

Views from the front line: insights into the role and commitment of casual business academics

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| Reviewer's comments | Changes made |
|---|-----------------------------|
| Are focus group members included in survey? | Clarified in method section |
| No of casuals in focus groups should be stated. | Stated in method section |
| More explanation of how objective relate to what was measured | Clarified |
| Were focus group results used to design questionnaire? | Clarified |
| Enhancement of literature review | Minor changes only |

Views from the front line: insights into the role and commitment of casual business academics

ABSTRACT

Casual academic staff contribute significantly to the teaching load in many universities worldwide including Australia. However, their contribution and work needs are not always fully recognised. The aim of the research reported here was to investigate the role and support needs of casual academic teaching staff within a business faculty of an Australian metropolitan university. Data was collected through the conduct of three focus groups consisting of casual academics from the faculty and the administration of a questionnaire survey (N=106). The results showed that casual academic had a number of concerns most of which had been reported in the literature. Pay rates were generally considered not to have kept pace with workload, most casuals did not feel part of the faculty and some casuals found teaching classes with high proportions of overseas students challenging. Despite these and other concerns the general level of job satisfaction among survey respondents was high. It was clear that most enjoyed their teaching role. The relationship between casual academics their full-time academic subject coordinators was clearly very important. Satisfaction levels with coordinator support were generally high and perhaps the strength of these relationships is the glue that helps the casual teaching system to work reasonably smoothly.

Keywords: Employee involvement, Human resource development, Personnel management, Professional development, Business schools

INTRODUCTION

Casual academic staff contribute significantly to the teaching load in many universities worldwide including Australia. However, "the invisible faculty" (Gappa & Leslie, 1993), a term that has been used to describe casual academics, points to a lack of recognition, and perhaps understanding, of the contribution made by casual academics. The overall aim of the research reported here was to investigate the role and support needs of casual academic teaching staff – abbreviated to casuals – within a business faculty of an Australian metropolitan university.

This research is important for the following reasons. First, the faculty employs a large number of casuals. Second, the profile of casuals has changed. Casuals have long played an important role in the faculty's teaching program. Historically, they brought their practical expertise into the classroom. This is still the case today, with most of the faculty's casuals - around 60 per cent – being either salaried professionals or self-employed. However, as the profile of the University has evolved, so too has the profile of casuals. Research has assumed a more prominent role over the years. PhD programs are a much more important feature of the faculty than was the case, say, two or three decades back. Postgraduate students currently make up a significant proportion (over 20%) of casual teaching staff in the faculty. Third, competitive forces are mandating changes to improve the selection and support of casuals. Student evaluations of subjects, courses and institutions are used in the media for comparison purposes. Accreditation of business

schools by bodies like the AACSB (The Association of Advanced Collegiate Schools of Business) is gaining momentum and conditions of compliance include issues related to casuals. Lastly, service literature suggests that appropriate support for front-line workers, like casual, can enhance their performance, which in turn contributes to student satisfaction and hence to increased competitiveness (Heskett et al. 1995). Understanding the needs of casuals is a pre-cursor to providing suitable support. This paper describes the development and administration of a survey of casuals employed by the faculty. A review of literature related to the employment of casual academics is first presented. This is followed by a description of the methodology used in the research, the main findings, a discussion of these findings and the main conclusions drawn from the research. Plans to extend the research are also presented.

LITERATURE REVIEW

"The Invisible Faculty" is the title of a book (Gappa & Leslie, 1993) aimed at improving the status of part-time academic staff in higher education in the United States of America. It is one of the most widely cited publications on the status of part-time academic teachers. Its title captures the essence of how casual academic staff are seen and see themselves. They often perceive themselves to be invisible in the sense of being second-class citizens of their academic communities. Commonly they experience themselves as separate from full-time faculty and largely excluded from the mainstream culture of the academic unit (Jacobs, 1998).

