Sessional Staff at The University of Western Australia
A Position Paper by the CATLyst Network

This position paper is presented to the UWA Teaching and Learning Committee by members of the CATLyst Network elaborating on the experience gained from their current project which focuses on supporting the needs of sessional teachers at UWA. The network recognises the important role these teachers fulfill and the influence they have on the student learning experience. That this cohort of teachers is so varied and is continually changing, as is typical of any casual workforce, presents particular issues in the provision of sustainable and effective support. This paper highlights some issues faced by sessional staff generally and by sessional teachers at UWA specifically and encourages the committee to consider ways in which the provision systematic institution-wide support can be offered to these teachers.

Background
Sessional staff are teaching at Australian universities in increasing numbers. Loosely defined as "any higher education instructors not in tenured or permanent positions," sessional staff can include "part-time tutors or demonstrators, postgraduate students or research fellows involved in part-time teaching, external people from industry or professions, clinical tutors, casually employed lecturers or any other teachers employed on a course-by-course basis" (Percy et al. 2008, p.4). Percy et al. (2008) published the RED Report with the help of funding from the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC). Building on previous research conducted by the Australian Universities Teaching Committee (AUTC) in 2003 – the Guidelines for Managing, Supporting and Training Sessional Teaching Staff at University – the RED Report emphasizes the urgent need to Recognize, Enhance and Develop sessional staff in a climate where they are responsible for educating an increasing number of Australian undergraduate students. The RED Report highlights the inconsistent, inadequate or even non-existent support for sessional staff in many universities, drawing attention to the dramatic consequences for quality higher education if the needs of these vital teachers are not met.

There is a number of idiosyncratic dilemmas surrounding the development of sessional teaching staff in the university context. These sessional academics belong to a varied and diverse group, ranging in age from their early 20s (as in the case of many postgraduate students) to their late 50s and 60s (in the case of practising professionals who undertake part-time university teaching). Their qualifications and experience are equally varied, some having barely completed their own undergraduate studies, while others are highly qualified and experienced in their field of study. While the practical teaching experience of sessional academics may vary, for the most part they do not have any formal teaching qualifications and very little or no training to support them in their teaching role. With a large proportion of teaching, in particular undergraduate teaching, now being undertaken by sessional staff, "the imperative of assuring the quality of the casual teaching and learning environment has become critical" (Kift, 2002, p.1).

The RED Report highlights that the inadequate training and support of sessional teachers is a national issue and the state of sessional staff at The University of Western Australia (UWA) is no exception. Amongst UWA’s sessional staff there is a huge variability of practice, types of appointments, induction processes and staff development. This paper will argue that serious attention needs to be given to the development and implementation of a university-wide policy in relation to sessional staff. Indeed, this issue was recently brought to the attention of the UWA Teaching and Learning Committee at its meeting on Thursday 4 March 2010 when Ms Emma Thomson, President of the Postgraduate Students’ Association and Mr Ronoon Oehmen, immediate past President of the Postgraduate Students’ Association presented an overview of casual teaching arrangements. The issues they identified particularly concerned postgraduate students employed as sessional staff, but they form part of a wider range of issues related to these important teachers.
Sometimes we are not given enough information from the lecturers regarding the assignments and exams. I find that I am often learning what the exam is about through the students. It doesn't look very professional.

3. Recognition

- Sessional staff are often excluded from the 'life' of the school or faculty. There is often no way to have formal input into the content of the unit or to provide formal feedback about its structure and how it may be improved.
- Not all faculties have provision for sessional staff in their Excellence in Teaching awards.

What the sessional teachers said:

The university does not appear to appreciate the work we do. Yes, I receive a signed non-personalised Christmas card and that is nice but there is no other level of support. There is almost an expectation that I have to teach and whilst I enjoy the interaction with the students, I don't sense that the university could care less for the teaching that is done.

I am not invited to staff meetings where I could do this. Sometimes it is hard to see how the unit fits in with the rest of the course because I have little information about it.

