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# Sessional Academic Success: A Distributed Framework for Academic Support and Development

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# Sessional Academic Success: A Distributed Framework for Academic Support and Development

## **Abstract**

With approximately half of Australian university teaching now performed by Sessional Academics, there has been growing recognition of the contribution they make to student learning. At the same time, sector-wide research and institutional audits continue to raise concerns about academic development, quality assurance, recognition and belonging (Red Report, 2008; May, 2013). In response, universities have increasingly begun to offer academic development programs for Sessional Academics. However, such programs tend to be centrally delivered, generic in nature, and contained within the moment of delivery, while the Faculty contexts and cultures that Sessional Academics work within are diverse, and the need for support unfolds in ad-hoc and often unpredictable ways.

In this paper we present the Sessional Academic Success (SAS) program – a new framework that complements and extends the central academic development program for Sessional Academics at Queensland University of Technology. This program recognizes that experienced Sessional Academics have much to contribute to the advancement of learning and teaching, and harnesses their expertise to provide school-based academic development opportunities, peer-to-peer support, and locally contextualized community building. We describe the program's implementation and explain how Sessional Academic Success Advisors (SASAs) are employed, trained and supported to provide advice and mentorship and, through a co-design methodology, to develop local development opportunities and communities of teaching practice within their schools. Besides anticipated benefits to new Sessional Academics in terms of timely and contextual support and improved sense of belonging, we explain how SAS provides a pathway for building leadership capacity and academic advancement for experienced Sessional Academics. We take a collaborative, dialogic and reflective practice approach to this paper, interlacing insights from the Associate Director, Academic: Sessional Development who designed the program, and two Sessional Academic Success Advisors who have piloted it within their schools.

## **Keywords**

Sessional Academics, development, distributed leadership

## **Cover Page Footnote**

We gratefully acknowledge Professor Suzi Vaughan, DVC Learning and Teaching, for her vision, recognition of the important contribution that Sessional Academics make to QUT, and for her support and trust in what we could achieve in the SAS program. We thank Professor Karen Nelson for the example she has set, and Karen Whelan for her support and sage advice. We also thank Assistant Deans Professor Sue Savage and Associate Professor Karen Sullivan for their advice and facilitation of the program within their faculties. And, for their contribution, commitment, innovation and courage to create new pathways for Sessional Academics and for their feedback on the program, which has enriched this paper we thank our colleagues in the SAS teams: Health: Psychology and Counselling: Dr Zoe Hazelwood (coordinator), Emily Adam and Dr Colette Roos (SASAs), SEF: Mathematical Sciences: Associate Professor Dann Mallet (coordinator), Julian Back (SASA), Kristen Harley (deputy SASA); Electrical Engineering and Computer Science: Dr Peta Wyeth (coordinator), Liam O'Sullivan (deputy SASA); CIF: Media Entertainment Creative Arts: Dr Jason Sternberg (coordinator), and Rachel Parsons (deputy SASA).

## Introduction

Since the landmark Sessional Teachers in Australian Higher Education project released the *RED Report: Recognition – Enhancement – Development: The contribution of sessional teachers to higher education*, (Percy et al. 2008), there has been increasing recognition of the contribution that sessional academics<sup>1</sup> make to student learning in higher education. While precise figures remain elusive, it is estimated that more than half of university teaching across the sector is now conducted by sessional academics (May 2013). Moreover, a conclusion presented in the *RED Report* that “[s]essional staff make a significant but largely invisible contribution to the quality of teaching and learning in higher education” (Percy, et al. 2008, p1) continues to echo recent conclusions drawn by Australian (as well as British) research (see, for example, May 2013; Bryson 2013). With narrow roles and short-term, periodic contracts, sessional academics have limited chance to build an academic profile or to advance through promotion. Further, with a part-time role that revolves around classroom delivery, they have fewer opportunities to network with colleagues than do contracted staff, or to offer their insights and experience to others (Hamilton 2008).

Over the past decade, as the "sessionalisation" of the academic workforce has increased across the sector, research has examined the extent and form of the contribution made by sessional academics to teaching and learning in higher education; for example, the *RED Report*, (Percy et al. 2008). Work has been done to make recommendations for institutional and sector-wide improvements and to support local academic-development programs; for example, the AUTC project *Training, Managing and Supporting Sessional Teaching Staff*, Teaching and Educational Development Institute (2003) and *Subject Coordinators: Leading Professional Development for Sessional Staff* (Lefoe et al. 2011). Encouragingly, benchmarking of best practice in Australian Universities has commenced; for example the current OLT project *Benchmarking Leadership and Advancement of Standards for Sessional Teaching* (BLASST 2013).

