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What place for sessionals in languages and cultures education in Australian universities? A first national report

Abstract

LCNAU’s first national colloquium, held in Melbourne in September 2011, was directly preceded by a national forum and workshop specifically for so-called ‘casual’ or ‘sessional’ staff teaching in languages and cultures programs in Australian universities. At the event entitled ‘What place for sessionals in languages and cultures education?’ special attention was given to the discussion of initial results drawn from a national survey of sessional staff from around the country. Some of these results are also presented and analysed here in order to provide real, readily available data about a critical element of languages and cultures staffing in Australian universities and to inform debate about the professional status and development of languages and cultures academics — with an explicit focus on the sessional or casualized component of that workforce. We also report on recommendations made by sessionals present at the national forum and workshop to address problems and inadequacies identified in the survey.
1. Introduction

“WANTED: casual teaching staff. Postgraduate qualifications essential, PhD preferred. Minimum three hours work per paid hour; hours to be advised. No office provided. Three months work available; chance for more next year, after four months unpaid break.” Sue Green, ‘Upstairs, downstairs’, *The Age*, 12 July, 2011

The establishment of the Languages and Cultures Network for Australian Universities (LCNAU) in 2011 was an important moment for languages academics in Australia. Amongst its many aims is to provide support for all those who work in the profession — permanent staff, junior staff, as well as the large number of so-called ‘casual’ or ‘sessional’ staff members who carry a large part of the teaching burden of language programs around the country, but who have neither guaranteed employment nor secure working conditions.¹

Despite the Australian tertiary sector’s dependence on sessionals in the provision of languages teaching, little is known or understood about those who have this role, in the absence of any targeted data sample or survey (see also Nettelbeck, Hajek and Woods 2012a, this volume). In an effort to address this obvious lacuna, LCNAU successfully applied for funding to the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) to organize a special event: the first-ever National Forum and Workshop for Languages and Cultures Sessionals. With the title ‘What place for sessionals in languages and cultures education?’, it was designed to allow sessionals from around Australia to come together to discuss their situation, concerns and issues, and was run over the half-day immediately preceding the commencement of LCNAU’s first National Colloquium in Melbourne, Australia (September 26-28, 2011). In the lead-up to the Forum, a national online survey of languages and cultures sessionals was conducted in order to obtain for this time a data-based profile of this group, as well as some sense of their working conditions and concerns. The intention was to analyse at least some of the results in time for consideration at the National Forum, to be followed by subsequent reporting on both the event and the survey at the LCNAU National Colloquium.

These same results are presented below, and are intended to inform current and future discussions about the nature and professional development of languages and cultures academics around Australia. In particular, LCNAU is partly established to address serious concern about excessive casualization of languages teaching in Australian universities. This trend is a result of a nationwide strategy by universities to reduce costs, but it is one which risks languages programs’ ability to maintain academic quality by reducing permanent staffing, impeding career development as well as research productivity (Nettelbeck, Hajek and Woods 2012b).

The timing of the National Forum can only be described as fortuitous — coinciding with the release of a series of publications (reports and press articles) centred precisely on the issues of sessional staffing and casualization in Australian
universities, in particular Bexley, James and Arkoudis (2011), Edwards, Bexley and Richardson (2011) and Hare (2011a, b). These studies point to the huge challenge of increasing casualization in Australia’s tertiary sector over the past twenty years, a period which has seen rising numbers of students coupled with a concomitant decline in permanent staffing. In 2011 there were approximately 67,000 casual staff teaching in Australian universities, and of these most were female (64%). At the same time the median age of permanent academic staff continues to rise, and there are indications that over the next ten years Australian universities will increasingly face a significant staffing crisis as a large number of permanent academic staff who are currently employed reach retirement age (Hare 2011a; May 2011).

3. The Forum and Workshop and online survey

Once funding was made available by the ALTC, the survey instrument that preceded the Forum was quickly developed by the authors and made available online. Schools and faculties hosting languages programs were then contacted and asked to circulate the weblink to their sessional staff. In three weeks, 55 sessionals from ten Australian universities completed the survey. The central aim of the survey was to collate data specifically about the nature and experience of the sessional languages workforce that could then be discussed by sessionals themselves at the Forum and Workshop.

