Sessional employment and quality in universities: 
a risky business

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The international higher education sector is increasingly reliant on precariously employed academic staff who deliver a significant proportion of teaching load. Although this is increasingly viewed as a risk to the quality of teaching and learning, there is little research that tests the proposition. We take up this challenge by analysing and comparing student course evaluations and the results of an online survey of sessional academics. Results show that the risk derives not from the sessionals themselves nor their teaching but from inadequate institutional support for and management of sessional academics.

Keywords: precarious academic employment, quality of teaching, quality assurance

Background

The “full-time, permanent, centrally-located teaching/research academic is no longer the norm” (Percy, et al., 2008:7). Although more than 53% of university classes are taught by sessional or contingent academics, little is known about who they are and their impact on the quality of teaching and learning (Coates, et al., 2009). Sessional academics hold a secondary status to the point that even official statistics on their nature and extent are notoriously unreliable (Coates, et al., 2009). Despite a forecast shortage of academics in Australia (Hugo, 2008) and a major review of higher education finding that the recruitment and retention of academics is the biggest issue facing universities (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008), doubt has been cast on the ability of sessional academics to contribute to the solution because of their perceived lack of quality (Coates, et al., 2009). University managements have seized on unfavourable comments about the levels and quality of sessional academics to view the issue as one of risk management (Percy et al., 2008) rather than workforce planning or quality of teaching practice (May, 2011). In the face of looming shortages of academics and government policy to increase students numbers (Bradley, et al., 2008), to overlook the contribution of sessional academics appears a ‘risky’ strategy in itself. This paper examines
the proposition that sessional academics reduce the quality of teaching and learning. We do this by reporting the results of a research project comparing student course evaluations of sessional and tenured academics and surveying the experiences and perceptions of sessional academics about factors affecting the quality of their teaching practice in a business and law faculty. The paper begins with an overview of the literature before presenting the research methods, findings and finally the analysis and discussion.

**Literature Summary**

Despite a number of terms used to describe academics paid by the hour or by the teaching period, the adjective, ‘sessional’, is commonly employed in Australia to highlight the flexible and transitory nature of this employment (Anderson, 2007). Sessional teachers are employed as tutors and lecturers but with no guarantee of further employment, they are “not paid to develop and maintain their knowledge-base, yet are expected to deploy it in the teaching process” (Brown, et al., 2010:172). The trend toward increasing numbers and proportions of sessional academics in higher education is a global phenomenon, but it is especially high in Australia (Higher Education Statistical Agency, 2010). In the past two decades, sessional academics as a proportion of the total higher education teaching workforce increased from 13 percent in 1989 to 22 percent in 2007 (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR), 2010). However, official government statistics are unreliable as they are based on full-time equivalent (FTE) calculations that fail to represent the actual number of individuals who contribute to teaching (Percy, et al., 2008). Despite their dependence on sessional academics, Australian universities are unable to report detailed and accurate information on the actual numbers and employment conditions of their sessional academics. Recent estimates based on more accurate superannuation data indicate that 61 percent of Australia’s total academic workforce (equating to 67,100 staff) are employed on a sessional or casual basis (May, 2011). Sessional teachers may be responsible for up to 50% of the teaching load in Australian universities including up to 80% of undergraduate teaching load (Percy, et al., 2008). Most commencing students will be taught by sessional tutors in small group classes, and it is this initial experience of university teaching that will leave lasting, either positive or negative, impressions (Kift, 2002). Criticisms of the quality of sessionals’ teaching are somewhat vague and centre around grade inflation (Moore & Trahan, 1998); lack of theoretical knowledge; and a tendency to identify more closely with their students than full-time faculty (Andrew, et al., 2009). However, the Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) has identified ongoing issues with the management of sessional academics and their exclusion from quality assurance measures and academic development as having a negative impact on the overall quality of teaching at several universities (The Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA), 2004, 2006a, 2006b).

