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ALL TAKE AND NO GIVE?
RESPONDING TO THE SUPPORT AND DEVELOPMENT NEEDS OF WOMEN IN CASUAL ACADEMIC ROLES

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Introduction

This chapter discusses the experiences and perceptions of women employed in casual academic roles in a large Australian university. It then canvasses the professional learning and support needs for this segment of the university workforce. The experiences of casual staff in this research correspond with those reported in other Australian studies (see, for example, Dever et al. 2006; Eveline 1998; Payne and Shoemark 1995) and those from elsewhere in the world (see, for example, Clark et al. 1996; Knights and Richards 2003; Lindsay 1996; Mertz 2009; Morley 1999). The casual workforce is continually expanding, which raises questions about how individuals within it can be supported to grow as academics and professionals within an expanding and more accountable higher education sector.

Extant research across Australian universities reveals gendered statistical discrimination, employee clustering and wage gaps, the operation of the ‘glass ceiling’, as well as gender equity inhibitors such as intimidation, discrimination, exclusion, violence (including bullying, harassment and physical violence) and stressors from the conflicting demands of work and family life (e.g. Bessant 1998; Delaat 2007; Dever et al. 2006; Eveline 1998; Hearn and Parkin 2007; Payne and Shoemark 1995; Shands 1998). The organisational consequences of such inhibitors include a more mobile workforce and lowered personnel retention, reduced productivity, unwelcoming organisational cultures, reputational damage, a reduced ability to attain organisational strategic goals or enact core values, and inhibited human capacity. Concomitant personal and professional consequences include negative health effects, feelings of inadequacy, reduced opportunities for career advancement and professional isolation.

Despite the mandatory adoption of anti-discrimination policies in Australia, gender-based employment and income disparities persist (ABS 2007; Cassells et al. 2009; Healy et al. 2009). This is created through human capital variables such as a lack of employer-provided training, women's lower qualification levels,
occupational segregation based on employment sector (in this case the public sector) and industry (in this case education), discriminatory attitudes and labour-market rigidities (Cassells et al. 2009; Healy et al. 2009).

Australia’s casual workforce is the fastest growing in the world after Spain (Munn 2004). Casual workers are defined by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2007) as those without an ongoing employment contract or access to usual leave entitlements. Due to the short-term or temporary nature of this work, casual employees have little protection available from unions or industrial awards. While usually receiving a pay loading above the hourly rate paid of that paid to permanent employees, casual academics can be dismissed at short notice with no recourse to severance or redundancy payments (Cassells et al. 2009). A lack of job security and employment certainty can make it difficult or impossible to maintain a reasonable standard of living or to secure a mortgage, for example (Forward 2005), and has longer-term implications for superannuation savings. Predominantly, casual academics in Australia are women (Foddy et al. 1996; White 2001).

The rapid expansion of the casual workforce in Australian universities is primarily due to budgetary cutbacks as globalisation increases the impetus for organisational ‘efficiencies’, national and institutional competitiveness and workforce flexibility (Munn 2004). Market-driven principles and corporate managerialism have railed against and diminished equity policies and pursuits (Marginson and Considine 2007), while gendered power relations and masculine organisational cultures persist in the Australian higher education sector (White 2001).

In this research, the great majority of casual workers (also referred to as ‘sessionals’) held part-time positions, with full-time casual employment being less common. Casuals are positioned at the bottom rungs of the academic hierarchy which in Australia goes from Level A (assistant lecturer) to Level E (professor). The university employs twice as many casual women academics as men. Within this group, three times as many women than men are employed at Lecturer A and B level (see note 1) with the opposite occurring at the highest end of the academic employment spectrum where over twice as many men are employed as professors (Level E) compared to women (73 to 32).

This research sought to identify those aspects of the university’s policies, practices and work culture that proved positive for women academics that should be enhanced, and those that had deleterious effects which should be eliminated or improved.

The study privileged the lived experience and voices of all women academics, but this chapter focuses on the responses of those employed in casual positions during 2010. Through anecdotes and very frank accounts of their experiences, perceptions, beliefs and suggestions derived through a university-wide survey and
semi-structured interviews, this chapter delineates benefits, common problems and their effects, and canvasses ideas for what should change for the current professional development and support needs of casual staff to be met.

Below the advantages and disadvantages of casual employment are discussed before turning to their implications for professional learning and support, and ramifications for policy change.

The advantages of casual academic work

It is important to state at the outset that the women participating in this research generally stated they ‘loved’ their jobs, and many appreciated the flexibility and family-friendly hours that were possible through casual academic appointments.

