

2023

## "Appreciate we are individual humans with previous experience": An exploration of sessional marker experiences

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### Recommended Citation

Hammond, K. M., Rai, M., Hassouna, A., & Raleigh, S. (2023). "Appreciate we are individual humans with previous experience": An exploration of sessional marker experiences. *Journal of University Teaching & Learning Practice*, 20(6). <https://doi.org/10.53761/1.20.6.8>

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## "Appreciate we are individual humans with previous experience": An exploration of sessional marker experiences

### Abstract

Continuous increase of global reliance on sessional staff in higher education has not been accompanied by the development of strategies to enhance quality learning and teaching or understanding the experiences of these staff. This has resulted in a general discontent among this category of academics. The growing importance of building respectful working environments that integrate inclusive care and performance quality leads to the emergence of standards frameworks. Explorations of sessional staff lived experiences are vital to inform policy and practice. This study examined sessional staff predominantly in a marking role in a local context of an Aotearoa/New Zealand University. We explored our markers' agreement with selected principles of an Australian national framework. Based on an anonymous Qualtrics survey, the quantitative data showed our markers agreed with most of the selected Australian framework principles at the individual and department levels. An appreciative inquiry of the qualitative data identified markers' desires for increased professional development, infrastructure and resources, and personal motivation. Considering our markers' experiences, we propose several actions in a workshop format to provide insights for developing better structures and policies for retaining, training, and engaging with sessional staff.

### Practitioner Notes

1. Higher education relies increasingly on marginalised sessional staff working as teachers or assessment markers.
2. Professional development and socially inclusive environments for sessional staff improves quality of teaching and learning and creates a respectful working environment for all.
3. Our survey of our sessional markers' views found they agreed with most of the standards developed in Australia and comments on their own experiences helped us identify positive areas and points for immediate improvement in our local context in New Zealand.
4. We recommend permanent staff connect with sessional staff to offer professional development and greater opportunities to increase recognition, professional development, and systematic feedback.
5. We propose a one-day conference plan and evaluation form to increase quality of teaching and learning and strengthen relationships between permanent and sessional staff.

### Keywords

sessional staff; professional development; appreciative inquiry; higher education; markers

## Introduction

There is a global demand in higher education to create positive cultures that sustain momentum for promoting and improving teaching quality (Unsworth et al., 2020). This quality also extends to marginalised sessional staff. Higher education increasingly relies on sessional staff in Australia (Baik et al., 2018; Harvey, 2017; Milne, 2009; Knott et al., 2015; Percy et al., 2008; Sutherland, 2002) and in Aotearoa/New Zealand (Sutherland & Gilbert, 2013). Women mostly comprise those who are either early career academics or post-graduate students; these non-tenured sessional academics form a critical part of the tertiary education landscape (Baik et al., 2018, Crimmins, 2016; Harvey, 2017; Hitch et al., 2018; Knott et al., 2015). In the absence of systemised professional development (PD) opportunities, this significant reliance on sessional staff is considered as a risk indicator for tertiary education (American Association of University Professors [AAUP], 1993; Tertiary Education Quality Standards Agency [TEQSA], 2012). In terms of quality, research based on data from institutions across the United Kingdom (Beaton, 2017) and Australia (Crimmins, 2017; Knott et al., 2015) underlined the lack of systematic opportunities for PD of sessional staff. A common issue is difficulty accessing PD opportunities and these are often not included in their contracts (Gilbert, 2017; Milne, 2009).

Investment in sessional staff requires attention not only on their performance, but also their lived experiences (Crimmins, 2016; Richardson et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2022). Feeling valued is an important component of building successful relationships in co-teaching. A qualitative analysis of teaching assistants and teachers found the important factors in developing good relationships to be: affinity, open and regular communication, a sense of belonging at the class and school level, professional compatibility, and autonomy (Jardi et al., 2022). Milne (2009) also found sessional staff desired greater recognition and inclusion in the university's communities.

Systematised approaches for sessional staff development have not been achieved across the tertiary education sector, but increasing examples of good practice exist at institutional, faculty, and department levels. Managing quality enhancement and assurance for sessional staff PD is context specific (Harvey, 2017; Knott et al., 2015). Institutions in different countries have adopted their own theoretical approaches to designing, achieving, and evaluating various PD initiatives (Harvey, 2017). For example, in Australia, development of a systematic approach to quality learning and teaching, shows good practice (Brown, 2015). The Benchmarking Leadership and Advancement of Standards for Sessional Teaching (BLASST) framework is designed to act as an educational tool that stimulates reflection, as well as action, and enables institutions, faculties, departments, and individuals to evaluate and lead good practice with sessional teachers (Luzia et al., 2013). The framework evaluates practice in learning and teaching,

### Academic Editors

Section: Developing Teaching Practice  
Editor-in-Chief: Dr Joseph Crawford  
Senior Editor: Dr Rebekkah Middleton

### Publication

Received: 9 November 2022  
Revision: 28 February 2023  
Accepted: 3 August 2023  
Published: 16 August 2023

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support (e.g., management and administrative policy), and sustainability of procedures and systems affecting sessional staff by establishing national, validated, and evidence-based criteria and standards (Harvey, 2013).

