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Experiences of Sessional Educators within an Australian Undergraduate Paramedic Program

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Objectives: To explore the experiences of sessional educators in an undergraduate program within the paramedic department of a university in Melbourne, Australia.

Methods: A qualitative methodology was used that involved 10 semi-structured interviews with a purposive sample of sessional paramedic educators. Data collected from the interviews were thematically analysed to identify major issues from interview transcripts. The study was conducted in the paramedic department of a major university located in an outer metropolitan area of Melbourne, Australia.

Results: Interview analysis identified five key themes of the sessional paramedic educator experience: informal processes, program inconsistencies, preparation for teaching, connection and support, and, educator benefits.

Conclusion: This study fills a gap in the literature by describing the experiences of paramedic sessional educators, which was previously unreported. Many of the experiences expressed were commonly reported in the literature from other disciplines. Although the experiences was generally described as positive, the study identified a need for targeted support of these individuals, including formalisation of employment procedures, encouraging the open and timely transmission of information, as well as provisions for performance feedback and professional development.

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Introduction

Higher education has undergone an enormous transformation over the past few decades (Bradley et al. 2008; Bolden et al. 2012). A component of this change, both in Australia and internationally, has been the increasing casualisation of education professionals (Bryson 2013; May, Strachan & Peetz 2013a). Historically, higher education has been primarily delivered by staff in ongoing or tenured positions; however, higher education has become increasingly reliant on casual or "sessional" educators, otherwise known as "contingent" faculty in the United States (Nadolny & Ryan 2015; Baldwin & Wawrzynski 2011). These sessional workers have been described as "any higher education instructors not in tenured or permanent positions, and employed on an hourly or honorary basis" (Percy et al. 2008, p. 4). This gradual transformation in the labour force has resulted in an estimated 40-50% of university teaching in Australia being performed by individuals employed on a casual basis (Percy et al. 2008), which is a far higher percentage than the 19% of casual employees in the entire workforce (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2011). Extensive use of a contingent or casualised workforce in higher education has also been documented in the United Kingdom (Bryson 2013), United States (Baldwin & Wawrzynski 2011), Canada (Puplampu 2004) and Europe (Musselin 2013), and the reversal of this trend is seen as highly unlikely (Burgess et al. 2008).

In general, casualisation has been facilitated by changes in labour regulations that have reduced barriers to casual employment, as well as by the relative benefits for employers, including financial, legal and operational advantages (Campbell & Brosnan 2005). Within the higher-education landscape, further explanations for this workforce transformation have also been proposed. For example, the number of university students has risen dramatically in the past few decades without a concomitant rise in permanent university staff (Bradley et al. 2008). Concurrently, additional strain has been placed on the system, with changing demographics within the student population that have heightened demands on education staff. One of the largest changes has been the substantial increase in international student numbers in Australian universities, which rose from 8.5% of the total student profile in 1996 to 26.5% in 2007 (Bradley et al. 2008). Teacher recruitment to meet the demands of the increase in both student numbers and diversification of the student body has primarily come through increased employment of sessional teaching staff (Coates et al. 2009).

In addition, government funding to Australian universities has also fallen considerably (Brown et al. 2008), resulting in Australia having one of the lowest levels of public funding for university-equivalent tertiary education among the OECD countries (Universities Australia 2015). Casualisation of the academic workforce is a financially attractive option for universities to function under tight fiscal constraints and the relatively high cost of full-time academic staff, such as large overheads and on-costs. The extent of the potential cost saving is illustrated by one faculty in an Australian university that estimated a saving of $2 million annually through the casualisation of its teaching staff (Marshall 2012). The cost saving offered by casualisation has also been acknowledged internationally (Noble 2000; Bryson 2013).

Previous research has identified many issues of concern for sessional staff, including insecurity, lack of such rights and benefits afforded to ongoing employees such as sick leave entitlements, professional-development activities, experience-based incremental promotion, and basic provisions such as office space and computer access (Burgess et al. 2008; Bryson 2013; May et al. 2013a). Despite these potential disadvantages, many sessional staff accept sessional employment for an extended time and report enjoyment from teaching and interacting with the students (Dixon et al. 2015; Bryson 2013).

Sessional teachers are often drawn from clinical or other professional areas, and bring with them a valuable level of knowledge and expertise. However, most are recruited through personal contact and or word-of-mouth (Brown et al. 2008; May, Peetz, & Strachan 2013b), rather than the more rigorous process of formal advertisement and interview that non-casual staff are required to navigate. As a result, some questions have been raised with respect to quality assurance in educational delivery by sessional educators (Coates et al. 2009; Percy et al. 2008).

