

Part-time/sessional staff: Making the most of an undervalued resource

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RMIT University's TAFE training and assessment is currently being conducted by a substantial number of part-time/sessional staff. People Services data, collated in August 2003, indicate that of 567 staff that were employed in the TAFE sector, 27% were part time staff while a further 692 employees worked as sessional staff during 2003. While there are a variety of practical reasons for the employment of part-time and sessional staff in any Registered Training Organization, these staff employment figures raise questions as to how the University is able to ensure continuity in teaching practice (including assessment), audit compliance, quality of training delivered as well as addressing the broader organisational issues around up skilling its teaching practitioners to ensure a professional and sustainable teacher workforce. The employment of part-time/sessional staff also highlights potential difficulties in a range of day-to-day work issues, such as planning, timetabling and the daily administration work that is handled by teaching staff, the dissemination of information and participation in RMIT University staff development programs. At a broader organisational level it raises issues of 'belonging' to the University, a key factor in team building and developing strong staff morale. Two thirds of the program team currently delivering and assessing the Certificate III Dental Assisting is employed on a part-time/sessional basis. This paper will research the difficulties experienced by this group of employees and the implications for the delivery of existing programs and the development of new programs in the Dental Assisting area.

Introduction

During 2003, the Dental Assisting program team from the Department of Health and Biosciences participated in a Reframing the Future project. The successful submission was for the implementation of a mentor project, which was an attempt by the team to try and address a range of issues that were generated by the perceived inequities brought about by virtue of the employment status of program team participants. The team recognised that developing, delivering, resourcing and assessing programs had become the responsibility of the full-time and permanent casual staff while sessional staff felt excluded from a range of opportunities afforded their colleagues.

The results of the Reframing the Future mentor project were reviewed in the paper 'Mentoring: A Professional Development Framework For Part-Time Staff At RMIT University' which was presented at the 2003 Post Compulsory Education Conference and therefore will not be revisited in this paper. I will however attempt to explore the range of issues that program team members indicated impact on their ability to deliver the Certificate III in Dental Assisting at RMIT University on a day-to-day basis and more broadly on the University's mission to deliver quality programs to students that have a consistent approach to methodology and pedagogy.

Literature Review

The literature review for this paper indicated that the Australian workforce is increasingly becoming more casualised and that the trend could be having an adverse affect on the quality and consistency of the services being delivered. The literature also points to the areas of financial entitlements for employees and the rights of casual and sessional staff to access professional development opportunities as being key issues that need to be considered.

Sharon Burrow from the ACTU notes that "By any measure the growth of casual employment in Australia has got out of hand." (Burrow P1) and that 'Over the past

decade the number of casual workers has increased by 52%. In fact, 7 of every 10 new jobs created during the 1990s was a casual job.” (Burrows p1)

Angela Clare wrote in the Police Journal Online that

‘The Australian workforce has been undergoing a marked process of “casualisation” over the past two decades This process refers to the growth of a range of non-standard, less secure forms of employment – casual, temporary or contract – and a relative decline in the standard model of full-time, permanent work.’ (Clare p1)

In a 2001 report prepared for the Minister for Education, Training and Youth Affairs and the Minister for Health and Aged Care, Aitken et al note that with the casualisation of nursing ‘...there is an upward trend towards casualisation of the nursing workforce that is significant in terms of both professional development for nurses and health service planning in the future.’ (Aitken et al p4) They further note that “The debate revolves largely around the issues of quality, impact on the health system and cost. ...” (Aitken et al p3) and that “...the most commonly reported negative aspect of agency nursing is the difficulty in maintaining continuity of care.” (Aitken et al p4)

Both Clare and Aitken et al note the impact they believe casualisation is having on professional development. ‘Casualisation is a cause for concern for a number of reasons. ... [one of which is that it offers] ...few training and development opportunities.’ (Clare p1) and “Of particular concern are claims that agency nurses have a lower commitment to professional development...” (Aitken et al p3) Aitken et al further state that [agency nurses become] “...individually responsible for maintaining their current knowledge.” (Aitken et al p3) Kift refers to McAlpines’s research that reported “...casuals are, almost routinely, excluded from training and staff development opportunities...” (Kift p2)

Tertiary Education seems to be one sector of the workforce that has become increasingly casualised “Tertiary education is one of the most casualised sectors in Australia.” (Kift p1) This view is supported by a University of Queensland project that looks at sessional teaching in Higher Education stating “The Australian higher education system is one of the most casualized industries in the employment market.” (Chalmers et al p1)