Many universities now offer academic-development programs for sessional academics, exemplified through a range of case-study presentations at the recent BLASST National Leadership Summit, "Setting the standard for quality learning and teaching by sessional staff" (BLASST 2013). While the extent and reach of such programs varies, they offer considerable benefit to sessional academics, and in turn their students. However, such programs tend to be centrally offered, and are therefore (necessarily) generic in nature. And, because they are offered to sessional academics at the commencement of their contracts or the teaching semester, they (necessarily) provide pre-emptive training and advice, which is encapsulated in the moment of delivery. Local approaches are also needed to address unique faculty contexts with their varied cultures, processes and practices. And ongoing, just-in-time support and advice is needed to enable inexperienced sessional academics to successfully navigate the complexities of their day-to-day teaching.

Some universities, such as our own, have also moved to include sessional academics in institutional teaching award programs as a form of recognition. While this is undoubtedly welcome, it is important to note that, relative to the opportunities that such recognition may

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<sup>1</sup> Several terms (for example, "sessional academics" and "casual teaching academics") are used for academics who hold short-term teaching-only contracts in Australia. In the US, "teaching assistant" and "adjunct professor" are similar descriptors (see May 2013). Here we adopt the most commonly employed term in Australia and the UK.

present to tenured staff in terms of academic promotion and increased responsibilities, it offers few pathways to advancement and leadership roles for sessional academics.

While important shifts have begun to occur in the areas of development and recognition, much remains to be done if, as a sector, we are to effectively equip our sessional teachers; fully acknowledge the contribution they make to academia; retain experienced sessional academics and their accumulated expertise; and maximise their potential for learning and teaching leadership. New approaches are needed that facilitate local support and development, provide opportunities for advancement and acknowledge and harness the individual and collective capacity of sessional academics to contribute to university life.

In this paper we describe a new framework that has been designed and piloted at Queensland University of Technology (QUT) to complement and extend the University's central academic-development program and provide ongoing local (school-based) support and development. The Sessional Academic Success (SAS) program proceeds from the understanding that experienced sessional academics have much to contribute to the advancement of learning and teaching, and acknowledges their expertise, understanding of local contexts and insights into the specific needs of sessional academics in their schools. It employs them as Sessional Academic Success Advisors (SASAs), develops their leadership capacity and enables them to provide contextually specific academic development and timely support to new sessional academics. By building local, supportive communities of teaching practice, SAS aims to ensure that new, as well as experienced, sessional academics are embraced by their faculties and supported to realise their full potential in teaching and academic leadership.

We take the approach of reflective practice in our discussion on the design and implementation of the SAS pilot in 2012. "Reflection-on-action", as defined by Schön (1983), provides the practitioner with insights into their professional practices, and facilitates the evaluation of the experiences these practices produce. It thus enables an iterative development process, whereby learning from reflection is folded back into, and improves, a practice. Reflective practice has been recognised as an effective tool in many teaching and learning contexts, as well as in the field of design, because of the deepened insight and self-criticality it engenders (Rogers 2001). In line with the collaborative approach of the SAS framework, we take a dialogic approach to the paper, interspersing descriptive discussion with reflections by the first author (A1), QUT's Associate Director: Academic Sessional Development; the second named author (A2), the School of Media, Entertainment and Creative Arts Sessional Academic Success Advisor, who trialled and implemented the program in a unique way; and the third named author (A3), the School of Computer Science and Electrical Engineering Sessional Academic Success Advisor, who piloted the program in a different context. It is our shared intention to enrich the insights we provided through this multi-perspective and multi-voiced approach to reflective practice.

## **Project Background and Local Contexts**

At QUT, approximately 2,500 sessional academics teach across six faculties in a variety of roles – from tutors and demonstrators to lecturers, markers and work-integrated learning facilitators. Recognising the important role that sessional academics play, the university has made a long-standing and substantial commitment to academic-development programs, which sessional academics are paid to attend. The program has evolved and improved over the past decade. It long took the form of a full-day, conference-style event in which academics and learning and teaching

developers presented a range of topics in a series of parallel sessions. Now the centrally offered academic-development program is comprised of a series of sequenced workshops delivered by an experienced academic (this paper's first author), along with guest speakers drawn from relevant QUT support services (Library, Student Success and Retention program, Human Resources and Teaching Evaluations). Scaffolded three-hour sessions begin with an *Introduction to Learning and Teaching*, which aims to develop confidence and competence by focussing on preparing to teach; the value of the role; the expectations of students, subject coordinators and University; approaches to engaging students in learning; and classroom management. This is followed by *Strategies for Student Success*, which presents referral points for a raft of institutional support for students, as well as strategies deployed in the classroom that enable student success. Drawing on student success factors identified by Tinto (2009), it focuses on curriculum that engages students, support for student learning and building a sense of belonging in learning communities. *Assessment for Learning* then identifies the role of assessment in curriculum, matters of academic integrity and approaches to formative and summative feedback that recognise achievement and trigger critical reflection. *Strategies for Academic Success* builds on the Student Success module. Mirroring the success factors of engagement, reflection and supportive communities of practice, it applies them to teaching practice as factors in academic success. *Developing Teaching Practice in Large Units* offers teaching teams the opportunity to learn together and to collaboratively design curricula and engagement for student learning in large subjects.