There was an integrated review of evidence published in 42 studies (from Australia & UK) over the past decade on PD for sessional staff using the BLASST framework as a benchmarking tool. The review revealed that systemic and sustained good practice to support professional development for sessional teaching staff is yet to become a reality. This review highlighted the need for further research into new practices, and for higher education institutions to systemically evaluate and reform the support they provide to their workforce (Hitch, et al., 2018). Another systematic literature review explored how educational practices are developed and documented in the research literature over the 10-year period of 2008–2018 for sessional staff, at Canadian and North American postsecondary institutions (Sabourin, 2021). Major findings included sessional staff feeling disconnected from the institution, faculty, and department; unappreciated and undervalued for their contributions, both real and potential; a lack of camaraderie and the need for fellowship; and the want and need to be valued and respected as an equal member of their academic community. In addition to such reviews, some journals (e.g., *International Journal for Academic Development*, and the *Journal of University Teaching & Learning Practice*) have devoted special issues to exploring the intricacies of providing support to sessional staff. Therefore, international research is including the voices of sessional staff to make the working environment safe and inclusive (Kanitkar et al., 2020). Unsworth et al. (2020) noted that in quality teaching in the UK, assessment and giving feedback to learners is a key activity. Quality teaching cannot be provided unless permanent and sessional staff are offered opportunities for professional development and a sense of belonging.

Limited data on sessional staff makes it difficult to develop systematic approaches to support and recognise sessional staff. Information about who they are, and the PD they require, needs further exploration. Sessional staff perform a variety of roles and come from a variety of backgrounds, so understanding their needs and benchmarking to a consistent standard can be difficult (Gilbert, 2017). However, it is important to understand their needs and expectations when developing appropriate support and recognition (Kanitkar et al., 2020; Milne 2009).

## **Context**

While developed in the Australian context, some aspects of the BLASST framework have been transferable to international contexts. We respond to the call by Luzia et al. (2013) to use the BLASST framework to stimulate reflection and development within a local context. In our bicultural context of Aotearoa/New Zealand, the values of care and kindness are central to our engagement practices with sessional staff. As teachers, we strive to express these values at the school level, which includes our sessional staff. Our school has 86 sessional staff and approximately 30 permanent staff. Sessional staff cover two main roles of teaching undergraduate tutorials and/or marking assessments. Previous studies (Bell et al., 2010; Chester, 2012) have focused on the teaching role of sessional staff. However, marking assessments is also a form of teaching when it is formative for future assessment (Nicoll et al., 2022) so sessional staff as markers are

also valuable. Therefore, we narrow our focus to the marking role of sessional staff as many of our staff do not teach and would be potentially marginalised in class-teaching-focused initiatives.

PD for our markers includes a general induction-styled training to the Learning Management System (LMS) and marking feedback standards. This is followed by course-specific training occurring weekly, fortnightly, or only prior to an assessment due date, depending on specific course needs. The pre- and post-moderation offers further constructive feedback on understanding of the grading requirements. Retaining a quality workforce and offering positive working environments with growth potential is important in our context with large courses (400-2300 students). We have also experienced issues around markers quitting abruptly and/or not following marking guidelines accurately. Improvements in communication, satisfaction, increased retention, and the quality of grading could be achieved with insights into markers' expectations and hopes for their role, and how these can be facilitated.

## **Rationale**

Previous research found sessional markers occupy a marginalised position and lack PD opportunities. Although universities consider induction to be important, less is understood about the ongoing development of sessional staff (Percy et al., 2008). As permanent staff working directly with our markers, we wanted to understand their needs for PD and personal motivation to inform what we could improve in the immediate future. We aim to find out if the Australian BLASST framework is perceived by our markers as relevant. The framework has also been used as a starting point in Ireland (Educational Developers in Ireland Network and Higher Education Colleges Association, 2015). We use appreciative inquiry to understand what sessional staff consider is working well and what they aspire to see in the future. From this, we will reflect on our current practices and identify areas for improvement. Given that sessional staff occupy marginal spaces, we aim to conduct this study to identify gaps and recommendations for PD and social valuing to support our sessional markers. We are looking for how our practices, as permanent staff, may follow the broader and relevant concepts of the Australian BLASST framework and align with our university values of *tika* (integrity), *pono* (respect) and *aroha* (compassion) (Auckland University of Technology, 2021 [AUT]). These values are inspired by indigenous Māori values; however, the English translation does not fully encompass the richness of the Māori meanings in the single-word English translations. Furthermore, these values interweave in their expression and thus cannot be considered as three discreet concepts (Stewart et al., 2021). Therefore, we understand that these words have a collective meaning together in the Māori language. This collective meaning is more than the sum of its parts. Nevertheless, as non-Māori authors we align with the university efforts to be true to these values while interpreting them for our linguistic understanding.

## **Method**

This study employs a cross-sectional, mixed-mode survey design (Creswell, 2020) in which we collected quantitative and qualitative data. We address the first research aim to know our participants' degree of agreement or disagreement with some of the BLASST

framework statements from the individual and department levels, as these are the levels we can directly work with as lecturers. A qualitative approach is used for the second aim of understanding what markers consider is working well in our current context and what they would like to see in the future. The combination of these analyses will assist us to identify areas for improvement of the marker experience and PD.

## Method

### Participants and Ethics

The study received ethical approval from the University's Ethical Committee (ref. 22/173). The research team took extra care regarding contacting casual markers due to the power imbalance between us, as staff, and markers, as casual employees. We used an anonymous survey and employed appreciative inquiry for answers to open-ended questions. We surveyed participants who have been teaching assistants marking on courses in the Department of Interdisciplinary Studies for at least one semester and with current contracts in 2022. As an overview, our sample were: female (80%), marking only (63%), evenly spread over new to five or more semesters marking with us, and held a master's degree or higher (80%).