The Forum and Workshop proved to be very effective spaces for discussion and collegial collaboration among sessionals and was welcomed as a positive initiative by its approximately fifty participants. Only sessionals were permitted to participate in order to allow them to talk freely — which they did by airing common concerns and issues, as well as discussing personal experiences and some of the answers to the online survey distributed to sessional staff in the weeks preceding the forum. Participants were also asked to consider and formulate possible solutions to problems and issues identified in the survey and subsequent discussions.

4. Presentation of some survey results

The online survey was divided in four parts focussing in turn on (a) demographic characteristics; (b) teaching; (c) university environment; and (d) academic progression and career development. We discuss some initial results from each section in turn, before turning our attention to discussions and suggestions made at the Forum and Workshop for improvement and remediation.

4.1 Demographic profile

Survey respondents were first asked to provide basic demographic (personal, teaching and educational) information in order to provide a general idea of the personal and professional profile of the community of languages sessionals around Australia.
Gender: The overwhelming majority of languages sessionals are women (80%), at least in our sample — a proportion that is higher than the Australian national average (64%) reported above.

Age: The age group is relatively evenly spread, across a wide range from low 20s to 60 years of age, as shown in Figure 1. Most sessionals are, however, concentrated in the middle 30–49 (58.2%) bracket.

Figure 1: Age of sessional respondents

Years of teaching: More than two thirds of respondents (70.9%) have five years or less of teaching experience, with almost a quarter (23.6%) having less than a year’s experience (see Figure 2). These figures suggest a relatively high turnover of sessional staff — and a significant reliance on new sessionals (often with no previous experience) entering the workforce over relatively short time frames. A number of explanations could account for the pattern in Figure 2; for example, it may reflect a small but steady flow through the sector of postgraduate students in languages and cultures who teach casually for additional financial support, or who wish to strengthen their curriculum vitae by adding teaching experience before completion of studies (see next section). Alternatively, it may reflect a positive transition to other, more permanent employment, including teaching in schools. More negatively,
it may also reflect the unreliability of or dissatisfaction with sessional employment from semester to semester, leading in turn to a short to medium-term pattern of turnover in this part of the workforce. On the other hand almost 30% of respondents have been employed as sessionals for five or more years — and many of these for more than ten years — a sign at the other end of the employment continuum of low turnover and change. Not surprisingly, some participants at the Forum and Workshop reported feeling trapped as sessionals with little prospect of change or transition into permanent academic employment.

![Figure 2: Years of sessional teaching experience](image)

**Academic qualifications**: Contrary to what is commonly assumed about sessionals in Australian universities, languages sessionals are not composed for the most part of young postgraduate students earning a living while studying. Just over a third (37%) of sessional respondents are currently completing some kind of postgraduate degree (Master’s, PhD, etc.). On the other hand, almost two-thirds of respondents already
have postgraduate qualifications: over half have a Master’s degree, while a tenth has already completed a PhD. Overall these results are consistent with an earlier nationwide finding by May (2011) that “in contrast to the wider casual workforce, casual academic staff are amongst the highest qualified in the Australian workforce.”

![Figure 3: Academic qualifications of sessionals](image_url)

In response to a question of possible future plans, among sessionals not currently studying, a third (33%) are considering undertaking further university studies, while half (50%) might undertake further studies. Sessionals, therefore, constitute an important pool of possible postgraduate students for languages and cultures programs.
4.2 Teaching

**Language programs and their reliance on sessionals:** One important question in the survey was explicit in seeking to identify the proportion of languages represented that were taught entirely by casual/sessional staff. While most sessionals (76%) reported teaching alongside continuing academic staff (who, in the majority of cases, also coordinate the subjects/courses/units involved), a quarter of language programs, according to the sample, are taught by sessional staff only. That such a high proportion of languages in Australian universities might now be taught in this way is of special concern, and requires further in-depth investigation. It clearly reflects efforts by some universities to reduce staffing costs, but has significant consequences for the supervision and monitoring of sessionals and their teaching, as well as for the design, quality, promotion and maintenance of languages programs in the long-term.

**Weekly teaching hours:** the amount of teaching varies significantly with an average in Semester 2, 2011, across the nation of seven hours per week. However, more than a quarter of respondents report nine or more hours of teaching — with some teaching as much as 20–24 hours per week.

![Figure 4: Average sessional teaching hours per week (Semester 2, 2011)](image)

Despite the evident reliance on sessionals around the country, most respondents reported that their involvement in deciding the number and timetabling of hours they teach is limited (47%) or even non-existent — with a full third (33%) reporting no input at all. Only a fifth (20%) reported having strong input with regard to these same issues.