Chalmers et al reason that

“Significant reductions in government funding, increased student diversity and expectations, burgeoning student numbers, and the accommodation of changing educational technologies and globalisation have led to substantial changes in the employment practices in the higher education system?” (University of Queensland p1)

The National Council of the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) says “...the high and increasing levels of casual employment close-off the opportunities for career development for many employees.” (NTEU p1) while Kift has raised some critical questions with regard to casualisation

“How is their transition to more expert teacher facilitated by staff development and enhancement opportunities: What are management processes and

strategies for training and supporting this casual workforce on which such heavy reliance is now placed to deliver increasingly complex programs to an ever-larger number of students? (Kift p1)

Kift further asks how do we "...address the issue of acculturating casual staff to the new teaching and learning 'student-focussed' agenda...?" (Kift, p1)

Burrows notes that casual and sessional staff are able to be productive and integral members of any work team and that they "...may develop the skills and knowledge of permanent employees and will often become an indispensable part of an employers operation." (Burrows p1)

The author was unable to locate any studies done specifically around the issue of casualisation of staff in the Vocational and Education Training sector.

Methodology and Data Analysis

The original Reframing the Future mentor project was set up as a workbased-learning model and in keeping with the overall strategies of Reframing the Future "Providing relevant, timely, workbased staff development, the structure [of workbased learning] embraces national training directions and policies..." (Mitchell et al, p21)

While assessing the potential benefits of initiating the pilot mentor program I needed to identify the individual employment choices of staff within the program team. Consideration needed to be given to the range of influences that impacted on the work time and job specific abilities of sessional and casual staff. These factors included geography (some staff lived outside of the metropolitan region), familial responsibilities, the educational background of staff and whether staff were engaged in the classroom delivery of the program or workplace assessment only. I also wanted to assess the level of personal confidence, knowledge and skill that each staff member had around a variety of teaching and learning issues that are crucial to the effective delivery and assessment of any VET program. It was while gathering this evidence via group workshops, one-on-one interviews and the participant's reflective journals that the range of day-to-day issues associated with their employment status and its impact on the work of the program team began to emerge.

A series of workshops explored the RMIT Teaching and Learning Strategy and some key group understandings around assessment, student centred learning and the role of the teacher in the Teaching and Learning process. Participants brought a level of openness to these discussions that unearthed a range of issues that, for the casual and sessional staff, were seen as symptomatic of broader organisational problems that affected their ability to work to their full potential.

For a two-week period around mid July, all participants were asked to engage in one-on-one interviews with the author (in the role of Facilitator of the Reframing the Future project) around a prepared list of questions. Whilst the bulk of the questions focused on the mentor project, the discussions gave participants a vehicle for expressing their concerns around a range of issues that impacted on their work. Data collection was an ongoing process for the duration of the project. Suggested themes that staff were asked to explore via the reflective journals included (but were not limited to) feelings of belonging (to the program team, the Faculty and/or

organization), of enhanced and/or accelerated professional growth and personal responses to the benefits or otherwise of a mentor program.

Discussion

As at August 2003, the Dental Assisting Program team was delivering and assessing its Certificate III in Dental Assisting with five full time equivalent staff members and 8 sessional staff members. Only two of the full time staff members were employed at a full time fraction while the other three staff were employed, on contract, at either .6 or .8 of a full time staff member. These staffing levels reflect the broader 2003 RMIT University VET staffing statistics (See Figure 1) of 414 full time staff members with 153 employed as casual staff (i.e.: less than a full time staff fraction and on a contract). A further 692 sessional staff members were employed to deliver or assess TAFE programs at this time.

