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What does the escalating number of part-time teachers in the workforce mean for Higher Education?

Higher Education is very different from how it was when academics, now on the verge of retirement, joined the profession forty years ago (eg UUK 2010). One of the main differences is the increased proportion of academic and teaching staff working on non-standard contracts in universities. Across the world, definitions and measures of the numbers of academic staff on part-time and sessional contracts vary. OECD statistics, for example, suggest that percentages of part-time academic staff vary from as little as 2% in France to around 60% in Japan. Estimated figures for the UK (eg Armstrong 2011) put the proportion of part-time teachers at around 40%.

The numbers and diversity of part-time teachers reflect a number of changes in Higher Education. Such changes include, for example, the curriculum offer: part-timers may be employed for their active professional expertise in, for instance, medicine and creative and performing arts. Crucially, increased student numbers have changed the face of university education in potential tension with student expectations.

Casualisation of teaching has many implications for Higher Education and the students who study within it. The professional development of staff on non-standard contracts, exploring the experiences of these staff, their recruitment, preparation and support and the quality of educational outcomes for students is the subject of a forthcoming book (Authors, in press). In this paper, drawing both on literature of the changing academic profession (eg Brennan et al 2007; Locke 2007), empirical work and discussion of data drawn from a range of institutions in Australasia and the UK, we will consider the challenges for full-timers, part-timers and academic development, and discuss the implications of casualisation of academic staff for the sector as a whole.

Challenges for staff

For part-time teachers, working part-time in a large organisation such as a university can be a very isolating experience, exacerbated if someone is a part-timer in multiple institutions. Part-time teachers may often feel excluded from the community of colleagues either because they are not invited to meetings or social events or because these fall outside their contracted time. They may also lack access to the university's resources such as stationery or office space for meeting with students. This lack of integration can be detrimental to the part-time teacher's future career development and may serve to discourage them from remaining in the profession (Coates et al, 2009).

This disenchantment with academia as a career has also been shown to extend to those in full-time, permanent positions. The RED report (2008) noted that although a large percentage of HE teaching was delivered by part-time teachers, this disguised a large supervisory load on permanent staff who generally take responsibility for convening and administering courses - one of several factors which has led to an increasing dissatisfaction with academia as a career (Coates et al, 2009). Coates et al further argue that this view,

coupled with the fact that 50% of senior academics will be retiring in the next decade, presents a real danger for the academic profession as a whole.

Challenges for academic developers

One principal challenge for academic developers is that part-time teachers are often invisible to the rest of the institution. Our research highlighted examples of this and, more importantly, systems to identify and support ongoing professional development for part-timers. While many teachers on non-standard contracts welcomed professional development, there are issues which militated against their engagement, such as: the time it takes and who pays for that time; the fact that it might overlap with some other activity (paid or otherwise); or the perceived lack of need for professional development for part-timers that is occasionally found amongst academics.

There are also challenges associated with determining the needs of this very disparate group, since these will vary with experience and intention. Our research suggests that while aspiring academics have clear goals in relation to developing their teaching and research skills, the needs of career part-timers have more to do with institution-specific support. We also consider the extent to which professionals who teach alongside their practice seek their professional development needs in other areas.

The challenges for Higher Education

As discussed above, the main challenge for Higher Education is the diminishing attraction of academia as a career. Although the notion of flexibility associated with part-time work is sometimes cited as being a positive, today's economic climate means that many are forced to undertake more than one part-time job thereby undermining this idealised view (Gottschalk and McEachern, 2010).

The quality of students' learning experience is an important issue for consideration with respect to part-time teachers. There is very little evidence, perhaps because of the difficulties associated with effective comparison and measurement, that the quality of teaching is worse when provided by a part-time teacher. However a study of markers which identified a number of quality issues for part-time staff noted that "although there was no firm evidence that the sessional staff ... were deficient as markers, there was every indication that if they were deficient, it would be hard for the universities to find out." (Smith and Coombe, 2006:65).

Implications

While many part-timers aspire to be permanent full-time academics, there is evidence that attraction for the profession from within is waning (Coates et al, 2009). The competition between research, teaching and increased administration means that, for many, the career is no longer seen as a desirable one. Indeed, for some, it has become untenable and they have left to pursue research or professional careers in the private sector. One potential outcome of this is an increase in the need for speciality teachers to fulfil particular *teaching* roles resulting in a further increase in part-time teachers. How can institutions identify

professional development needs and structures for such a disparate group? Can Higher Education continue to offer high quality teaching alongside research if the numbers of part-time teachers continue to rise and if, so, how can this be achieved?

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