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Teaching in Focus: The value of implementing a program-specific teaching support project for staff wellbeing and student success

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Abstract*

This paper reports on a program-level teaching support initiative that was implemented in a Health Sciences undergraduate degree with a large and highly casualised teaching team. It has been argued that to improve student retention and success, universities need to consider implementing comprehensive teaching support models that address institutional, program, and individual level needs. We report on the implementation of our project and reflect on participant feedback, which demonstrated the value of the program for improving staff wellbeing. We argue that introducing support strategies for staff at a local level is essential not only for delivery of high quality learning experiences, but also for staff wellbeing which, in turn, has important implications for student success and retention.

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Introduction

In the Australian University context, the use of casual (sessional) teaching staff is common (Coates et al., 2009; Percy et al., 2008; Ryan, Burgess, Connell, & Groen, 2013), with statistics suggesting that over half of all university teaching in Australia is undertaken by casual staff (Australian Government Department of Education & Training, 2016). However, despite their critical role (Ryan et al., 2013), in many cases casual teaching staff lack experience or have a developing knowledge in teaching pedagogy, philosophy and content, and the purpose of assessment to support expected learning outcomes (Boud & Falchikov, 2006). Without structured support and guidance, these issues are likely to impact negatively on the student learning experience and retention (Klopper & Power, 2014; Percy et al., 2008). This trend is reflected at Flinders University, in Adelaide South Australia, where increased student numbers have resulted in an increased demand for teaching staff, often at short notice (Ryan et al., 2013). Growth in teaching staff numbers and student enrolments highlights the need to cultivate and support consistency in approaches to ensure that students receive a quality educational experience in any classroom situation. This is particularly the case where casual teaching staff receive limited formal training (Coates et al., 2009; Percy et al., 2008).

Consistency in teaching and learning outcomes across programs is a legitimate expectation of students (Hénard & Roseveare, 2012). Further, as Percy et al. (2008) suggest, supervising academic staff members “have the responsibility of assuring the quality of teaching in their programs with large numbers of sessional teachers” (p. 8). It has been suggested that casual teaching staff are: “marginalised” and “at the periphery”, often do not have access to the same professional development

opportunities as other teaching staff and are not fully integrated within academic teams (Coates et al., 2009; May, Strachan, Broadbent, & Peetz, 2011; Ryan et al., 2013). Considering that casual teaching staff are responsible for a significant proportion of teaching, “the quality of the student learning environment is jeopardised by a lack of attention to the professional development of sessional teachers” (Percy et al., 2008, p. 4).

Background

The Bachelor of Health Sciences (BHS) degree at Flinders University is a multi-disciplinary health-related degree and accounts for one of the largest course enrolments at the university. The large student numbers inherently require large teaching teams, many of which—as with the national trend—are staffed by sessional casuals. In addition to the large numbers of students and teaching staff involved in the BHS, the degree is unique in that core topics¹ need to cater for students who require professionally accredited degree qualifications, as well as students wanting a broadly based health education that will provide transferrable skills. This requires staff development tailored to meet both student expectations and the development of professional competencies.

This paper describes a project put in place to better support teaching staff within the BHS degree. The “*Teaching in Focus*” project was established as a strategy to provide discipline-focussed support and training for teaching staff to achieve the following:

- Foster improved quality in teaching and learning,
- Promote consistency across topics within the course,

¹ At Flinders University a ‘topic’ refers to a subject or unit of study within a course.

- Provide the opportunity to develop new skills and approaches in teaching and assessment methods,
- Develop strategies for managing specific situations, and
- Encourage collegiality amongst new and experienced teaching staff.

We draw on the work of Hamilton, Fox, and McEwan (2013) to argue that such an emphasis on meeting the needs of casual staff is essential to providing meaningful learning experiences and improving student retention.

Overview of project

Hénard and Roseveare (2012) identified that support for quality teaching has institutional (policy and quality improvement focus), program (design, content and delivery) and individual (innovation to support learning and learner-orientated approaches) level dimensions. The three major pillars of the *Teaching in Focus* project were a workshop program, peer support activities, and the development of a practical resource in the form of a handbook. These pillars impact at the program and individual levels and are outlined below.

Delivery of workshops for teaching staff

Percy et al. (2008, p. 10) noted that support for casual teaching staff is often provided on an unplanned basis, and this presents challenges at many levels. As part of the *Teaching in Focus* project, a series of seven two-hour workshops were held, addressing a variety of teaching-related matters specific to teaching within the BHS. All staff were invited to these workshops (approximately 40-50 teaching staff members per semester). Hénard and Roseveare (2012, p. 10) highlighted that “[s]trengthening horizontal

linkages and creating synergies is a particularly effective way of supporting the development of quality teaching”. The workshop program provided an ideal platform for these linkages and synergies across the teaching staff complement.

