

Casualization of academics in the Australian higher education: is teaching quality at risk?

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the issues casual academics face in Australia and whether these pose risks to teaching quality. The logic of the rampant casualisation in Australian universities is exposed first (i.e., mainly flexibility and cost saving to offset drops in government funding), followed by a discussion on the theoretical risks casualisation generates to teaching quality. Among these, one can include: less skilled, less professionally-equipped and less secure teaching staff, fewer inputs from up-to-date research, compromised academic and professional integrity. Indeed, surveys indicate that casual academics in Australian higher education providers have to cope with, among other issues, inadequate working conditions, lack of job security, differences in treatment as compared to full-time faculty and little support to engage in research activities. These findings compose a grim outlook of Australian academia, one that can jeopardise the contribution of higher education to Australia's economy and export accounts. Debate on these matters cannot be postponed much further: strategies to mitigate the risks uncovered are required now.

Keywords: Casual academic, Sessional academics, universities, higher education providers, work conditions.

INTRODUCTION

Casual teaching academics have been designated with various terms such as 'sessional academic' 'adjunct' and of course 'casual teaching staff'. This status excludes them from most of the rights and benefits that have come to be associated with standard ongoing employment at university (Campbell, 1996). The main rationale behind their appointment appears to be cost saving and flexibility in managing teaching staff.

It is believed that casual academics now represent over 60 percent of teaching staff in higher education institutions with a growth of 17.1 percent in 2012-2013 alone (May, 2011). Lazarsfeld & Morgan (2009) noted that casual academics, in some universities, carry out 80 percent of undergraduate teaching and that, in some private higher education institutions, the entire teaching team is made up of casual academics.

Whether this rapidly increasing casualisation of teaching staff poses risk to teaching quality is a legitimate question. This study aims to answer it by surveying casual academics working in a number of Australian universities and higher education providers. It examines a range of issues from the perspective of casual academics, particularly whether they believe their status and the issues that are attached to it inhibit their ability to perform and result in less than desirable teaching outcome. Lastly, this article proposes suggestions to mitigate the risk to teaching quality that have been uncovered.

EDUCATION AND CASUALISATION IN AUSTRALIA

Education, especially higher education, is one of Australia's most important service export industries. In its 2013 'International Trade in Services' report, the Australian Bureau of Statistics reported that international students studying and living in Australia contributed \$14.461 billion to the economy in 2012-2013. The report of the International Education Advisory Council entitled 'Australia – Education Globally', predicted that Australia's export education industry could grow by 30 percent by the end of the decade to reach \$19 billion (Australia – Education Global, 2013). The same report warned, however, that the emergence of new Asian competitors, combined with that of international online providers, known as Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), could create a global oversupply. It is therefore important that Australia stands ready to face these challenges if it wants to maintain growth of this export sector. This effort includes Australian universities and higher education providers investing on quality of teaching and research excellence.

The use of casual teaching staff in universities and higher education institutions is not a new concept. Traditionally (before 1980), casual academics were hired to assist in the teaching of undergraduate subjects (Kimber, 2003), primarily from the ranks of postgraduate students and industry experts. This had noble purposes: postgraduate students offer their more junior peers the benefits of their cutting-edge research (simultaneously allowing future academics to hone their teaching skills) and industry experts offer their in-depth understanding of the profession (Kimber, 2003). All in all, casuals traditionally added quality in the undergraduate education delivery and enhanced students' learning experience.

There has been an important shift in both the motives for using casual teaching staff and the processes used for hiring them, particularly since the late 1970s, however. Adjuncts have become increasingly used by universities as a cost saving measure to offset losses of revenue and to remain financially viable (Marginson, 2000; May, Strachan & Peetz, 2013), resulting in a rapid increase in the numbers of casual academics at the expense of their full time counterparts. Being generally less qualified than full-time faculty, adjuncts are also paid less. The substitution of full time academic for casual teaching staff is now universities' major cost saving strategy (Lazarsfeld-Jensen & Morgan, 2009).