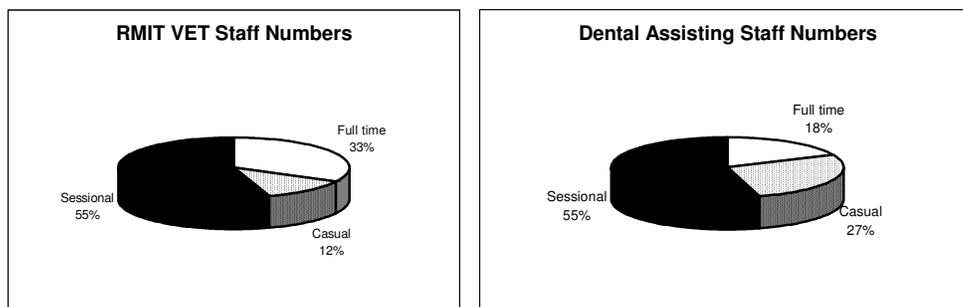


Figure 1 - Comparative-staffing figures as at August 2003

These figures show that 55% of the total number of staff delivering and assessing programs in the VET sector at RMIT University are sessional staff. The Dental Assisting program team also delivers its programs with a sessional staff percentage of 55%. The Dental Assisting group employ 27% of staff in the casual category against the university figure of 12%. However both groups demonstrate that at least two thirds of all of their delivery and assessment is conducted by sessional and casual staff. The importance therefore of addressing the ramifications of these figures for the overall benefit of the quality of programs being delivered by this institution becomes significant.

If we believe that the development of an effective program team requires a high level of communication, shared or common understandings around the work of the team and a level of consistency around quality and pedagogical imperatives then the professional needs of all staff delivering the program must to be considered. Furthermore, those needs are required to fit in with broader organizational strategic directions.

“RMIT staff work in complex and changing environments and experience competing priorities, increased workloads and resource restrictions. Nevertheless our people – staff, students and alumni – are our key resource. They require appropriate infrastructure and effective systems to support their work. It is their expertise, enthusiasm, commitment and motivation that will build the capability of RMIT as a learning organisation. (RMIT University 2 p1)

RMIT University has a policy that demonstrates it has an expectation around the appropriate induction and inclusion of sessional staff.

‘Induction is an important process for new casual staff. ...Casual teachers should be advised of the following:

- Their conditions of employment
- Provision of an e-mail account
- Access to the RMIT library services and intranet
- Notice required
- Access to training activities
- Information on core University policies such as student administration, code of Ethics, Equal opportunity, compliance with quality systems, including the Australian quality Training Framework and occupational health and safety issues.’ (RMIT University 3, p5)

However the experiences of the sessional staff in the Dental Assisting program team would seem to indicate a gap between the expectations of the organization, the rightful expectations of staff and the application of the policy.

The sessional staff highlighted a range of resource issues that they believe impact on their day-to-day work. All expressed frustration at not being given any keys to open classrooms, offices and resource rooms with the result that sessional staff waste time trying to find the full time or casual staff who do have keys. Sessional staff stated that this situation made them feel subservient to the full time and casual staff while the full time staff feels that they are constantly scrutinizing the sessional staff. When approached on this issue management argued that the issuing of keys was a security matter (the program team share space at the new Dental Hospital) but it continues to rankle staff.

All of the sessional staff commented that they had never been oriented to the physical layout of the university. Facilities such as libraries, university food outlets and the location of key staff such as the Vice Chancellor and Portfolio Pro Vice Chancellors and TAFE Director remained a mystery. The staff did not know what the university had to offer by way of professional and personal support services. This can be seen as a fairly critical oversight given that the program team has always worked in dental facilities technically classified as being part of the city campus but physically located several blocks away from the campus proper. Some sessional staff mentioned that their physical isolation made it difficult for them to create meaningful professional networks within the organization.

The majority of sessional staff had limited Information Technology skills and this set up a cyclic problem. The same staff had not had email accounts set up for them and this severely limited their opportunities to keep in touch with a range of communiqués around university policy as well as utilizing a major communication tool for both internal and national information. By not being compelled to access the IT facilities for communication purposes, staff did not have authentic tasks to pursue that allowed them to improve their IT skills. This again exacerbated the sessional staff’s feelings of isolation from the broader university community.

Another area of concern for staff members who did not participate in the day-to-day activities of the organization was the use of language. The VET sector has a very unique language which, if you are unfamiliar with it, can make conversations difficult

but when you combine “VET speak” with “RMIT speak” you end up with a very exclusionary language. It is worth noting that RMIT has its own acronyms website in recognition of the difficulties staff may encounter, but again, if staff don’t have access to this resource it is not reaching the very group who would most benefit from it.