The workshop topics were as follows:

1. Teaching in Focus: Panel discussion from established BHS staff.
2. The philosophy of the Bachelor of Health Sciences.
3. Teaching in Focus: Practical tips for teaching in the BHS.
4. Introduction to learning analytics on FLO (Flinders Learning Online).
5. Supporting students in distress (specific to content in BHS topics).
6. Everything you wanted to know about assessment: Policy and 21st century directions.
7. Mapping the needs of sessional staff: Lessons learnt from STARS² 2015 and panel discussion from sessional staff.

Importantly, the workshops provided time and space for networking and developing relationships between casual and other staff members. According to Heath, Hewitt, Israel, and Skead (2014) in their survey of casual teaching staff in South Australia and Western Australia, the opportunity to talk with other staff about teaching and think about teaching methods were the most highly valued activities in teaching development. Participants at each teaching workshop were asked to complete a brief evaluation form to determine the utility of the content and how the workshops met participants’ learning requirements.

² Students, Transitions, Achievement, Retention & Success (STARS) Conference 2015, Melbourne Australia

Peer support

a) Supporting casual teaching staff through a voluntary mentoring program.

Simpson, Cockburn-Wooten, and Spiller (2005) identified that mentoring programs can have benefits at the institutional and individual level (both for mentors and mentees). In particular, they highlighted that mentoring can have positive effects in terms of reflecting on practice and building organisational culture. As part of the *Teaching in Focus* project, all new teaching staff were invited to participate in a voluntary mentoring program. Interested staff were matched with an experienced staff member for a mentoring relationship across one semester. Mentors were invited through an expression of interest, and were required to have at least three years of teaching experience. In addition, the mentors were not the mentees' direct supervisor. Simpson et al. (2005) reported that mentoring programs can operate on formal and informal levels and each approach has its own benefits. Therefore, each mentoring partnership was encouraged to develop their own approach to match their needs and expectations. The mentoring program was evaluated for its effectiveness at the end of the 2015 academic year via a brief survey of participants (mentors and mentees).

b) Undertaking peer reflection on teaching for new teaching staff.

Similar to mentoring, peer evaluation of teaching has benefits at institutional as well as individual levels (both for the reviewer and those being reviewed) (Harris et al., 2008). Heath et al. (2014) reported that casual teaching staff highly valued having their class observed by a colleague. As part of the *Teaching in Focus* project, a program was trialled in two topics where new fixed-term and casual teaching staff participated in a formative peer reflection activity. They viewed the teaching of

an experienced staff member and then reflected on their own teaching. Teaching staff who participated in the peer reflection activity were asked to write a brief reflective report documenting their experience of this interaction and their perception of its effectiveness.

Development of a handbook

In order to further support teaching staff, a handbook was developed as part of the *Teaching in Focus* project. This handbook provided (i) a summation of teaching-related policies and procedures and their application to topics; as well as (ii) orientation and induction information for new teaching staff. The handbook provides an overview of the BHS and its affiliated programs to contextualise the position of the teaching staff member across the program and provide an overarching perspective of the student learning experience. Heath et al. (2014) identified discipline-specific content as important in highly-casualised staffing environments as it provides an optimal level of information that staff, particularly the inexperienced, can readily use. Handbooks and teaching resources have been shown to be highly valued by casual and part-time teaching staff (Bevan-Smith, Keogh, & D'Arcy, 2013). At the time of this publication, the handbook has been completed and adopted by Topic Coordinators in Semester 1 of 2016. It will be evaluated through a survey at the end of the year.

Discussion

In addition to the evaluation tailored specifically to the three aspects of the project, a focus group was carried out with casual staff. The focus group was intended to have a dual role—to seek feedback on the *Teaching in Focus* project activities, and to undertake a needs analysis to inform decisions about continuation and expansion of the project. The feedback received on the project was overwhelmingly

positive. However, the most notable theme to come from the data was the impact of the project on staff wellbeing and their sense of commitment and connection to students. Staff concerns for the wellbeing of their students were also a key theme with participants concerned about how they felt their role as teacher often shifted across boundaries into pastoral care. Participants felt that the workshops offered as part of the project were an important way in which staff could feel a sense of community; and they felt valued as part of a group. These findings are significant and support other literature that has suggested that staff wellbeing needs further research in order to consider the relationship between the emotional labour of staff and how this impacts on student wellbeing and success (Berry & Cassidy 2013).