These issues can affect paramedic university programs, which continue to grow in popularity around the country. At present, there are 20 accredited university paramedic programs in Australia (Council of Ambulance Authorities Incorporated). Given the competency-based and vocational nature of these programs, sessional teachers are vital to the success of each program. They provide important clinical expertise, and in many cases, provide clinical credibility from local emergency-based ambulance services such as Ambulance Victoria. The sessional educators participating in this study were primarily paramedic clinicians who were employed on a part-time basis to facilitate

tutorial-type activities. However the existing literature focuses less on these clinician-teacher sessionals and more on sessional educators who aspire to become academics.
While the paramedic department in the Australian university examined in this study orientates all sessional teachers before they begin teaching within programs, very little is known about their experiences and professional needs as sessional teachers. Such areas are yet to be explored in the paramedic discipline, and therefore this study will contribute new knowledge and inform recommendations for best practice for paramedic sessional teachers.

Methods

This exploratory pilot study was undertaken within a qualitative framework.

Participants and procedures

A purposive sample of sessional teachers employed to teach in an undergraduate paramedic program within an Australian university were invited to participate. Sampling in this manner sourced participants with valuable knowledge of the subject matter (Devers & Frankel 2000). Emails were sent to these individuals inviting them to take part in a semi-structured interview lasting for approximately 30 minutes, exploring their experiences of working as a sessional educator. The interviews consisted of demographic questions, as well as questions inviting experiential reflection of recruitment, orientation and working as a sessional educator. Through this process, views on work preparedness, professional support and development, relationships and communication were explored. The interviews were conducted via telephone, as interviewees found this method universally more feasible to schedule alongside their shift work, and it has been found to be an appropriate method for use with semi-structured interviews (Cachia & Millward 2011). Interviews were performed during December 2015 and January 2016 by a member of the research team with no prior professional relationship to the interviewees, audio recorded, transcribed verbatim by an external transcribing service and de-identified by pseudonym prior to analysis.

Data analysis

Based on a thematic-analysis approach (Braun & Clarke 2006; Braun et al. 2014), the transcripts were read multiple times to determine recurring content and subsequently coded, enabling prevalent themes to be identified. This approach was chosen to provide a rich description of responses to the questions concerning educator experiences. The members of the research team reached consensus on the identified themes, and on data saturation, which was deemed to have occurred after 10 interviews, as no further themes were being identified. QSR NVivo 10 was used to organise the data and assist with this process.

Ethical considerations

All participants completed a written consent prior to participation. Ethics approval for this project was granted by the University Human Research Ethics Committee.

Results

Participants

Thirty-six sessional educators were invited to participate by email, and consenting individuals were interviewed by one of the members of the research team with no other individuals present in the interview room. These interviews ranged from 25:18 to 48:12 minutes in duration, with a mean length of 36:18 minutes. Ten people were interviewed, the majority of whom were male (7); participants' ages ranged from 25 to 52 (mean 37.5 years of age). Approximately half the interviewees (6) had dependent children; similar numbers had worked as a paramedic for an average of 14 years (range 3-45 years) and worked as a sessional educator in the paramedic department for an average of just over 3.5 years (range 0.5-10 years). Only three individuals had formal postgraduate educational qualifications (Certificate IV in Education and Training, Graduate Certificate in Health Professional Education and Bachelor of Education). However, all of the interviewees had some level of previous practical experience in education, ranging from personal fitness training to on-road clinical paramedic instruction. All but one were involved primarily with practical education sessions, and two individuals took part in the grading of student work.

Results

Five key themes were identified from analysis of the interviews: informal processes; program inconsistencies; preparation for teaching; connection and support; and educator benefits.

1. Informal processes

a) Communication and feedback

Although many interviewees mentioned that they felt valued and were often thanked informally by academic staff for their efforts, there was a distinct lack of constructive feedback on their teaching performance:

> *They certainly appreciate you going in and teaching their unit and that sort of thing, but I haven't received any formal or even any loosely informal feedback on my performance, or what I can do to improve, or what I need to stop doing.* (Tony)

This lack of feedback often led to feelings of uncertainty regarding their teaching capabilities or performance, and to feelings that there was a necessity to learn on the job through trial and error.