The sessional staff were delighted to participate in the Reframing the Future program because it provided the first opportunity for all of the staff to meet as one program team. This situation was in part due to many of the sessional staff only participating in workplace assessment and therefore not seeing the need to regularly visit the campus. Of concern is the implicit notion in this action that workplace assessment can be done ‘outside’ of the ever-changing requirements of effective teaching and learning. It also highlights that, as a program team there has been no opportunity for moderation around teaching and assessment. Communication opportunities amongst the group members have also been hampered by the use of sessional staff from outside the metropolitan area. These members only participate in workplace assessment in regional areas and information around their assessment responsibilities is sent via mail.

Chalmers et al have noted some critical statistical findings in their final report on the AUTC Project into sessional teaching in the Higher Education sector at the University of Queensland that seem to mirror the experiences of staff in the Dental Assisting group. They include the “Level to which part-timers are involved in unit planning and assessment” (Chalmers et al, p19) indicating that 42.8% of respondents said that they were never involved in unit planning and assessment while 25.6% said that they were only sometimes involved. When the report reviewed the findings on the question the “Frequency of involvement in teaching team meetings” (Chalmers et al, p20) the results showed that 61.4% said they were never involved in teaching team meetings and 25.5% said that they were involved in teaching team meetings only sometimes.

Although

“RMIT expects teaching staff at all levels, as facilitators of the learning process to [among other things], ...have a commitment and desire to share their field of expertise and its relevance to professional practice... continually improve professional practice through reflection, discussion and innovation... actively search for new ways to help students to learn, ...seek opportunities to share ideas with other teachers. (RMIT University 2, p3)

the Dental Assisting group had never seen the need (prior to the Reframing the Future project) to create this key professional development opportunity for staff. Several sessional staff members believe that there is a two-tiered staff system with only the full time and casual staff members actively involved in the process of developing new programs, which is a major source of teaching and assessment professional development. The central Teaching and Learning group within the university often supports this process and helps develop clarity around university policy and current pedagogical practices. Chalmers et al report that 40% of the part timers at the Queensland University of Technology, when asked the question how many of the “Part-timers who feel encouragement to be part of the teaching culture” (Chalmers et al, p23) responded “Never” while 46% responded “Sometimes”.

The sessional staff’s interviews and journals revealed that a great deal of confusion existed around their financial entitlements. This confusion is, I believe, exacerbated

by the often-romanticized view of educators as employees who will participate in a wide range of activities that support the organization, students and their own professional development without pay and 'just for the love of the job'. Common areas of confusion were around tea breaks, travel and mileage claims and whether or not sessional staff should be paid to attend meetings. While policies relating to these questions can be found on the RMIT web site titled "Employment and Payment of Casual Staff", if staff have neither the expertise nor resources to access the web then obviously they have to rely on clarity coming from Management.

The area of Professional Development is a further example of the two-tiered staff structure that seemed to exist in the Dental Assisting area. RMIT states that 'Faculties are encouraged, where appropriate, to provide training/development activities for their casual teachers.' (RMIT University p5) The workshops conducted during the Reframing the Future project confirmed that many of the sessional staff did not know what the AQTF was. The same group did not know that the university had a Teaching and Learning Strategy, an Assessment Policy or teaching and assessment strategies, case studies and templates available to access on the RMIT website.

There are several factors that impact on the importance of the professional development issue in this instance. The first is that the group of sessional staff involved in the Dental Assisting program primarily come from an industry that, at the time of their gaining qualification, only required a Year 10 pass for inclusion into the program. Whilst participants have extensive experience in the dental industry as Dental Assistants and Oral Health Hygienists they are now involved in an educational environment that places very different demands on its practitioners than those they experienced when they were training. Group discussions revealed that many still model their own teaching practices on the ones they were exposed to when they were in the classroom.

The second factor is the lack of opportunity afforded sessional staff to take up the range of internal and external Professional Development forums that would significantly enhance their understandings around Training Packages and Teaching and Assessment pedagogy.

While several sessional staff have finished their Certificate IV Assessment qualifications, most are still trying to complete them and again, given their own educational backgrounds, most expressed frustration and disappointment with this experience. Several sessional staff members have failed units but as a result of the Reframing the Future project they are now being more appropriately supported in these endeavours. The program team, as a whole, is more committed to providing appropriate and supported workplace teaching and assessment experiences for this group to assist in their professional growth.

Again the report by Chalmers et al provides statistical evidence that indicates the Dental Assisting experience is not a limited one. Respondents indicated that 84% of staff answered no to the question of the "Extent of encouragement to undertake professional development" (Chalmers et al, -21). When it came to the question of whether the part timers were encouraged to participate in "Attendance at Academic Staff development Unit programs" (Chalmers et al, p22) 79.6% of the respondents answered no.