In addition, QUT's Human Resources collaborate with the Learning and Teaching Unit and the Research Students Centre to present a two-day *Sessional Career Advancement Development* program for HDR students/sessional academics considering an academic career. It offers insights into the university sector, the production of an academic portfolio, strategic advantages when applying for academic positions and preparation for academic roles. The Learning and Teaching Unit and E-Learning Services also provide a range of electronic and hard-copy resources, and some subject-, school- and faculty-based development opportunities are provided at a local level.

In 2012-13, approximately 500 sessional academic staff participated in the centrally offered programs, including 84% of new sessional academics. The programs have been well received, with evaluation (average 76% response rate) scores averaging 4.6 out of 5 (with 5 being the highest positive score) for the program, and 4.85 for teaching. Almost all participants (that is, more than 99%) indicate satisfaction with the programs (on a satisfied/not satisfied response option). Qualitative feedback commonly cites an increased sense of confidence, competence, optimism and enthusiasm for the role. Such academic development is important and transformative, as the following representative feedback from a new sessional academic attests:

It was unbelievably helpful and has transformed me from a nervous, ill-informed tutor into one with confidence and a passion for what I am about to take on! (Email from sessional academic, Law School, to the first author, 2012)

However, surveys of sessional academics at QUT (conducted by the first author and reported in her QUT Teaching Fellowship Report, 2008) as well as institutional sessional-staff opinion surveys conducted in 2008 and 2011 (Bowman 2011), have identified the need for ongoing teaching-development opportunities; local and contextual holistic support; and increased recognition of excellent sessional academics and their practices. Our unfolding reflections upon these findings and our own experiences follow.

A1: Periodic academic development is crucial; the problem is that when it is offered centrally, it is necessarily *generic*, while faculty teaching contexts, processes, cultures and pedagogies are *diverse*. Offered at the beginning of semester, it is necessarily *momentary*,

while the need for support and advice is *ongoing*. And, sequenced for the purpose of incremental scaffolding, it is largely *linear*, while classroom challenges tend to occur *unpredictably* on the ground. And, while my development programs provide an opportunity to *meet other sessional academics from across campus*, opportunities to make *discipline-based connections* with experienced peers and mentors are also necessary to build a sense of community.

A2: The question is then, how can we support sessionals' immediate needs and foster a sense of personal and collective belonging? To successfully navigate the complexities of sessional employment we need new pathways; those in-between spaces that create connections; pathways that support new sessionals and connect them to experienced sessionals; local and focal networking pathways that connect sessionals to their faculty; and learning pathways that connect sessionals to their peers in communities of learning.

A3: Local support, governed and maintained at a university-wide level, is exactly what sessional academics want and need. The precise challenges they face differ by faculty and school, prompting the need for someone local they can rely upon to help them when the solution to their problem is not apparent.

It is from this understanding that the Sessional Academic Success program was designed and piloted. It is important to note that it does not replace existing central academic-development programs, but complements them through a new, additional framework that further supports sessional academics in ways that are local, contextually specific, timely, emergent and responsive to changing needs.

## **Foundational Concepts and Principles for a New, Complementary Framework**

The philosophical approach underpinning the design of the SAS program re-envisages institutional structures and hierarchies. Through the principles of distributed leadership, it redefines the concepts of leadership and community-building. As MacBeath (2005) argues, leadership is not only located in formally designated leadership roles. As a quality, attribute and capacity, it is evident in "local" innovators who sit within many strata of the organisation and operate as exemplars and sources of information and advice. These experienced professionals initiate new approaches and share their wealth of institutional, operational and tacit knowledge. Leadership then is structurally dispersed and embedded within communities of practice, which determine its forms of implementation. Such communities are perpetuated because, rather than being contingent upon a single leader, they are contingent upon the strength of relationships between people (MacBeath 2005; Spillane 2005). Therefore, as Johnson, Lee and Green (2000) argue, strengthening the cooperative relationships and interactions between people improves individual and collective performance and capacity.

