

“An essential right”: findings from an evaluation of a professional development program for tutors

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Sessional Staff

- Australian higher education sector is increasingly reliant on sessional staff.
- Sessional staff are defined as “any teachers in higher education who are employed on a casual or contract or sessional basis. This may include lecturers, tutors, unit, program and subject convenors, demonstrators, and markers” (Harvey & Luzia, 2013, p. 3).
- This casual academic workforce is arguably less experienced, than ever before (Sutherland, 2009: p. 147), with limited professional development opportunities (Knight et al., 2007).
- In order to ensure quality in teaching in our universities we need to also support the career and professional development pathways of sessional staff (Harvey et al, 2005: p. 1).

Tutoring Induction Program

- The Tutoring Induction Program (TIP) is a University-wide initiative run by the central academic development unit, the Learning and Teaching Centre (LTC).
- TIP developed in an ad hoc fashion.
- Initially a professional development program in the Business Faculty.
- Before 2013, there were no professional development portfolios that catered specifically for tutors.
- There were a number of variations in the program across the Faculties.
- There is currently no centralised funding for tutor induction.
- Funding arrangements are Faculty-based, resulting in inequity and unsustainable practice according to the BLASST (Benchmarking Leadership and Advancement of Standards for Sessional Teaching) national standards framework.

Evaluation

Learning and Teaching Centre undertook an evaluation of TIP in 2014.

The intended outcomes of the evaluation project were to:

- assess the current content of online and face to face workshops
- collect and analyse qualitative data from stakeholders and participants in the program
- review the variations of the program across the different faculties
- review program and plan implementation for a revised Tutor Induction Program in 2015



Evaluation Framework (Wadsworth, 1997)

	Open Enquiry	Audit Review
	How are we going? How is TIP currently being run?	Have we done what we set out to do? Is TIP meeting its objectives?
Comparative	What are we doing? What's working and what's not working?	What did we set out to achieve? What are the signs that we have done this?
Problem-posing	How could we improve things? What is going well and how could we do more of that? How can we let go of the things we don't want to be doing?	What are we not doing (that we intended to do)? And what are we doing that we didn't intend to do?

Method

- The evaluation consisted of several phases: a literature review of research around sessional tutors and tutor training, and an audit review of the content of the TIP workshops.
- Qualitative data was gathered via semi-structured interviews with the key stakeholders involved in the organisation and delivery of TIP.
- Additional qualitative and quantitative data was gathered via the distribution of a survey to previous participants in TIP from 2013 – 2014.



TIP is an essential program

Interviewees (academics) stressed the importance of TIP, whilst highlighting the general lack of support for tutors and sessional staff.

Quotes (academics):

“A Tutoring Induction Program is absolutely vital, absolutely vital to disciplines, absolutely vital to the academic profession, absolutely vital to the sector.”

“ There has not in the past been enough support for sessional staff. This is an indication of the importance of sessional staff to teaching. They do the bulk of the teaching with the least resources.”

*“Well I just think it’s not even a choice, **it’s an essential right**. We have particular statutory requirements around accessibility... We have policy requirements that are around assessment, we’ve got the health and safety stuff. We’ve got security of students, security of staff. If we put our teachers into a situation where they haven’t got that prior experience and knowledge, then I think we’re negligent. It’s not even a choice.”*

Tutors are engaged with TIP

- **81.5%** agreed or strongly agreed that the workshop aims were clear and relevant to me as a tutor/teacher.
- **76.4%** agreed or strongly agreed that the information provided through the workshop/s (resources, handouts, websites etc.) assisted my professional development as a tutor and teacher.
- **75.7%** agreed or strongly agreed that the TIP session/s (face-to-face and/or online) I attended provided ideas and skills that I have been able to implement in my own teaching.
- **71%** agreed or strongly agreed that TIP learning activities (e.g. in-class or online discussions and exercises) were effective in developing my understanding of teaching in higher education.
- **65.8%** agreed or strongly agreed that TIP learning activities (e.g. in-class or online discussions and exercises) were effective in developing my teaching practice in higher education.
- **68.5%** agreed or strongly agreed that I have changed aspects of my teaching practice after participating in a TIP workshop or session.