> *I wasn't sure that I was doing it right at that time…I just needed someone to say, "Yes, that's right. That's what we want."* (Clair)

It was also mentioned that the majority of feedback received was in an informal manner from the students, not staff, who:

> *…will give…it in, you know, body language, and they give it in a look here, they give it in how much you can see them enthused about what you're doing.* (Bob)

b) Recruitment

Recruitment processes were reported as universally informal. However, participants expressed no disgruntlement, just a sense of acceptance of the process. Employment in a sessional position was mostly the result of informal communication and personal contact, including chasing up information themselves:

> *It was kind of through word of mouth more than anything*. (Tony)
> *I hadn't seen a position advertised, I just approached it just to see…*. (Anna)

2. Program inconsistencies

a) Inconsistent expectations and delivery of course information

There was much discussion regarding the need for more consistency in information about where the students are in their studies with regard to the curriculum, as well as departmental expectations. That is, what have the students previously been taught and to what level they should be expected to operate educationally? There seemed to be little such information:

> *…understanding where the students are at with their studies, and sometimes it's really hard to have a quantitative list of expectations. Sometimes you have to go and do a few sessions…to get a feel for what to expect from them….* (Frank)

This was supported by a suggestion that:

> *…all of the sessionals [needed to be] on the same level with our expectations [of] where the students should be and what our – I guess what level they need to be at week to week and where we're trying to get them at the end.* (Harry)

b) Lack of continuity of educators

As a consequence of the casual nature of sessional educators' employment and paramedics' limited availability to work as educators when it fitted around their on-road paramedic shifts, some courses were taught by various people, resulting in a lack of continuity.

> *Walking in and out of tute groups or classes, you rarely get the same group of kids. You don't really know which ones are the strengths and which ones are the weaknesses. It does become quite difficult sometimes*. (Tony)

3. Preparation for teaching

a) Pre-existing qualifications/experience

Most sessionals did not have formal education qualifications. However, all had some form of practical education experience, which was perceived to assist in the sessional role.

> *It was mainly the background I already had [in] dealing with students, and providing an educational role. Perhaps if I didn't have that experience I probably wouldn't have felt as prepared*. (William)

However, one respondent shared that he:

> *...probably wasn't really qualified to teach even in a practical sense very well*. (Tony)

b) Preparation provided by the workplace

All sessional educators in the paramedic department involved in this study participated in an induction day at the start of each academic year. There was mention that the induction day was primarily an introduction to the university and didn't provide much information on teaching. This perceived lack of educator training is illustrated by the following comment:

> *...there should be some sort of training day, especially for the new sessionals…on how to teach… how to get the concepts across…and even to get some guidance on how [University name] permanent staff teach and how they try to get their message across....* (Tony)

Observation of other educators was suggested as a method that could be employed to assist in learning how to teach:

> *I think having them shadow other sessionals would probably be a good way to introduce them into the role and then over a few sessions they gradually take more responsibility and eventually they're running their own.* (Anna).

This is especially relevant when:

> *...not every sessional [is] necessarily aware of how to teach.* (Bob)

Comments on the level of day-to-day preparation provided to sessional staff were mixed. Some educators reported receiving sufficient information in a timely manner to assist their teaching:

> *…we got the scripts for what we had to fulfil, like the scenarios that they wanted to do and the outcome they wanted to achieve with the students. So that communication was really, really good*. (Trevor)

However, sessionals often reported difficulty in obtaining the information required for the smooth running of their class:

> *I guess one of the common complains that sessional staff would have, is turning up to sessions without content knowledge of what's going to be delivered that day*. (Frank)

4. Connection and support

a) Staff relations

Most reported having a good working relationship with the academic staff and were not aware of sessionals being treated in an unfair manner:

> *I don't hear much negativity in the background. I rarely hear anyone putting anyone else down, especially from staff members…I feel like there's a lot of respect each way.* (Tony)

A few interviewees mentioned that this positive relationship may stem from the fact that many of those involved had previously worked with each other clinically:

> *I mean, most of the sessionals there have worked on road and ambulance and still do casually. So they're quite well known. I've never had any issues with anybody there*. (William)

b) Connection to workplace

Feelings of connection to the workplace were varied. Some individuals felt a strong association with the university and felt that they were "sort of accepted as part of the crew…like part of the team, I guess*"* (Harry), whereas others felt quite detached from the workplace:

> *…you definitely did not feel like part of the core group, and that seems reasonable being [due to] the fact that we were casual potentially in the way we turned up…yes, I felt just blind to what the department was doing.* (Frank)

Some viewed this disconnect as an inevitable part of the sessional experience:

> *You come in to do what you need to do and move on…sometimes you're not privy to all the information, so therefore, don't be upset when you're not told*. (Trevor)

c) Professional development and academic support

None of the individuals had taken part in any professional development, apart from the induction day, while working as a sessional educator. Some had seen opportunities, but had chosen not to participate.