A number of learning and teaching projects in Australia have employed the principles of distributed leadership. Drawing relationships between them, the Office for Learning and Teaching funded *Synergies in Distributed Leadership* project established an in-common description of distributed leadership for learning and teaching as:

a leadership approach in which collaborative work is undertaken between individuals who trust and respect each other's contribution. It occurs as a result of an open culture within

and across an institution. It is an approach in which reflective practice is an integral part enabling actions to be critiqued, challenged and developed through cycles of planning, action, reflection and assessment and replanning. It happens most effectively when people at all levels engage in action, accepting leadership in their particular areas of expertise. It requires resources that support and enable collaborative environments together with a flexible approach to ... diverse contextual settings in an institution. Through shared and active engagement, distributed leadership can result in the development of leadership capacity to sustain improvements in teaching and learning. (Jones nd)

The principles of trusting and respecting inherent strengths and expertise, engaging in reflection and iterative development, acting in diverse settings to support and enable and sustaining improvements in learning and teaching are all fundamental to the SAS project. By acknowledging that inherent leadership, innovation and influence are located beyond the highly visible hierarchical structures of universities – in local, informal contexts and in experienced sessional teachers – we can bring together a framework that builds the capacity of leaders who have already driven innovation and taken a proactive approach to mentoring sessional academics in their schools. Moreover, by stretching leadership across the various strata of the university, we can harness multilevel support structures to facilitate their agency as local leaders to extend the initiatives and community foundations that are already in place, and to develop new ones.

At an operational level, QUT’s Student Success and Retention (SSR) project has influenced the design of the framework. To enable Tinto’s (2009) factors of student success – curriculum that engages, timely access to support and being part of a learning community – the SSR project has built and connected a range of university-wide support structures for students, which are complemented by a peer-mentoring model that involves “[making] connections with more experienced peer [which] is understood to promote a sense of belonging and facilitate engagement” (Menzies & Nelson 2012, p1). The SSR project, and in particular its peer-mentoring program, offers a precedent for recognising and fostering inherent, distributed leadership capacity in universities. By systematically demonstrating its impact, SSR has proven that a distributed, strength-based model can lead to substantial gains for students (helping to stem attrition and build leadership capabilities, to name just two). The student success factors employed within the SSR program have been extrapolated to factors of academic success: academic development that engages; timely access to academic support; and a welcoming, supportive community of teaching practice. These have become the three pillars of the project design.

It is important to acknowledge that a number of mechanisms already support and enhance these factors at the institutional and local levels, as outlined in Table 1.

Table 1: Academic Success Factors and Mechanisms that Enable Them

	Academic development that engages	Timely access to academic support	Participation in a community of teachers
Institution-wide mechanisms	University development programs, online training, published guides	HR orientations, administration services, library, technology support	University and faculty awards, seminars, newsletters
Local faculty and school mechanisms	Subject coordinator training, faculty/school development programs (e.g. orientation)	Administration, subject-team meetings, subject coordinator	Teaching-team meetings, faculty seminars

The Sessional Academic Success program complements these formal mechanisms by providing focussed, locally situated and contextually responsive development, support and community-building that takes into account the needs of sessional academics, given the cultures, processes and practices of their schools.

Enactment of the program involves recruiting and employing experienced Sessional Academic Success Advisors as social agents of change, as designers and implementers and as stakeholders in the outcomes of local approaches. A co-design methodology is employed in the design process. Co-design, as defined by Fuad-Luke (2012), involves representative stakeholders working with expert facilitators/designers who provide models and frameworks for designing solutions, as the stakeholders identify community needs, goals, tasks, ambitions and desires through contextual analysis, and then develop design solutions. A cooperative process, co-design harnesses social capital, facilitates the ongoing capture of local knowledge, enables the sharing of cultural insights and information and shapes the subsequent decision-making and design approach. In the process, it helps determine the fluid social construction of meaning and local identity, and builds connectivity between people. Ultimately, co-design supports the invested community in contributing to developing approaches from which they will meaningfully benefit.

Out of a literature review and contextual research into the stated needs of sessional academics at QUT, the philosophical approach of distributed leadership, the example provided by the SSR project and the process of co-design, the Sessional Academic Success project has embraced the following principles:

- Experienced sessional academics – who have successfully navigated local, contextually specific practices and processes and have already innovated in those contexts – can model success and have a wealth of tacit knowledge to share.
- These experienced sessional academics are well positioned, and can be entrusted, to identify local needs and to co-design unique, locally appropriate solutions that enable the success factors of academic development, timely support and supportive communities of teaching practice.
- These local leaders and innovators provide a key to supporting sessional academics and to helping them feel welcomed and included in faculty life.
- Acknowledging and building the leadership capacity of experienced sessional academics not only benefits them and less experienced sessional academics as individuals, it can also be expected to benefit student learning as it enhances the confidence and capacity of sessional teachers.
- Enabling this leadership is of benefit to the academic community as a whole, because it builds collective institutional strengths.