Casual academic jobs are often in demand from those who are not currently seeking permanent employment in academia, such as doctoral students, those undertaking studies in a location that is not going to be their home beyond the short term, those who have caring duties or those from other employment sectors who see it as an avenue to future permanent employment.

The flexibility, self-regulatory and self-directed nature of casual and part-time academic work was reportedly a highly valued feature. For women with children, the ability to work from home and to come and go to meet family obligations was a feature of university working life that they believed would not be available in many other work environments. Similarly, women who had other caring responsibilities, such as aged parents, cited this as a positive aspect. The women who felt the benefits of casual employment believed that their decision to work was in their own hands, casual work provided income or extra income, and provided the flexibility to attend to caring, nurturing or other interests.

Some women cited that through casual work they were able to pursue their own research interests. Some needed to earn extra income while undertaking doctoral or other studies, while others continually undertook part-time contracts because they did not want full-time work and part-time permanent posts rarely come up.

Research respondents believed they required and possessed high-level time-management skills and the ability to juggle many tasks. Many were proud of their achievements and reported having good rapport with students and their permanently employed peers. Some casual women were pleased to have been offered opportunities to assume membership on faculty committees, which they believed would benefit their curriculum vitae.
The disadvantages of casual academic work

Despite the benefits of casual work, many drawbacks were reported which are categorised under two major themes discussed below.

Teaching

When it comes to sessional teaching there are severe disadvantages, both for students and casual academics themselves. Casual academics cannot make long-term plans, often don't know until just before a semester commences whether they have a job or not, do not have a dedicated office or university-supplied computer, and have little access to the collegiality and support of their permanently employed peers or the opportunity to get to know them. Some women explained how they travel to and from work with their materials permanently residing in their car boot (Forward 2005). Hourly payments for sessional staff exclude essential activities such as meeting attendance, preparation, marking, student consultations and the administrative work attached to teaching, but have concomitant costs such as petrol, car-parking, childcare and time.

The women cited feelings of guilt and resentment about out-of-hours work (such as responding to student queries – often online) which was unpaid, although students who are unaware of teachers’ part-time, casual employment status expect instant replies. The women therefore expressed the fear of receiving unfavourable survey results in compulsory student course and teacher evaluations. Not only were survey results used to determine future employment, but they were also instrumental in determining relationships with the permanently employed academics who engaged their services. Some illustrative comments were:

At certain times of year (e.g. marking exams) I have no choice but to mark all weekend to get them done in time to submit results. This is very hard on my family life. It is also hard having lecture times scheduled (e.g. 4–6 p.m.) which do not allow time for me to get from the university to the child care centre.

I had a course meeting to attend – unpaid, but I showed up because I supposed they have bothered to include me as part of the team . . . There were no car parks left. Eventually I found one, rushed to the meeting, only to find I’d received a parking fine when I returned. There was a sign that I’d missed apparently when I drove in – I wasn’t allowed to park there. That meeting cost me $120 and the meeting turned out to be a waste of time anyway . . .

. . . students are very demanding . . . if only they knew how many students you had and how much work there was to do! They expect instant responses on [the university’s learning management system] . . . There’s little respect sometimes . . .
However, interviewees believed that since they did more face-to-face teaching than many permanent or full-time staff, they often knew the students better than their peers, and felt they could be of more assistance to students. Timetabling arrangements often didn’t suit them, with part-time hours being spread throughout the week rather than in convenient blocks of time, yet for casual academics it’s often the case of ‘take it or leave it’.³

With Australian universities relying increasingly on full fee paying international students, much teaching is conducted online. The demands of online students from around the world with their different time zones can be overwhelming, especially when a failure to respond in a timely way can result in low student evaluations of teaching, as mentioned above. The most invasive part is that online teaching can occur anywhere and at anytime, including at home, after hours. Sessionals reported working much unpaid overtime to keep up with their students’ demands, with some courses literally enrolling hundreds of students.

Research participants believed that the university places its emphasis on research over teaching and community service (the three aspects cited as comprising the work of an academic). This palpable emphasis is seen to position casual teaching intensive staff in an inferior category, adding to the low status attached to their non-permanent employment. All complained of too much ‘administrivia’ such that it is, in reality, a fourth, hidden and time-consuming dimension to academic work.

**Working conditions**

The most severe aspect of casual employment is the lack of entitlement to any kind of leave, with sick leave and holiday leave cited as being the most difficult downside. Australian university courses typically do not run during the Christmas period, and therefore casuials often don’t work from November until March. This situation causes some women to take on more work than they would like during the year to put money aside to cope with this annual ‘down time’. However, additional shorter periods of ‘down time’ occur during the year during semester breaks.

