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Using workforce strategy to address academic casualisation: A University of Newcastle case study

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Casual and sessional academic staff have traditionally been on the margins of institutional life despite the expansion of this cohort across the university sector. This article details a project to address this lack of recognition through a workforce strategy to engage, support and effectively manage this often neglected cohort of the academic workforce. We discuss the learnings from the project and its potential application for other universities.

Keywords: casual / sessional academic staff; casualisation; distributed leadership; insecure work; precarious employment; The University of Newcastle; the UON Academy

Introduction

This paper explores workforce strategies to enhance the engagement, professional development, management and performance of casual and sessional academic staff. There are various terms used to describe this employment relationship internationally, such as ‘adjunct’, ‘visiting fellow’, ‘teaching associate’, ‘teaching assistant’, ‘sessional’, and ‘visiting faculty’. For the purpose of this paper, we use the term ‘casuals’ given its predominant use in Australia, and agree with the definition provided by Percy et al. (2008, p. 4) which states this cohort of academics ‘include any higher education instructors not in tenured or permanent positions. This includes part-time tutors or demonstrators, postgraduate students or research fellows involved in part-time teaching, external people from industry or professions, clinical tutors, casually employed lecturers or any other teachers employed on a course-by-course basis.’

As many authors have noted, the growth in student enrolments in the Australian university sector has seen a parallel expansion in the casual academic workforce – estimated at between 20 to 25 per cent (cf. Norton & Cherastidham, 2014; Bexley et al., 2013) – which now proportionally mirrors that of the overall Australian workforce (May, Strachan & Peetz, 2013; Pocock, Buchanan & Campbell, 2004). Some casually employed academic staff have become so entrenched in the university sector that they are effectively ‘permanent casuals’ (Pocock, Buchanan & Campbell, 2004). Australia is not alone in witnessing the rise of precarious forms of employment in academia, with comparable trends in many western countries.

While much of the debate in the literature has concerned the problematic nature of precarious employment in academia, notably its insecurity and poorer employment conditions, in recent times there has been a growing awareness of the potential impact of this workforce on

teaching quality, graduate outcomes, and the overall student experience. Traditionally on the margins of academic life, casual academic staff members deserve to be treated as a more integral part of the academic community, and universities stand to benefit by effectively marshalling their casual academic workforce to enhance an institution's overall teaching and research performance. We argue it is time for university management to develop targeted strategies to support and manage this workforce cohort.

In this paper we examine the current research on the employment conditions and contribution of casual academic staff and apply the findings to our own institution, the University of Newcastle (UON), hereafter described as 'the University', where casual academic staff make up approximately 22 per cent of the academic workforce. We outline the development of a systematic, university-wide workforce strategy to manage, support and enhance the contribution of our casual academic staff. First, we discuss what the literature has to say about precarious employment in the higher education sector. Second, we discuss best practice cases from the literature and develop a practical framework for the University's casual academic staff. Third, we present the key findings from broad organisational consultation that informed the development of the University's workforce strategy for casual academic staff—the UON Academy (hereafter referred to as 'the Academy'). Our findings highlight the need to redesign fundamental human resource processes and practices, improve physical space and support structures, and importantly build leadership capability in all of our staff to change organisational culture towards promoting a more supportive environment for casual academic employees. Finally, we consider how to ensure the sustainability of the University's Academy initiative.

De-standardisation of the Academic Profession

The increasing casualisation of academic work represents a significant change from the traditional way academic staff were employed, namely tenured, secure and often remaining in the one institution over an entire academic career. Edgell (2012, p. 148) refers to this widespread labour market trend as the 'destandardisation' of work, which he suggests has arisen 'due mainly to the competitive pressure for flexibility and the global adoption of information technology', echoing Beck (2000, p. 84) who argued that 'all around the world, flexible work and insecure terms of employment are growing faster than any other form of work'. In the academic context, the destandardisation trend has led to proportionally fewer tenured positions, which are increasingly supplanted by fixed-term and casual (hourly) forms of employment. Referencing the work of Rhoades (1998), Marginson (2000, p. 33) highlights the paradox of the marginalisation of casual academics:

The unstated deal is that as long as full-time tenured staff are left alone, those tenured staff will tolerate management's employment of part-time/casual staff at the 'margins'. But the 'margins' have grown so large, and are so centrally placed in key areas, that in practice in many institutions it is the tenured 'core' which is being marginalised.

