

Strengthening the connection between sessional staff and university: Why and how to create a more cohesive and integrated learning community of teachers



Disconnected



Disconnection

In the past, the normal paradigm of academic work has been to perform a range of duties involving teaching, research, administration and community service. However, these duties have been disaggregated or unbundled 'as a result of a variety of forces including the massification of national systems, the application of technology in teaching and increasing specialisation of academic roles' (Macfarlane 2011: 1)



Disconnection



This disaggregation has particular resonance with regard to teaching and the type of employment used.

What we now have is an academic workforce where 76,000 of the 110,000 academic staff are sessional (May, Strachan, Broadbent & Peetz, 2011)

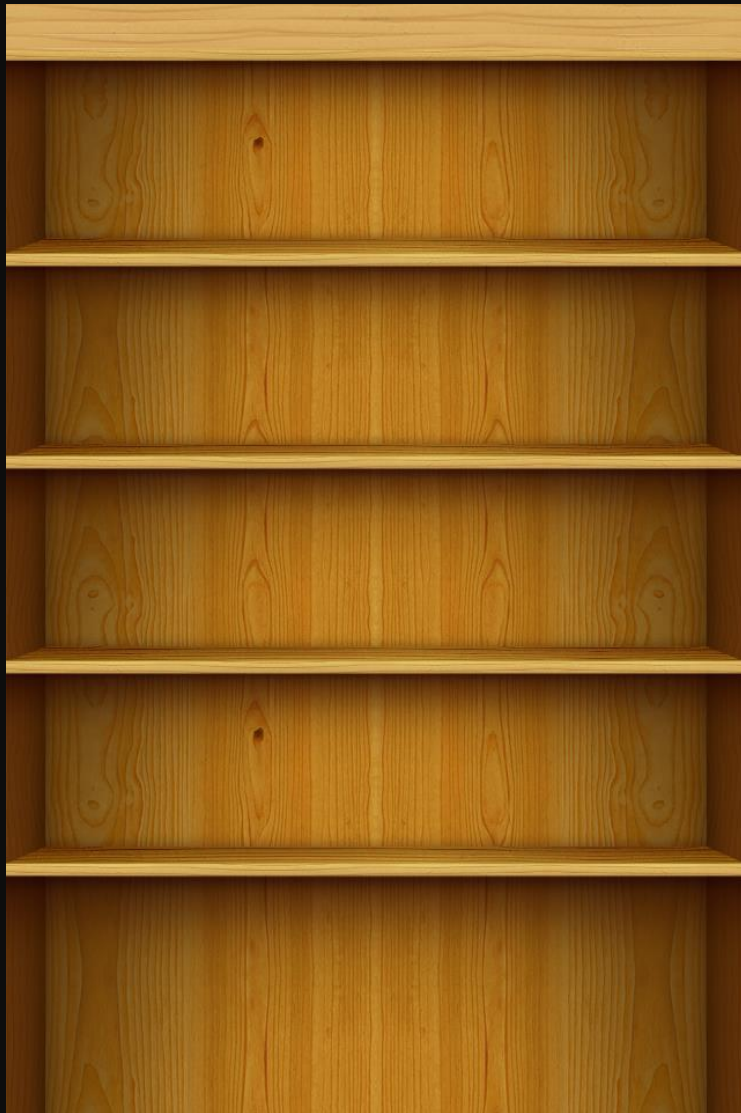


Where 80% of undergraduate teaching is undertaken by sessional staff (Percy, Scoufis, Parry, Goody, Hicks, Macdonald et al., 2008)



What do we know about these 67,000 sessional academics?





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‘...very little is known about the qualifications, training and experience of casual staff’ (Coates, Dobson, Edwards, Friedman, Goedegebuure & Meek, 2009 , p.10).

Based on a comparison of three studies of sessional staff in Australia (Fine, 1991; Junor, 2002; Ryan, n.d.)

- the average age of sessional staff has increased from 30 years in 1991, to 45 years in 2012
- the sessional workforce is becoming more gendered toward females, with 61 percent female
- the mean duration of employment as a sessional has increased from 1.5 years in 1991 to 4.9 years in 2012

What do we know about the *experience* of sessional staff?



They feel excluded

Based on research by Fine (1992), Junor (2005) and Ryan (n.d.) most sessional academics feel excluded from mainstream social and professional activities. In particular, a comparison of the three sets of data identifies reductions in relation to performance feedback, awareness of entitlements and career advice, and the opportunity to attend conferences and seminars.



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The quality of teaching and marking undertaken by sessional staff has been called into question and their contribution to academic integrity and student retention is problematized (Smith 2010; Umbach, 2007).

A high percentage of sessional staff is seen as a risk to all academics (Banachowski, 1996, 2000; Brown et al 2010; Percy & Beaument, 2008).





Ryan and Bhattacharyya, 2011 (by comparing scores on official student course evaluations for similar courses taught by sessionals and full-time academics) found no significant difference in course evaluations between the two groups of academics



A study by Smith and Coombe (2006) presents that there was no evidence that sessional staff are deficient markers. However, they did identify a common concern that sessional academics have fewer opportunities to find out about university procedures or to ask questions.

Before we consider how then to integrate this *valuable* resource to learning and teaching into the universities they serve, let's consider another imperative for the support of sessional staff fully into 'they academy'.

(As if a social justice is not reason enough!)





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Recent studies in academic workforce planning suggest that, due to the predicted retirement, migration and changing profession of the Australian academic workforce, almost 50% of the current academic staff will need to be replaced within the next five years (Hugo, 2008; Hugo & Morriss, 2010)



In addition, a large study on the motivations and career aspirations of current PhD students identifies that nearly half expect to work outside the tertiary sector; and of those that select higher education as a career, 40% expect to move abroad (Edwards, Bexley & Richardson, 2011).



This research supports the thesis that the recruitment and retention of high quality academic staff is 'the biggest issue confronting the sector over the next decade' (Bradley, 2008, p.24).



Many scholars of Australian higher education have identified that offering ongoing employment to some of the 67,000 sessional academics could contribute to an academic staffing solution (Coates & Goedegebuure, 2010; May et al, 2011; Ryan and Bhattacharyya, 2012)



This is supported by evidence that the majority of sessional staff have been employed casually within the same Higher Education (HE) institution for more than three years, are studying or have completed a higher degree by research (HDR), and are seeking full time ongoing academic employment (May et al., 2011).



Yet Coates et al (2009, p.30) note that it remains unclear whether ‘the current pool of casual staff would be sufficiently well prepared to take on a mainstream role’. More specifically, Ryan and Bhattacharyya maintain that sessional staff are ‘frequently excluded from the professional development opportunities that would allow them to form part of the solution to the shortages among tenured academics’ (2012, p.247)





What potential strategies are there to enhance sessional staff connectivity to the university they serve and support a cohesive L & T university culture?

discuss



Strategies for inclusion and development

Sessional staff representation on university committees;
Developing policies that are inclusive to sessional staff contribution and enhancement;
Establishing a sessional staff Community of Practice;
Building Course Coordinators' capacity for leadership in Learning and Teaching (including the mentoring and support of SS); and
Establishing a SS Mentoring or peer support program.

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