Workloads for most casuals are high during peak teaching periods. Some reported working fewer hours than they would have liked while others who wanted more work reported losing hours due to funding cutbacks, programme discontinuation or research projects coming to an end (that provided money for a permanent academic’s ‘teaching buy-out’ which sessionals fill). Earning sufficient income can be difficult.

Mostly, the women had interrupted careers and had either entered or returned to academia after having children. Many were the primary caregivers to minors
and took on the majority of household work in their families, hence family constraints conspired with university workloads to make for difficult working lives.

Many research participants reported being appointed as committee representatives and while there is an upside to this (reported above), the downside is that once on a committee, many eventually saw this as another unpaid task and waste of precious time. With so many other things to do, committee meetings were seen to be boring, unproductive, time-consuming and irrelevant to the work of casuals.

The prevailing perception is that sessionals are at 'the bottom of the heap', earning little respect or encouragement. The women spoke about the individualistic nature of academic lives and feelings of being 'exploited'. They believed that unacceptable workplace behaviours were evident, were tolerated and went unchecked. They felt isolated and invisible with a lack of support and access to information in a competitive environment:

... there's a culture of individualism in academia and looking after yourself rather than working in a team... when you do need assistance or you do need someone to go out of their way to do something to help you, it's a very rare individual who will do that and you're... left to flounder on your own... especially in the early stages... there's no one in a senior position actually assisting you or supervising you. It does often lead to a culture of blame and stepping away from problems rather than people helping and assisting to solve the problem.

The women also felt they received little or no recognition, acknowledgement or thanks for their efforts.4

While some women valued the freedom and flexibility to pursue self-determined working practices, most expressed a sense of oppression from the university's 'greediness' (Franzway 2001), with expectations and the boundless nature of their work taking no account of their working hours or status.

Some sessionals had received some form of induction while others had none beyond an initial conversation to complete an employment contract. A do-it-yourself (DIY) ethos was acutely experienced by new staff especially, who felt thrown in the deep-end as they were expected to survive with little support. Unfortunately, those who mentioned induction processes saw these as inadequate and unhelpful – they were conducted online and not face-to-face. It was a case of 'sink or swim'.

All interviewees wished to be successful, but saw the only means of achieving this was to work harder and for longer. The women saw that expectations of long hours were exacerbated by too many 'invisible' administrative tasks perpetuated
and exacerbated by Web 2.0 technologies and the seemingly universal acceptance of a 24/7 university work culture driven by personal desires for 'success'. They said:

Most of the time there is no time to do anything but work, otherwise you fall hopelessly behind. So instead you fall hopelessly behind on housework, friends, family, etc.

While the flexibility of academic life in theory allows me to be available to my family when I am really needed, the pressure of workload means that I rarely take up this opportunity.

[Work] impacts principally through high stress levels at home, long work hours due to poor managerial decisions on workload balances. I was recently asked to go up to 0.8 employment and was asked to take on more teaching despite the fact that I am already working considerably more than I am being paid for. Evenings become more work time rather than family time.

[I am] mostly working more than my part-time hours in order to get things done at the level that is expected but at the same time being aware of the unspoken views of more senior staff that part-time staff are not as committed.

For my first few years ... I was so stressed that it impacted on my health, and the stress and health issues impacted on my family life. These days I have adopted my stubborn refusal to make [the university] the centre of my world. It impacts in the sense that retirement saving will be constrained by my inability to progress my career ... But I'd rather get to retirement with my health intact than with more dollars in super and major stress-related health issues.

Compared to other sections of the academic workforce, there are fewer casually employed women who hold doctoral degrees, yet many are doctoral candidates. The women expressed difficulty in finding time for research, publication and furthering their own qualifications due to their employment commitments. This was a universal concern amongst respondents who were looking to become a full-time academic. Many had been appointed in casual positions for many years, and could see little hope of obtaining permanent work. To acquire a permanent position usually requires a PhD and a publication record, but this is a vicious circle, with their current role taking valuable time and energy away from achieving the required pre-requisites. This situation is exacerbated when casual staff members are not permitted to be named in national competitive research funding submissions. And once employed on the lowest rungs of the academic ladder, acquiring promotion entails achieving 'research active' status, although there are few opportunities for teaching intensive staff to obtain a sizable research record and experience:
It is generally research that is shuffled/omitted to make way for both teaching and family commitments which are both required and inflexible.