We may be witnessing a Taylorist-style differentiation of the academic labour process, with complex tasks that were previously undertaken by full-time tenured staff, increasingly segregated into specialised forms of work undertaken by casual employees, such as 'teaching-only' roles, casualised marking assistants and course support staff (especially among online providers). The reasons underpinning the transformation of the academic profession through casualisation are complex and multifactorial, but key factors include the decline in public funding per student for universities and changing higher education public policy settings. Other factors include prescriptive Enterprise Agreements that limit organisational agility, growth of the research higher degree student cohort and the need for enhanced industry engagement with

access to staff with professional currency. One final factor is the intensification of research performance to improve university rankings in response to national and global competition (Probert, 2013; Bexley et al., 2013; Marginson, 2000).

While not supportive of the prevalence of academic casual and short-term contract staff, Bexley et al. (2013, p. 398) acknowledge that ‘a level of casualisation is both necessary and desirable for efficiencies and effectiveness (including for providing opportunities for HDR candidates and adjunct staff)’. Norton and Cherastidtham (2014, p. 34) also note that ‘for students, casual teaching staff can offer expertise – often from professional practice – that full-time academics lack’. They estimate that ‘a quarter of casual academic staff work outside the university sector. For aspiring academics studying for a PhD, casual teaching work helps them financially and gives them experience relevant to their future careers. About half of casually employed academics are also students, mostly in PhD programs’ (p. 34). Furthermore, casual appointments are often used to relieve some staff of teaching duties so that they can have increased time to undertake research (Probert, 2013).

Casual academic employment can be beneficial for those who choose to enhance their professional careers through teaching and where casual employment fits with professional and family life. Women in particular may choose, or may have no option other than, to take up casual academic work if they are primary carers. While beyond the scope of this paper, we acknowledge there is a clear gender dimension to academic casualisation, whereby women are overly represented in casual and fixed-term employment (Strachan, 2012).

The casualisation trend also involves considerable disadvantages, both for those aspiring to an academic career and for the nation generally. Casual employment *per se* can involve job insecurity, lack of career path, low pay, an absence of accrued leave benefits, working hours that are often irregular and unsociable, and a lack of status and visibility in the workplace. For those aspiring to an academic career, casual employment makes it difficult to start a family, obtain a mortgage or settle when you are precariously employed. In terms of the national interest, Australia’s desire to grow a knowledge economy relies on a highly educated workforce, many of whom are PhD qualified, but casualised employment for a substantial part of a graduate’s early career is hardly an effective or efficient use of their expertise and capacity. As Barcan (2013, p. 217) states:

The serious questions raised by academics about how healthy, viable and prosperous a life a prospective academic might have within a university are not arguments against, for example, massification. They are, rather, grave interrogations of the intellectual and personal sustainability of a mass system organised around exploitative labour, whether that be the precarious labour of the ever-increasing casual staff or the overwork of the diminishing tenured staff.

The requirements for Australian universities to improve efficiency, performance and productivity, the need to develop global partnerships and expand revenue streams, ensure innovation in technology-enabled learning and teaching, while driving research performance and reputation, have a direct impact on the structure of the academic workforce. Given that all universities rely significantly on casual academic staff, who can often be responsible for a large amount of the undergraduate teaching delivery (Percy et al. 2008), we argue that university management can no longer take this workforce cohort for granted; though identifying just what support and development academic casual staff require can be a challenging task.