Payment is essential

- Half of the interviewees (academics) commented that payment is essential.

Quotes (academics)

“The main lesson to be learnt is, if you pay someone to do professional development, you get better results.”

“If we, as a campus, want to be seen to be adhering to national standards, the BLASST standards... then that is what we should be doing. We should be offering a minimum number of paid hours for our tutors and any of our sessional staff to participate in that TIP program.”

- In contrast, tutors were not often aware of their rights regarding payment.

Quote (tutor):

“I have been attending TIP in my own time and was not aware for a long time that we could be paid for our time. I get the impression that the department has a very tight budget and I feel awkward/embarrassed to ask for payment.”

Payment

- This is consistent with research that suggests sessional staff are often excluded from workplace entitlements and infrastructure support (Ryan et al, 2013, p. 165), and are underpaid or do not receive sufficient payment for preparation and marking (Brown et al 2010; Lazarsfeld-Jensen & Morgan, 2009).



Tutors prefer face-to-face or blended workshops

Regarding your professional development, do you prefer a workshop program, that is mostly or all

Face-to-face (in person)	42.1%
Online	0%
Blended	57.9%

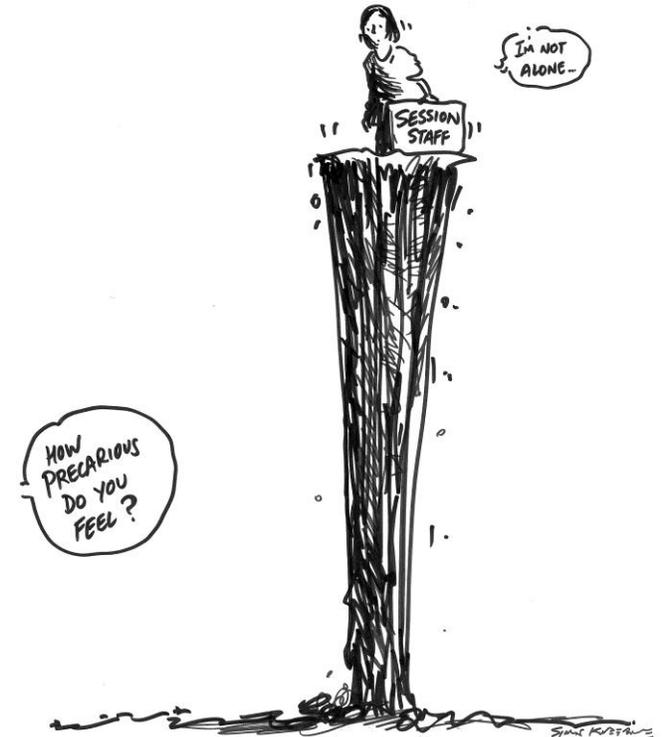
Tutors value the interaction with other tutors

- Tutors reported that what they found most useful about the program was discussing and sharing ideas with other tutors.
- This finding is supported by the literature in which sessional staff often report feeling isolated (Lazarsfeld-Jensen & Morgan, 2009) and invisible (Brown et al, 2010, p. 179).

Quotes (tutors):

“I think the face-to-face workshops works better for me since I could better engage with other academics in the room.”

“I like spending time in a room with other people who are doing the same job as me, exchanging information about what does and does not work in our classrooms.”



Revised program

- We have implemented a revised, blended version of the program for 2015.
- It will be compulsory for all tutors to complete 6 workshops to be eligible for a certificate of completion and payment from department.
- Tutors will attend an introductory face-to-face workshop at the beginning of semester and a face-to-face capstone unit at the end of semester.
- In between, they will complete a choice of four online modules.
- Developed a series of program level outcomes and conducted a curriculum review of the workshops to ensure they aligned with the outcomes.

Implications

- Illustrates the need for evaluating professional development programs, in particular, programs for tutors and sessional staff.
- Will be of interest to anyone developing an evaluation strategy in a higher education context.
- Highlights the gap between permanent staff and casual staff, and the need to have equitable systems in place for the support and development of sessional staff (in adherence to national standards) (BLASST).
- There is still a lot of work to be done. Funding arrangements continue to be Faculty-based resulting in inequity, but we will continue to advocate for centralised funding.

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