Supporting sessional teaching staff in the UK – to what extent is there real progress?

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Keywords

sessional staff, staff support, training and development

In common with much of worldwide higher education, United Kingdom universities deploy a very large number of teaching staff on "atypical" employment contracts. This term covers a wide number of arrangements other than being employed on the traditional lecturing contract. A lecturer is salaried, on a set of national scales, on a standard national pension scheme, and is covered by all the human-resource and professional-development infrastructures normal in large organisations and established professional careers. However, those on atypical arrangements may not be salaried for their teaching role, and are usually paid a piece-rate per hour or on a fee. Their contracts, rather than being open-ended, are limited to a fixed term or for the duration of a task. These staff are frequently part-time and may have another role in or outside the university. They will be collectively described here with the Australian term "sessional teachers" (in North America they are described as "adjunct faculty"). In the UK they are most frequently called "part-time teachers" – which does not distinguish them from lecturers on part-time contracts – a rather unhelpful confusion in this context.

I conducted many studies on this group of staff over a 10-year period up to 2008. I shall review some of that work here, but the main purpose is to offer an update. Has the situation changed? Is the current focus on the student experience, driven by the tripling of student fees, translating to ensuring a much higher quality of support for all teaching staff to ensure the students gain a stronger learning experience? While the focus of the article is on support and development of sessional staff, some context needs to be considered first.

Sessional Staff in the UK

The main driver for deploying sessional staff has been massification – the large growth in student numbers since the early 1980s. Increasing recruitment three- or fourfold created a particular pressure on staffing seminars and laboratory demonstrations and conducting assessments (Bryson 2004a). However, sessional staff cover the whole range of teaching roles, including designing and leading their own modules (Allen 2001). They are deployed for a number of other reasons. For example, they offer current practitioner knowledge and cover areas of specialist expertise. This is particularly true in vocational subjects such as the arts, music, architecture and design, business, medicine and law. Their employment covers the peaks and troughs of demand in a more flexible way than do lecturing staff, at least in the eyes of resource-focussed managers. Employing sessional staff also offers an important buffer against the costs and issues of redundancy: theyare considerably cheaper in resource costs, and may be easier to recruit – particularly in situations where senior management apply tight controls to the replacement and recruitment of salaried staff. Moreover, their deployment "frees up" lecturing staff to carry out research. In one , at a research-intensive university, sessional staff undertook all the undergraduate teaching in one social - sciences department (Powney et al. 2001).

Who Are the Sessional Staff?

Sessional staff have a host of titles, such as visiting lecturer, teaching assistant, hourly paid lecturer or graduate teaching assistant. Bryson (2006) identified several categories:

1. Postgraduate students (could be part-time)
2. Graduate teaching assistants
3. Early-career researchers
4. Those carrying out another main role in the university (e.g. research, technical, administrative, library/information systems)
5. Those with a full-time (usually professional) role outside the higher-education institution
6. Former senior professional practitioners who have retired
7. Portfolio combinations including one or more of the following:
   a. multiple teaching roles/working for multiple employers
   b. a freelance/consultancy
   c. a part-time secondary role (possibly low- paid, but offering a more-certain income)
8. Sole employment as sessional teacher
9. Semi-retired former academic staff

Major factors that determine who is recruited include the task and who is available locally – the insecure contract and level of reward make this a distinctly local labour market in the main, and the recruitment process is frequently "casualised" and informal too. Thus in research-intensive universities a plentiful supply of postgraduate research students and contract researchers results in their making up a large proportion of sessional staff. In the rest of the sector it is rather more common to bring sessional staff from outside (categories 5-8 above). The ability to do so relies on being in a large labour market such as a city or conurbation. An example would be one London university specialising in the creative arts, where 80% of the teaching is undertaken by sessional staff. There are also specialist situations and arrangements, such as in health disciplines, with both large numbers of honorary teaching staff (health professionals) and hybrid contracts for lecturer-practitioners. The latter grew out of making professions such as nursing graduate entry only. In subjects such as continuing education and TESOL and EFL teaching, the flexibility of the type of teaching required lends itself to the deployment of sessional staff.

