

How Do We Assess the Impact Sessional Staff have on the Student Experience?

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Sarah joined VUs HR Department in February 2004 as a Senior Project Officer with responsibility for the development and implementation of HR policies and projects. Key achievements in this role included the development of the Staff Code of Conduct in 2005, implementation of a University-wide staff performance and development planning framework in 2006, and the preparation of VUs application for Workplace Productivity Program funding in 2007. Sarah was the Manager of the Workforce Policy and Projects area within HR between 2007 and 2009 before Acting as General Manager HR Advisory Services for 12 months. In September 2010, she took up the newly-created role of HR Strategist which aims to provide high level strategic planning methodology and advice on workforce policies, initiatives and strategies in developing a contemporary HR function for the University. She currently oversees the sessional staff research project.

Sue is drawing toward the completion of her PhD in specialising in development and growth strategies within organisations and has used methods relevant to those outlined in this research project. She has published and presented at teaching and learning conferences in the area of professional development and the impact of globalisation on professionals. She currently works as a research officer at Victoria University, focusing on research into sessional staff experiences and teachers in Graduate Certificate courses at RMIT

The majority of first year university student teaching is performed by sessional staff. At the same time, contestability is now urging all universities to focus on enhancing the quality of the 'student experience' and in particular student engagement. Is then the student experience impacted by the nature of their teacher's employment (ie sessional or continuing) and, in turn, the teachers' level of their own engagement with the institution? How is the level of student engagement measured by the sessional teacher? Is there a correlation between the level of managerial support provided to sessional staff and the experience of the students of that sessional teacher? Or is a student's experience more closely impacted by the individual teacher's level of expertise, contemporary knowledge and/or personal approach to student engagement irrespective of the nature of their employment?

Some research to date has indicated that the "risk" of employing sessional academics lies not in the sessionals themselves but in the processes and policies that a university employs to manage them (Ryan 2011). Using interview data from a new university, this paper explores the ways in which sessional employment may impact, if at all, on the quality of learning and teaching and, in turn, the student experience. The paper also discusses the dimensions of what is commonly considered 'good practice' when managing and engaging sessional staff and the challenges of applying a 'one size fits all' good practice model across different areas. A key finding from the research to date is that the traditional 'good practice' models cannot be universally applied to support the relationships sessional staff need to have with their students.

A number of sessional staff and managers of sessional staff from a cross-section of university faculties were interviewed and it was found that each of these 2 cohorts place a different emphasis on what they consider important when monitoring the quality of their practices and engagement of their students. Those factors the managers and sessional staff of the university considered to be key to good practice and critical to improving the student experience were also compared to those factors measured by the Australian Survey of Student Engagement (ACER 2011).

The findings are considered in the context of reconceptualising academic work and initiatives to achieve the 'right blend' of academic staff to maximize the student experience. In summary, what was discovered was that in terms of quality and in terms of what was considered 'good practice' there were differences across disciplines, between sessional staff and their managers and between the university case-studied and broader global measures of quality. The challenge is to provide an innovative and strategic approach to supporting and managing sessional staff that draws on integral theory and targets the diverse range of sessional requirements so that ultimately the student experience is markedly enhanced.