### Appreciative Inquiry

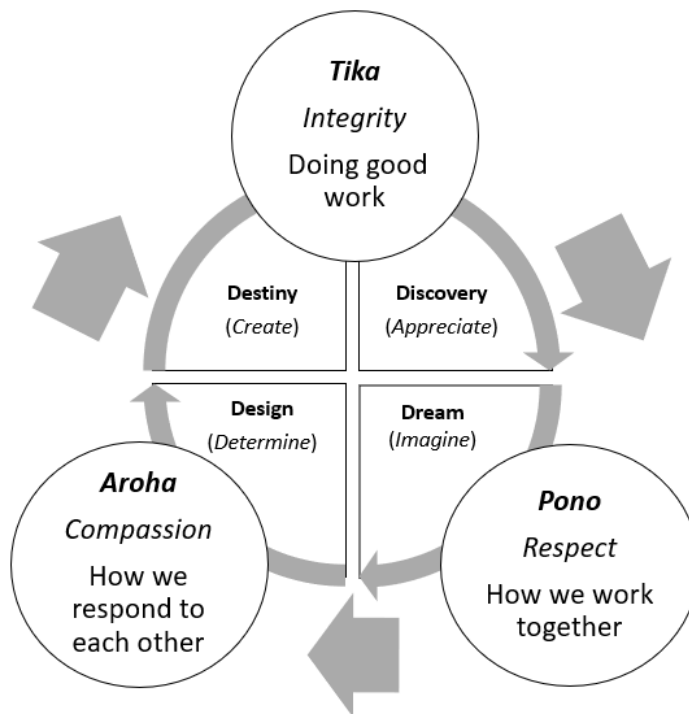
Appreciative inquiry has five core principles that underpin qualitative exploration based on experience in organisational development (Cooperrider et al., 2003). These principles are: 1) The constructionist principle in which an individual creates, or constructs, the reality of their world through an active process of interaction and discussion with other people; 2) The simultaneity principle in which inquiry and change are not separate processes. Inquiry prompts a change process from new insights; 3) The poetic principle in which people make meaning from the words. Their choice of words reveals how the topic is understood and can be changed or reframed; 4) The anticipatory principle envisages potential changes and creates a feeling of control over and motivation to change; and 5) The positive principle underpinning all the others as questions seek to identify strengths to engage people in positive change. These principles operate within a 4-D cycle of: discovery (using positive questions to see what is worth valuing), dream (using discoveries to envisage what could be), design (developing strategic intentions), and leading to destiny (realising intentions through action).

Appreciative inquiry is appropriate in our context as it is a form of participatory research in which we are working with, and for, the sessional staff. Through identifying what is working well in a non-confrontational way in the discovery phase, we will also see what could be improved. By listening to sessional staff perceptions, we can dream and imagine future initiatives, and determine what might be possible for us to create. This approach aligns with the values of *aroha*, *pono*, and *tika* which foreground the importance of building ongoing relationships. Respectful and inclusive relationships are integral in our appreciative inquiry process. The alignment of the two frameworks is illustrated in Figure 1. An important aspect in our relationships is that we have caring conversations. Dewar (2011) described the 7Cs of caring conversations as being: courageous, connective, curious, collaborative, considerate, compromising, and being

able to celebrate. These principles align with our values of building caring relationships. Thus, we embrace a relational constructivism as we work together to understand insights and create new possibilities (Jonsdottir et al., 2004). We hope this study is a first step in ongoing, collaborative dialogue with sessional staff about their experiences and our shared visions for an inclusive and supportive working environment.

**Figure 1**

*Integration of appreciative inquiry and the values of tika, pono, and aroha*



## Measures

The online questionnaire design for this study began with a question on participants' consent. The initial section then included demographic questions to enable comparisons with previous research. The next section comprised of items from the BLASST framework regarding PD. These were adapted from the "Good practice" criteria at the individual level, and some items at the department level. For example, one good practice criterion at the individual level was, "As a sessional staff member I identify my own professional development needs". This was adapted to: "I feel that is important that as a casual marker I identify my own professional development needs". Participants could indicate agreement or disagreement on a 5-point Likert Scale response from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree. The number of items selected was reduced to enable the questionnaire to be completed within 15 minutes. These items relate to levels at which we, as permanent staff, can affect change. The final appreciative inquiry section included open questions of: 1) what worked well, 2) what markers' ideal would be, 3) what needs to be maintained or changed, and 4) how AUT staff could make this happen.

## **Data Collection and Analysis**

The invitation, emailed to 86 potential participants in early July, provided a link to the survey and included information about the study. A reminder was sent on July 15th with further communication regarding interest in marking. The survey remained open for one month (July 6th to August 8th). The Qualtrics software generated descriptive statistics of the quantitative data regarding demographics and degree of agreement with the BLASST framework statements. Using abductive reasoning allowed progressing from the participants' descriptions and meanings to theoretical categories that enabled understanding and explaining their experiences and perceptions (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). The process of data analysis extended from the making of early, tentative analytical notes individually, through to the reading and processing of the data, to the final stages where we collectively categorised the codes into three themes of: PD, resources and infrastructure, and personal motivation. This helped us test and validate our definitions of the abductive themes. Throughout the analytical process, we continued to review the literature on sessional staff development.