The Numbers of Sessional Staff

Statistics about staff undertaking teaching in UK higher education have been collected by a national agency (Higher Education Statistical Agency, or HESA) for several decades. However until fairly recently universities were not required to return staff who worked for less than 25% full-time equivalent in a year. Thus in the authoritative Dearing Report (NCIHE 1997) the number of sessional staff was estimated at merely 4,000. Husbands (1998) estimated the real number at the time to be more like 75,000, through extrapolation from a survey of personnel officers.

More recent attempts to enumerate this group have also been problematic. Bryson (2004) calculated an estimation of 28,000 hourly paid teachers (who had no other job function – using IRHEPC 1999 data); 15,000 to 20,000 contract researchers who taught; at least 15,000 to 20,000 postgraduates who taught; and a further 10,000 to 15,000 staff in other university roles who also taught. These numbers were extrapolated from other research particularly at the institutional level,

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and indicate an estimate of 70,000 to 85,000, about the same number as those employed in salaried teaching positions at the time.

Since 2004, universities have been required to return all staff to HESA, but that has not fully clarified the enumeration problem. HESA does not distinguish salaried staff from non-salaried. Many sessional staff appear to be "invisible" to personnel systems. Their uncertain and complex contractual status, high turnover and confusion about who takes responsibility for management (particularly HR management) for such staff means that a massive effort is needed to identify such staff at even the faculty or departmental level. HESA also does not seek a headcount of part-time staff, but measures them in "full-person equivalents". The analysis from Bryson and Clark (2007) using a specially commissioned HESA dataset demonstrated considerable disparity between the estimates provided by case-study universities for other research projects about sessional staff and their returns for the same group made to HESA. There are also strong political reasons why institutions report such widely varying proportions of sessional staff (personal communication by senior managers with the author). One push to underestimate numbers is the desire to demonstrate that as large a proportion of teaching staff as possible are "research-active" for both esteem and a good performance in "league-tables". Conversely some universities may seek to demonstrate that their staff-to- student ratio is higher by returning as many teaching staff as possible. There would appear to be considerable discretion for each institution to designate staff as they see fit within the HESA requirements.

Therefore the national statistics underestimate sessional-staff numbers considerably, and it remains rather unclear whether the accuracy of return is improving. What is noticeable is that the number of full-time teaching staff has grown from 76,000 to 84,000 between 2004 to 2011, whereas over the same period the number of part-time teaching staff has grown from 36,000 to 56,000 (HESA 2013); notwithstanding the ambiguity of the statistic, this may reflect, to some degree, growing numbers of sessional staff. The sheer diversity of the sector exacerbates this problem. As noted, universities are operating in rather different local labour markets for sessional staff and with rather different demands. This may account for the relatively small proportion of part-time to full-time teaching staff found in research-intensive universities, according to HESA (12-30%), compared with teaching-intensive (35-65%), as although they both usually deploy large numbers of sessional staff, the armies of postgraduate students and graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) doing this role in research-intensive universities are not reported to HESA.

Thus it is difficult to state if the numbers of sessional staff are growing or declining or if their contractual status is changing. Tomkinson (2012), for example, found little movement or change. What can be said, though, is that the ability to enumerate and identify such staff in human-resource statistics remains as difficult as it always has been. That would seem to apply as much at the institutional level as it does the national level in the UK. The categorisation of staff used by HESA is not appropriate to identify or distinguish sessional staff.

