

SESSIONAL ACADEMICS: A MARGINALISED WORKFORCE

Penny Bassett
Lecturer in Management, Victoria University of Technology
Australia

Abstract: Increasingly organisations are becoming flexible in staffing terms, the model consisting of a core of permanent staff with a periphery contingent workforce of contract, casual and temporary employees. Recent Australian and overseas studies have indicated that the higher education sector is reflecting this trend with casualisation of the academic workforce, particularly in the lecturer and below range. There is an increasingly large group of marginalised academics in these positions. The possibility of an entrenched model consisting of permanent academics on the one hand and an underclass on the other has the potential to cause staff problems and to degrade the quality of education provided. While most casual academics find their teaching role satisfying they feel marginalised, exploited and expendable. Chances of gaining a tenured position are slim. A survey was carried out at two Australian universities where sessional academics were asked questions about their working conditions and aspirations. The results confirmed the findings of previous research that there is growing dissatisfaction and disillusionment amongst casual academics about their status and opportunities within the higher education sector.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past ten years there has been a growth in the use of part-time and casual academics. This paper includes a review of the literature on the increasing casualisation of the academic workforce and the results of a survey of the perceptions and aspirations of sessional academics at two Australian universities. The qualitative stage of the research project will focus on casual employment conditions relating to women in particular. However the survey aimed to provide broader profile of sessional academics in the context in which the major part of the research will be carried out. It is beyond the scope of the present study to make comparisons between females and males.

The aims of the paper are to:

- Review the literature to substantiate the claim that casual academics are marginalised and have very limited career opportunities in the university sector.
- To provide a profile of sessional academics and their attitudes towards their working conditions and career opportunities.
- To discuss the implications of the growth of an academic underclass.

BACKGROUND

The increase in student numbers over the last ten years, combined with funding cuts, has led to a corresponding growth in part-time academic staff. This reflects a general trend towards the minimalist, flexible organisational model (Handy 1993).

However, as Castleman et al point out, “Flexibility” is an insidious term in this [academic] context’ (1995: 9). Management has an economic rationalist approach where sessional and limited term academics are employed as a cost-cutting measure and are equally seen as expendable.

Sessional¹ academics are the focus of my paper, as they are the most exploited section of the academic workforce. They are paid by the hour, usually to teach, and have few of the rights or privileges of tenured or contract staff, that is, paid leave, access to research funding, office facilities, etc. Moreover they are employed on an ad hoc basis, outside the stringent selection procedures applied to other academic staff (Castleman et al 1995; Fine et al 1992). Not least, a high proportion of women are accumulated in this bottom echelon of academia.

In 1997 while females comprised 47.3% of the total Australian academic workforce they were over-represented (72.1%) in the fractional-full time category (DEETYA 1997:4). Castleman et al (1995) in a study of Victorian and South Australian academics found that 47.4% of women were sessional, with an alarming 40.2% of all the academics studied being sessional. Since 1988 there has been a growth in the employment of casual academics of 69.9% (Richards 1998:17). In 1996 there were 10,396 full time equivalent (FTE) casual academics employed in Australian Universities, with a 5.3% increase predicted for the 1997 figures (ABS 1997). Actual numbers of casual academics would, I suggest, be at least twice this figure.

Casualisation of the academic workforce is endemic across all OECD countries (Aziz 1990; Kogan et al; Rhoades 1996). A marginalised academic workforce is becoming part of an entrenched flexible model. Part-time academics (who include both 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 1983 quoted in Rajagopal & Farr 1996). In relation to women academics, amongst others, part-time women are seen as having ‘limited access’ (Castleman et al 1995). Leatherman (1997:A12) suggests that the increasing number of part-timers in one American university is producing ‘faceless departments’ where students see a succession of part-timers and only in the later stages of their courses can put a face to the full-time academics.

Implicit in the term ‘faceless department’ is a denial of full participation in academia for a high percentage of academic staff. In a Tasmanian study Kirov (1989) found that ‘fractional lecturers are not considered members of the faculty, are not invited to faculty meetings, or circulated with the faculty minutes’ (p.41). This is supported by other research with Kogan et al (1994) suggesting that part-timers’ interaction with full-time faculty members in an academic context is limited. Access to basic support

¹ Casual or sessional academics are paid by the hour and have no leave entitlements (DEETYA 1997:68). Their employment is limited to 60% of an academic teaching load.