It is now well established that students experience an ongoing sense of transition through “evolving identities, needs and purposes” whilst at university (Lizzio, 2011, p. 1). In parallel, we argue that casual teaching staff also experience their own ongoing transitions from undergraduate student, to postgraduate student, to new and inexperienced tutor and beyond. Often these identities overlap as postgraduate students are frequently sourced as sessional teaching staff (Beaton, Bradley, & Cope, 2013). Amidst their own identity transition, they now have a role to play in the transition, achievement, success and identity development of students. Students move through the transitioning lifecycle guided and supported by teaching and learning experiences; so too sessional teaching staff need to be guided, supported and valued in the multiple (cross-boundary) roles they play in that transition (Klopper & Power, 2014). The activities carried out in the *Teaching in Focus* project were selected as they were identified through the literature as being highly valued by casual and inexperienced teaching staff members. In addition, the project responded to an initial needs analysis that identified the

support for casual staff provided at an institutional level, then sought to complement such support with local, context-specific mechanisms that addressed program and individual level needs (Hénard & Roseveare, 2012).

The approach taken in the *Teaching in Focus* project has parallels with the innovative “distributed leadership model” (Jones, Lefoe, Harvey, & Ryland, 2012; Hamilton et al., 2013). We concur with Hamilton et al., in that we argue that by providing carefully tailored programs that map institutional, program, and individual support relationships, staff wellbeing and retention will be improved; and this in turn will improve student wellbeing, success and retention. As we have discussed elsewhere (Abery & Gunson, 2016), student wellbeing and success are cyclically related to the wellbeing of staff. Thus, high quality programs need to address the emotional as well as knowledge- and skills-based aspects of teaching. Hamilton et al. (2013) estimate that, at a university level, the economic value of well scaffolded casual support programs that improve staff and student retention is significant. Thus, we argue that initiatives such as the *Teaching in Focus* project need to be supported as core business in university settings, in order to provide meaningful learning experiences and to maximise both staff and student engagement.

Implications

The project and discussion above were presented at the *Students, Transitions, Achievement, Retention and Success* (STARS) Conference in Perth, Australia in July 2016. The presentation and involvement in a Special Interest Group session on distributed leadership (hosted by Kathy Egea, Neela Griffiths and Jo McKenzie from the University of Technology, Sydney) provided the opportunity to discuss the implications of the project findings, and seek feedback on its theoretical and practical application. The discussion with

attendees provided anecdotal confirmation of our own findings. Others agreed that the issues we raised around the interconnection between staff and student wellbeing, and the pedagogical and professional challenges of casualisation, were being keenly felt across the higher education (HE) sector in Australia.

The *Teaching in Focus* project provides further evidence of the need for programs that support teaching staff on multiple levels and that address the link between staff and student wellbeing in considered, and context-specific ways. One attendee noted that students are acutely aware of the precarious employment status of casual teaching staff. He argued this would either prompt students to become advocates for their tutors in challenging times or would conversely result in uncertainty and inconsistency in student learning experiences. The strength of the *Teaching in Focus* project was the way in which it brought together professional, academic, and casual staff in order to provide support around pastoral, professional, and pedagogical aspects of teaching. We argue there is a need to further explore the value of distributed leadership models of practice in managing large teaching teams.

We suggest that siloed approaches to casual employment in HE, where human resources and professional issues are separated from teaching pedagogy, perpetuate the sense of ambivalence and disjuncture that our participants felt. The conference discussion raised a number of key points that reinforced this. Firstly, meaningful cycles of feedback need to be established where genuine reflection is actively sought on all aspects of teaching and learning from staff as well as students. This should be used to inform the development of both teaching and employment practices. Secondly, dialogue and collaboration between professional and academic staff is essential. A professional staff member who attended the session made the explicit point that developing rigorous, student-

focussed pedagogy in highly casualised teaching teams has significant budget implications. Other studies have shown that, without collaborative models of management in HE, staff and particularly casual staff, can feel manipulated and exploited in relation to workload expectations (Jones et al. 2012). This has serious ramifications for student success if we consider that the wellbeing of staff and students are inseparable (Abery & Gunson, 2016; Berry & Cassidy, 2013). It is therefore essential that teaching initiatives take a “multi-level and cross-functional approach to leadership” (Jones et al. 2012, p. 67) so as to ensure a holistic approach that is both student and staff centred, and considers the complexities at play in the current higher education landscape.

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