The widespread deployment of sessional staff is worldwide. Other higher-education systems similarly exhibit a high use of "casualised" teaching staff. Barker (1998) estimated that around

25% (250,000 staff) of the instructors (teachers) in North American tertiary education were employed on contingent (temporary), part-time employment contracts as "adjuncts". The *RED Report* (Percy et al. 2008) and May (2011) have identified a similar growth of sessional staff in Australia; this is echoed in Canada (Rajagopal and Lin 1996, Puplampu 2004), Japan (Yamanoi 2003), France (Chevalier 2001) and Germany (Enders 2000).

Issues for Sessional Staff

Many research studies have examined the conditions in which sessional staff work and the consequences of this approach to deploying teachers in higher education. Such studies have produced powerful evidence, often gathered directly from accounts of those who work in such roles, that there are a host of negative issues and impacts:

- *Conditions of work* – sessional staff tend to be paid less. The very nature of a piece rate means that they are underpaid or unpaid for the tasks they do, and thus their compensation is not pro-rata with salaried colleagues (Allen 2001); sessional staff frequently do not qualify for superannuation or similar benefits (Bryson et al. 2000); they have fewer rights (in contractual terms or employment rights) and less status in the organisation; their facilities (such as office space, administrative support or even access to a photocopier) are much poorer (Findlay-Brookes 2003). All this contributes to exclusion from the academic community (Anderson 2007).
- *Access to promotion and an academic career* – sessional staff are not on incremental scales or even grades. Thus there is no promotion, and no system that recognises a progression of responsibilities. Duration in the job and gaining expertise and experience might have the opposite effect to that in a normal professional role. Barker (1998) contended that the longer individuals are a sessional staff member, the less likely they are to gain a more secure and recognised teaching post – what she called "accumulated deficit". Tam (1997) described such a situation as a "not a bridge but a trap".
- *Professional development* – the invisibility of sessional staff to human resources and other staff development systems results in a lack or even absence of support and development opportunities, such as induction, appraisal, mentoring, development courses and training (Allen 2001, Anderson 2007).
- *Inequality of opportunity* – a recurrent theme is the lesser support and treatment of sessional staff – both real (as already noted) and perceived – in comparison to colleagues, and a consequent sense of being a "second-class citizen".
- *Insecurity, uncertainty and precariousness* – to be employed on short-term contacts with little surety of renewal is fraught with uncertainty for the individual, and can create all sorts of practical difficulties as well as low self-esteem (Bryson & Barnes 2000), and engender low commitment (Lowry 1996).
- *Underemployment* – Barker (1998) and Bryson and colleagues (2000) have revealed the tendency to deploy sessional staff to fill gaps, and to restrict them frequently to a narrow range of roles (which are often the roles that salaried staff wish to do less of). Managers also often place restrictions on the level of responsibility they can take (Bryson 2004). This creates a sense of being underused and underemployed.

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All this contributes to very powerful sense of marginalisation. As Bryson and Scurry (2002 p30) put it:

> *Taking all the evidence together, these workers can be described as highly marginalised…all the mechanisms and systems within universities make no allowances for any of their particular needs as they are geared up for full-time and long tenure models.*
> *...those outside universities tend to view the role of university teaching as worthy of high esteem. This contrasts with part-time teachers' own view of their position at the bottom of the academic hierarchy due to being part-time, temporary and doing a teaching only role.*
> *We can note that many of the part-time teachers act to further marginalise themselves...Their interactions and socialisation with other staff are confined to their own group. They have no "voice" and are unwilling or unable to act to influence the systems and full-time colleagues to change the situation….*

And from the same study (p26), in the words of a sessional staff member:

> *I've said to myself, how long can I put up with all of this? I'm worth more than this.*

There is another insidious consequence of being disempowered and marginalised and inhabiting a peripheral space outside the professional, academic communities of practice (Anderson 2007). This is the inability for, or constraints against, some sessional staff to undertake appropriate professional formation as academic teachers (Knights et al. 2007). This is linked to a sense of fractured occupational identity (Abbas & Maclean 2001) – not something likely to lead to good outcomes for the individual or the organisation.