It is important to reiterate and establish some caveats, however. First, the Sessional Academic Success framework is one part of a holistic institutional strategy for supporting sessional academics, and it does not serve to replace central academic development, nor does it defer responsibility for institutional, faculty or subject coordinators' support to Sessional Academic Success Advisors. Second, local SAS approaches should not be envisaged as isolated or independent activities. It is crucial, given the context of sessional academics, to provide appropriate training and support to SASAs so they can navigate the structures and processes of academia to which they may not ordinarily be privy. Institutional and school facilitators and champions are necessary to enable the activities they propose. Third, clearly defined roles, guidelines, training and risk management are necessary, and reporting protocols are necessary to



gauge impact. This is not in the spirit of hierarchical oversight; rather, such measures are needed to ensure that the SASAs are supported and have contained parameters and delimited scope and points of referral, and that their efforts are captured and acknowledged. And finally, of course, recognising the casual nature of sessional employment, those recruited into such leadership roles should be formally recognised and paid for their (part-time) commitment, with the cost offset by an anticipated reduction in sessional academic attrition and the (largely hidden) administrative and academic costs that this brings.<sup>2</sup>

In line with these principles and safeguards, the Sessional Academic Success project at QUT was designed as a centrally coordinated, multi-faculty program that recruits and supports experienced sessional academics as Sessional Academic Success Advisors to provide *contextually specific, on-the-ground, just-in-time* training, support and advice to inexperienced sessional academics *within locally sustained communities of practice*. Its aims are to enhance the confidence and competence of new sessional academics by providing them with support from a trusted, experienced peer (thus helping ensure teaching quality, student satisfaction and engagement in learning); to improve sessional-academic retention through this support and sense of belonging within a supportive community of practice; and to provide pathways for experienced sessional academics to build and exercise leadership capacity (and in turn to build institutional capacity). Put simply, the intention of the project is *to help promote confidence, competence, support and a sense of belonging amongst sessional academic staff, and so to enhance the capacity of students, sessional academics and the broader community of academics*.

## Implementation of the Sessional Academic Success Project

Implementing the Sessional Academic Success project – in line with the principles of acknowledging multiple forms of expertise and leadership, strengthening relationships between people and interconnecting knowledge and insights from across institutional strata – meant that community stakeholders were conceived of broadly, and advice and feedback on the framework was garnered from across the university. This included seeking input from the Deputy Vice Chancellor Learning and Teaching through to assistant deans, program coordinators, learning designers, subject coordinators and, of course, sessional academics. Out of this consultation, a multi-tiered, networked and nodal framework was established (Figure 1) in which Sessional Academic Success Advisors (SASAs) occupy the centre of a map of support relationships. Training, as well as ongoing support and advice, is provided by a central coordinator (the first author) on process and university-level matters, while school facilitators or champions provide advice on local matters and facilitate local activities. Senior and "understudy" advisors are paired

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<sup>2</sup> In business literature the cost of staff turnover is estimated at between 50% and 150% of an annual salary because of recruitment, training and productivity costs (e.g., Bliss 2013; Insynch Insights 2012). NSW Business Chamber (2012) lists various contributing factors, such as lost investment in recruitment, costs of employee induction, training development, administration processing etc.). Based on an average of these figures, we have calculated that if sessional academic turnover is reduced by as little as 2% in the QUT context, anticipated savings are greater than program expenditure.

to ensure a line of succession, sustainability and continuity in the support of each school's sessional academics.

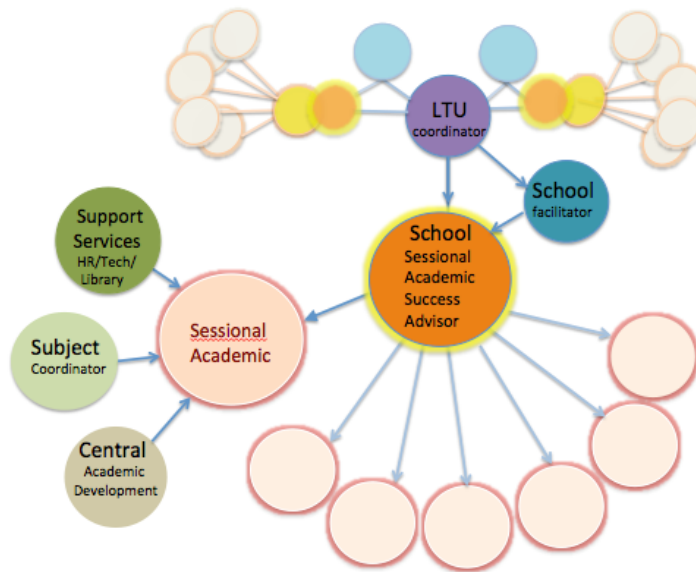


Figure 1: Map of Support Relationships

A pilot program commenced in 2012 across four schools (Psychology and Social Work; Electrical Engineering and Computer Science; Mathematical Sciences; and Media, Entertainment and Creative Arts). In the second-phase pilot in 2013, this was extended to seven schools. It has unfolded as follows. In 2012 assistant deans within faculties were invited to nominate an academic as a school coordinator/facilitator, who in turn nominated experienced sessional staff to become Sessional Academic Success Advisors. In the second pilot (2013), an expression of interest has been sought from sessional academics in the schools, with applicants responding to a position description and selection criteria in a competitive process (which is approached as an academic-development activity). In both cases, the priorities in recruitment of school facilitators and SASAs are experience, expertise and an established commitment to supporting sessional academics. This allows the program to function from a position of strength and to tap into existing expertise and established community networks.