Educational institutions such as American community colleges and Canadian universities have explored problems associated with the employment of casuals (eg. State Council for Higher Education in Virginia, 1998; Farran, 2007). Issues commonly explored include growth in the employment of and growing dependence on casuals, factors influencing the hiring and retention of casual staff (Pearch & Marutz, 2005), problems associated with the employment and management of casual staff and the general problem of helping increase the effectiveness of casual teaching staff (Jacobs, 1998). Farran (2007) quotes data from the American Association of University Professors to point out that the proportion of tenured and tenure-track academic staff at U.S. universities has dropped from 57% to 35% since the 1970s with a corresponding increase in the proportion of casual staff employed.

In Australia a similar pattern is found. The increasing proportion of casuals in the Australian workforce has been an issue of general concern for some time. Watters et al (1996) point to the growing importance of part-time academic staff, the flexibility they offer the labor market, the growing need for universities to address their professional and career aspirations and the lack of information regarding their qualifications, background, motivation for teaching, teaching abilities and concerns regarding their employment and

teaching performance. Along with many writers in this field these authors refer to the nomenclature problem associated with a category of staff variously known as part-time academics, sessional teachers, casual teaching staff and a variety of more specific descriptors which vary between disciplines. As Langenberg (1998, p.43) succinctly put it, the one thing that they have in common is that "They are all defined by what they are not: they are not "regular" faculty".

Casual employment is sometimes seen as a transitional phase to full-time employment (Productivity Commission, 2006) but other commentators have emphasised the disadvantages casual academics face in comparison with those in more permanent positions and indeed a few individual casual teachers have written about their experiences in critical terms (Berry, 2003). A common concern for institutions is that many part-time staff suffer from a lack of recognition for the contributions they make to teaching and learning and the generally low status of adjunct faculty (Greisler, 2002). A report for the Australian University Teaching Committee – now the Carrick Institute – suggests that the casualisation of the teaching workforce in Australian universities has not been handled well at the level of the institution and criticises the management and development of casual teaching staff in Australian universities (Herbert et al., 2002). Australian and overseas literature on universities' use of casual teaching staff is in general agreement that the high level of use and strong growth of this category of staff is "here to stay" and that much needs to be done to ascertain what support should be offered so that casually employed teachers can make effective contributions to university teaching (Watters et al., 1996).

The need to come to terms with the problems of managing casual teaching staff has been addressed in a number of Australian universities. Watters et al (1996) and Nicolettou & Flint (2004) addressed the questions of training, supporting and generally integrating casual teaching staff with full-time faculty members. A specific example is the University of New South Wales which, in its Sessional Teaching Staff Strategic Action Plan, suggests that support processes exist in some schools and faculties and that some of these could be exemplars for other units within the University. The strategic plan includes checklists for implementation of policy vis-a-vis sessional staff. Other universities have developed or are in the process of developing Web sites to support sessional staff and printed handbooks which address the information needs of casual staff. It seems that the management of casual teaching staff is mostly being addressed on an institution by institution basis and, in some cases, on a faculty to faculty basis. Herbert et al. (2002) reports on a joint project conducted by two Brisbane universities and commissioned by the then Australian University Teaching Committee (AUTC).

The AUTC report found no current examples where universities as a whole were providing a unified approach to the support and management of casual teaching staff. It is mostly left up to schools, departments and individuals such as subject co-ordinators and heads of schools. In our university the business faculty is by far the largest in terms of student enrolments and the biggest user of casual teaching staff. As is the case with most universities in Australia, we have a central unit devoted to the promotion of good teaching and effective learning throughout the University but it is not known to what extent its services are used by or even known to the several hundred casual lecturers employed each year by the faculty. We have found ourselves in a situation experienced by many other institutions -- not knowing much about the attitudes, concerns, satisfactions, and motivations of the casual workforce on which we rely so much. Of particular interest is the issue of the commitment level of casual staff as compared with full-time academics, a question recently addressed by Joiner and Bakalis (2006).

METHOD

The review of the literature outlined above identified a wide range of issues and variables that were relevant to the research. To confirm the relevance of these issues in the context of the faculty and to identify any additional ones, three focus group sessions were conducted. Each focus group consisted of a mix of casuals from the five teaching schools in the faculty. There was a total of 23 participants in the three focus groups. The focus group meetings lasted about one hour and a semi-structured format was used to make sure major issues were addressed. The sessions were voice recorded, transcribed and then subjected to content analysis to identify the main themes.