It is not all doom and gloom; otherwise, rather fewer individuals would continue to be sessional staff. The same studies show that in spite of these issues, many sessional staff enjoy teaching and working with the students. The upsides, such as there are, of sessional teaching, may depend on large part on the "eye of the beholder" as well as the local context and the different aspirations and goals of individual sessional staff. The opportunity to become a sessional teacher can create a more flexible path into working in higher education than the rather proscribed route of researcher to lecturer. The route, or "bridge", of sessional staff into secure and salaried contracts has only been made available in some universities (less so in the research-intensive) and in some subjects. The vocational subjects tend to more highly value the practitioner experience that sessional staff bring with them (Bryson 2004b). Opportunities and conditions will depend heavily on policies and the approach of those managers and colleagues who are more or less proactive.

The same studies cited earlier show that sessional staff appreciate the excellent feedback they often get from students and that the interactions they have with other sessional colleagues and students does create a form of community that offers positive features. Nonetheless, any upsides seem to be *in spite of* the structures and conditions, and there are too many downsides. The principal issue of being at the periphery and excluded is deeply problematic. This appears to be a systemic weakness and issue of neglect or indifference. Why is this permitted by the key players and shapers in higher education?

The role of Higher-Education Policy-Makers

Central-government policies have a huge impact on higher education, but in general this is indirect. In the UK, the government has never intervened in academic employment issues. There has been a consensus of government policy over 30 years or more to facilitate employment flexibility in the public and private sectors. Thus there are no direct constraints on the casualisation of academic employment, nor on the rise and rise of sessional staff (Bryson & Blackwell 2006). A regulatory constraint has come from a different source. A series of EU directives has meant that the UK, as a member state, has been required to bring in a number of regulations to treat part-time and full-time staff, and those on fixed term rather than open-ended contracts, equally.

The higher-education funding bodies and agencies in the UK have also ignored the sessional-staff issue. They have not sought to influence institutional policy or to directly fund investigations into any consequences. Their position would appear to be to leave it to mechanisms such as quality assurance (Bryson & Blackwell 2001) to ensure that teaching quality is maintained. It is notable that quality-assurance mechanisms have not tended to identify any concerns about the high deployment of sessional staff (Powney et al. 2001).

The academic trade unions did not begin to address the issues of sessional staff until the late 1990s (Conley & Stuart 2008). Arguably the dominance in the union hierarchy by staff on traditional contracts and sessional staff's position on the periphery disempowered sessional staff in representation. But the growth in numbers of casualised staff alerted the unions at this time to a threat to their survival if they did not recruit and organise them. Therefore University and College Union (UCU) has campaigned, frequently using the leverage of the legislation mentioned above, to alleviate contractual insecurity and employment conditions, with some success. In theory there should be equal pay for equal work, and staff who worked a succession of temporary hourly paid contracts should have access to a mechanism of transferring to more-secure salaried contracts. However, in practice this is not yet easy to do, particularly in the research-intensive university sector, where there is less adherence to national employment conditions.

Bryson and Blackwell (2006) examined the position of university senior managers, particularly human-resource managers, to sessional staff and to related policies. Many universities did not have much policy at all. In those universities that do have a policy there was a polarisation of approach. In a minority, there was an integrationist policy – to treat sessional staff in the same way as all

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academic teachers as much as possible, and thus to ensure they had access to the same support and infrastructure. A few had even better practice, in that they had also developed mechanisms to address the specific and diverse needs of the different groups of sessional staff. Conversely, the majority took a more negative approach, by adopting a differentiation strategy. This was driven by a "risk-management" philosophy. They sought to ensure that sessional staff would not be eligible for equal treatment with "academic lecturers" by making their roles distinct and restricted; they could therefore justify a minimalist approach to supporting them (for example, arguing that responsibility for their professional support and development lay outside the university, as they were not "full" members of the university). In a legal context, this was designed to enable an "objective justification" to treat sessional teachers differently to other academic teachers.