The University of Newcastle experience: Addressing the heterogeneity of the casual academic workforce

In 2011, the University commissioned a review of its casual academic workforce to better understand this cohort. The review analysed a range of data including historical trends, segmentation of the casual academic workforce cohorts and performance indicators (e.g. student feedback on the teaching performance of casuals, as compared to that of ongoing staff). We also examined employment drivers and aspirations, length of service, and the provision of University facilities and services (e.g. induction, IT and library access). In addition, we reviewed training and development needs, career choices, and employment costs.

The review found the University casual academic workforce was heterogeneous and consisted of a number of distinct cohorts:

- Permanent casuals (staff employed over many years and often undertaking a high number of casual hours per week; some of whom sought academic careers and others that did not).
- Qualified academic job seekers (aspiring academics, often PhD qualified, but yet to secure full-time, ongoing employment).
- Research higher degree students (those both seeking an academic career and those not).
- Multiple job holders (undertaking various combinations of academic and non-academic work, who mostly did not seek a full-time academic career).
- External industry experts (full-time professionals in organisations outside academia).
- Self-employed professionals (using casual academic work as a supplement to their career).
- Retired academics (contributing to the academy in various ways, but not seeking full-time employment).

While the findings for the University of Newcastle were similar to other sector-based reports (e.g. Percy et al., 2008; Harvey, 2014), a majority of the University respondents indicated a preference to obtain full-time academic work. These employees became the initial focus of our workforce strategy.

In 2012, a high-level working group was established, involving the authors and the director of the University's Centre for Teaching and Learning, to address the opportunities, challenges and benefits of a structured and formalised support mechanism for casual academic staff. Input from the director was key in the creation and development of the University of Newcastle Academy, which was integrated as an initiative into the University's strategic plan, and subsequently its new enterprise agreement. The working group also proposed a charter that outlined the responsibilities of faculties and schools towards casual academic staff.

With the establishment of an Academy Advisory Group in 2014, composed of a wider range of members from across the institution, it became increasingly clear that there were two main streams for action. The first concerned practical components related to services, systems access and information. The second involved the clarity of leadership behaviours that would be required to ensure a sustainable cultural shift towards greater engagement, recognition and support for casual staff.

Attention to the industrial relations aspect of our academic workforce was considered at the early stages of the Academy project. The National Tertiary Education Union worked with the University's Enterprise Bargaining Team and industrial relations staff to identify the key issues and how the Academy would be included in *The University of Newcastle Academic Staff Enterprise Agreement 2014*. The endorsed Agreement states:

The University will establish the UON Academy during the first 12 months of this Agreement and will seek regular input and feedback from the Academic Staff Consultative Committee (ASCC) on its development and operation. The UON Academy aims to provide a systematic approach to the recruitment, induction, professional development, performance management, and recognition of casual academic staff. It will aim to ensure consistent employment practices, provide dedicated

human resources support, and be a conduit for effective communication with and between casual academic staff (p. 34).

The framework for the Academy was influenced primarily by the RED report (see Percy et al. 2008) as well as the Benchmarking Leadership and Advancement of Standards for Sessional Teaching (BLASST; see Harvey 2014) and the Coordinators Leading and Advancing Sessional Staff (CLASS; see Lefoe et al. 2011) reports. The RED report provided a range of case studies that addressed the common issues across the sector related to casual staff. The BLASST report built on the principles of the RED report and provided a Sessional Staff Standards Framework, which outlines criteria to measure outcomes in learning and teaching, management and administrative policy, and procedures and practices around casual academic staff. The CLASS report adds a further dimension by focussing on building leadership capability and capacity among subject coordinators. These are the frontline ongoing staff who manage and supervise the majority of casual academic employees within the sector. For the development of the Academy framework, the CLASS report highlighted the importance of distributed leadership as a prime focus for success.