Australian part-time academics are either permanent or contract staff who work no less than 15 hours and no more than 20 hours per week and who are entitled to pro-rata leave entitlements; internationally the part-time category appears to include casual academics.

services such as offices, telephones, etc. is also limited (Kogan et al 1994:56). In a Canadian study Lundy and Warne (1990) confirmed this finding that part-time academics had minimal access to these basic support services, suggesting that this marginalises as well as disadvantages these academics. They go on to state 'another effect of these petty deprivations is to erode what one might call the 'academic persona' of the part-timer'' (Lundy & Warne 1990:215)

Continued re-appointment as a sessional 'is characterised by uncertainty and insecurity' Fine et al (1992:51). Despite a degree of satisfaction with their teaching roles, an American study found that interviewees felt vulnerable and 'dissatisfaction with second-class status was almost universal' (Gappa and Leslie 1993:43) This consisted of lack of consultation, lack of appreciation and marginalisation. Rajagopal and Farr (1989) found that even if they are unionised part timers are excluded from academic decision making processes, which are limited to full-time academics. Other writers including Leatherman (1997) support this.

Rajagopal and Farr (1989:284) state the 'characterisation of university faculty as a "basic equality of colleagues" becomes highly questionable'. Rajagopal and Lin emphasise this in stating that part-time academics 'feel that they are greasing the wheel for the full-time faculty's continued gains in salary increases and better working conditions' (1996:259). In the area of pay equity Rajagopal and Farr (1989) conclude that while full-timers' salaries include teaching, research and service (and the implication that they are incremental), part-timers' pay may vary within institutions, but is often a single rate across the university, largely regardless of experience and qualifications.

Lowe (1994 quoted in Collins 1994:62) sees casual and contract academics as 'second class citizens' having 'no career prospects, poor facilities and limited funding'. The new Industrial Relations Commission ruling restricting the use of fixed term contracts (Healy 1998), may, in my opinion, disadvantage casual academics as universities will prefer this form of employment to one that may involve disputes or legal action.

METHOD

This was an exploratory, quantitative study to provide the basis for a qualitative research project. The aim was to explore the issues of marginalisation by examining the perceptions of Australian sessional academics of their working conditions and career opportunities.

A questionnaire consisting of mainly of closed questions, with two concluding open questions for additional comments about career development and working conditions, was developed and piloted.

Analysis of the results was carried out using SPSS.

Population and sample

Sessional academics in the business and arts faculties at two Victorian universities were surveyed. Purposive, i.e. non-probability, sampling was used as the results are not intended to be generalised. Questionnaires were hand delivered or mailed to 372 sessional academics in the business and arts faculties.

There was a 25% response rate. In terms of gender 57 females and 34 males responded the difference in numbers probably being due to the fact that the covering letter stated that the PhD was exploring the issues as they relate to women. Table 1 provides a profile of the respondents.

Table 1: Profile of sample

Gender	Female	57
	Male	34
Age range	20-29	9.9%
	30-34	12.1%
	35-44	46.2%
	45-49	11.0%
	50-<64	20.9%
Qualifications	Doctorate	2%
	Masters	33.7
	Bachelor	34.8
	Honours	14.6
	Grad.Dip	12.4
Income per fortnight from sessional work	Range	\$86-\$2,100
	Female	Mean \$605
	Male	Mean \$671
Reliance on sessional income	Female	Mean 27.75%
	Male	Mean 29.12%
Hours work as a sessional per week this semester	Range	1– 11 hours
	Mean	7.76
Number of sessional positions worked this semester	1	55%
	2	28%
	3	11%
	<4	6%
Number of semesters worked as a sessional	Range	1-13 semesters
	Mean	6.69

N=91

Many of the subjects were underqualified: while only 2% had doctorates and 33.7% masters, over a third of the subjects (34.8%) had only a bachelors degree with the remaining subjects having honours (14.6%) and graduate diplomas (12.4%). 50% of the subjects were studying for a higher degree.

While most subjects did not have dependent children or dependent adults amongst those who did, females had a mean of 72.5% responsibility for childcare. Females had a mean of 73% for responsibility for domestic tasks.