A major player in UK higher education is the Higher Education Academy (HEA). In general, the strategic support of sessional staff has been rather weak. Between 2006 and 2007, there was a brief period of focussed activity, and some resources given to a national project led by the HEA. Some studies were commissioned, events held and material disseminated. However, that work is no longer readily accessible from the HEA archives. A major problem hindering a strategic approach has been constant restructurings of the HEA. It has been rare for an individual to hold the same role for more than a brief time, and continuity is lost. The same might apply to their provision of resources. The HEA website has constantly been restructured, and previous resources just disappear with the next iteration. Even so, it is surprising that a search of the current HEA (2013) provision yields not one mention about sessional teachers or related issues other than a reference to graduate teaching assistants and a few references in the resources archive to studies from several years ago – and even these are hard to locate, as no keywords seem to have been allocated to them!

Examples of Good Practice and Their Fate

All the major initiatives on sessional staff have taken place at a level below that of national and comprehensive coverage. Ironically, one of the key objectives of the rather short-term HEA national project was to identify these initiatives and disseminate the associated good practice. A selection of the projects identified by the HEA forms a good reference point to examine the long-term success and embedding of such initiatives. Is there evidence of that, several years on? The HEA project examined initiatives arising out of the HEA Subject Centres; Centres of Excellence in Teaching and Learning; broader initiatives; and individual universities.

HEA Subject Centres

The HEA supported a team representing each of the 24 subject groupings across higher education. In 2006 each subject centre was surveyed to examine their support of sessional staff. The response showed, in general, a good awareness of sessional-staff issues. There was considerable activity in a majority of subject centres in supporting postgraduates who taught workshops (e.g. economics; geography; law; materials education; maths; and psychology). This always included provision of workshops and sometimes handbooks (economics) and resources such as reports and

recommendations about better development practice (sociology), including online resources (psychology; law). In some cases there was collaboration with the professional body for vocational subjects. Another collaborative partner was the group Supporting New Academic Staff, established in 2002. Fewer subject centres were directly involved in supporting other forms of sessional teaching. The exceptions were providing a workshop for technicians who taught (engineering) and the provision of wider support resources (English). A larger project, which the HEA had given substantial funding, was undertaken jointly by the subject centres of health sciences and business and management. Focussing on sessional staff who were mid-career professionals, it undertook a comprehensive analysis of national staff statistics and 10 institutional case studies.

So have these initiatives continued or made a lasting impact? The answer is: apparently not. Workshops are currently being provided, but they are now offered in only two subjects (English and economics) and are aimed at graduate teaching assistants. Some resources in the form of reports can be still located, after some delving on the HEA web-site[1]. An explanation for this diminishing activity lies in the restructuring of the subject centres in 2011. They were subsumed into the main HEA organisation, losing their independence, and their activities scaled down considerably. This has meant they no longer play any significant role in supporting sessional staff.

The large-scale project produced findings much in line with earlier research on sessional staff, and also made recommendations (Woodall & Geissler 2009). These were valuable because they were aimed at managers and staff at the level of subject school, and included many practical tips. The report is still available online, but not directly from the HEA. There is no apparent evidence that it has had any lasting impact or been embedded into policy or practice.

Centres of Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETLS)

The CETLS were the largest investment ever in teaching by the Higher Education Funding Council for England. Some £315 million was invested in 74 CETLs, usually based at a single university, which focussed on one specific issue of learning and teaching (HEFCE 2011). Sessional teaching was not primary in the work of any CETL. However, in 2006, four CETLS responded to my survey on behalf of the HEA Part-Time Teachers Network to indicate they were doing some work. One CETL focussed on preparing new academics, including postgraduates, to teach. Another CETL was based in the University of the Arts, which employed a very high proportion of sessional staff in very wide-ranging roles, who were critical to both teaching and research for this institution. Therefore the CETL had invested in supporting sessional staff and evaluating the relationship between practice and teaching (Shreeve 2007). The other CETLS were based at the Open University, and, again because sessional staff did the majority of the teaching, had invested small grants and fellowships for sessional staff to undertake scholarship.