In the RED report, Percy et al. (2008) identified five domains in which there is scope for improvements in managing and supporting the casual academic workforce:

1. *Systemic and Sustainable Policy and Practice:* Universities often lacked systemic and sustainable practices.
2. *Employment and Administration Support:* Support for casual academic staff was typically informally managed at the unit or school level with little human resources involvement.
3. *Induction and Academic Management:* The quality of induction practices for casual academic staff varied greatly; most focused only on policy requirements rather than on teaching and learning.
4. *Professional and Career Development:* Paid professional development for casual academic staff was rare (though some examples existed), and targeted career development schemes were often unavailable.
5. *Rewards and Recognition:* Many casual academic staff reported being under-valued by their universities. While some informal recognition practices existed at a number of universities, the RED report found there were few opportunities for casual academic staff to contribute to curriculum design, enhancement of teaching, or to develop their careers.

As Probert (2013) notes, the undervaluing of these casualised ‘teaching-only’ positions, compared to ‘research-only’ and the standard ‘teaching and research’ positions, is likely due to the fact ‘that teaching is perceived, overwhelmingly, as being awarded lower status than research’ (Probert, p. 37). To address this, Probert (p. 38) suggests that there is a ‘need to put in place definitions of good teaching, rigorous processes for assessing teaching quality, and the development of robust promotion criteria’.

Seen through the lens of the RED report’s five domains, it is fair to say that the University’s historical approach to managing its casual academic workforce needed considerable improvement. Recruitment practices, induction, management processes and payment for different duties were inconsistent across academic schools. Widespread organisational change in systems and culture were required and the Academy aimed to address all of these domains through a whole of institution workforce strategy.

Designing the Academy

The key elements of the Academy were refined and adapted as the project evolved. It is worth noting that a number of consultative mechanisms were found to be essential to engage stakeholders and ensure reforms were fit for purpose, including:

- Sector consultation (learning from what other institutions had attempted).
- Senior endorsement by the Vice-Chancellor and the University Executive Committee.
- Project sponsorship by an Executive Committee member (Germov, the second author of this paper) who reported regularly to the Executive Committee on Academy developments and championed the project across the university.
- Establishment of an Academy Advisory Group with wide cross-university representation, including the Pro Vice-Chancellor (Learning and Teaching), heads of school, the Centre for Teaching and Learning staff, faculty and school executive officers, course coordinators and representatives from Human Resource Services and the Union.

During the design process, a core work team led by the first author (Crawford) met individually with heads of school and directors to acquire a better understanding of the specific needs of each academic school in relation to casual staff, to identify existing good practices and to determine initiatives that would have the greatest potential impact. An outcome of these consultations was the need to clarify the goals of the Academy and to manage stakeholder expectations, which were formalised in the following four guiding principles, and proved invaluable during a range of meetings and workshops:

- Principle 1:* the University is committed to providing Academy members with a sense of inclusion and identity in the University community.
- Principle 2:* the University is committed to providing equitable and transparent employment conditions for Academy members.
- Principle 3:* the University is committed to the development of orientation and academic management guidelines that prepare and support Academy members and facilitate quality learning outcomes for students.
- Principle 4:* the University is committed to supporting the professional development of Academy members and to rewarding and recognising the overall contribution of Academy members to the University.

The principles speak to a whole of institution approach. They express the University's intent to address a fundamental workforce issue—the fair treatment and proper recognition of casual academic staff.

Key Features of the University Academy

The Academy was established in order to implement a systematic approach to the recruitment, career development, performance management, recognition and professional support for casual academic staff. All casual academic staff are automatically members of the Academy, the key features of which are listed below and then discussed in turn:

- Resourcing, Physical Space, and Business Process Improvements
- Recruitment
- Orientation, Induction and Professional development
- Academy Website
- Communication and Engagement
- Distributed Leadership.