**Advance notice of teaching:** Almost two-thirds (63%) of respondents reported being informed of their teaching hours only within a very short time frame (ranging between a couple of days to three weeks) before the start of the teaching semester. Only 14% were notified more than a month in advance. While the employment of casual staff is convenient for universities, as it allows final decision-making about resource provision and staffing levels to be fine-tuned to as close as possible to the
start of semester, participants at the Forum were highly critical of the practice and impact it had on them, including uncertainty, financial insecurity and an inability to plan.

**Supervision of sessional staff:** 38% of respondents felt that they receive little or no supervision over their teaching, with more than 50% having no coordinator allocated for support or advice. These results partly reflect the disappointingly high proportion of language programs now taught only by sessionals (see above), but also the effects of other pressures on permanent staff who might be expected to supervise them.

One of the significant consequences of the long-term increase in sessional staff is an increase in administrative and organisational work for the falling number of tenured staff, who are often left to manage large teams of casual staff teaching in their courses. Such an outcome is reported nationwide across the Australian tertiary sector (Bexley, James and Arkoudis 2011) and is also specifically identified as a major threat to the effectiveness and wellbeing of language programs in this country (see Nettelbeck, Hajek and Woods 2012a/b).

The question of adequate supervision was a matter of considerable discussion during the Forum. Participants working closely with course/subject/unit coordinators reported that there is often a lack of direction and organization, but are also aware of the constant pressure felt by coordinators to perform across a wide range of areas in addition to their responsibilities for teaching supervision.

The discrepancy between the first two results presented in this sub-section on supervision suggests that a small proportion of respondents (approx. 12%) did not feel the need for supervision — presumably because they consider themselves highly autonomous and experienced in what they are doing. On the other hand, fully 81% of surveyed sessionals indicated that they thought it is necessary to have a mentor/supervisor for sessional staff.

### 4.3 The university environment

Given the high and increasing number of casual/sessionals employed by universities, the survey also sought to identify the extent to which these staff felt they fit into the university environment — both in collegial and practical terms. Not surprisingly, given some of the results reported above, more than half the respondents reported feeling undervalued and marginalised by their university. Although some of them do have a strong sense of belonging within their department, they also have an equally strong sense of feeling ‘disposable’ at the end of a semester, and of not fitting into any ‘working category’.

On a practical level fewer than 40% of respondents were satisfied with the space and infrastructure allocated to sessionals during semester. Discussions at the Forum pointed to such problems as the low status of space and technology assigned to them, and the day-to-day difficulties with sharing both of these with many other sessionals.
4.4 Academic progression and career development

The final area of investigation and discussion was the question of academic progression and career development. Given the increasing reliance on sessionals across Australia’s university sector and the projected crisis in academic employment as today’s permanent staff begin to retire in large numbers (see above), it is perhaps surprising that only 15.7% of sessionals respondents said career planning or advice was available to them. Almost half said none was available while more than a third was not certain, as shown in Figure 6.
Figure 6: Responses to the question ‘Does your university offer career planning or advice for sessional staff?’

It is clear from both survey results and discussion at the Forum that sessionals do not feel guided through their career progression, nor is there any obvious career progression available to them. This is an ironic and disappointing outcome considering that sessional teaching is the traditional entry point, along with postgraduate research, for most tenured academics, in languages as in other sectors of the university.

5. Addressing the survey results: suggestions and recommendations from the Forum and Workshop

Overall, there is no doubt that sessionals are well aware that casualization is a significant reality of Australian universities – across the board and not just in the teaching of languages and cultures. This awareness was confirmed by survey results and by subsequent group discussion. However, forum participants were clear that if this ‘reality’ is to work efficiently and productively then it is important for sessionals to have an unambiguous definition of the place they occupy within languages programs and among other academic colleagues.

Discussion at the Forum about the survey results produced a number of suggestions about how these issues might be addressed.
5.1 Teaching
Given that 84% of sessionals reported the need to seek extra work during semester breaks (and that only 24% reported being offered research work within the university during semester breaks), it is clear that the timing and organization of semester teaching hours is an important aspect in the life of sessionals. Participants at the Forum strongly emphasized their preference for a contract for teaching hours in both semesters to be completed at the beginning of the academic year, in order to help with the planning of work, research, study and personal commitments of sessional staff.