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[1] For example, there is a searchable database of subject-centre resources for new staff at http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/snas

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CETL funding ended in 2010. Some CETL work continued through funding by its host university. However, as far as can be ascertained, these initiatives for sessional staff essentially ceased.

Broader Initiatives

The HEA project identified several funded initiatives that focussed on a single subject provision but across the sector. This included Development of Postgraduate Language Assistants (DOPLA) and Support for Part-time Teachers in Sociology. The most ambitious and sophisticated of these initiatives was the Art and Design Empowerment of Part-Time Tutors (ADEPTT) project. All these projects were funded by the Fund for Development of Teaching and Learning (Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE).

ADEPTT was set up in 2003 and concluded in September 2006. Led by a partnership of five universities, it produced a diverse range of resources and project materials. These approaches had been designed to complement mainstream institutional-development activities, with an emphasis on local, small-scale, peer-facilitated, flexible support. The project also sought to involve sessional staff as directly as possible in the design of both resource materials and events. Resources included:

- The Widening the Circle Report (a needs analysis based on empirical evidence from sessional staff themselves) (Findlay-Brookes 2003)
- A set of flexible training resources (a pack for sessional staff and one for those who facilitate their support and development)
- A project website (http://www.adeptt.ac.uk/about.cfm)
- Practical training for departmental facilitators
- Case studies of alternative forms of support

Early evidence from this initiative showed that at least some departments were adopting the approaches proposed by ADEPTT (Bryson & Findlay-Brookes 2005).

The ADEPTT website was still accessible in 2013 (www.adeptt.ac.uk), although it has not been added to since 2007. The DOPLA website is apparently still being maintained, although no new materials appear to have been added in several years. The only legacy of the Sociology project is the project report (http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/documents/resources/database/126_Support_for_Part-Time_Teachers_of_Sociology.rtf).

Current New Initiatives

Since 2007 there have been just two new initiatives at the national or multi-institutional levels in the UK. This may stem in part from the recent lack of suitable funding sources and the demise of bodies such as the independent subject centres and the CETLs, and from a lack of interest from national agencies such as the HEA. There was a report on the provision of training courses on teaching to graduate teaching assistants (Lee & Pettigrove 2010) that confirmed that such courses

are widely available at the local level, but certainly not taken up by all graduate teaching assistants. The FAVOR project (http://www.llas.ac.uk/FAVOR) focussed on language tutors, another large group of sessional teachers. The project supported the language tutors themselves to develop open educational resources. Not only did they participate in a community to gain expertise, they created a legacy of resources for other sessional language tutors. FAVOR was funded from a national fund that promotes e-learning and the development of e-resources.

A recent publication on the position and development of sessional teachers sheds some light on local initiatives in the UK (Beaton & Gilbert 2012). There are excellent contributions from colleagues outside the UK, but I shall focus only on the UK perspective here.

- Gaskell (2012) describes the rather more elaborate system of support provided by the Open University, where systematic policies are in place, including more-secure contracts, mentoring, appraisal and student-feedback mechanisms to enhance tutors' professional development.
- Lee (2012) argues for a holistic approach that goes beyond offering initial training and the "functional" to include opportunities for enculturation, critical thinking, emancipation and relationship development. This is laudable, but it was not all clear that she found evidence that such holistic support was being provided.
- Wilson (2012) draws on a small research study to focus on the transition and induction of new sessional staff. She reminds us to address the issue that they arrive as experts in the field but tend to be made to feel like novices in the university setting, and that models of support must be flexible and individualised to be effective.
- Parker and Sumner (2012) examine the growing practice of online tutoring, noting that this requires a social element as well as pedagogic role, and that this more complex provision creates further development issues for sessional staff.
- Wareing (2012) considers working part-time, and all the virtues it brings to the organisation, more broadly. She outlines a number of simple steps and practices to ensure that the whole staff team works cohesively and ensures equity and parity of esteem.

