how to sustain initiatives for sessional staff despite ‘organisational instability’ is pertinent. One Australian research-intensive university has achieved and sustained a systematic approach to institutional tutor professional development, described in this special issue in the paper, ‘Sustaining institution-wide induction for sessional staff in a research-intensive university: The strength of shared ownership.’ Integrating an educational change model with social network theory, Matthews, Duck, and Bartle (2017) present an analysis and identification of factors that enhance sustainability of programmes. The roles of partnerships, stakeholders, and a multi-level approach are revealed as just some of the keywords for sustainability.

Activity Theory, a systems approach, frames the research by Gilbert (2017) into professional development for tutors in a New Zealand university. Her paper, ‘Academic development of sessional staff: what can be learned from tutor training programmes?’ recognises the importance of contexts, diverse perspectives, and ‘contradictions and perspectives’ leading to development. These are influencing factors when working with the diverse cohort that is sessional staff. Applying Activity Theory to the analysis of quantitative and qualitative data, from both tutors and tutor co-ordinators, Gilbert (2017) reveals a series of ‘systematic tensions’. In tandem, she also used the BLASST framework to assess tutor training. Where training options had not attained a standard of good practice, the strategy was to develop action plans to move towards standards of good practice. Two authentic examples of these evidence-informed change plans are detailed and make for compelling reading.

Moving to the disciplinary level, the sixth paper, ‘Using quality enhancement processes to achieve sustainable development and support for sessional staff’, focuses on sessional teachers within a dental school. Over a period exceeding a decade, a systematic approach, structured as continuous quality improvement cycles, was adopted to develop professional learning to meet the needs of professional clinical staff. Lekkas and Winning (2017) achieved quality enhancement through the strategic application of research-informed recommendations and frameworks, and feedback garnered from multiple sources of evaluation data. They outline the resultant diverse range of initiatives in their paper.

The special issue concludes with a reflective piece, “An essential right”: reflections on evaluating a professional development program for tutors’. Evaluation of learning and teaching initiatives, inclusive of those for sessional staff, necessitates a planned approach, informed by evaluation theory. The evaluation reported in this reflective paper integrated three approaches: Participatory Action Research, MERI (Monitoring, Evaluation, Reporting and Improvement) and Participatory Evaluation. The authors (Fredericks & Bosanquet, 2017) reflect on lessons learned from the evaluation findings of a university-wide tutor programme. The resourcing of participation in such programmes is argued as a matter of equity and of good practice.

Implications and future directions

The research reported in this special issue informs us that many individuals, departments, faculties, and institutions are leading professional development for quality learning and teaching with sessional staff. The range of research-informed initiatives share a goal of quality enhancement but are varied by: level and size of application, theoretical orientation, mode of delivery, and mode of evaluation. Yet, much more needs to be done for this cohort on whom we rely as teachers in the academy.

The priorities for the sector that emerge from this research, if we are committed to systematising good practice with professional development for sessional staff and as identified by the BLASST standards framework, include:

- (1) ‘comprehensive and accurate’ data collection about sessional staff (BLASST, 2013, p. 12) to enable us to better understand and know our sessional teachers and their professional development needs, and
- (2) increasing the provision of support for individual career development (Andrews et al., 2016), which means dedicated financial resourcing.

In addition, the research reported in this special issue is all located in the government or public sector. Given the large number of higher education institutions located in the private sector, a priority needs to be:

- (3) engagement by private and non-self accrediting higher education institutions with benchmarking, and other activities, to self-assess their standards of professional development for sessional staff.

This special issue provides evidence of diverse good practices for supporting sessional staff, but as these practices are not systematised across the sector, a further priority is identified:

- (4) there is a need to engage and work directly with university executives, such as the Deputy Vice-Chancellors (Academic), to effect a more systematic approach to good practice with sessional staff. University executives need to assume a proactive leadership role in understanding and supporting their sessional staff.

For academic developers, there are several implications for practice that can be derived from the papers in this special issue. Firstly, we need to ask for, even demand, data on our sessional staff. Once we know who they are, we can seek their input into professional development needs and raise awareness about this critical cohort in our departments, faculties and institutions. A second implication is the need to provide professional development that is context specific, whether that be generic and institutional or disciplinary. As sessional staff are a diverse group, we need to respond with multiple and flexible modes of delivery for professional development, ranging from face-to-face block mode or modularised sessions, to workshops and online options, but all within a Community of Practice framework.

Finally, we can be inspired by our colleagues, the authors of these papers, and ‘build in research and evaluation’ (Wadsworth, 2010) into our own academic practice with sessional staff so that we can contribute much needed empirical evidence. Theoretical approaches which can support collaborative and sustainable outcomes for this research include Distributed Leadership (Jones, Harvey, Lefoe, & Ryland, 2014) and Participatory Action Research (Harvey, 2013b; Kemmis, McTaggart, & Nixon, 2014) underpinned by Reflective Practice (Harvey, Coulson, & McMaugh, 2016). Broadly, we have a duty to ensure that sessional staff are supported with development opportunities to, in turn, ensure a quality and sustainable higher education system.

In conclusion, heartfelt thanks are extended to the contributing authors, peer reviewers, senior editors, and colleagues who are all working towards good practice standards for professional development with sessional staff. This special issue acknowledges and appreciates the pivotal role that sessional staff have in supporting quality learning across the sector, for without sessional teachers we would not have a functioning higher education system.

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