SASAs are appointed in part-time paid positions. They attend training, which includes an introduction to the rationale and methodological framework; the project parameters, aims and objectives; and a written project brief. They are introduced to their two key roles: ad-hoc peer support and identifying local needs and designing, developing and implementing local, contextually appropriate, academic programs in response to them. The first role involves answering questions and providing strategic advice to sessional academics in their school. Training

for this includes anticipating likely requests for help and advice; learning how to field questions; becoming familiar with policy guidelines, referral points and processes for data collection; and capturing advice in a central, Google Docs-based system. In these training sessions, SASAs share their own insights, experiences and approaches to solving the challenges that they, and others they have advised, have previously encountered.

A1: I was motivated by the belief that empowering experienced sessionals to effectively engage with and support their peers is an important key to building a community of practice. This extends to the SASAs as peers. By sharing classroom challenges, innovations and achievements with other SASAs, their expertise is acknowledged and, at the same time, it becomes clear that the principles of advising are applied in a variety of contexts. In this way, the power of a learning community is realised amongst the SASAs.

A2: What was important about the training sessions is that they fostered a collegial spirit, providing a safe space for critical independent and interdependent reflection: a space in which prior experience was exchanged and valued. As an opportunity to make explicit what could have remained an implicit part of my teaching and learning journey, the scaffolded training both affirmed and extended my experiential knowledge. By placing Sessional Advisors at the centre of sessional-academic success, everyday sessional-academic experience is imbued with value, enabling everyday sessionals to be recognised as extraordinary contributors to the university community. Sessional experience and expertise is acknowledged, valued, built and shared. I envisage my place within this program as not so much a leader, but an advisor and mentor.

A3: Connecting with other SASAs in these sessions exposed alternative approaches, highlighted the strengths in the existing support structures and provided an opportunity to affirm a common purpose in our roles as sessional academics. The more individuals feel supported and aware of the resources at their disposal, the more invested they become in their role (and potentially the higher their job satisfaction), which will likely result in better learning outcomes for students.

The second key role of SASAs (identifying local needs and designing, developing and implementing relevant academic programs) was accomplished through a co-design workshop that posed the following question: What do sessional academics need in our school in the areas of academic development, support and community-building?

Within the co-design workshops these broad project goals were pursued through a sequenced design process and project workbook. First, SASAs and their school facilitator collaborated to establish local contexts and needs. Various approaches were taken by the different teams – from online surveys, which offered insights into the complexion of cohorts of sessional academics, to focus groups, to an online space where ideas and proposals were posted by sessional academics within the school.

After this contextual evaluation and needs analysis, SASAs took the lead design role in proposing initiatives and frameworks, with the school facilitators providing contextual and feasibility advice. Proposals were presented to the whole group for critique and feedback in relation to the feasibility of implementation, projected reach, aims and objectives, along with the proposed strategy for evaluating success and measuring impact (as part of an iterative design process). The role of the central coordinator and school facilitators was to ensure effective implementation (by enabling access to resources, rooms, approvals, mailing lists, catering and so on). Agency and responsibility

for strategic decisions, design, promotion and implementation of the programs, as far as possible, rested with the SASAs.

A1: It is my belief that if we support and then trust our students in the tasks we set for them, they will produce what is new, unexpected and surprising. The same principle was applied here. I anticipated that supported, open problem-solving with clear goals, frameworks for enactments, an environment of trust in the SASAs' capacity and community-based reflection could lead to innovative solutions that I could not have anticipated.

A2: The initiative called upon my creative, investigative and problem-solving skills to develop and implement a program befitting the diverse demographics and emergent needs of my school's academic cohort. The sequence of the workbook built strategically, highlighting connections between ideas while directing us towards a common goal. The project design provided a safe, supportive and structured framework to collaborate within, whilst simultaneously offering sufficient freedom and self-determination in shaping our project direction. The freedom that ensued is due to the culture of respect cultivated. Hence, through the trust bestowed upon me, the duties and responsibilities I encountered were beyond those typically performed by a sessional academic member.

Such a premise empowers participants to instigate real and sustainable change as expertise is built and shared. This consolidated training was all that was needed to establish a clear plan and set our project in motion. The layered framework also facilitated reciprocal dialogues with other SASAs, collectively illuminating principles of best practice and fostering pedagogical innovation through the project. While the content and delivery style may vary substantially between disciplines, a factor that links all sessional academics is an overarching goal to facilitate student success.

