AT THE OTHER END OF THE CHALK DIVIDE: a survey of sessional academics in a Regional Australian University

Mr Paul McGrath: Principal Researcher
Dr Stephane Le Queux: Supervisor
Background

• Tertiary casual labour is actually exceeding the Australian industry average by up to 150% (ABS, 2013).

• Estimated that > 50% of first year courses taught by sessionals

• Australia appears to be following international trends
“They don't realise how much the School relies on the goodwill of sessionals”.

(Northern Australian University Survey, 2013)
• Economies of scale have subordinated the needs of staff to those of the massification and commodification of knowledge.

• A new breed of sessional generalists has emerged, solely to suit the needs of the faculty with no consultation or consideration for individual expectations (Churchman, 2002).
“I absolutely love teaching. But am leaving the university sector due to dissatisfaction with basic recognition of sessional staff...”
(Northern Australian University survey, 2013)
Survey

- NAU’s Planning Department confirmed 1,110 sessional teaching positions along with 108 FTE positions were recorded in 2012.
- Potential participants were identified as those who had sessional contracts as at 1st January 2013.
- Initial invitations sent via NAU’s Human Resources Department, N = 346
- Further inquiries at faculty level, resulted in new invitations being emailed, N = 516.
- Ultimately a response rate of 22% n = 113, regarded as a fairly representative sample.
• Survey instrument was same as used by Newcastle University.

• 49 questions across 6 main areas of concerns

• Separated Career & Non-Career Academics

• Potential participants were identified as those who had sessional contracts as at 1st January 2013.

• Available on-line for 13 weeks.
Respondent Profile

- Female
- Between 40-49 y.o.
- Importance of discipline
- Sessional for > 4 years
- Earn > 60% of their income
- Casual academic only
- Qualified academic
- Academic apprentices
- Prefer to be tenured in 5 years
- Enroled/Hold HrD

0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80
Areas of Concern

- Financial planning
- Personal & Professional planning
- Risks in Refusing unreasonable...
- Discontunity
- Insufficient notice
- Family life

Career Academics vs Others
Specific Concerns

- Focus on:
  - Remuneration
  - Processes & Resources
  - Inclusion & Skill Development
  - Motivations
Remuneration

- Responding to emails, teaching preparation, staff development and research were identified as lacking sufficient remuneration.
- 64.5% identified dissatisfaction with payment for student consultation, marking, and responding to emails.
- Payments do not reflect the actual time spent on above tasks.
“...since 2001 I have repeatedly had problems with being paid - contracts have not been prepared, tax file numbers not submitted, pay for 1 week full time lecturing has been divided over 20 weeks etc. This factor has been very disappointing and I have considered not taking contracts... simply because of the administrative hassle in getting paid”.

(Northern Australian University survey, 2013)
Processes & Resources

• Delays in payments and contract registration - primary reasons for dissatisfaction.

• Access to training & quality of development.

• Career academics and others stated they received none or barely adequate access to training and development 14% and 16% respectively.
“Difficulties accessing personnel, conflicting advise on contracts, contract not matching requirements, attitudes of some quite rude towards a sessional”.

(Northern Australian University survey, 2013)
Inclusion & Skill Development

• Comprehensive dissatisfaction with access to equitable promotion opportunities, with a majority of negative or neutral responses reported from career academics.

• 47% stated they had never, rarely, or had occasional contact with their supervisor

• 53% recorded that they often or very frequently had contact.
“...need mentors, regular training-especially on teaching styles”.
(Northern Australian University survey, 2013)
Motivation

• A high level of responses from non-career academics indicated that satisfaction from teaching was the main motivating factor.

• Career academics indicated academic experience as a stronger motivation.

• Flexibility of working hours was a motivating factor, only from non-career sessionals.

• Work/Life/Balance was depicted as equally important for both categories.
“It is very disheartening to work for an organisation for 11 years, receive continually excellent feedback from students, and yet have no opportunity to get a permanent position - even if it were part-time”.

(Northern Australian University survey, 2013)
Summary of Comparisons – NU and NAU

- Male
- Over 40 years
- Over 50 years
- Sessional for > 5 years
- Earn > 60% of their income
- Hold multiple jobs
- Multiple PT/casual job holder
- Academic apprentices
- Prefer to be tenured in 5 years
Conclusions

- Northern Queensland Sessionals feel:
  - Exploited
  - Undervalued
  - Remuneration lacking
  - Unsure if they will be offered tenure

“...take all of NAU forward, together”
(NAU academic in email to senior management, 2013)
Emerging Issues

• Heading towards a two tiered approach
  o Those who teach
  o Those who research and teach

• NTEU supporting the creation of teaching only academics.

• New EBA’s now in place
Future Considerations...

• Solidarity? Us & Them?
• Union support of two classes?
• Changes internal labour market?
• Labour Process in Tertiary markets?
• PhD as a pathway to academic career?
The debate continues...

“Too often in the past EAs have included such clauses but universities have simply ignored them. That’s why casualisation increases inexorably. As a result, many casuals just look upon the NTEU as a bosses’ union, made up of members who themselves use casualisation (e.g. through using research money to buy out their teaching at casual rates) as a way to prevent their own conditions being eroded”.

(George Morgan, 2014)