These commentaries are redolent with advice on effective practice; however, in the main, they do not present evidence that good practice is gaining ground across the sector.

I repeated the survey (unpublished) of educational developers (albeit more informal than the 2007 version), but this yielded only nine constructive responses. Most of this small sample detailed their support in the form of accredited courses for staff. These were widely available to graduate teaching assistants and postgraduates, although most respondents acknowledged that not all of those who taught attended the courses, or completed the assessment. Three universities made a particular effort to include wider categories of sessional teachers in such courses. The courses had frequently begun life as a SEDA Professional Development Framework (PDF) course for new teachers. SEDA, the Staff and Educational Development Association, is the UK university educational developers' own professional association; it has taken the lead in this area in the absence of action from other national bodies. One respondent noted that such courses were now running three or more times a year in their institution:

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The first stage of our GTA teaching programme at [ ] is continually oversubscribed and we struggle to put around 100 research students through stage this annually. This results in many GTAs not completing this programme until after long into the academic year, though they will have started their teaching much earlier.

However another Professional Standards Framework (PSF) – the UK-PSF, which is validated by the HEA – has just had a major relaunch. The framework outlines a set of level descriptors where Associate status (D1) is very much aimed at sessional staff (HEA 2013). A major boost for this is that HESA are requiring universities to report on the teaching qualifications for all those carrying out teaching roles. The great majority of teaching staff in the UK do not have formal teaching qualifications. More-recent entrants are likely to have completed a course – for lecturers this is likely to be a postgraduate certificate – which may meet the D2 standard. The HESA reporting requirement and the much greater current focus on teaching quality indicators in the UK higher-education sector (the former probably stems from the latter) offers the likelihood of league tables, as well as the direct use of such statistics in government-imposed information sets provided to prospective university applicants. This competitive pressure, in the context of an emerging higher-education market for students, places the training of teaching staff at centre stage.

Only three respondent universities to the 2013 surveys had developed initiatives that went beyond courses. One university, which employed several thousand sessional staff, was in the process of reviewing and updating policy in this area. A respondent at another university had undertaken a study on visiting lecturers in 2011, which led to a set of recommendations, but it was unclear how far this had been implemented. The final example had initiated the sort of approach that had made a difference in the earlier case studies discussed in the previous section of this paper. A dedicated support role for sessionals had been created, and this appeared to have real potential, as one (deidentified) respondent put it:

We are scoping out how the current courses meet the needs of part-time teachers, how accessible they are, and whether we have an unmet need for development…. [S]o far there is a clear indication from hourly paid lecturers that they want more professional development, and this should possibly be offered in a different model so that it is easier for them to access. Many are also interested in the possibility of networks, and this could potentially be a forum to ensure that they are aware of development opportunities and are in receipt of other information that would generally be available to more permanent members of staff at induction….

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Discussion and Conclusion

Certain features have been observed to act as successful catalysts in creating an impetus for change in an institution.

- An evaluation or evidence-gathering takes place, involving the sessional staff themselves – this creates a case for change, frequently a moral case too, which encourages management to act.
- At least one senior manager supports the initiative and resources become available.
- Ideally, an alliance of parties with diverse roles and with local *and* strategic influence is formed.
- A champion or champions emerge to undertake the task of implementing change on the ground.