> *I have not taken part, and I'd say I initially might have been a little bit lacking in the fact that I do see [university]-wide things that just come through my email and I have not actively pursued any of them*. (Frank)

Paradoxically, most expressed an interest in taking part in any future professional-development opportunities offered. However, most commented that their topic preferences were education and communication strategies:

> *…like lecturing and tutoring and ways to improve or engage…. I think that would be beneficial. Like, how to actually deliver sessions….* (Anna),

> *Just a refresher on different ways to approach a debrief, giving that feedback, and that feedback verbally and in writing.* (Clair)

5. Educator benefits

a) Enjoyment

A benefit for many of the educators was the enjoyment they received from teaching the students, even though the financial rewards were not as great as working clinically:

> *…we wouldn't be doing it if we didn't enjoy it, and I think that's the important thing. I think I find most of the sessionals, they enjoy it, although it's not for the money*. (Andrew)

b) Personal professional development

Another much cited benefit of sessional teaching was that it was a way of staying current with information and continuing to develop professionally.

> *Selfishly, the positives were my own personal development as both being a teacher and covering the content, so there was the intrinsic motivation and benefits.* (Frank)

c) Casual nature of the work

The casual nature of the work was generally seen to be positive in the paramedic setting. All but one of the interviewees were primarily employed as on-road paramedics on shift work. As a result of this, the occasional nature of the educator role meant that they were able to schedule sessions around their clinical roster.

> *So I would never be able to commit to permanent days or anything like that because it's simply impossible with the rotating shift roster*. (Wendy)

Discussion

This study examined the experiences of sessional educators within a paramedic department of an Australian university. Although studies of sessional educators have previously been conducted at universities, both in Australia (Strachan et al. 2012; Ryan et al. 2013; Brown et al. 2008) and internationally (Bryson 2013; Ott & Cisneros 2015; Kezar & Sam 2010), this is the first study known to the authors to specifically report on paramedic sessional educators; it thus provides important data on a rapidly growing profession in higher education. Paramedic sessionals primarily work concurrently as health professionals, and as such may bring their clinical expertise into the classroom. A similar clinician-teacher model is often employed in other fields of health professional education (Andrew et al. 2010; Knott et al. 2015; Tremblay et al. 2001; Jafri et al. 2007). These "industry experts" typically have a different professional background compared with those sessionals who are "aspiring academics" (Kimber 2003). However,

the results of this study, along with the existing literature, indicate that these distinct groups of sessional educators encounter similar workplace issues (Bevan-Smith et al. 2013; Brown et al. 2013; Dixon et al. 2015).

The present study highlighted the predominance of informal processes associated with working as a sessional educator. Employment opportunities were universally reported as casual in nature and were dependent on previous professional connections, word-of-mouth and personal contact, rather than in response to formal employment advertisements. The casual nature of gaining employment has been a consistent finding within the literature internationally (Brown et al. 2008; Kezar & Sam 2010). In the Australian context, a recent study of 2,918 university sessional teaching staff supported this study's findings regarding the informal nature of obtaining sessional positions, with 83% finding work through personal contact (Strachan et al. 2012). The pervasive informality is suggestive of a short-term, reactive response to employment that has the advantage of being flexible, but the disadvantages of being precarious, impermanent and fragmented.

This is in contrast to the formal processes of advertisement and interview usually involved in obtaining ongoing employment, and thus has led to some authors questioning quality assurance in the sessional-teacher workforce (Coates et al. 2009; Percy et al. 2008; Halcomb et al. 2010). Moreover, the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency in Australia has commented that a largely sessional workforce has the potential to be a risk "relative to the provider's ability to deliver quality educational outcomes for all its students" (Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency 2012).

A casual approach to the communication of subject matter and educational expectations was also highlighted. These concerns support other studies that have commented on the frustration experienced by sessionals, who often receive teaching material too late for classroom preparation (Dixon et al. 2015), and the overall need for better access to information (Brown et al. 2013). The need for processes to improve the timely access to information required for classroom preparation and for consistency in educational expectations between staff members was seen as very important to enable successful execution of their role.

