



The experience of sessional teachers in nursing: A qualitative study



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SUMMARY

Background: Worldwide, there is a growing reliance on sessional teachers in universities. This trend is reflected in an undergraduate nursing program in a large Australian metropolitan university where a significant proportion of contact hours is staffed by sessional teachers, yet little is known about what type of support is needed for sessional teachers to optimise their capacity to contribute to the academic program.

Objectives: To describe the experiences of sessional teachers in a Bachelor of Nursing program in an Australian university.

Design: This is an exploratory qualitative study; fifteen sessional teachers were interviewed using semi-structured questions to explore their experiences of teaching.

Setting: This study was conducted in a large metropolitan school of nursing located on three sites.

Participants: A purposive sample of 15 sessional teachers was interviewed for this study.

Methods: Semi-structured interviews were conducted face to face. Thematic analysis was used to identify major themes in the interview data and collaborative analysis was undertaken to ensure rigour.

Results: Findings revealed that sessional teachers enjoyed teaching, were committed to their role and viewed their clinical currency as a valuable asset for teaching. However, participants also spoke about wanting a sense of belonging to the School, with most feeling they were “outsiders”. Areas identified for improvement included system and process issues, micro teaching and assessment skills, classroom management and timely access to resources.

Conclusion: There is a need to improve sessional teachers' sense of belonging and to provide an inclusive structure and culture to optimise their capacity to contribute to the academic program.

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Introduction

The use of sessional staff by universities is a growing phenomenon around the world (Andrew et al., 2010; Brown et al., 2013; Landrum, 2009; Marshall, 2012; Hamilton, et al., 2013; Harvey, 2013). A significant proportion of contact hours in Australian undergraduate nursing programs is staffed by sessional teachers (Salamonson et al., 2010). Indeed, in Australian universities, across all disciplines in higher education, there has been a consistent increase in the number of sessional (casual) teaching positions (Cowley, 2010; Kimber, 2003). The situation has been exacerbated by the increasing and worsening global and national shortage of qualified experienced nurse academics (Rukholm et al., 2009). Given this increasing trend to casualisation, it is imperative to understand the experience of sessional teachers in order to inform the development of supportive structures with which to enhance their experience of teaching and to address their need for professional development and career progression. The purpose of the study was to explore the experiences of sessional teachers in a Bachelor of Nursing program in an Australian metropolitan university with a

view to collecting data to inform the development of best practice support for sessional teaching staff.

Background

The literature shows an increasing trend to casualisation, both locally and internationally (Gilbert, 2013; Harvey, 2013), with estimates that the majority of teachers in higher education are employed as sessional teachers (Luzia et al., 2013). The Department of Industry, Innovation, Science, Research and Tertiary Education reported that the estimated number of casual staff employed in higher education in 2014 calculated as a percentage of total full-time equivalence (FTE) comprised 16.2%. In 1996 the estimated number of casual FTE was 10,185; this number steadily increased to 19,780 in 2014 (Department of Industry, Innovation, Science, Research and Tertiary Education, 2014). Universities have a heavy reliance on sessional teachers and it has been suggested that sessional teachers are likely to be responsible for half the teaching load and that their responsibilities range from casual marking to unit design and coordination and may include non-academic roles (Coates et al., 2009; Gottschalk and McEachern, 2010; Percy et al., 2008).

Percy et al. (2008), in a large Australian study into the contribution of sessional teachers to higher education identified that the changing nature of the Australian university teaching workforce is reflected in a

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steady increase in the number of sessional staff and in the operational requirements of universities, and that this combination of factors presents quality challenges for universities. They found that the growing demand for flexible online learning, course and unit offerings designed to meet the needs for local, off-shore, multi-campus and distance learning and the increasing focus on vocational orientation in courses posed challenges for quality enhancement for sessional teachers (Percy et al., 2008).

Study Context

The aim of this paper is to provide insights into the experiences of sessional teachers in a large school of nursing located on multi-campus metropolitan university. Sessional teachers employed by the School teach across a range of subject matter including nursing skills in simulated nursing environments; classroom tutorials teaching nursing and related content; a small number teach basic science.