The women understood that to be successful, they have to make time for the ‘important’ work that ‘counts’ in universities, which mostly revolves around research and publications. The following quote demonstrates the constant self-questioning about how time is used and for what purposes and the dilemma that there are always things that get in the way of this ‘important’ work:

I think the challenge of the job – my aim – is always to step outside the job and see what’s important, what will be important next week, not now and try and do those jobs – not the ones that are crowding me for attention. I still have to learn that everybody has to learn that skill everyday to try and shut out all the noise and focus on what really matters in the job.

Casual staff members have few opportunities to attend professional development activities in work time. While continual professional learning is an expectation, such activities are often conducted at the personal expense of sessionals and in their own time.

The casual academics were generally not members of the union and so exploitation and unfairness goes unaddressed. Without job security, leave provisions, regular working hours, professional training, opportunities for career planning or advancement, these women are at a distinct disadvantage (Waddoups 2005).

Health, wellbeing and work/life balance were issues of concern, with many women feeling that their working lives impinged detrimentally on their personal and family lives and their personal health, happiness and sense of wellbeing.

Significantly, the women were sceptical of the importance that the university’s corporate leaders placed in gender equity and fair employment issues, and were pessimistic about improvements occurring in the near future.

Implications for professional learning, development and support

The implications of the above information for professional learning, development and support are considerable. The women had many suggestions and ideas that they believed would improve their position and functioning as members of the academic workforce. They believed the following measures would enable and assist their contribution to the effective functioning of the university and their contribution to university life:

- The women argued they needed role models of casual staff who had positive experiences of working in higher education – ‘who have learnt how to work
the system and get through the red tape, who've coped and pushed through and accomplished to get somewhere for themselves'. Towards the same ends, some suggested the benefits of having mentors who could inform their induction and continued work in academia. Respondents wanted someone who could advise, provide insights, answer questions, encourage and help them to devise positive strategies for their teaching, research, service and future employment.

- A proper induction process is required, preferably with back-up written materials to refer to afterwards. The types of induction components mentioned included learning how to navigate and use university's learning management systems (online teaching and learning programmes which currently sessionals have to 'work out' for themselves); the important policies related to teaching and learning, such as assessment policies, assignment timelines, citation conventions, misconduct protocols, etc.; the university’s faculty structures, personnel and their roles and contact details; faculty strategic plans; basic information about administrative requirements; campus maps; how library support can be utilised; sources of technical support, for example.

- Opportunities for further professional learning and development conducted during paid work time and free of cost to contracted sessionals. These opportunities included attendance at faculty retreats, university provided conferences (which were also seen to be a useful means by which fledgling researchers could disseminate and discuss their own research), as well as access to national and international conferences. For these latter, more expensive activities, some suggested that a pool of funds could be allocated through which sessionals could apply for funding on a competitive basis.

- Ongoing 'over-the-shoulder' support for online learning management systems (which appear to be different across universities). Help lines for dealing with difficulties, with their long phone queues, are frustrating and waste more (unpaid) time. (The area of online teaching difficulties and the propensity of academics to engage with constantly changing technologies is so extensive it formed the focus of other research, hence extensive details will not be provided here – see Starr et al. 2011; Starr forthcoming 2012.)

- The women called for specialised support from the university’s human resources division and for policies that pertained to their particular needs. For example, the women believed the unpaid work issue should be addressed; there is a lack of any plans or policies for casual staff to convert to permanent employment status – it appears as if sessional ranks just keep expanding, with no strategy as to what percentage of staff should remain on
an inferior employment footing. There were calls for sessional staff to be represented during enterprise bargaining rounds (which determine pay and work conditions). Some also called for information about leadership development, promotion and career advancement in the university.

- The women called for time to pursue their own studies and research, in much the same way as provisionally employed Level A academics who do not have a PhD are able to access supplementary provisions (time and money). This was seen as being ‘pie in the sky’ for first time sessionals, but for those who have ‘been around for years and are part of the woodwork’, this provision would be seen as indicative of the worth of casuals and acknowledgement of their needs for continual learning development as well as opportunities for professional advancement. Women also called for support for their research, publications and grant applications.

- The women believed that networks of casual staff should be developed. Blogs or professional associations or alliances with other academics who supported their needs, were seen to be an idea that could provide support, encouragement and good ideas but which could also provide advocacy and political impetus. This was seen as the major way that university policies could be challenged or changed – through effective, organised, collective action. (While unions perform such roles, some respondents argued they could not afford union fees and were dissuaded from joining when their employment was so uncertain.) (See Waddoups 2005.)