Drawing on the literature and the information from the three focus groups, a survey questionnaire was designed to collect a significant amount of data from the population of current and recent casual academic staff. The final questionnaire which included a total of eighty five questions was constructed as follows: Part A consisted of seven sections organised thematically e.g. recruitment and support; workload and pay. Each section included a number of items related to that theme requiring a response on a seven point agreement scale from 1 = strongly disagree to 7 = strongly agree. Each section also provided space for respondents to make comments.

Part B measured organisational commitment using the 23 item scale developed by Meyer and Allen (1997) and recently used in research into casual academics at an Australian university by Joiner and Bakalis (2006). This instrument measures commitment in three separate components – affective commitment (“I like to work here”), continuance commitment (“I need to work here”) and normative commitment (“I should work here”).

Part C measured casuals’ job satisfaction.

Part D consisted of 19 demographic questions and a final open-ended question soliciting suggestions for improving the teaching performance of casual staff.

Questionnaires were mailed out, together with a reply-paid return envelope, to 305 casual academic staff and 106 usable returns were received; a response rate of 35%. Participants in the three focus groups were included in the questionnaire mail out. Questionnaire returns were anonymous. Most of the questionnaire returns (72%) were from respondents who had taught in the semester in which the survey was administered. Quantitative data from the questionnaire survey was analysed using SPSS. NVivo was used to help analyse the qualitative data from the questionnaire survey and the focus groups.

RESULTS

A selection of the key results are presented in this paper. Details of the respondents are presented first followed by results related to key themes contained in part A of the questionnaire. To gain a preliminary understanding of relationships between variable correlation analysis is presented. Two data reduction exercises using factor analysis within SPSS were undertaken on items to form most of the variable used in the correlation analysis. These data reduction procedures are explained in more detail below. A considerable amount of qualitative data was collected from the focus groups and from the questionnaire responses which generally supported and illuminated the quantitative findings.

Details of Respondents

The average age of the 106 questionnaire respondents was 43 years and 36% were females. Casuals were made up of salaried industry professionals (38%), self employed (21%), postgraduate students (21%), career academics (11%), semi-retired academics (5%) and others (4%). The highest formal academic qualification of most casuals was a master’s degree (49%), followed by a bachelor’s degree (36%); 7 per cent had doctorates. For a little over 80 percent, their highest degree was in their teaching field.

Workload and Pay

Most respondents believed that they do more work than they are paid for, but rated the faculty surveyed as generally comparable to other institutions in terms of remuneration. The amount of work needed to support teaching, especially marking, was clearly a contentious issue. Data provided by casuals on their yearly workload revealed that on average approximately 1.5 hours was spent on activities to support their teaching, like preparations and marking, for every hour of face-to-face teaching. Although, not surprisingly, due to the variety of teaching activities (e.g. lectures, tutorials) there was considerable variation in this figure across questionnaire respondents.

Teaching

The results relating to teaching suggest a strong general perception among casuals that there are non-pecuniary benefits from teaching, such as the benefit of interaction with students and colleagues and so on. Most casuals believed that training and development opportunities in the faculty were not totally adequate. Nevertheless, nearly 80% indicated they had "well-developed skills for managing students in the classroom". These two responses suggest a strong level of self confidence in the classroom despite the absence of training and development opportunities. The fact that most respondents had considerable practical teaching experience (an average of 5 years) may have contributed to this perception.

The proportion of international student in the faculty has increased significantly in recent years. The response to the statement: "I enjoy teaching classes which have a high proportion of international students" drew a diverse response from casuals. Some respondent liked the challenges involved, while clearly others did not. There was good evidence that the changing student mix had impacted on teaching strategies. Approximately three quarters of respondents agreed with the statement that: "I have had to adjust my teaching style to take account of the high proportion of international students".

Are classes too big for effective teaching? There were mixed views on the issue, although slightly towards the negative i.e. classes are too big.