Research on the sessional academic workforce provides general characteristics and specific barriers to improved quality of teaching but little to say on the quality and capabilities of sessional teachers themselves. Sessional teachers tend to be younger and more female than the tenured academic workforce (May, 2011; Coates, et al., 2009). Typologies of sessional academics commonly divide into research students, industry experts, academic aspirants, casual by choice, and retirees (May, 2011). Other than these general characteristics and typologies, there is scarce information about the qualifications and teaching experiences of sessional academics or differences between faculties.

Barriers to improving the quality of teaching by sessionals include: underpayment for time and/or limited time for preparation and marking (Brown, Goodman, & Yasukawa, 2008;
Kimber, 2003; Lazarsfeld Jensen & Morgan, 2009a); lack of input to curriculum development (Brown, et al., 2008); lack of development opportunities, formal and informal (Anderson, 2007; Knight, Baume, Tait, & Yorke, 2007; Percy & Beaumont, 2008); and poor management of sessional academics (Percy, et al., 2008) including exclusion from mainstream teaching discussions (Junor, 2004; Lazarsfeld Jensen & Morgan, 2009a). Few universities have formalised policies and procedures governing recruitment and support of sessional teachers which may pose a reputational risk (Percy, et al., 2008). Marking and moderation standards among sessionals are often arbitrary and threaten academic standards (Percy, et al., 2008). The very nature of precarious employment adversely but makes them susceptible to bullying, unfair demands and feelings of isolation and lack of recognition (Lazarsfeld Jensen & Morgan, 2009a) and feeling undervalued (Percy, et al., 2008). Such emotional responses to work are not conducive to effective work engagement. While these barriers provide insight into the problems faced by sessional teachers, similarly to the general characteristics outlined above, they do little to shed light on the quality and capability of sessional teachers (Hugo & Morriss, 2010).

The questions posed in this research are directly related to quality and capability. The questions are: How capable are sessional teachers? What is the quality of their teaching? How is their teaching quality assured in terms of inputs, maintenance and outputs? and, how satisfied are sessional academics with work?

**Research Method**

The research was undertaken in a faculty of business and law at a large Australian regional university. The faculty, predominantly the business school, employed 67 tenured and full-time contract academics and approximately 130 sessional academics in May 2010. The research was designed in two parts: a comparison of scores on official student course evaluations for similar courses taught by sessional and full-time academics; and an online survey of sessional teachers.

The first component of the research was a comparison of student evaluations of graduate business courses held over the period, January 2009 to June 2010. This analysis was carried out independently by the University’s Reporting Unit to protect the identity of the individual teachers. The unit is responsible for measuring and recording student feedback on courses throughout the university and thus had access to the relevant student course evaluations for each of the identified courses. A total of 118 evaluated courses were identified of which 47 were delivered by sessional staff. The mean of responses for two questions on the Student Feedback form were compared: overall satisfaction with the quality of the course and availability of lecturer to provide assistance and advice. Evaluation scores of over 3.50 out of 5 were considered positive results for overall satisfaction and scores between 3.00 and 3.50 were considered to reflect a neutral response. Courses evaluated over the period showed that 83 percent were in the positive overall satisfaction range. Comparisons of means were made on the basis of: same course codes; similar delivery modes (face-to-face or online) and overall mean scores. We use student evaluations as a proxy for quality of teaching but in doing so acknowledge that student evaluations are only one aspect of quality of teaching and even within these evaluations “there are other factors apart from quality of teaching that will influence students’ scores” (Morahan, 2010:3).

The second component of the research was an online survey of sessional academics. Because sessional employment varies within and between teaching terms, the population of sessional
academics for the period January 2009 and May 2010 was used in order to cover different teaching terms, locations and modes of teaching. Email addresses for all sessional academics employed in this period were supplied by the administrative staff of each school. Invitations were sent to 130 sessionals to participate in an anonymous online survey over a three week period. Twenty one of these emails were returned as non-deliverable, hence it was assumed that 109 sessionals received the email and invitation. The 59 percent response rate of 64 respondents was reduced to 52 percent or 57 responses when incomplete surveys were eliminated. We considered this response rate more than reasonable given difficulties in establishing accurate email addresses for sessional staff.

The survey instrument was adapted from several earlier surveys by Junor (2004), Coates et al (2009), Smith and Coombe (2006) and Knight (2007). It included 43 items across five sections: employment information (10 items); academic development and support (7 items); academic practice (16 items); motivation and satisfaction (2 items); and demographics (8 items).