- Some longstanding casuals were aware that their permanently employed peers are encouraged to forge a nexus between teaching and research. To achieve this requires time for academics to pursue both research and teaching enhancement activities. They believed that their circumstances thwarted such ideals, yet they saw that their chances for permanent employment might be enhanced if they could speak to and demonstrate such professionalism.

- The women called for some basics: more chances for collaboration, collegiality and teamwork with all peers and access to proper university facilities such as meeting and office spaces and up-to-date IT resources.

- Lastly, but importantly from a cultural sense, the women called for more respect, recognition, acknowledgement and appreciation from personnel at all levels and from all sectors of the university.

**Conclusion**

This research revealed many similarities in women’s stories and experiences to those reported in other research literature on gender in higher education.
Unfortunately, the same sorts of findings have been reoccurring over decades. These are independent individuals who almost universally experienced a sense of workplace isolation, frustration and invisibility. This corresponds with the stories in Mertz’s (2009) book and those cited by Isaac, which resound with ‘self-silencing’ and working twice as hard as women had to ‘walk fast, and catch up’ (Isaac 2007). Unsurprisingly, then, the women believed their criticisms and concerns to be general within the higher education sector and not specifically related to their employing university alone.

Due to the power of hegemonic social values some inequalities are so structurally and historically entrenched and naturalised as to be generally invisible (Hearn and Parkin 2007). Despite numerous policies, legislative interventions and workplace practices, gender inequalities continue to operate. The university is perceived to provide gender neutral policies that appear, in reality, to be gender blind. Innate subtle, covert biases still appear to explain gender discrimination; and despite gender-friendly, equity and anti-discrimination policies, the ‘difference’ prevails. Hence the organisational cultures within higher education institutions perform a similar function to those elsewhere in everyday life. As yet, equity policies and practices have not been totally successful.

The casualisation of higher education with reduced employment conditions and benefits, a greater diversity of students, larger classes and workloads, the atomistic nature of academic teaching and learning, and a plethora of invisible but time-consuming work tasks are the commonly expressed downsides of casual working arrangements (Payne and Shoemark 1995). Feelings of exploitation, work intensification, and lack of acknowledgement and gratification are exacerbated if these essential staff members are not sufficiently supported professionally in appropriate and responsive ways.

Such issues have important ramifications for teaching and learning quality, now an integral component of the Australian higher education policy and funding landscape. From 2012 government funds to universities will be distributed according to students’ choices of courses and institutions, creating a more competitive market in higher education based on consumer choice and determinations of ‘quality’ (Bradley et al. 2008). Since large numbers of students are taught by casual staff, some investment in their professional learning and support is urgently warranted. Of concern, however, is that while casual staffing numbers are growing, resources for support and development are inadequate or diminishing or are being relegated as a personal responsibility (Forward 2005).

The positive outcome of this research is that many of the suggestions for improvement nominated by casual women employees would require little in the way of resources or effort to enact. The ideas are sensible, reasonable and quite conceivably could produce effective results for casual staff members and their
students, especially at a time when market forces are ramping up with possibly massive consequences for the higher education sector.

Since casual staff members feel marginalised from university decision making and employment provisioning, the suggestions cited above could include one more – that in addressing issues surrounding casual academic employment, incumbents themselves should be the first port of call for ideas for improvement in the development of (much needed) appropriate policies and procedures and their proper and timely enactment in practice.

Notes

1 The academic promotion structure spans Levels A to E: A = associate lecturer, B = lecturer, C = senior lecturer, D = associate professor, E = professor.

2 When academics receive research funds they may include teaching substitution to enable them more time for intensive research work. While they may employ sessional staff to undertake these teaching commitments, student satisfaction survey results are attributed to the permanent teacher.

3 The overall research observed higher levels of work satisfaction the higher women were positioned on the academic promotional ladder. The most satisfied women usually had long academic careers and had learnt to work within the structures and processes governing their work. Women employed at Levels D and E had more discretion in their work, with teaching loads reduced due to their research profile and made up to a large extent by doctoral or masters research students.

4 Such rewards were seen to be missing for the majority of women academics whether permanently employed or casual staff, and were seen to be important to everyone at every stage in their careers. The effects of women academics' labour going unrecognised resulted in feelings of alienation and work atomisation and distant institutional support and allegiance.

5 Naturally the women expressed many ideas and suggestions to ameliorate their circumstances. Here I mention only those related to the topic of this chapter.

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