Method

This was an exploratory study using a qualitative approach to data collection and analysis. The purpose of the study was to explore the experience of being a sessional teacher. A semi-structured interview technique was used for the purpose of collecting focused, in-depth information (Polit and Beck, 2012) on the experiences of sessional teachers. All sessional teachers employed in the 2011 academic year were sent an email inviting them to participate in the study by a professional staff member not connected with the study. Twenty responded and were sent an information sheet. In total 15 sessional teachers were interviewed for an average of 30 minutes; as data saturation was achieved by the 15th interview, further interviews were not conducted (Polit and Beck, 2012). Interviews were digitally recorded and transcription was undertaken by an independent transcription service.

Thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) was used to analyse the data. Initially interview transcripts were read and analysed separately by each member of the project team with each reading the transcripts multiple times to identify recurrent content and patterns. Subsequently, the team met to identify and discuss emerging themes. Once agreed upon, the themes were entered into an Excel spreadsheet with relevant direct quotes from the participants' interviews. To ensure rigour, collaborative analysis was undertaken on multiple occasions so that each theme was adequately and credibly supported by the interview data, confirmed by team consensus, and so the depth and complexity of the experiences of sessional teachers were captured. Descriptive data was comprehensively detailed to establish transferability (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Polit and Beck, 2012) of the study's findings.

Ethical Considerations

Approval for the study was obtained by the University Human Research Ethics Committee. Interviews were conducted by an experienced independent research assistant. Participation was voluntary, participants completed an informed consent, interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed and interview data containing personal or identifying information was removed during transcription. Each interview was coded to protect participants' identities.

Findings

Six main themes emerged from the data that illuminated the experiences of sessional teachers teaching in an undergraduate baccalaureate nursing course in an Australian metropolitan university: *Overall experience*; *Belongingness*; *Things that help*; *Things that hinder*; *Strengths I bring* and *Support needed*.

Overall Experience

Overwhelmingly, the participants judged their overall experience as a sessional teacher as a positive and rewarding one.

I've enjoyed it. I want to make a difference to the next generation and I hope to do that because I'm still enthusiastic and passionate about my work (Participant 14).

Participants emphasised that being a sessional teacher was a career choice as this allowed them to work flexible hours of their choosing, continue in their clinical employment, undertake higher educational pursuits, and juggle work and family commitments effectively.

Being a sessional teacher really works for me...I have commitments and restrictions, so being available five days a week is not an option for me... being able to choose to work two or three days a week gives me the opportunity to come in fresh each day with vim and vigour and just enjoy my days (Participant 3).

Other participants noted that sessional teaching allowed them to concentrate on teaching, whilst avoiding staff politics, and the administrative work of continuing academics.

It is a liberating experience, not having to do so much administration work; liberating to know that I can walk in the classroom, I can give the lecture, there's no pressure and I can walk out (Participant 5).

Belongingness

Participants spoke about wanting a sense of belonging to the School and University. The perceived transient, contingent, nature of sessional teaching contributed to their experiences and strong feelings of not belonging. Participants also felt there was no physical place for them, evidenced by lack of office space, computer terminals, and lockers where they could leave their belongings between classes. They also identified a lack of social spaces within the School where they could easily mingle and converse with other staff. Indeed, most participants felt they were outside looking into the University and School as "fringe-dwellers", or even when they were invited in, feeling as "guests" in someone else's home.

Yes, I hate being a fringe-dweller. I hate it... I'll trudge my textbooks back and forward and not have anywhere to dump them...I teach from eight o'clock until five o'clock on Wednesday and I haven't an office anywhere. I can't dump stuff anywhere (Participant 1).

Feeling like a guest, despite having the micro-teaching skills and understanding the workings of the tertiary sector, there was still a feeling of a lack of a sense of belonging (Participant 3).

Some sessional teachers spoke about a divide between continuing academic teaching staff and sessional teaching staff, which impeded not only their sense of belonging but also their capacity to contribute. To mitigate the lack of belongingness, one participant noted that "the casuals all hang and stick together" (Participant 1).

Things That Help

Participants identified their previous experience in both teaching and the clinical area as significant in helping them in their role as sessional teachers.

Being an experienced clinician and clinically current. Just giving different clinical examples which seem to work so much better than getting things out of a textbook (Participant 6).

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