Role Clarity

Casuals were generally clear about the core requirements of their roles such as understanding the duties for which they were being paid. They were less clear on some specific issues such as the degree to which the faculty makes teaching and assessment standards explicit. Marking standards however seemed to be quite clearly understood with over 80 per cent of respondents agreeing with the statement: "I have a good understanding of assignment marking standards in my subject". Rather surprisingly, as it is a complex issues for full-time academic staff, dealing with plagiarism was reported to be well understood by about two thirds of casuals.

Support from Subject Coordinator

Generally casuals had very positive perceptions about support from their subject coordinators. Nearly 80% agreed that the coordinator encourages their input into subject development. Over 90 per cent agreed that they received appropriate support from their coordinator. Nearly 90 per cent agreed their coordinator was easy to contact and 70 per cent disagreed with the statement that: "Sometimes there are things I would like to tell my subject coordinator but I fear not being invited to teach again". There were very few negative comments about subject coordinators and it clear the relationship between casual and coordinator was both very important and a strength in the faculty.

Recognition and Involvement

Generally casuals perceived a low level of involvement in the faculty and did not really feel part of "the family". They wanted the faculty to do more to recognise their contribution and seemed willing to participate more in faculty affairs if given the opportunity. Most respondents were keen to have increased interaction with both full-time staff and other casuals.

Correlation Analysis

Data reduction was carried out on the 39 items in part A of the survey questionnaire. This was to establish a set of robust variables, based on the data collected, (rather than the general thematic grouping used to organise part A of the questionnaire) to use in further multivariate analysis. Factor analysis using principal component extraction and then varimax rotation was conducted. New variables were formed from items loading significantly on factors. Negatively worded items were reverse coded and items that did not make sense in terms of the meaning of a variable being formulated were omitted. The internal consistency of items making up each variable was evaluated by calculating Cronbach's Alpha (for an explanation of Cronbach's Alpha see for example Cortina 1993). Table 1 provides details of the variables formed for part A items using the above procedure.

Table 1. Details of variables

| Variable name | Description | No. of items | Cronbach's Alpha |
|----------------------|--|---------------------|-------------------------|
| Belonging | Recognition, participation, communications, a culture that embraces casuals | 6 | 0.878 |
| Student standards | Standards declining | 2 | 0.777 |
| General support | Student feedback, administrative support, training and development opportunities | 5 | 0.734 |
| Coordinator support | Adequacy of support and encouragement to participate in subject development | 3 | 0.848 |
| Classroom facilities | Classroom preparation, audio visual facilities | 2 | 0.821 |
| Teaching skills | Ability to manage students, knowledge of standards | 3 | 0.636 (rather low) |
| Pay satisfaction | Pay in relation to workload, pay compared to other institutions | 2 | 0.631 (rather low) |

Table 2. Correlations between variables described in Table 1

| | Belonging | Student standards | Gen. support | Coord. support | Class. facilities | Teach. skills | Pay sat. | Job sat. |
|----------------------|-----------|-------------------|--------------|----------------|-------------------|---------------|----------|----------|
| Belonging | 1 | .217* | .407** | .166 | .214* | .102 | .328** | .290** |
| Student standards | .217* | 1 | .138 | -.065 | .077 | .193 | .145 | .141 |
| General support | .407** | .138 | 1 | .393** | .367** | .255* | .208* | .414** |
| Coordinator support | .166 | -.065 | .393** | 1 | .221* | .365** | .014 | .449** |
| Classroom facilities | .214* | .077 | .367** | .221* | 1 | .261** | .187 | .167 |
| Teaching skills | .102 | .193 | .255* | .365** | .261** | 1 | -.122 | .312** |
| Pay satisfaction | .328** | .145 | .208* | .014 | .187 | -.122 | 1 | -.059 |
| Job satisfaction | .290** | .141 | .414** | .449** | .167 | .312** | -.059 | 1 |

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Data for the organisational commitment scale was factor analysed in a similar way to that described above for items in part A of the questionnaire. This is a three factor commitment model (Meyer and Allen, 1997) 8 items being related to affective commitment (a measure of how strongly an individual likes working in the organisation), 9 items measure continuance commitment (simply put; a measure of the need to work in the organisation) and 6 items measure normative commitment (a measure of obligation to work in the organisation). Note, that using a sample of 72 casuals working at an Australian university Joiner and Bakalis (2006) obtained a five factor solution. In the research reported here a six factor solution emerged from the analysis. Table 3 provides details of the number of items that were included in each of the three commitment components describe above and the values of Cronbach's Alpha. Correlations between the three commitment components and job satisfaction are also shown in Table 3.