## **Findings**

### **Quantitative analysis – Agreement with the BLASST framework**

Nineteen people responded to the survey invitation (23% response rate). The highest proportion of participants were female (79%), living in the local city (89%) with master's or Doctorate qualifications (79%). Two thirds were marking only, and semesters of experience split evenly into thirds: between one, two to four, and five or more semesters of marking. Over two thirds (68%) identified as 'highly competent' markers with almost all (95%) currently marking. These demographics are similar to those noted in previous research in Australia (Harvey, 2017) and Aotearoa/New Zealand (Sutherland & Gilbert, 2013).

We asked general questions relating to each of the three BLASST framework principles: Quality teaching and learning (which included PD), support for sessional staff, and sustainability. For PD, we asked if markers felt that PD was important to them (79% in agreement range). For quality teaching and learning, we asked if having processes to ensure quality of teaching and learning in marking would be an important factor in their desire to return as a marker (79% agreement range). For support, we asked whether feeling supported would be an important factor in their desire to return as a marker (95% agreement range). For sustainability, we asked if having processes of sustainability (relating to providing feedback and recognition of quality marking with longer contracts) would be an important factor in their desire to return as a marker (84% agreement range). These findings indicated our markers also valued these general principles. Table 1 shows the agreement with the BLASST framework statements at the individual level. The original criteria numbers are included in parentheses (BLASST, 2013).



**Table 1.** Percentages of agreement with statements from the BLAAST Framework (Individual level)

| Statement  | Strongly agree | Agree | Neither | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|--|----------------|-------|---------|----------|-------------------|
| 1. I feel it is important as a casual staff member that I actively maintain timely and regular communications with my department and relevant staff. (2.4b)  | 74             | 21    | 5       | 0        | 0                 |
| 2. I feel it is important as a casual staff member that I am provided with the opportunity to provide feedback on all aspects of my marking experience, including: training, resources, moderation, learning activities, and communication. (3.4a) | 58             | 26    | 10      | 5        | 0                 |
| 3. I feel it is important as a casual marker that I seek out and engage with professional development opportunities offered. (1.4a)  | 53             | 26    | 11      | 11       | 0                 |
| 4. I feel it is important as a casual marker that I participate in learning and teaching activities, keep up to date with new policies, resources, research, and other developments in my field as part of my professional development. (1.4b)     | 53             | 26    | 11      | 11       | 0                 |
| 5. I feel that is important that as a casual marker I identify my own professional development needs. (1.4a)   | 42             | 37    | 16      | 5        | 0                 |
| 6. I feel it is important as a casual staff member that I am provided with the opportunity to become involved in and engage with policy development. (2.4a)  | 26             | 32    | 26      | 16       | 0                 |

At the individual level, Table 1 shows the majority of participants agreed, or strongly agreed, with the BLASST framework statements (at least 58%). This was particularly evident in the items about feeling supported and maintaining timely and relevant communication with staff. These statements showed the belief in the importance of playing an active role in one's professional development. These also included some expectations from staff about the provision of support through evaluation, resources, and participation. The least agreed-with statement concerned participation in policy development as nearly half the participants were either neutral or in disagreement with

this level of participation. Table 2 shows the agreement with a selection of BLASST framework statements at the department level.

**Table 2** Percentages of agreement with statements from the BLAAST Framework (Department level)

| Statement   | Strongly agree | Agree | Neither | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|---|----------------|-------|---------|----------|-------------------|
| 1. I feel it is important that casual markers have meetings that allow debriefing, planning, sharing of good practice, collaborative development of learning and teaching strategies as well as mentoring and team building opportunities. (1.3c) | 74             | 21    | 0       | 5        | 0                 |
| 2. I feel it is important that there are systematic processes in place to identify good casual marking. (3.3c)  | 74             | 11    | 16      | 0        | 0                 |
| 3. I feel it is important that departments have identified a supervisor for each casual staff member. (1.3d)  | 74             | 11    | 11      | 5        | 0                 |
| 4. I feel it is important that casual markers are regularly evaluated and receive comprehensive and systematic feedback. (1.3f)   | 68             | 16    | 16      | 0        | 0                 |
| 5. I feel it is important that casual markers who provide good quality marking are offered longer-term contracts and/or employment over a sustained period of time. (3.3c)  | 47             | 5     | 5       | 11       | 32                |

At the department level, Table 2 shows figures indicating strong agreement, or agreement with, most of the statements. This describes markers' desire for the department to engage with them regarding participation in learning and teaching processes, and systematic development and evaluation of their work. Conflicting opinions about longer contract provision was an interesting finding. The least agreed-with statement concerned the provision of longer contracts for good quality marking. Although over half (52%) were in the agreement range for such a contract determinant, 43% were in the range of disagreement.