Forum participants suggested that the issue of adequate supervision and support could be dealt with within a school or department by the appointment of a dedicated and clearly identified sessional support person or coordinator. Such a person could be a permanent academic who could be given time release — or at the very least recognition for the role. Participants are keenly aware that the lack of centralized supervision often leaves an already overburdened course/subject/unit coordinator to sort out practical problems.

5.2 University environment
With respect to the sense of disconnection between sessionals and the university environment, it was considered at the forum that universities often seem to lack a representative for sessional staff (a sessional representing the whole cohort). Moreover, most universities do not have a sessional representative at school/department level, in meetings or on official committees. Both situations could be easily remedied by appointing a sessional to each of those roles and ensuring that such representatives exist, are regularly available, and have an important role in communication and representation at all levels of the university structure.

5.3 Academic progression and career development
Given the frequent public pronouncements across the university sector about the importance of research as a measure of institutional success, sessionals are well aware of the need to develop research skills and capacity, alongside teaching expertise, as part of their own career development. Not surprisingly therefore, they expressed the desire to contribute more to the research environment, especially during semester breaks. Such skill development could also be linked to teaching. Suggestions from sessionals present at the Forum on how to improve their research and teaching profile included the following:

- assisting as research assistants;
- helping with curriculum development;
- organising/participating in seminars for language teachers;
- course planning for the following semester;
• preparing and delivering guest lectures in their field of expertise;
• taking part in small research projects.

6. Sessionals and LCNAU — establishing a reciprocal relationship

Discussion at the Forum and Workshop concluded with consideration of how to develop a reciprocal collaboration with LCNAU — to improve the professional status and development of sessionals as well as to maintain the future academic population that would in due course be expected to drive the network. In answer to the question ‘what can sessionals contribute to LCNAU?’, responses focussed on providing information and feedback about programs and teaching around Australia, as well as about their own situation. The online survey was a useful first phase tool, but more consideration should be given to more comprehensive information gathering and analysis (see also Nettelbeck, Hajek and Woods 2012a, this volume).

In response to the question ‘what can LCNAU do for sessionals?’, sessionals were clear that it could usefully provide a space (virtual or real) for them — a good example of which was the National Forum itself where they could discuss common issues, share experiences and, just as critically, meet with colleagues. They also felt that LCNAU could develop and/or support recommendations for languages departments to support and improve the situation of sessionals. This latter suggestion has already been partly addressed by the sessionals themselves — at the Forum and as presented and discussed briefly in Section 5. LCNAU will take these recommendations for further development and national advocacy.

7. Conclusion

For the first time, we have an initial national data-based profile of the sessionals who teach in languages and cultures programs in Australian universities, as well as a research-based idea of the extent of the difficulties and challenges they face. None of these problems should surprise — many of those now permanently employed as languages academics could well report having worked under similar conditions in an earlier phase of their careers. Those same issues are today, however, made more difficult by greater student numbers, fewer permanent staff, and much less oversight and monitoring, leading to a greater reliance on sessionals to take more teaching-related responsibility. Many of the challenges identified in the national survey could be met if the recommendations formulated by the sessionals themselves were implemented. These do not necessarily demand significant expenditure, but they do require thought, communication and commitment by universities, faculties and schools that employ sessional staff in their languages and cultures programs. Improving working conditions in an enduring way for sessionals is essential, but it is not the ‘main game’. A greater and more difficult challenge is to reverse the
national trend towards academic casualization in order to strengthen languages and cultures programs around the country. If Australian universities are to achieve their international aspirations, they will need to foster practices and structures that guarantee the provision of solid languages and cultures programs as well as critical research depth and disciplinary strength among their staff: and none of this can be done with a heavily casualized workforce.

Notes

1. Strictly speaking, casu als or sessionals in the Australian work context are employees who have no permanent status (whether part-time or full-time) but are employed for a specific number of work hours (typically without any form of written contract), and without separate entitlements to sick leave or annual holidays (these are factored into their hourly rate of pay), or guaranteed employment (over any period of time). They are sometimes referred to (inaccurately) as tutors (who can in fact have contracts and/or be permanent) or as teaching assistants.

References


Nettelbeck, C., J. Hajek and A. Woods. 2012a. Leadership and development versus casualization of languages professionals in Australian universities: mapping the present for our future. This volume, 35-45.