Table 3 Correlations between commitment and job satisfaction

| | Affective | Continuance | Normative | Job sat. |
|--|-----------|-------------|-----------|----------|
| Affective commitment (4 items Cronbach's Alpha = 0.855) | 1 | .015 | .441** | .441** |
| Continuance commitment (5 items Cronbach's Alpha = 0.851) | .015 | 1 | .147 | -.077 |
| Normative commitment (4 items Cronbach's Alpha = 0.769) | .441** | .147 | 1 | .285** |
| Job satisfaction (single item) | .441** | -.077 | .285** | 1 |

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Casual academics are a diverse group of people with different needs and aspirations. For example, many research students see casual teaching as a pathway to a full-time academic career. Although there are some general concerns among casuals, it is important to keep diversity in mind when designing a change management program.

The questionnaire survey results show that casuals generally enjoy their teaching role and their job satisfaction is high despite a large number of concerns. Table 2 shows, for example, that the correlation between 'pay satisfaction' and 'job satisfaction' is not significant. However the relationship between these two variables may be mediated by the variable 'belonging' (there is significant positive correlation between 'belonging and 'job satisfaction') and further analysis is planned to investigate this possibility. The most consistent theme in the literature on casual academics is that they feel outsiders. The results of this research concur with this view. The literature shows however that a number of institutions in Australia are involved in initiatives to improve the support and effectiveness of their casual staff.

It is clear from this research and from the literature (e.g. Joiner and Bakalis, 2006) that the relationship between casuals and full-time academics who coordinate the subjects they teach is very important. Table 2 shows a significant positive correlation between 'job satisfaction' and 'coordinator support'. Satisfaction levels with coordinator support were generally high and perhaps the strength of these relationships is the glue that helps the casual teaching system to work reasonably smoothly.

In the analysis of the commitment questionnaire (see Table 3) only 13 of the 23 items on the scale loaded onto the three commitment components. However, the values of Chronbach's Alpha for the three

components was satisfactory. Table 3 shows a significant positive correlations between 'affective commitment', 'normative commitment' and 'job satisfaction'; there are no significant correlations with 'continuance commitment'. Joiner and Bakalis (2006, p.446) report a significant positive correlation between 'affective commitment' and 'continuance commitment'.

Casuals made many suggestions on how their job satisfaction could be improved and on how the faculty could encourage teaching excellence. These suggestions and comments were grouped into a number of themes. The five groups listed below are in order of report frequency. The detailed information included in the comments will be useful in guiding improvements in the support and management of casuals.

- More training and professional development
- Better pay, especially recognising marking loads
- Greater recognition and involvement in the faculty
- Better support, including the development of an information system
- Better quality students especially in terms of their ability in English

Further analysis of the results of the research will be undertaken. This will include applying techniques such as multiple linear regression to examine the relationship between variables more closely. Analysis of differences between groups, e.g. by age group, family arrangement, has been partly undertaken and this will be continued. The structure of the results on the commitment instrument will be more closely examined against published work. Data collection is also being extended. A survey of faculty full-time academics who manage casual academic staff is being undertaken. Results presented in this paper clearly confirm the importance of the full-time academics role in the effective management of casual academics. This survey will compare coordinator's views on the needs of casuals with those provided by casuals themselves in the research results reported in this paper. Coordinators will also be asked about the adequacy of the support they receive to manage casuals. We will also be investigating how other universities in Australia have responded to the changing needs of casual academic staff in order to identify good practice. It is hoped that this research will lead to improvements in the management and support of casual academic staff that universities are willing to resource.

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