Supporting sessional staff to achieve positive student learning outcomes

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Sessional staff nos

- Aust tertiary sector reflecting international trends
- Increased
  - from 10.8% of full time (F/T) staff in 1993
  - to 15.% in 2005 (estimated 14,231 staff: DEST, 2005)
  - NTEU (2007): risen by 34% 1996-2004 (cf 6% tenured)
- Over decade 1995 to 2005 (DEST, 2005)
  - Sessionals increased by 54% (from 9,249 to 14,231)
  - while F/T staff only >9% (from 64,349 to 70,123)
  - fractional staff >44% (from 7,157 to 10,341)
  - NB esp sessional > of 18.2% in 1998-2000 (DETYA, 2001)
What are the issues?

- Need to manage possible (mis)match
  - First time [FY!!] teacher with FY student
- Professional development of sessional teachers being addressed in US, UK and Aust
- How to recruit; then support & assure quality of sessional experience
  - Assure experience for *both* staff and students
- Facilitate their acculturation into contemp HE
  - Generally and re changed & changing sectoral imperatives
Is it otherwise important?

- Industrial issues (equity, gendered nature, exploitation potential, pay, *etc*)
- Diversity re both motivations & cohort make-up
- Clear pedagogical concern re student experience and for professionalism of tertiary teaching
  - Complex L&T agenda – including:
    - Student engagement/student centred
    - Curriculum renewal around a range of drivers
    - Pervasiveness of ICTs
    - Increased participation /massification
    - Diversity of cohort
Why are sessionals increasingly important?

• Because they can make or break the student experience
  – They are one of the “everyone’s” (whose QA business it is!!).
• Sector changing so dynamically, no matter when they were last at Uni it WILL now be different
• Often have an assessment responsibility (possibly from Day 1 if tutorial participation)
• Is make or break for our selling new T&L agenda given their role as frontline providers (esp in the FYE)
  – Can have a critical impact on students’ perceptions of program objectives
  – For PT students they may be “the (only) Face”
FY context

- **For many FY students**
  - First point of personal contact often sessional tutor.

- **For many sessionals**
  - FY is where they first teach

- Greatest need for tutor training in FY where students vulnerable (Barrington, 1999)

  - Criticised FY small group teaching
  - Thought that < half tutors “good at explaining”
  - Only 53% thought teachers were enthusiastic
  - Sense of injustice re “lottery” of tutor quality

Has improved over last decade

Teaching ideas, guidelines, checklists, resources and case studies
**ALSO re importance**

- **Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA)**
  - Flinders audited in August 2006
- **New Carrick Project commissioned ($200K)** –
  - Recognition, development and enhancement of the contribution of sessional teachers to teaching and learning: a suite of resources for policy-makers, professional developers, faculty, and sessional teachers
  - Recognising “immense contribution” of sessional staff
- **Parallels b/w FY sessional teacher & FY student**
  - Eg: diversity, expectations, motivations, desire to harness enthusiasm and goodwill, sense of belonging
How to support sessionals and improve student experience

• Balance training, support & management of this diverse cohort with economic reality of use as cheaper alternative for program delivery in climate of reduced funding, larger student numbers of increasing complexity and diversity.

Four heads

1. Quality
2. Standard teaching and learning support
4. Shift to institutional assimilation and sense of belonging

Quality – Good Practice (1)

- **Policy initiatives**
  - *Both* administrative and procedural *and* substantive
    - eg QUT Law Faculty – *Sessional Academic Staff Guide – Administrative Procedures*
      - Practical and admin issues – helpful tips and completed proformas
    - eg QUT Law Faculty – *Policy on Sessional Academic Staff* which states…
      the Faculty’s position in relation to the recruitment, support and development of its sessional academics

- **Staff development**
  - Ideally three levels – Institutional (eg FLOSS & FEAST here at Flinders), Faculty, Unit/course
QUT Law Faculty Policy on Sessional Academic Staff
Old version at http://www.tedi.uq.edu.au/sessionalteaching/

Policy on casual academic staff

QUT Faculty of Law

1. Introduction

The Faculty of Law recognises that casual staff play an important role in the delivery of its undergraduate and postgraduate programs. The purpose of this policy is to state the Faculty’s position in relation to the recruitment, support and development of its casual academic staff. In so doing, this policy recognises that different issues arise in respect of casual staff employed in the undergraduate and postgraduate programs.

A copy of this policy should be distributed to all full time and casual academic staff.