## Qualitative analysis – appreciative inquiry

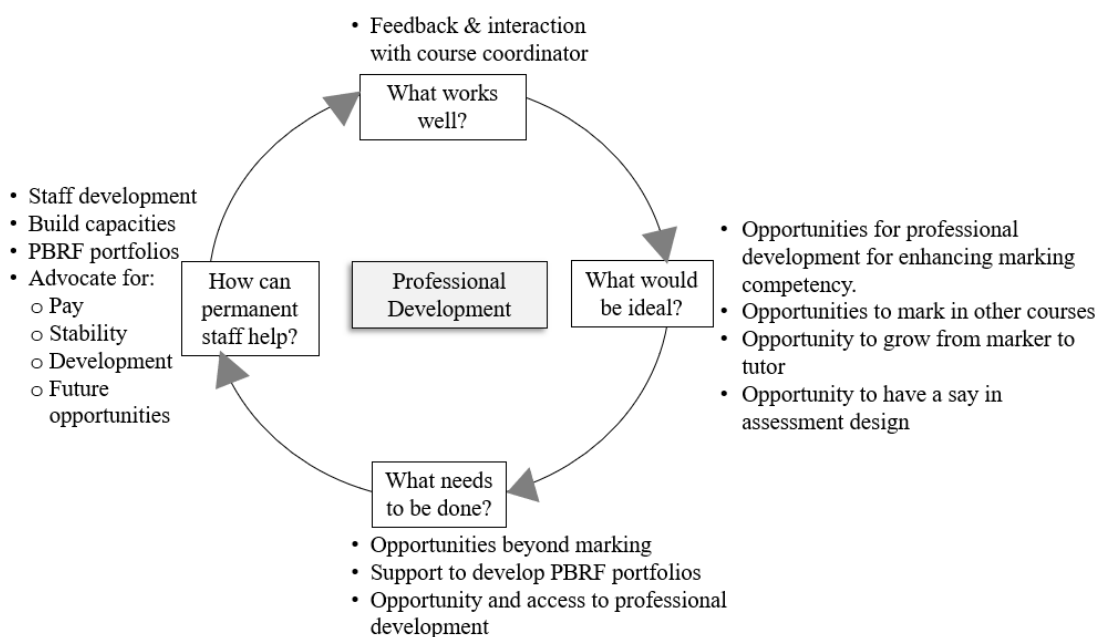
This section presents the analysis of the appreciative inquiry questions for each of the three themes: PD, infrastructure and resources, and personal motivation. We also interpreted a fourth theme of ‘advocacy’ from marker appeals for staff to advocate on their behalf across the other three themes. As one marker explained, “Casual & precarious workers don’t have a say in the policy or practice of the university. We need advocates that value the development of TAs.” Thus, markers appeal to course staff to advocate on their behalf for PD and better working conditions.

### Theme 1: Professional development

Figure 2 shows successful, and hoped for, aspects of PD from the appreciative inquiry process.

**Figure 2**

*Appreciative inquiry of PD*



*What works well?* Markers acknowledged their professional growth was currently working well by being able to mark for courses outside of their specific area, as one marker wrote, “It’s challenged me in subjects I would not normally consider.” Almost all markers indicated their satisfaction and appreciation of the marking training and resources as being beneficial to their understanding of the grading processes.

*What would be ideal?* The markers’ ideal aspirations for professional growth and stability in employment were illustrated by comments such as, “Employment by AUT... the ideal future situation would be to have a permanent job.” Markers also mentioned about the need for, “Minimum-hour contracts,” as well as, “higher hourly rate per semester.”

Statements such as, “An opportunity to become part of the teaching team,” and “Ability to feed back into changes in assessments,” show the markers’ motivation to be a stronger part of the course teaching team.

*What needs to be done?* The markers noted their expectations for building competencies as one marker wrote, “Opportunities for professional development in relation to pedagogy, learning and teaching - even if the sessional staff role is only as a marker, these are crucial for competent feedback.” Additionally, there was interest shown in opportunities that would allow growth from the marking role, such as into tutoring. For example, one participant mentioned the desire for “Opportunities beyond marking, e.g., progression into teaching or linking into research projects.” There was also desire for “Support to develop [research] portfolios.”

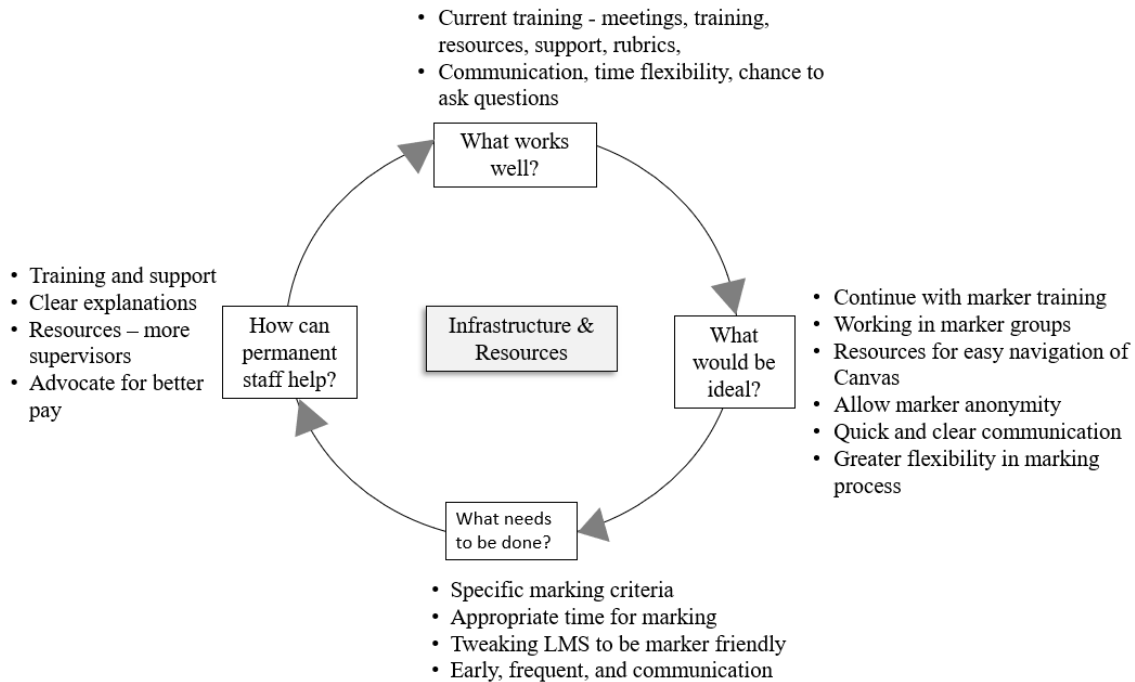
*How can staff help?* Expectations of permanent staff help were outlined in relation to both enhancing marking capabilities as well as markers’ professional growth/development. In terms of marking capability, one marker wrote, “It would be helpful if the staff could explain some of the reasons for the changes so that we can remember the new instructions easier.” Another spoke about the need for “Being informed of clear marking criteria.” Markers required permanent staff to be more aware of recognising opportunities beyond marking; for example, in teaching or research projects. Overall, the markers expressed their desire for, “More opportunity and access to professional development”, as well as identification of their individual efficiencies to, “build their capacities”. From these findings, we chose to work on greater connection between markers and research projects (see session 2 of proposed activity).