However, some of these factors may be rather fragile. The higher-education policy environment is fraught with changing imperatives, and new priorities can undermine any current initiative. Changing and finite funding streams can also stifle initiatives – particularly if the funding that supported the initiative in the first place was time-limited and external. Turnover of roles means that champions are often lost, and when they go, the initiative withers on the vine. The longer-lasting initiatives seem to be have become more embedded through a number of processes: being developed in a more iterative way, and thus becoming built into the local culture as "the way we do things round here"; continuing to be pushed by a steering group with a monitoring function, often with sessional staff representatives who keep refreshing the imperative; implementing an infrastructure and processes (not dependent on short-term funding); and establishing specific provisions and mechanisms that fit with the situation of sessional staff, such as a communication system, and flexible and diverse provision.

So whither the UK situation? Most initiatives have quietly disappeared. Direct sector-wide approaches appear to be extremely unlikely in the present climate, as there are no prospects of major funding targeted to such an area. The FAVOR project, with its emphasis on new technology and open resources, offers a potential way forward – it is a dynamic, flexible and low-cost approach that creates a cross-university community – although it does not really address all the major issues identified here.

It appears that major change will only happen at the local (institutional) level. Since that is unlikely to be spontaneous, what might influence such change? Management are very strongly driven by key performance indicators (KPI). Is the UK-PSF likely to create a relevant KPI that will stimulate innovation? The problem is that the UK-PSF focusses on training accreditation only, and the indicator element comes through a statistical return. We have noted before how HESA have been very ineffective at gathering any useful data on sessional staff (or even on their existence). Why would this be different? The pervasive and enduring invisibility of sessional staff to systems and the ease with which management have in the past hid or manipulated staff returns do not give grounds for optimism. It is a compliance approach rather than a positive or constructive initiative – another facet of the risk-management approach. Focussing only on

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training accreditations falls woefully short of addressing the broader and deeper issues of supporting and developing sessional staff. Comparing this approach with the BLASST project, which has established a more complete set of benchmarking standards in Australian universities, makes the PSF approach look rather pale in comparison (BLASST 2013).

However, there is a gleam of light. A rather fundamental change is creeping through UK higher education. This has been accelerated by the recent sharp increase in student fees: a silver lining to an unwelcome policy with all its other deleterious consequences. The sharper focus on student recruitment and retention has made senior management interested in the student experience. This adds to the slow but noticeable rise of the position of teaching and learning. Despite some muddled thinking that wrongly characterises students as customers, there is an emerging virtue of these developments that places student engagement much more central in terms of importance. Thus could the student engagement and partnership agenda have some impact here? As Beaton and Gilbert (2012) observed, many of the issues for students in their transition are similar to those experienced by new sessional staff. We have moved a long way on the student-experience agenda, as we have recognised that it is their whole experience that matters to maintain and enhance their engagement and success. We have made great strides in embracing diversity and being inclusive with students – so is that possible with sessional staff? The key to the movement on the student agenda has been changing the attitudes of staff at both the local (practice) and senior (strategic) levels and creating an infrastructure to support student engagement. Applying such a positive model to sessional staff would avoid the pitfall of transactional, risk-management approaches. Instead it would foster a context where staff are valued and seek to build relational cultures and a sense of belonging and community.

This may appear wildly optimistic, but we may note that it already exists in some settings. Research and anecdotal accounts inform us that some sessional staff have a much better experience than others. In part this stems from the flexibility of being sessional acting in harmony with, rather than hindering, their particular personal circumstances. However, given that most sessional staff (May 2013) desire a long-term, ongoing teaching position in higher education, there seem to be two salient, linked factors that enable a better experience and more integration and involvement in the local department:

- The experience, expertise and scholarship that the sessional staff member brings are valued by colleagues and managers.
- Education itself (including learning and teaching) is highly valued within the local culture and context.

 Some subjects – education, health and art and design, for example – have traditionally had this type of culture. The evolution to a situation where all subjects embrace such values, due to the rise and rise of the focus on student engagement, gives hopes that sessional staff too will form part of an "engaged" community where continual professional development and participation is embedded. The point that it is culturally embedded is crucial. This overcomes the issue of excellent policies just not being implemented. For sessional staff, the local context and practice is everything in shaping their experience and development.

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