One of the problems clouding the debate on these matters is the dearth of data. The exact number of casual academics employed in Australian universities and higher education institutions is debatable owing to lack of data; neither universities nor the Department of Education communicate or collect such statistics. A few studies have highlighted the rapid growth of casual academics staff in Australian Universities, however (Junor, 2004; Bexley, James & Arkoudis). Percy et al. (2008) reported that in the period 1989-1998, the employment of sessional teaching staff in the Australian higher education sector increased by 67 percent. The unpublished Department of Education Science and Training (DEST) figure reported by Junor (2004) showed a continued increase in casual academics during period 1994-2002. Junor stated that during the period, a rapid growth in student enrolments was accompanied by a significant decline of full-time equivalent continuing staff, counterbalanced by an increasing recourse to casual academics. Coates et al. (2009) also reported a continued increase of adjuncts, together with a decrease in full-time continuing faculty. In proportion to teaching staff, the increase of casuals jumped to 22.2 percent in 2007, up 76 percent from the 1989 level of 12.6 percent. During the same period, the proportion of continuing staff decreased to 59.3 percent from 63.60, a drop of 7 percent. May (2011) estimated that casual academics accounted for approximately 60 percent of all academics in Australia, performing at least 50 percent of undergraduate teaching, with women representing 57 percent of all casuals. Perhaps more strikingly, in some universities, casual academics carry out 80 percent of undergraduate teaching (Lazarsfeld-Jensen & Morgan, 2009).

Many perceive casual teaching staff to have inadequate access to resources, to have inappropriate skills and qualification, to lack professional development opportunities, and perhaps more importantly, to have no commitment beyond the semester for which they are contracted (Basso, 2003; Standing, 1997). What is certain is that the cost of education delivery and the quality of teaching are two key aspects that need balancing. As far as staffing goes, the current approach appears one-sided and strategies that are aimed at cutting costs are bound to put downward pressure on quality. The next section provides an in-depth theoretical assessment of this argument.

CASUALISATION AND TEACHING QUALITY

Quality teaching is paramount for students' learning experience and to the production of knowledgeable and skilled graduates who can meet the workforce needs of the future. A number of studies suggest that education contributes to economic growth and development (Brown, Goodman & Yasukawa, 2010; Coats et al., 2009; Maginson, 2000). Bradly et al. (2008) in particular emphasise the important role higher education providers have when it comes to producing the skilled workers of the future.

The primary task of teaching academics is to impart knowledge to students. Knowledge changes rapidly in today's dynamic environment, meaning that academics regularly need to engage in professional development activities to keep their skills and knowledge up-to-date. In that regard, research is integral to what academics do and their contribution to the community of their peers and society at large. Continuing up-skilling through professional development activities also enable academics to learn and think innovatively, eventually to improve teaching. As Percy & Beaumont (2008) noted, however, casual teaching staff generally have no or limited access to professional development activities. The same authors argue that this situation is likely to work against achieving excellence in teaching, since casuals are at risk of teaching skills and knowledge which are no longer used or relevant in industries.

Since casual academics are appointed on a short-term basis, the need for a stringent recruitment process, normally afforded in appointing continuing staff, is less likely to be enforced. Indeed, the authors' own experience suggests that casual appointments are made on informal basis, generally through referral and recommendation. Appointments made without proper scrutiny run the risk of selecting individuals without the required level of qualification or experience, affecting in turn teaching quality and students' learning.

Casual academics are generally appointed on a semester-by-semester basis (usually lasting 12 to 13 weeks), meaning that their job is guaranteed only for the semester for which they are contracted. This condition is a source of anxiety, with anecdotal evidence suggesting that staff start to worry for the next semester even before they begin the current one. Evidence was recently given before the Australian Council of Trade Union underlining the chronic problems adjunct academics face (Trounson, 2012). These include an inability to get a home loan owing to an unsecured job, having to seek and manage various concurrent casual employments, the stress of having to reapply every term for the same position and more generally the impossibility to project one's financial prospects more than a few months ahead. All these frustrations can hamper casual academics' commitment to a career in academia and, as a consequence, to quality teaching. This reality was acknowledged by National Trade Union President Jeannie Read when she admitted that the rate of casualisation in the sector was hurting delivery quality (Trounson, 2012).