Findings

Findings are arranged in three sub-sections: first, quality and capability; second, quality assurance measures including inputs, maintenance and outcomes; and third, satisfaction among sessional academics.

Quality and Capability
Quality of teaching was measured through the comparison of student evaluation of courses and capability is taken from both the profile of participants and self-reports on their teaching practice.

Quality of Teaching - Student Evaluations
The comparison of student evaluation of course scores across 118 courses taught by 71 permanent and 47 sessional academics revealed no significant differences between the two groups of academics. The lack of significance applied to the same courses taught by the different groups, to the same modes and locations of delivery, and to the individual group means compared to the overall mean scores. Although not significant, two trends did emerge, permanent academics scored more highly in terms of availability and sessionals scored more highly for online delivery.

Capability of Sessional Academics - Participant Profile
The profile of participants is described in terms of: age; gender; qualifications; and type of employment. One of the most striking characteristics of this sessional group of employees is their age: over 70 percent of the cohort was over 40 years old and almost 50 per cent was over 50 years of age. Although, 52.5 percent of the sample was male, among the Research Higher Degree (RHD) students who constituted 20 percent of the sample, 75 percent were female. The group was reasonably well qualified, with 37 percent holding or enrolled in a PhD, 35 percent holding a Master degree and 3 percent holding an Honours degree. Tutoring was the most common form of sessional employment (72 percent), although 62 percent were also employed as lecturers with full coordination responsibilities. Almost half (48 percent) had been employed for five or more years, including 25 percent who had over 10 years experience as a sessional teacher.
**Capability of Sessional Academics – Teaching Practices**

Participants were asked to provide information covering their professional experience, teaching methods, autonomy and learning goals. The majority of sessional staff cited professional experience as the major factor in informing their teaching practice, with almost all 90% employing practical examples to demonstrate theory and 75 percent stating that non-academic professional experience strongly informed their teaching. In line with this, skills in the application of theory to practice were rated by 84 percent as the main focus of their teaching followed by evaluative skills (79 percent). Memorisation was given the least emphasis (44 percent). Although sixty three percent reported having considerable autonomy to allocate grades including the freedom to fail students, this would be influenced the higher numbers of tutors and markers whose work is more closed moderated than those in lecturing positions. Respondents perceived the most learning goals to be critical thinking and analysis (88 percent) followed by writing skills (77 percent) and working effectively with others (74 percent).

**Quality Assurance Measures**

The following results are grouped under three headings to reflect overall quality assurance processes and measures: inputs, maintenance and outputs. These are all factors under the control of the employer, the university.

**Inputs - Academic Development and Inclusion**

Factors in this sub-section were taken from questions relating to: induction; professional development; training opportunities; inclusion in School activities; career advice and promotions opportunities. The least positive results apply to all these factors. See Table 1 below for a summary of the results as recorded in terms of favourable responses, commencing with the small number of favourable responses for professional development (13 percent) and concluding with the largest percentage of favourable responses for occupational health and safety information (27 percent).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Percentage Favourable Responses (No = 57)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Professional Development</td>
<td>13</td>
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<tr>
<td>Opportunities for Advancement</td>
<td>16</td>
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<tr>
<td>Career Advice</td>
<td>17</td>
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<tr>
<td>Induction</td>
<td>18</td>
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<tr>
<td>Access to Training and Development</td>
<td>18</td>
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<tr>
<td>Inclusion in meetings</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Receiving newsletters</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occupational Health and Safety Information</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The lack of development support and exclusion from faculty life is demonstrated in the following comment by a respondent:

As a casual staff member, I am not offered any training or development opportunities nor am I even aware of them. I am not formally advised of any vacancies or promotional opportunities. For this I rely on my direct supervisors or trawling through the university website. I am not on distribution lists for school newsletters and have to rely on checking the school website by which time the
newsletter is typically out of date ... I am largely disconnected from what is happening in the school or across the university (Respondent No. 1).