Resourcing, Physical Space, and Business Process Improvements

Casual academic staff had reported their frustration at being ‘cut-off’ from access to key systems at the end of the year when they were trying to complete marking and enter student results, only to be reinstated a couple of months later if they were offered further casual employment. Access to IT and Library systems for a full calendar year (with an additional three-month grace period) was established for casual academic staff as one of the first outcomes of the Academy. This improvement came as a result of cross-unit collaboration between areas responsible for the University’s IT and library services and human resources, and proved to be far more complex than initially envisaged.

A further ‘quick win’ was achieved by making a funding allocation available to each academic school to be spent on requested improvements following consultation with their casual staff. The range of approved grants included refurbishment to spaces and facilities used by casual staff, expansion of hot desks, access to laptops for loan, access to printers and laser pointers, lockers for storage, pilot funds for research grants, professional development workshops, end of year reward and recognition events, and opportunities to network with other staff in a school.

During the course of these activities, especially once the physical space improvements commenced, some ongoing academic staff questioned why we were apparently prioritising improvements for casual staff over them. This caused us to revise our communication strategy, which had focussed on promoting the Academy to casual staff, rather than simultaneously communicating the benefits to ongoing staff and other members of the broader University community. We also recognised the critical importance of partnering with heads of schools and school executive officers to implement certain Academy initiatives that addressed their key concerns, such as improved casual payment and appointment processes, which served to lessen the administrative burden. This resulted in a closer working relationship with key stakeholders at the school level.

Recruitment

The recruitment of casual staff was found to be varied and fragmented across the university. Often this relied on decisions made by subject coordinators with little supervisor oversight—put simply, there was no standard recruitment process for casual staff across the organisation. A business improvement manager was assigned to the Academy project to map the current recruitment practices for casual staff. Even though schools confirmed that their recruitment processes were resource intensive and inefficient, there was a reluctance for schools to change these processes. However, two schools agreed to pilot a new recruitment process for casual academic staff. The new approach introduced rigour and transparency into the casual recruitment process and was progressively implemented throughout 2015.

Orientation, Induction and Professional Development

Relevant and accessible induction and orientation processes for casual staff were found to be an area requiring significant improvement. An orientation e-book was developed and reviewed by stakeholders, to supplement and render consistent any local school and discipline induction processes where they existed.

During the formation of the Academy, extensive consultation and collaboration with the Centre for Teaching and Learning occurred. This resulted in the customisation of existing teaching resources to best meet the needs of casual academic staff; obtaining examples of best practice teaching to share on the Academy website; enhancement of teaching support and guidance, including access to online modules to support casual staff to teach and assess their

courses. Existing processes to obtain student survey feedback on teaching and courses as well as peer review and mid-semester feedback, were also made available to Academy members.

The UON Academy Website: www.newcastle.edu.au/current-staff/teaching-and-research/uon-academy

A dedicated Academy website was established as one of the key resources for our casual academic staff. The Academy website includes support guides for information technology and human resources systems; procedural and policy advice; professional development information; links to teaching resources; orientation information; information on pay, contracts and timesheets; and links to the Faculty librarians for resources and assistance where needed.

Communication and Engagement

Finding effective ways to communicate and engage with casual staff has been a key element to embedding the Academy. As noted in both the RED and CLASS reports, many casual staff do not utilise the staff email account that is available to them, which makes communication with this cohort difficult. The initial plan was to establish an institution-wide Academy e-mail list, however this was not feasible at that time and the school executive officers agreed to be the distribution point for information to casual staff in their respective schools. To communicate effectively with Academy members, we developed a quarterly newsletter presenting key information for casual staff, including professional development opportunities and examples of best practice case studies involving current casual staff.

Presentations were scheduled with key leadership groups, such as the Heads of School group, to promote the Academy and its benefits. It is worth noting that during the Academy project we encountered a certain disinterest from some ongoing staff about the Academy and its purpose, especially the value of improving the employment conditions for casual staff. It reinforced the fact outlined earlier: that despite their number, casual staff are often invisible and under-valued in terms of their workload and performance. Given our experience, we broadened our communication and engagement work to encompass frontline academic staff. The challenge was to shift the culture through engagement and leadership at all levels of our workforce.