The difficulties broached above can translate into casual academics compromising their professional integrity to secure a job for the next semester. Compromised integrity can take the form of grade inflation in the hope it would boost students' evaluations, weakening of marking criteria to the same purpose, unwillingness to report inadequate student behaviour to placate management, etc. Further, the growing casualisation of academics has *de facto* created two working classes within academia – full time continuing and sessional staff. When this segregation is combined with differentiated accesses to resources and benefits, resentment towards (and a sense of injustice with regard to) the employing institution can only obtain. Having a sense of belonging is another important factor of performance; among other things, one's sense of belonging is determined by how equitably and respectfully one believes one is treated. When one believes one does not belong or simply that one is looked down upon, a vicious circle can settle in, resulting in sessional academics just 'doing the work' and refusing to go the extra mile that would produce quality outcome.

Universities and higher education providers are on the frontline when it comes to developing, promoting and spreading knowledge. If they are to rise up to the challenge, individuals involved in this process should be treated fairly and supported adequately. While the current budgetary constraints universities face cannot be denied, a strategy of ever increasing casualisation is bound to affect adversely teaching delivery and the student learning experience.

DATA AND METHOD

Data was collected through an online survey of casual academics working in three universities and two private higher education providers in Australia. One hundred and fifty-six casual academics were surveyed and forty-three responded, a response rate of 27.50 percent. This level of response rate, which appears seemingly high for online surveys, shows that the subject matters surveyed are of significant interest for casual academics.

Thirty-one responses (72.10 percent) came from universities and twelve (27.90 percent) from private higher education providers; 65.10 percent of respondents were male and 35.9 percent were female. A majority of respondents (51.2 percent) were between 40 and

49 years old (the next largest group was between 50 and 59 years of age with 23.30 percent). None of the respondents were under the age of 30.

For analysis, for each item surveyed, respondents had the choice between six categories. Responses are presented in descriptive form comparing frequencies for each category. In order to provide statistical validity and support, the Pearson chi-square goodness-of-fit test model comparing more than two independent responses was used. The model tests the null hypothesis (H_0) that responses do not significantly differ against the alternative hypothesis (H_1) that they do. JMP statistical software was used to test the model; a benchmark p-value of 5 percent is used to determine the significance, meaning that H_0 is rejected if the p-value of the Chi-squared test is equal or less than 0.05.

FINDINGS

Table 1 (Appendix) presents findings with respect to work conditions in which the respondents find themselves. Results suggest that a majority do not have access to a dedicated work space for preparing and providing student consultation but the Chi-squared test indicate that this is not statically significant. A quiet space at home has been indicated as the preferred alternative space by 71 percent of the respondents and this is statistically significant. One positive aspect of Table 1 is that a marginally greater percentage of respondents believed that they have access to sufficient training and support. It appears, however, that a majority of casual academics (45 percent) believe that they have been unfairly treated as compared to their full time colleagues; the Chi-squared test indicates that this result is statistically meaningful.

With respect to respondents' commitment and dedication (Table 2), only 33 percent indicated that they work only for one institution. This compares to 51 percent who work in two institutions. Eleven percent indicated that they work in three institutions and the remaining 5 percent work in more than four institutions. When it comes to the number of units delivered concurrently, 30 percent delivered 3 units whereas 35 percent delivered 4 or more units, presumably in different institutions. Sixty-five percent of the respondents indicated that their academic commitment would increase if they were full time and 43 percent indicated that they are unable to afford a desirable level of time for preparation. Chi-squared tests for all results are statistically significant.