I had a comment made to me recently when I asked if I could have access to a computer to do some grading into WebCT, where I was told that I wasn't important as I was only a tutor.

4. Resources and facilities

- Not all sessional staff have
  - after hours access to buildings.
  - a UWA email address in order to receive emails that other staff and students receive.
  - ongoing access to the library.
  - access to lectures, lecture and course notes on the UWA website.
  - access to an office with internet access.
  - access to shared folders to adequately fulfil their duties.
- Classroom facilities are often inadequate and sessional staff are not always provided with the basic tools of teaching such as whiteboard markers and erasers.

What the sessional teachers said:

One of the courses I demonstrate has after hours labs (in the evenings) but I do not have after-hours access or have to come in before the building closes, have to leave the laboratory door wedged open with a tissue box, and cannot leave the building until after the class is over and everyone else has left. If I couldn't leave anything behind I have to call out the security people and because I do not have a staff or student card they do not think I should be allowed in.

It's a bit of a lonely job as the sessional teachers are not provided with an office or base in the School. This means there is nowhere to go between classes. It creates the feeling that you are not really part of the School or really a member of the academic staff.

The rooms sometimes provided are dirty with broken down furniture, no air-conditioning, trivial things such as white board marker pens and cleaners are in impoverished supply.
Feedback collected on the day indicated that the event filled an otherwise unacknowledged need for support and professional development. Approval ratings for the program are shown below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How would you rate each of these aspects of the program?</th>
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<tr>
<td>Program was relevant to my needs</td>
<td>98</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sessions provided opportunities for interaction</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content was appropriate for my level of experience</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activities will help me develop useful skills and knowledge</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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What the sessional teachers said:

- More sessional staff PD days, Excellent, well organised, Resourceful & supportive.
- Let all sessional staff know about them. I only found out because my UWA email account was still open from my previous job.
- In 15 yrs of teaching for UWA this is the first teaching development I've had from UWA & I really appreciate & support your efforts. Thanks so much.

3. A dedicated sessional staff website was developed and launched at the Professional Development Day. The site offers sessional teachers access to up to date relevant information including teaching resources and tools, links to faculties, schools and CATL, updates on Teaching and Learning related events around campus. Access is also available through this site to an online discussion board which has allowed the creation of a community of practice amongst the sessional teaching population at UWA. The website can be viewed at [www.catl.uwa.edu.au/projects/sessionalteaching](http://www.catl.uwa.edu.au/projects/sessionalteaching).

Conclusion

The CATLySt Network argues that the needs of sessional teachers can no longer be left to the existing ad hoc arrangements. The deficits that currently exist in relation to their support have now been identified nationally (RED Report, 2008) and locally (T+L Committee paper March, 2010 and CATLySt Sessional Staff project 2009/2010). There is an imperative for a university-wide policy in relation to sessional staff. As these teachers are responsible for a large part of undergraduate teaching, it is essential to adequately support and train this group to preserve the high quality approach to education that UWA prides itself on. Surely, sessional teachers are uniquely positioned to influence a majority of the performance indicators associated with the University's education strategic objective: To improve the quality of the student learning experience. It follows that better training, resourcing and valuing of these key players will help facilitate the achievement of the strategic objective.

A systematic, consistent and uniform approach to the support of sessional teachers can only be achieved through the provision of an institutional policy. Clearly, the time for a University sessional staff policy addressing employment approaches, pay and conditions is long overdue. The CATLySt network recommends that consideration be given to addressing the issues relating to employment conditions, development opportunities, ongoing support and recognition as outlined in this paper and steps be taken to initiate the process of policy construction.

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1 Performance indicators from the University's Operational Priorities Plan (OPP) 2009-2013 that can be directly influenced by sessional teachers include: 1) Student satisfaction (SURF, CEQ); 2) Course completion rates; 3) Student Pass Rates; 4) Graduate outcomes; 5) Australian Universities Survey of Student Satisfaction (AUSSE)