## **Theme 2: Infrastructure and resources**

This theme on infrastructure and resources included processes and materials available to markers for performing their roles. Figure 3 shows the aspects of infrastructure and resources throughout the appreciative inquiry process.

### **Figure 3**

*Appreciative inquiry of infrastructure and resources*



*What works well?* Markers expressed appreciation for the training currently available and the flexibility of the process. At the pre-marking stage one marker stated, “The markers meetings where we mark one assignment together to calibrate our expectations of what a pass or fail etc. looks like is very helpful.” During the process of marking, a marker mentioned the value of “Very clear marking criteria / rubrics (e.g., how many points allocated to what sections).” This marker also commented positively on the approachability of the training staff. Another marker acknowledged current benefits of time flexibility by mentioning “Being able to choose my hours.”

*What would be ideal?* Markers described the ideal as having more time, easier LMS navigation and greater flexibility. One marker stated, “Having more time to mark each piece of work. Make Canvas less complicated. [...] Having a better system to give anonymous feedback than the current one.” There was also mention of having more communication and flexibility around workload as turnaround times were tight when marking across different courses. One marker mentioned, “More flexibility on workload, more information regarding dates and timelines for new markers as it was suddenly thrust upon us and I hadn't realised that my two allocated module assessments overlapped.”

*What needs to be done?* Markers aspired to have more one-on-one or small group support with “More marking supervisors.” A suggestion by another marker was “Having a manual of instructions that can be saved to our computer.” Another marker hoped to have “a better system to give anonymous feedback than the current one [Canvas].” Finally, one marker stated the need for “More flexibility on workload [...] the workload was too intense.” Markers asked staff to provide “marking criteria that is specific enough and allows for consistency between markers which is fair on students.” They also advised the staff to properly estimate the marking time by asking for allocating the “necessary time for marking.” Additionally, markers have recommended setting LMS to be marker

friendly by suggesting to “tweak the current Canvas platform [...] to make it quicker to mark.” Although course staff cannot set the pay rate, they can advocate for a pay raise for markers, as many requested “improving the rate of pay.” We noticed this contradiction between marker training being described as working well but also some markers indicating room for improvement. This may have occurred owing to varying training practices between courses.

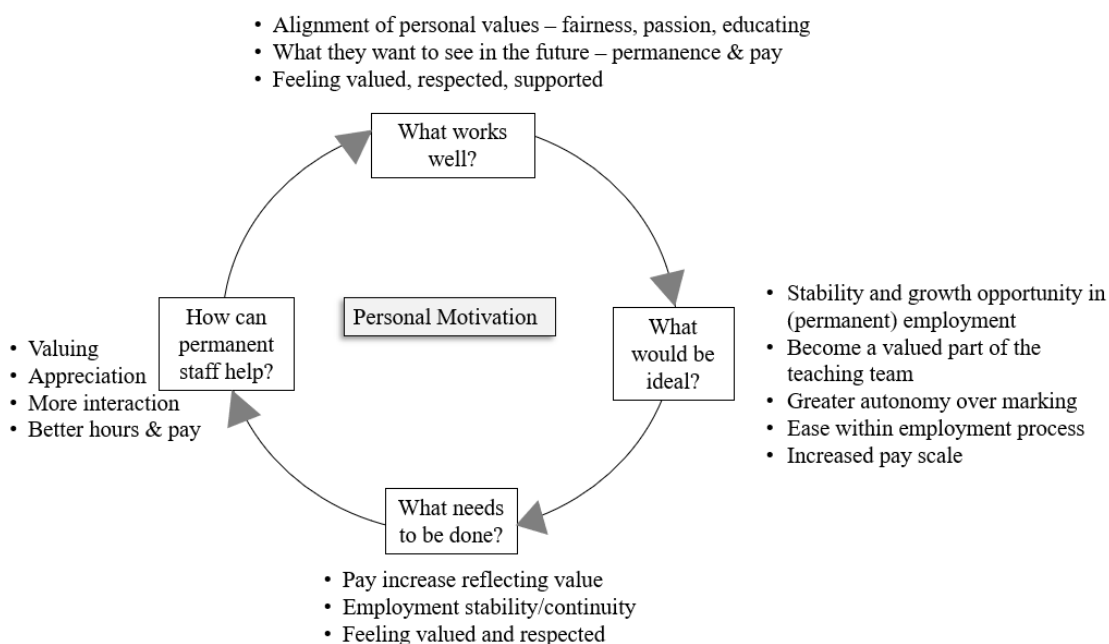
*How can staff help?* Most comments related to pay, which we can only advocate for. However, one marker mentioned, “more interaction with their team of markers, appreciate we are individual humans with previous experience (or some with no experience).” Based on these findings we chose to include a feedback process for markers to report on their experiences of marking (see session 3 of proposed activity).