**Maintenance - Processes and Resources**

Factors in this sub-section cover the processes to assure quality both in monitoring and employment as well as access to resources required to effectively carry out work. The processes and resources include: moderation; notification of work; and access to email, photocopying and support staff, both administrative and academic.

Typically the work of lecturers is not monitored or moderated except at final grading sessions. Hence the 59 percent who reported having their marking moderated by permanent academics would most likely reflect the presence of markers and tutors whose work could be expected to be moderated by course coordinators. Short notification periods for teaching allocation was cited by over 60 percent of respondents and resulted in concerns about inability to plan ahead (83 percent) including making necessary changes to teaching materials. Ninety percent of respondents were most concerned by insufficient payment to cover their time spent in preparing for class, providing feedback and consulting with students (90 percent). In the words of a respondent:

> To give the students correct feedback so as to improve their essay writing skills cannot be done properly in the time allowed. By not allowing tutors to improve the basic skills of the students, this eventually reflects badly on the school/faculty and the university (Respondent No.16).

Access to resources was viewed more favourably, especially email access (74 percent favourable) and access to administrative staff (65 percent favourable). Access to academic staff was the least adequate resource with 36 percent favourable response. Despite the access to email, a frustration for some was the withdrawal of email accounts between teaching terms:

> You know where you stand with the uni when things like your email, HR online, your office are cut off between years. It is a one way relationship, you could not run your uni without casuals, and yet there seems to be an "only when the uni needs you" attitude. (Respondent No. 18)

**Outcomes – Feedback and Recognition**

Factors in this sub-section cover feedback processes to assure quality such as student and supervisor feedback and well as process that recognise the contribution of sessional teachers.

Despite student feedback being rated by 92 percent of the sample as the most important input into teaching and teaching improvement, only 59 percent reported that teaching evaluations were regularly carried out. This lower percentage reflects that tutors are less likely to undergo formal evaluations than lecturers. Feedback from academic supervisors a favourable response from only 27 percent of the sample and most of these were RHD students. This same group reported having their contribution to teaching recognised while the majority of 73 percent felt they were not recognised.

**Satisfaction among sessional academics**

Participants were asked to rate their satisfaction with various aspects of their work as well as one question requesting a rating of overall satisfaction with employment as a sessional teacher. First, overall satisfaction with work was divided being rated as *very satisfied* by 15
percent of respondents and either *dissatisfied* or *very dissatisfied* by 20 percent. The greatest sources of satisfaction were relationships with students and stimulation of the work itself while sources of least satisfaction were opportunities for promotion, security, and feedback and recognition. See Fig. 1 below for a summary of the sources of satisfaction.

![Figure 1: Sources of Satisfaction of Sessional Employees](image)

**Discussion**

From the results, a broad conclusion might be that this sample of sessional teachers appears generally capable and engaged in teaching that is of equal quality to tenured teachers but is hampered by institutional policies that fail to provide appropriate quality assurance processes and measures. Job satisfaction information reinforces that sources of satisfaction stem from internal factors such as the individual teacher and their relationship with students while sources of dissatisfaction and concern stem from external sources such as university policy and process. One can only wonder about the potentially more positive effects on sessionals’ quality and capability if such processes and measures were in place. The ‘risk’ to quality lies more with the university than with the individuals who constitute the sessional teaching workforce.

**Quality and capability**

The evidence from student course evaluation scores of no significant difference between sessional and tenured lecturers is important because student evaluation is the main indicator used by institutions and government to measure quality of teaching. The non-significant trend that sessionals are less available to students may be viewed as a consequence of their employment status rather than a comment on the quality of their teaching. Thus, on this evidence alone, the contention that sessional teachers are of a lesser quality is quashed. The capability of sessional lecturers sounds reasonable in terms of their qualifications and experience both in teaching and professional practice although a comparison with tenured lecturers would be required to ascertain the difference and make a judgement. Similarly for teaching practice, a comparison between sessional and tenured staff might point to important differences but on what is before us, it seems that sessional teachers are fully aware of the need to inculcate graduate attributes and higher order learning skills through their teaching practice and they have an advantage of bringing professional practice experience to their
classrooms. Andrew et al.’s (2009) assertion that sessional academics lack theoretical knowledge cannot be adequately assessed apart from noting the high percentage of respondents who rated application of theory to practice as the major focus of their teaching practice.