2. Undergraduate Programs

Policy on Sessional Academic Staff provides for -

- appointment or nomination into pool of approved candidates prior to specific appointment to unit

- Mutual obligations that exist b/w Sessionals & Faculty re:
  - Training and staff development;
  - Communication and mentoring;
  - Resourcing and support; and

- Quality assurance processes re on-going review of teaching performance (now also QUT Policy).
2. Standard L&T support and training

- **Hard and soft resources**: Banal issues not worth dissipating goodwill on – e.g.:
  - Teaching tools such as text books; study guides; tutor answer guides & lessons plans [to reduce student lottery]; assessment criteria & standards; marking guides; *etc*.
  - eg, IT & LMS access; e-mail; pigeon holes; locker/room

- **Standard Teacher Training**: Information about, and (ideally) some practice in, teaching and assessing (eg, re facilitating small group learning in all of its diversity and complexity; how to provide good formative feedback; etc)
3. “New agenda” T&L imperatives

• Recognises that changed external drivers have caused
dynamic shifts in HE curriculum design and in L,T & A: eg-
  – Student-focussed agenda
  – Courses restructured & learning objectives redefined to
    meet changing govt, student and employer demands
  – Graduate attribute/skills development
  – Development of on-line L&T (LMSs)
  – The contemporary nature of the student learning
    experience and their reality
• All must be made explicit b/c they exacerbate traditional
  issues and will likely be different from when many
  sessionals were students
Staff Development Programs at QUT

- **At University Level** (like your FLOSS and FEAST)
  - Office of DVC(A) and L&T Support Services present “QUT Sessional Academic Programs [SAP] ” twice yearly see http://www.talss.qut.edu.au/staff/staffdev/developTeach/sap.jsp
  - Mixture of sessions and staff paid to attend
  - Introductory and advanced levels with Faculty component

- **At Faculty Level**
  - Most Assistant Deans (L&T) have developed specific training programs for induction of new sessional teachers
  - Eg in Law – condition of employment and paid to attend

- **At Unit Level**
  - Induction to unit – its place in overall program, philosophy, L,T & A approaches
  - Some Faculties standardised to pay extra week to support 3 attendances
For example: Law Faculty Program addresses
(and provides materials/resources on):

- The contemporary legal & justice education environment;
- Introduction to changing patterns of student engagement and “the student experience”
- The LT & A philosophy of the Faculty;
- Assessment and feedback expectations of teachers (with examples of good practice feedback provided);
- Introduction to the use of formal teaching evaluation tools;
- How to facilitate an effective tutorial; and
- A workshop simulation of tutorial best practice and strategies.
Sessionals’
“main concerns about assessing students”

- “Giving **constructive feedback** to enhance knowledge and learning”;
- “How to be **fair and equitable** in assessing the students... especially tutorial participation”; “**being fair**”;
- “**Being objective** when marking assessment – knowing students semester performance which may be poor/good”;
- “**Consistency** of marking”; “Assessment and allocation of marks and consistency across tutorials”;
- “Explicit statements about **performance criteria**”; Vague criteria”;
- “Marking exams for subjective answer questions”; 
- “Grading standards in Group Assessment”
Re assessment, training session covered:

- Some aspects of assessment theory;
- Intro to assessment terminology;
- Discussion re types of assessment tasks in Faculty;
- Examination of assessment criteria & standards for sample assessment tasks;
- Consideration of various feedback mechanisms *with* samples of good practice: eg samples of
  - completed CRA Sheet;
  - individualised assignment feedback page;
  - general feedback on assessment task posted on on-line site.
- Brief look at examination marking; and
- Reference to obligations in relation to academic dishonesty (ie, suspected cheating or plagiarism).

- More recently team work
Well received…
Participants particularly appreciated:

- “The broad cross section of issues covered”; “Eye opening!”
- “The time for audience discussion”; “The open forum for suggestions and criticism”; “Finding out about our concerns”;
- “Actual strategies provided, not just theories”; “Addressed real issues I have encountered.”; “Practical applications made effective practical demonstrations – good mix with theory”;
- “My key concerns – fairness and consistency in assessment, and providing feedback – were well addressed”; “Real problems well addressed”; “Gave comfort”/ “Alleviated concerns”
- “Relevant”; “Very comprehensive handout – including examples, thanks!”; “Example handouts”; “Useful handouts”.
- “Contact with other tutors”; “[I] left with a feeling of confidence and motivation”
4. Institutional Assimilation & Sense of Belonging

- All of above re philosophical and academic belonging *but also* institutional belonging
- Sessional teachers’ experience a lot like FYE!!
  - Many feel isolated, peripheral and unsupported
- Sensible to facilitate inclusivity
  - Manage & harness various aspirations
  - Many are our ambassadors in professional workplace
- Consider including sessionals in policy discussion and formulation of strategy; on committees; in grants; etc
Some ideas around facilitating inclusivity

- Mentoring b/w teaching team members
- Sharing unit evaluations and seeking views to improve offerings
- Provide incentives to attend conferences
- Involve in teaching initiatives
- Provide networking opportunities
- Institute teaching recognition awards for sessionals
- End of year function/letter from Dean to thank and seek feedback
- Invite to join research group/ participate in collaborative research projects
Conclusion

• Many of generic issues for sessionals brought to a head when asked to assess and provide feedback

• Hope to move beyond the old model that:
  ...selected [staff] on the minimum qualifications of availability and past experience; [where] they are given guidance in only administrative matters, but not pedagogy and are seen as a form of cost-saving, semi-skilled labour (Barrington, 1999 citing Davids, 1994).

• Distinction between sessional and on-going increasingly irrelevant

• This also a model for providing much-needed support on assessment for (cf of) learning
Thank-you for listening

Questions, Comments, Discussion, Ideas...