Surveyed academics were also asked about their qualifications and research commitment and the results are presented in Table 3. A majority of respondents (30 percent) hold a Master degree by course work. This compares to 28 percent who hold PhDs and 14 percent who are currently pursuing their PhD. Casual academics with Bachelor or Bachelor with Honours accounted for 21 percent. With respect to their research activities, 58 percent have never published and 51 percent indicated that this would change if they were full time. The results are statistically significant.

In Table 4, seventy-four percent of respondents indicated that they do not compromise their academic integrity, a re-assuring result which still leaves 26 percent who indicated that they do. The responses in terms of professional integrity are more striking: only 21 percent indicated that they would report issues to the management, 46 percent said they do to some extent and 33 percent indicated they do not report at all. These preferences are statistically significant.

In Table 5 and 6, findings with respect to job security, performance and aspirations are presented, respectively. Job security was of concern to some extent for 35 percent of respondents, whereas it is significantly of concern for 24 percent. Sixty-one percent indicated that casualisation was affecting their overall performance. Twenty-five percent of respondents do not believe that the current casualisation trend will change, whereas 60

percent thought it would increase. Accordingly, they do not see a bright light at the end of their tunnel: 62 percent believe that they still would be working as casuals in 3 years' time. All results are statistically significant.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The findings reported above portray a grim picture of casual employment in academia and highlight the risk to teaching quality and students' learning experience it entails. Continuous improvement through professional development and training appears to be lacking. The paucity of professional development opportunities available to casual academics can only limit their ability to perform. Moreover, many respondents are of the view that they have been unfairly treated compared to their full time colleagues. This can only result in low morale and dedication.

Some casual academics work in multiple institutions, delivering a number of units simultaneously and this seems to be a developing trend. While doing so is legal and perfectly legitimate, it raises the question of the concerned individuals' ability to maintain a required level of standard across the board. This risk is reflected in the respondents believing that they are unable to afford a desirable level of preparation time and are not very committed to their work.

Academic qualification does not seem to be much of concern although there is a non-negligible minority with just a bachelor level. More concerning is the lack of research activities of respondents. This seemingly lack of research skills undermine their credibility as experts in their areas and this can only negatively affect their teaching.

Academic and professional integrity are also in question. The fact that more than a quarter of respondents compromised their academic integrity by inflating grades and pass rates to appease students and impress management is quite concerning. Even more concerning is the fact that a significant proportion of respondents do not report issues to their management for a fear of reprisal. Not escalated, these issues are unlikely to be addressed.

The future of Australia's higher education sector hinges on its ability to maintain and improve its quality standards. As the discussion above illustrates, the current and expanding casualisation of academics poses a significant risk to that prospect. There is no denying that universities are increasingly facing financial challenges, owing notably to the government's decision to cut funding. This situation has been exacerbated in the recent past by a significant decrease in international student enrolments, caused primarily by an unprecedented appreciation of the Australian dollar and changes in the migration policy affecting international students' ability to obtain permanent residency. As mentioned, universities and higher education providers have resorted (among other measures) to faculty casualisation to reduce costs. While this reaction is to some degree understandable, it does not factor in the decline in teaching quality that obtains, a decline which can only trigger further drops in student numbers. In this sense, academic casualisation can only be a short-term fix, unsustainable in the long term.

There are additional challenges to teaching quality, diagnosed in Hugo (2005a; 2005b). The 1960s and 1970s saw rapid increases in the number of academics, required to educate a growing workforce. These hiring waves were followed by a dearth of recruitments during the 1990s and the one and half decades since, resulting in what Hugo (2005b: 340) called a "lost generation" of academics. If the first waves are not replaced as they reach retirement age, the current casualisation approach will have growing implications.

What all this means is that the time for having a policy debate on the casualisation of the higher education sector in Australia is now. This debate should involve a range of stakeholders and consider various strategies and perhaps legal dispositions, such minimum

ratios of full-time academics in higher education providers, intended to safeguard teaching quality. The sector is going through difficult challenges and ways must be found to deal with them. Quick and short term solutions, like casualisation, will not do. What remains certain is that policies considered must have teaching quality at their heart.