### Theme 3: Personal motivation

Personal motivation included emotional aspects of current or future practices. Figure 4 shows the aspects of personal motivation throughout the appreciative inquiry process.

**Figure 4**

*Appreciative inquiry of personal motivation*



*What works well.* The qualitative responses further highlight that markers associate positive emotions in their communications with the course team during training workshops and through shared resources. As one marker wrote, “Interacting with the teaching staff and other markers and providing constructive feedback to students keeps me going.” This shows the human side of marking in which markers sought quality communications with other staff and the students.

*What would be ideal?* Responses showed hope such as, “Markers can also get moving up annually in the pay scale like academic staff and not always regarded as casual staff with no fixed hours which makes the employment unstable.” Aspirations included the desire “to become part of the teaching team” which indicates motivation for social connection and respect associated with being a teacher.

*What needs to be done?* Markers requested greater valuing of them as people. One marker stated, “Casual markers need to be valued more as a knowledgeable individual, rather than treated like a person who is meeting a quota necessary for marking x number of scripts.” One of the markers strongly lamented that, “The teaching assistant title does not reflect our contribution well [...] our names are not even listed as staff on the website. [...] We also don't qualify for most (almost all) of the staff benefits, we get a lesser gym discount than permanent staff members [...]. There doesn't appear to be a lot of thanks for the overtime that is required not just for marking but also for reading through marking instructions and examples beforehand.”

*How can AUT staff help?* Markers suggested staff advocate for increased appreciation and benefits, especially experienced markers. For example, a “more individualised package, or some form of 'promotion/pay increments' if achieve certain competencies”, and “Better to offer the experienced marker a long-term contract”. General improvements for conditions included, “More hours on a regular basis”. Based on these findings, we chose to include formal recognition of marking skill, giving feedback from staff and students, and offering them a space to share their experiences.

## Discussion

This study responds to a previous call for higher education to systemically evaluate and reform provisions for support of their sessional workforce (Hitch, et al., 2018). Our findings agree with international research (Kanitkar et al., 2020), showing sessional staff need to be seen as an integral part of the higher education community as opposed to external assets. Thus, inclusivity and support require reforming the working culture to include greater focus on the values of respect (*pono*) and compassion (*aroha*) to include sessional staff as it shows integrity (*tika*). We found our sessional staff agreed with most of the selected standards of good practice at the department and individual levels as described in the Australian BLASST framework (BLASST, 2013). This reinforces the applicability of BLASST to the sessional staff at our school in Aotearoa/New Zealand.

We find that the use of appreciative inquiry strengthened this study as it enabled building stronger and more supportive relationships with sessional staff. Using a Qualtrics survey, while not on a large scale, and limited to individual and departmental levels, enabled us to gather evidence of sessional staff views, experiences, and hopes to inform policies and programme development. We now have specific action points to implement or discuss further in iterative cycles of development. Including the perspectives of our markers themselves is vital in informing policies and program development, and in making a persuasive case for change. In the following sections, we discuss the three themes of PD, infrastructure and resources, and personal motivation in relation to the BLASST framework generally and our context specifically.

### Professional Development

In the theme of PD at the individual level, sessional staff commented on the desire to take an active role in participating in PD opportunities (principles 1.4a, 1.4b, & 2.4b). The course staff conducts some PD in terms of the marking role. However, our proposal of conducting a feedback workshop where new markers, experienced markers, and course coordinators can network to unpack and develop grading processes in a community of practice format, holds greater promise for professional development within the marker role. Additionally, such a workshop has potential for PD leading to upskilling to mentors and moderators. This would positively influence chances for permanent employment as and when positions arise. We also recommend development opportunities such as invitations to meet staff and contribute to research projects within the department (see Appendix).

Within the BLAAST principles at the department level, in addition to the existing administrative and in-course-mentor support, sessional staff agreed with the principle of having an identified supervisor (1.3d). We divide our markers into groups to be supervised individually by a course staff leader or mentor. We recommend continuing this practice as we notice good communication between markers and their supervisors during the marking process. However, while the BLASST principle 1.3d recommends a supervisor for each casual staff member, in our case we found the role actioned by the course coordinator. This contains an inherent power imbalance which may make casual staff hesitate to express any concerns. Therefore, we recommend having an additional neutral supervisor who can be approached for further discussion around professional issues. We propose that the Head of Teaching and Learning, or similar role, conducts this work.

In terms of regular evaluations (principle 1.3f), markers receive feedback from their course supervisors throughout the grading process and can request to have their work cross-checked. However, this results in feedback time directed to some individuals who require considerably more feedback than others. Consequently, time was not invested in offering any systematised formal evaluation of markers' work at the end of the semester. Based on our findings we recommend a dual-feedback review process with our markers. The first process operates during the semester with ongoing moderation of markers' work and ends with a review using standardised criteria such as communication with staff, quality of feedback to students, timely completing of allocated work, and responsiveness to moderation feedback. This aligns with BLASST principle 1.3f by ensuring that staff engage in a formal review at the end of each semester. The second process of the dual feedback review aligns with BLASST principle 3.4a about markers having an opportunity to provide feedback on their marking experience. We can see the value in this through the comments made by markers such as the desire to manage marking times across many courses. Therefore, the recommended dual review process allows for greater alignment with both BLASST principles (1.3f and 3.4a) and has the potential to facilitate effective communications where markers can share their marking experience and staff can evaluate marking performance. Such a process may enhance respectful and supportive communication to increase the sense of belonging and commitment to provide quality of feedback to students. This fulfils institutional goals of meeting timelines and incorporating the values of *aroha*, *pono*, and *tika* in the co-development of sessional and permanent staff. Such a dual feedback review process could be of value to other institutions that aim to value and develop their sessional staff.