A3: The design materials and guiding structures in place at the beginning of the program required us to be specific with our goals, and to carefully consider both the needs of the sessional academics in our school and the resources available to us. This was the first time I had considered my place in this community in this way and, to determine how we might support and develop it, the first challenge was determining its characteristics. The collaborative design process we were invited into gave us the autonomy to not only take an explorative approach initially, but then also gave us the freedom to adapt the program we initially envisioned to address the uncovered deficits. It was great that we could develop and invest in our own unique approach while also knowing that the outcomes would be valued both locally and in meeting the needs of the program, and that we were trusted to follow through with that.

A1: Recognising the capacity of experienced sessional academics to support their peers in ways that are unique, valuable and valued, and providing the agency and leadership to do so, was an important aspect of the program, as was working cooperatively to help ensure smooth and pragmatic implementation. The direct and immediate outcome I observed in the workshops was that participants' understanding was expanded incrementally and a "meta-awareness" of theory was acquired through experience, critical analysis and reflection – all principles transferred to/from student learning. I was to see transformational learning on many new levels, and I gained an increased passion for enabling sessional academics – and the next generation of academics – to realise their full

potential. And I was to see exciting outcomes realised that involve sophisticated approaches to building local capacity and community engagement.

## **Project Outcomes**

This design process led to a series of custom programs to provide sessional academics with contextually specific, needs-based, peer-to-peer development opportunities. Collectively, these programs include academic development in the form of just-in-time training (for example, training in assessment and marking when marking commences), and regular community-of-practice meetings to discuss challenges encountered and problem-solve collectively. Local resources were developed to complement university-wide resources, including checklists and directories of school contacts, and guides on school processes and practices. Resources were also produced by one of the schools for subject coordinators to better induct and support sessional academics.

Support to new sessional academics was provided through orientation tours and induction events, peer-based pre-semester rehearsals of classes, face-to-face consultations, peer feedback on classes, mentoring and direct advising and referrals. Each SASA logged requests for advice, categorising the types of questions asked and the challenges brought to their attention, along with the advice given and referrals made. This enabled patterns of support needs to be identified as they emerged. Each team encourages feedback from the sessional academics in their schools, which is coordinated by SASAs.

Community-building activities took the form of launches, social events, welcomes and welcome backs and virtual community groups in Facebook and Blackboard forums. Scholarship of learning and teaching events have been proposed for the following year, including workshops and writing bees (with a view to publishing on learning and teaching). Recognition was fostered through thank-you events and local prizes and awards (with nominations by students). Such programs complement the support and programs offered by subject coordinators, administrators, faculties and the central Learning and Teaching Unit.

At the conclusion of the pilot, each school presented the outcomes of the program design as a case study. An abridged example, produced by the SAS team led by the second author, appears in the Appendix. At the end of the 2012 pilot, the SASAs participated in a reflective focus-group discussion and completed a questionnaire that called on them to reflect on their experience of the pilot program. Some of this reflection formed the kernel of this paper.

## **Challenges and Opportunities**

Any dramatic shifts in institutional systems or human relationships pose challenges as well as opportunities. The challenges encountered during the SAS pilot related to systemic change and the shifts in thinking and acting that are required when formalising a distributed-leadership model. The framework presents challenges to entrenched hierarchical structures and established supervision models because it affords unprecedented agency to sessional academic staff. Perceptions of the SASA role within faculty structures therefore needed to be well communicated and carefully managed. At times it was important to clarify and better define the project scope and the SASA/facilitator roles.

A1: Due to the counterintuitive nature of the distributed-leadership framework, a crucial aspect of facilitation proved at times to be negotiation of roles, clearly establishing that SASAs are not a duplication or replacement of, but a complement to forms of support offered by unit coordinators, faculties, administration and central services, and assurance about the trust and respect implicit in the framework.

A2: At its core, this is a framework that privileges collegial *interaction* over hierarchal *action*, and creates a relational shift in the normalised coordinator/sessional academic relationship. In light of this complexity, challenges were encountered in defining roles and subsequent responsibilities. Building successful relationships in this context calls upon all parties to set aside the formal relationships of the workplace, use empathy and imagination to understand each others' roles and essentially view the structures and issues of academia from the point of view of a sessional.

A1: Other challenges related to communication, including identifying sessional staff within the faculties and establishing new "horizontal" channels for promotion and communication. Once established, a network of informal communication could perpetuate awareness.

A2: Initially, accessing essential information to establish contact with the sessional academic cohort was difficult. Nonetheless, such limitations manifested as an opportunity to harness all available resources and to capitalise on sessionals' pre-existing engagement with online social-media (Facebook) and technological platforms (Blackboard) to establish reach. And, while sessional academics' attendance at the program launch was lower than anticipated, perhaps due to difficulties faced in making initial contact, word-of-mouth proved a powerful tool to proliferate awareness of the program across the faculty. What started as coincidental social encounters and impromptu consultations later developed into regular "drop-in" sessions due to popular demand. Feedback from sessionals confided that the "level playing field" of these ad-hoc meetings encouraged freedom of expression, and created mutual spaces of trust and respect.