CONCLUSION

This study highlighted issues that casual academics working in Australian universities and higher education providers face. It highlighted that these issues restrict casuals' ability to perform, negatively affecting teaching quality. The study acknowledged the challenges universities face and argued that a quick fix, short term measure like casualisation is unlikely to resolve long term challenges. Whatever the case, this is a debate that the Australian education sector cannot afford to postpone for much longer.

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APPENDIX

Table 1. Work conditions and expectations

Dedicated Work space		Alternative work space used		Training and support		Sentiment of treatment	
Provided dedicated work space	%	Alternative space used	%	Current access to training and support	%	Unfairly treated compared to full time	%
Yes	46	Unused space in the institution	8	Quite insufficient	7	Strongly agree	17
No	54	Quiet space at home	71	Insufficient	38	Agree	45
		Anywhere there is quite space and time	21	Sufficient	48	Disagree	27
		In public transport	0	More than sufficient	7	Strongly disagree	11
Pearson χ^2	0.64	Pearson χ^2	121.84*	Pearson χ^2	53.84*	Pearson χ^2	26.56*

Note: * and ** denote significant levels of 1 and 5 percent.

Table 2. Commitment and dedication

Working in multi-institutions		Number units delivered in a week		Commitment to academic		Job preference	
Number of employing institutions	%	Units delivered in a week	%	Current access to training and support	%	Can afford preparation time	%
In one institution only	33	one	7	Less than it is now	7	Substantially less than desirable	5
In two institutions	51	Two	28	Equivalent to what it is now	28	Less than desirable	38
In three institutions	11	Three	30	More than what it is now	65	Desirable	48
In four institutions or more	5	Four or more	35			More than desirable	9
Pearson χ^2	53.44*	Pearson χ^2	121.84*	Pearson χ^2	83.84*	Pearson χ^2	54.16*

Note: * and ** denote significant levels of 1 and 5 percent.

Table 3. Qualification ad research activities

Qualification		Research activities		Research commitment	
Degree	%	Publications	%	If they were a full time	%
PhD	28	None	58	Lower than what they are today	2
PhD student	14	Once a year	21	Same as what they are today	1
Master (research)	7	Twice a year	12	Higher than what they are today	34
Master (course work)	30	Thrice a year	2	Significantly higher than what they today	51
Bachelor - Hons	7	More than thrice a year	7		
Bachelor	14				
Pearson χ^2	30.44*	Pearson χ^2	0.00*	Pearson χ^2	83.00*

Note: * and ** denote significant levels of 1 and 5 percent.

Table 4. Academic and professional integrity

Academic integrity		Professional integrity	
Compromise integrity	%	Cases of reporting issues	%
Not at all	74	Never	33
To some extent	26	To some extent	46
Often	0	Often	21
Pearson χ^2	84.56*	Pearson χ^2	9.38*

Note: * and ** denote significant levels of 1 and 5 percent.

Table 5. Job security and performance

Sense of insecurity		Overall performance	
Job security affects performance	%	Casualisation is affecting overall performance	%
Not at all	41	Strongly agree	19
To some extent	35	Agree	42
Significantly	19	Disagree	32
Very significantly	5	Strongly disagree	7
Pearson χ^2	31.68*	Pearson χ^2	27.92*

Note: * and ** denote significant levels of 1 and 5 percent.

Table 6. Future hopes and aspirations

Improves in the future		Future career prospect	
Current casualisation trend in the future will	%	Where you see in 3 years	%
Significantly decrease	2	Still a casual academic	62
Decrease	11	Working as tenure academic	33
No change	25	Working in different industry	7
Increase	44	Starting your own business	0
Significantly increase	16		
Pearson χ^2	52.10*	Pearson χ^2	93.37*

Note: * and ** denote significant levels of 1 and 5 percent.