Several sessional staff members expressed the view that there is an imbalance of power within the program team and that they are unwilling to speak out on issues because they feel they would be 'exposing' themselves to potential ridicule. This opinion gives credence to the sessional staff' view that they do not feel entitled to make suggestions around the issues that affect the program by virtue of their employment status.

Management may be contributing to the two-tiered staff system by continuing to use sessional and casual staff as a 'stop gap' measure rather than as fully integrated members of the program team. There needs to be a shift in management views around the use and value of sessional staff to maximise the potential benefits from this group and to create a more cohesive program team. Full time staff are feeling burdened with extra job responsibilities and unreasonable demands because they are perceived, by management, to be the most suitable staff members simply because they are always physically on campus. The full time staff feel they carry an unrealistic work and responsibility load and ultimately the blame if things don't go to plan.

Of concern to the author was the revelation by two sessional staff members that they only work in the Dental Assisting program because of the convenience and flexibility it affords them and the financial benefits. They do not want to extend themselves professionally or to take up any responsibilities and do not see themselves in the context of being key team members in a post compulsory education setting.

All of the sessional and casual staff continues to maintain links with the dental industry. Most are still employed part time as dental assistants or oral health hygienists while two sessional staff members are employed part time by one of the worlds largest suppliers of dental hygiene products This makes sessional staff an untapped resource when it comes to the Dental Assisting program team. They would be able to ensure the currency and relevancy of program content but because they have remained separate from the program team and program development process they have never been able to contribute. As a result of the Reframing the Future project there are encouraging signs that this is changing with at least one of the casual staff members taking up an invitation to visit a new Oral Health clinic where one of the sessional staff worked. By utilising and valuing the sessional staff's current workplace experiences the program team is helping sessional staff members to achieve a voice in the organization and as well as helping verify their competency around the technical and practice aspects of their discipline and make them an integral part of the program team.

Conclusion

The composition of the Dental Assisting program team would seem to reflect a national trend toward the casualisation of the workforce. While this paper has not attempted to explore the reasons behind this trend it has highlighted that sessional staff need to be considered as essential members of the program team and afforded every opportunity to develop the skills and knowledge commensurate with their position as teachers and assessors in the post compulsory education sector of a large university.

Clearly it is not sufficient for organizations to have policies in place regarding the employment of casual staff if there is no mechanism to monitor their implementation. The author is not seeking to apportion blame over the failure of the department in addressing basic sessional staff entitlements such as e-mail log ins and the provision of clear guidelines around professional development. However I am surprised that neither management nor staff (both full time and sessional) had questioned the practices that were clearly hampering their ability to work effectively.

Is it the sessional staff's own fault that they haven't pursued management or full time staff for answers and been more proactive in determining their rights and responsibilities? Or is it that this group of sessional staff, having come into a new job role at a large post compulsory education organization with little or no experience is simply unaware that there are policies and inherent job expectations that are integral to their position within Dental Assisting? The evidence points to sessional staff taking a passive role within the program team but given their lack of experience in this role and with outdated teaching models as a guide it is hardly surprising that sessional staff were not more proactive.

None of the full time staff or management team questioned whether or not there was a more appropriate way to integrate sessional staff into the program team and to more evenly distribute the workload that seemed to be weighing down full time staff. The sessional staff's belief that management and full time staff saw them as merely a temporary alternative to a full time staff member, willing to 'plug the gaps' but not actively contribute in the manner one would expect of professionals engaged in the delivery and assessment of a qualification would seem to be both fair and astute.

The sheer number of sessional and casual staff engaged in the delivery and assessment of programs at RMIT means we need to be very certain that this group of staff is being afforded every opportunity to be professionally nurtured, monitored and encouraged. The experience of the Dental Assisting program team demonstrates that it is not sufficient to have a policy in place, rather there needs to be active engagement with the policy and a means of monitoring its implementation. The quality and consistency of our teaching and assessment methods hinges on the ability of all of our staff to be working towards the same common goals within a consistent pedagogical framework.

The Dental Assisting program team are continuing to implement a range of strategies explored via the Reframing the Future program and are hopeful of providing a transferable mentor model that can be utilised by other program teams to assist with the effective integration of sessional staff.

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