Although the initiative presented challenges due to its experimental approach, ultimately my teaching abilities were furthered by it, as was my capacity to support my fellow sessional academics. The freedom embedded in the project and the subsequent flexibility of approach provided an opportunity for me to recognise and harness my leadership abilities – those I innately possessed, and those I was soon to learn. Through critical support and a scaffolded framework of advising, along with authentic reporting and facilitated self-reflection, all participating sessionals gained opportunities for professional growth and learning. And, because of the collegiality cultivated in both virtual and physical communities of learning, no matter the delivery or communication mode, peer-to-peer sharing of mutual experiences manifested as the primary trigger to dispel sensations of isolation and detachment. The potential of the program is that each sessional academic who treads the paths of learning and teaching will be able to retrieve the experiences of sessional academics who have gone before them, and they too will leave a footprint and prepare the ground for new pathways. In these ways, sessionals are empowered to have a voice, to share and to “no longer feel alone”.

## Conclusion

The framework we have described here is an emergent approach to providing local, contextually specific, ongoing and sustainable mechanisms for enabling the academic success factors we have identified: academic development, timely support and communities of teaching practice. It is too early to draw definitive, evidence-based conclusions on the Sessional Academic Success project's impact on the confidence, capacity and sense of belonging of new sessional academics through the support it provides; nor can we yet describe the flow-on effects to students, academic supervisors and university managers in terms of quality assurance, climate surveys and retention of staff. However, what can be concluded is that the implementation of the pilot program at QUT has realised a diverse range of project outcomes in response to highly varied school contexts, and has extended the leadership capacity of experienced sessional academics. An analysis conducted in late 2012 of the qualitative feedback gathered through surveys, emails and focus groups, conducted in late 2012, suggests that progress has been made in addressing recurrent themes in sessional reviews: the sense of disconnection from faculty life; recognition of expertise and opportunities for advancement; and building leadership capacity. It is for these reasons that, while it is still in the early stages of its iterative development, we have presented the framework here as one that can be adopted and adapted by those in the sector who recognise its unfolding potential.

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## Appendix: Abridged SAS Case Study

### A Tiered Framework for Supporting Sessional Academics: A SAS Program

The purpose of the Media, Entertainment and Creative Arts (MECA) SAS program was to implement a school-based support initiative with a tiered-design framework, using multi-modal delivery approaches befitting the diverse demographics and contextual needs of our sessional cohort. Based upon our experiential knowledge that sessional academics require collegial support, the MECA SAS program aimed to:

- Garner feedback to ascertain the needs of sessional academics
- Provide administrative support
- Foster pedagogical confidence and innovation
- Build a sense of community and develop communities of practice
- Facilitate professional development and build employment pathways
- Be flexible and adaptable in responding to the emergent needs of sessionals within the faculty.

With an emphasis on implementing a program that is as rich and multifaceted as the sessional cohort it supports, the framework consisted of the following inter-related tiers:

#### 1. *Wallwisher*

An anonymous online forum was established to garner unmediated feedback on the current and recurring needs of sessionals, initiated by the trigger question, “How can SASA help you?” Wallwisher was identified as an appropriate feedback mechanism, as it preserves anonymity and so increases honesty of participation and encourages freedom of thought. A layered sticky-note interface welcomes diversity of experience to be shared on an equal platform, and also documents individual needs within a shared space. The key themes that emerged informed the resulting framework, with tiered responses to expressed needs; for example:

- Desire to develop teaching and class-management strategies
- Wishing to communicate and collaborate with fellow peers
- Assistance with general administrative forms and procedures
- Aid in developing career pathways.

#### 2. *Blackboard website*

A centrally located series of online resources relevant to MECA sessionals was created to provide access to current information across the fields of teaching and learning, administration, policies and procedures and student support.

#### 3. *Facebook group*

A dedicated Facebook group was created to aggregate program interest and act as a decentralised hub of peer-to-peer dialogue.

#### 4. *Induction launch*

A launch introduced the program, activated the aforementioned online resources and initiated face-to-face community-building. Induction activities were designed to deliver information, foster collaboration and prompt peer networking.

#### 5. *Workshops*

A localised professional-development program addressed context-specific teaching and learning strategies that directly affect the student experience. The workshops have a dedicated focus on improving sessionals' experience through facilitating pathways for increased communities of practice, strengthening networks and sourcing opportunities for continued and broadened employment.

#### 6. *Drop-in consultations*

In response to demand, which grew as positive feedback was garnered and word of the program spread through impromptu peer-to-peer dialogues, consultations were formalised into weekly calendared sessions.