Distributed Leadership: Course Co-ordinators and Program Convenors

Shared leadership models and their relevance to higher education have been discussed by researchers in Australia and overseas (Jones 2014; Davis 2014; Jones et al. 2012; Bolden 2011). Jones argues that a distributed leadership model, which does not replace hierarchical leadership, offers an effective approach to build leadership capability in the higher education sector. According to Jones (2014, p. 132), the components of distributed leadership include:

a context that frames distributed leadership built on respect rather than regulation; a culture and values based on trust that supports individual autonomy; an acceptance of the need for change and development; a focus on activity undertaken collectively rather than by individual leaders in formal (structured) positions; and agreement by participants on mechanisms designed to resolve conflict given the participation of more people in a distributed leadership approach. Despite this emphasis on collective engagement of non-formal leaders, theorists have emphasised that distributed leadership is not a replacement for, but rather an addition to, formal leaders.

During the implementation of the University's current strategic plan, a Leadership Framework was developed, which outlines the capabilities and behaviours expected of staff at all levels of the university. The key premise of the framework is that of distributed leadership

as described by Jones, whereby forms of leadership can be exercised at all levels of the organisation. That is, leadership is not solely the remit of the senior executive. The Leadership Framework has been embedded in a variety of areas including recruitment processes, performance review and development processes, performance expectations frameworks and academic promotion processes. This Leadership Framework underpinned our approach to the Academy and also aligned well with insights drawn from the CLASS project. This highlights the importance of enhancing the leadership and support provided by subject co-coordinators, programme convenors, and school executive officers, who recruit, coordinate and manage casual staff on a day-to-day basis. Ensuring this group of ongoing staff have the necessary awareness, support and capability can have the greatest impact on improving the experience of the casual academic workforce.

During the consultation process, we witnessed outstanding examples of leadership from course co-ordinators and casual staff who took action to improve teaching quality and enhance the student experience. For instance, in one case, a course coordinator, head of school and two casual tutors worked collaboratively to introduce innovation to an undergraduate degree, which challenged conventional approaches. This was done by taking a less prescriptive group approach to learning to reflect a more industry-oriented model of collaborative working, and was used to support research outcomes among staff and students. Student attendance and engagement improved as a result, which was reflected in highly positive student feedback. This example demonstrates the distributed leadership model that creates leadership from a number of directions: top-down, bottom-up and middle-out (Jones 2014). That said, we are aware that embedding cultural change and reforming long established habitual practices, in terms of addressing the status, treatment, and involvement of casual academic staff, will take sustained effort over a number of years.

Conclusion: Embedding Cultural Change

Early indications show that the Academy is an instrument of cultural change. We have seen changes in attitudes and practices towards our casual academic staff which at the commencement of the project appeared difficult to achieve. Crucial to the success of this university-wide strategy was strong senior executive commitment to the project as well as widespread stakeholder consultation, including collaboration with local Union representatives. Without doubt, senior executive support was a key determinant of successfully developing and implementing the Academy model at the University. Challenges remain in endeavouring to change poor organisational culture and practices.

Increasingly, the university sector relies on casual academic staff to teach and support research. Historically, this cohort of staff has been on the periphery of university life, but their growing number suggests the need to address this group of employees as a distinct and important employee cohort. We have argued that this need is best served by an institution-wide workforce strategy championed by senior executive staff.

The Academy is a project-in-progress that endeavours to recognise the significant contribution of casual academic staff by ensuring this cohort is integrated, supported and rewarded through practices and processes. A key feature of the University's approach has been a focus on distributed leadership behaviours, detailed in the Leadership Framework, and embedded in the performance expectations of all staff. The Academy represents a significant cultural shift in terms of philosophy and practice. A large project for future research is an evaluation of the impact the Academy has on shifting an organisation's culture. Mapping the components of the Academy against a distributed leadership model represents an opportunity for future analysis.

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