**Quality assurance measures**

Our results are not unlike those reported in the literature when it comes to the process and policies of universities regarding sessional teachers. Issues identified by AUQA (AUQA, 2004, 2006a, 2006b) pertaining to the management of sessional academics and their exclusion from academic development opportunities are evident in our study as is Percy et al.’s (2008) contention that few universities have formalised policies and procedures for the support of sessional academics. Like other studies, our respondents did not feel adequately supported with training and development and opportunities for professional development (Anderson, 2007; Knight, et al., 2007; Percy & Beaumont, 2008). They felt excluded from mainstream faculty activities including newsletters, seminars and school meetings (Junor, 2004; Lazarsfeld Jensen & Morgan, 2009a) and tended to identify more closely with their students than full-time faculty (Andrew, et al., 2009). Despite the lack of formal support and isolation from mainstream faculty, respondents in this study did not report feeling subject to bullying but were concerned with intense work demands and feeling undervalued as found in earlier research by Lazarsfeld Jensen and Morgan (2009a) and Percy et al. (2008).

Employment conditions are among the factors that impact most negatively on sessional academics and the quality of their teaching and learning and in this regard, our respondents reflect the findings of other studies. Late notice of teaching allocations undermines the ability of sessional academics to effectively plan ahead and develop teaching materials (Allen, 2001; Barnes & O'Hara, 1999) while underpayment for time spent preparing for classes and engaging with students is a major limitation (Brown, et al., 2008; Kimber, 2003; Lazarsfeld Jensen & Morgan, 2009a). Course preparation is further hindered when access to library, photocopying and email services are withdrawn between teaching sessions (Lazarsfeld Jensen & Morgan, 2009b). Unlike previous research, our respondents were not concerned with having to engage in ‘grade inflation’ from fear of not having contracts renewed (Moore & Trahan, 1998). On the contrary, sessional academics felt they had autonomy in awarding grades and providing feedback much of which was subject to peer moderation in line with good practice (Smith & Coombe, 2006). There was little evidence that marking and moderation standards are arbitrary and threatening to academic standards as suggested by Percy et al. (2008).

**Satisfaction and dissatisfaction**

Underlying earlier observations and research (e.g. Junor, 2004), respondents derived satisfaction from their students and their work. Their dissatisfactions arose from university actions associated with lack of development opportunities, exclusion from faculty activities, inadequate support structures and employment conditions that reduced their ability to provide timely and effective teaching practice.

**Conclusion**

From a limited but focussed sample in this research, it seems clear that teaching quality is not compromised simply because an academic is classified as sessional. From an objective comparison of student evaluations there were no differences between sessional and tenured teachers. Sessional academics in our sample were self motivated, committed to their students and appeared to exercise sound pedagogical practice in their teaching in addition to bringing
professional and practical experience into their classrooms. The ‘risks’ associated with sessional employment appear to lie in management practices and policies. In particular improvements could be made in allowing sessional teachers access to developmental opportunities and providing greater forewarning of teaching allocations and the necessary supports to allow them to prepare, including efficient administrative processes. Further, the employment conditions for sessional academics need to take into account the actual time required for course preparation and student consultation.

The contribution of the paper lies in demonstrating that the ‘risk’ of employing sessional academics lies not in the sessionals themselves but in the process and policies that the university employs to manage them. Forecast shortages of academics and impending increases in student numbers suggest that university managements need to give urgent attention to reducing the ‘risk’ element of sessional employment by improving their supports for sessional academics and, further, considering sessionals as a more tenured solution to workforce planning. As indicated earlier in this paper, further research is required to compare differences among sessionals between disciplines and between universities and, within each of these, between sessional and tenured teachers. It would also be important to triangulate the data from sessionals with feedback from supervisors and managers to understand the obstacles to more effective management and development of sessional academics.

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Note: to obtain a copy of the sessional staff questionnaire used in this research, please contact Dr Suzanne Ryan at Suzanne.Ryan@newcastle.edu.au