The present study highlighted a lack of formal feedback on performance as an educator, with many participants describing having to learn the role on the job, and feeling uncertain as to whether they were doing well or not. As well as insufficient performance appraisal, this study's results indicate that there is a very low level of engagement with professional-development activities. These were primarily generic development activities offered to the general university staff, such as occupational health and safety matters. However, there appeared to be substantial interest in more-specific activities, especially those relating to teaching methods and strategies to deal with difficult or challenging communication situations. Common suggestions were focused on such topics as approaches to assist with student engagement, delivery of information, or how to best communicate with an under-performing student. These findings are comparable with other recent studies. For example, a recent study investigated the professional development needs of 439 sessional tutors from a large, research-intensive Australian university (Bevan-Smith et al. 2013). The faculties surveyed were Social and Behavioural Sciences, Engineering, Architecture and Information Technology, Health Sciences, Natural Resources, Agriculture and Veterinary Sciences, Business, Economics and Law, Science and Arts. The results highlighted a considerable degree of commonality of professional-development needs between the different faculties, and indicated that development in the areas of student assessment and feedback were highly valued throughout the university (Bevan-Smith et al. 2013). These findings are also supported by a study of nursing sessional educators, with development in classroom management, teaching and assessment skills amongst the areas requiring improvement (Dixon et al. 2015).

Many of the studies in this area report that sessional academics express feelings of marginalisation and isolation (Ryan et al. 2013; Brown et al. 2013; Dixon et al. 2015). Although feelings of disconnection from the university and staff were expressed by some in the present study, most participants felt that relationships between ongoing and sessional staff were positive, as was the general experience of their position. Both research and anecdotal descriptions imply that the experience of sessional educators may be quite different depending on "local context and practice" (Bryson 2013). In the present study, it emerged that many of the sessionals had some degree of previous professional relationships with academic staff while in a relatively small clinical area, and that this may have facilitated shaping their experience in a positive manner.

Sessional university employment is often seen as a choice only a minority of individuals would make (Junor 2004; Gottschalk & McEachern 2010); however, it was the preferred mode of engagement for the majority of paramedic

sessional academics. For most it was their secondary employment, with clinical on-road duties as their primary occupation; they viewed the ability to schedule extra work around paramedic shifts as a positive. This preference for casual work by those with concurrent clinical or other work has been reported elsewhere (Junor 2004; Dixon et al. 2015). However, the situation appears to be different from most cohorts of sessional academics reported in the literature, where often the only mode of employment available is on a casual basis, with many having frustrated hopes of progressing to an ongoing university position (Strachan et al. 2012).

Overall, the need for institutional and local support of casual educators was highlighted in terms of promotion of effective communication, connection to the workplace, education in teaching methodologies and professional development. Previous recommendations that have been made for casual teaching staff support include introduction of a mentoring program (Fagan-Wilen et al. 2006; Peters & Boylston 2006; Ziegler & Reiff 2006), a sound orientation program (Peters & Boylston 2006), introduction of awards for excellence in teaching for casual staff (Fagan-Wilen et al. 2006) and ongoing evaluation of this group's needs (Forbes et al. 2010).

Despite the difficulties that may be encountered as a sessional academic, this study illustrates that paramedic educators find their role can offer certain benefits. Enjoyment was gained from teaching and interacting with the students, their personal professional growth was enhanced through review of curriculum topics and keeping abreast of recent developments and the casual position enabled them to engage in extra paid work around the rotating rosters of paramedic shifts.

Limitations

This study has some inherent limitations. Although further interviews were deemed unnecessary, as data saturation had been reached and many of the findings mirrored those reported in the literature, the small sample size should still be considered. Researcher bias is also a possible limiting factor. Attempts to minimise this effect were made, as the interviewer was not a paramedic educator and thus had presumably fewer preconceptions about issues that may have been encountered by the interviewees. In addition, only 12 individuals responded out of 36 interview invitations, and 10 interviews were completed.

Therefore a non-response bias, where respondents may have answered questions differently compared with non-respondents is possible, thus limiting generalisability. Also, the paramedic cohort was drawn from one department in one Australian university. This profession-specific approach is an important step to fill a gap in the literature as well as assisting in the provision of a more complete picture of the overall sessional experience. However, it necessitates caution when generalising the results to other environments.

Conclusion

This study fills a gap in the literature by reporting on the experiences of sessional educators within the discipline of paramedicine. Our results indicate that many of the issues identified by paramedic educators reflect those reported for other disciplines and from other countries. The overlap amongst these issues, as well as between industry experts and aspiring academics, suggests that a generalised approach may be appropriate to provide a supportive framework that can increase the potential for sessional educators to contribute to undergraduate education. Targeted support of sessional educators should include formalisation of employment procedures, a thorough orientation, instruction in education methodologies, encouragement of open and timely transmission of information and provisions for performance feedback and professional development.

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