## Infrastructure and Resources

In the theme of infrastructure and resources, sessional staff comments aligned with the BLAAST framework in their desire for department level training that allows debriefing, planning, collaboration, and team building (principle 1.3c). While the markers appreciated the training meetings that provided information on marking processes and criteria, they wanted more opportunity to talk with a course coordinator individually and more time allocation for training meetings. We recommend in our proposed workshop to include a session where markers can provide feedback on the resources, experiences around marking processes, and sharing of ideas around improvement (see Appendix).

With respect to BLASST principle 1.3c, we recognised our pre-marking training meetings provided limited opportunities for markers to offer feedback around their experience of marking and how that might improve assessment design. Additionally, BLASST Principle 3.4a refers to markers having an opportunity to provide feedback on their marking experience. However, this is challenging at an individual level given our large number of markers (e.g., 15-45) in the core courses. Therefore, our recommendation of having a post-moderation meeting collectively with all the markers allows us to align better not only with BLASST principle 1.3c at the department level, but also principle 3.4a at the individual level. Such a post-moderation meeting will allow debriefing of markers' evaluations of the marking criteria and/or student responses to the assessment questions. Such collaborative debriefing feeds into planning the next iteration of the assessment and highlights where students need more support from teaching activities. These collaborative debriefing sessions can offer team building as we value and respect their knowledge and relationship with us.

Although our sessional staff agreed with BLASST principle 2.4a, that it was important to be provided with the opportunity to become involved in, and engage with, policy development, they asked for course leaders to advocate on their behalf for issues such as hourly pay rates. Therefore, we found that Principle 2.4a fails to acknowledge that even if an opportunity existed to engage with policy development, the vast chasm of power imbalance could make it a barrier for sessional staff to exercise their agency. This advocacy is progressing and has resulted in a recent pay rise. We recommend ongoing advocacy not only for remuneration that reflects the qualifications, but also other benefits permanent staff enjoy such as university gym memberships, vaccines, and inter-campus transport. At the school policy level, we can review our policies around provision of training and recognition to make them more systematic and formalised. At this level we are able to enact change PD and relational changes in a more responsive time frame.

## Personal Motivation

In alignment with the general Principle 3 of the BLASST standards, a key step for authors in this study was to understand ways to achieve 'long-term sustainability of quality learning and teaching' through recruiting and retaining good quality sessional staff and supporting them to develop as academic teachers (BLASST, 2013, p. 12). Previous research highlighted the importance of engaging in effective training support and productive communications with sessional staff to enhance job satisfaction and professional skills (Chen et al., 2016; Knott et al., 2015; Sutherland, 2002). The sessional staff in this study also voiced a desire for greater involvement and appreciation. In the

appreciative inquiry analysis, our findings highlight interpersonal factors such as trust, respect, a sense of belonging to an academic group and teamwork influence building successful partnerships with sessional staff (Jardi et al., 2022). Their call for being valued as knowledgeable individuals, rather than as marking assets resonates with Crimmins' (2016) findings around the invisibility of sessional staff and their expectations of respect and recognition of their experience. Our proposed workshop will address many areas of improvement. These respond to the call for formal and informal opportunities to address the academic development and recognition priorities of sessional staff (see Appendix). Such opportunities along with the ongoing weekly engagement with our markers would also enable increased recognition, inclusivity, and appreciation for sessional staff thereby enhancing engagement and motivation (Byers & Tani, 2014). Furthermore, this approach aligns with the university values of integrity (Tika), respect (Pono) and compassion (Aroha).

While our study identifies sessional staff wanting recognition and appreciation for their contributions, it was surprising to find substantial disagreement (nearly half) with BLASST principle 3.3c that sessional staff who provide good quality marking are offered longer-term contracts. Such a finding necessitates potential refining of the BLASST framework that was centrally developed and therefore broadly focussed, to local contexts addressing the diversity of cultures, processes and practices (Hamilton et al., 2013). Understanding the unique experiences of markers and attending to their just-in-time needs are important in maintaining a professional workforce of academic staff. This will enable them to successfully navigate the complexities of their day-to-day teaching and provide quality feedback to students (Anderson, 2007). Information shared in the conference proposed above may enable addressing this gap with this BLASST principle and the values of our sessional staff.

### **Limitations**

We acknowledge our low response rate of 23%, possibly reflects either sessional staff, 1) experiencing power imbalances, meaning they may hesitate to respond, or 2) they see their employment as a minor consideration in their lives, and therefore the survey response as unimportant. Furthermore, there may be some sample bias with all our participants rating themselves as at least "competent" on marking ability. Therefore, our findings are presented in the light of these potential biases. Nonetheless, the points raised are of value to the development of a more inclusive and respectful working environment for all stakeholders.

Our focus here was on the markers' experiences and views and not those of permanent staff. We are also at the coalface of sessional staff policy and its enactment, and we mark assessments too. In this study we have responded by reflecting on the voices of our markers. As we move forward, the relationship between us goes both ways and understanding our common and differing perspectives is required to build mutually rewarding experiences and quality of teaching and learning.

In addition to the development of our local workshop, we could build from the current study by including more sessional staff in our future rounds of research from diverse educational contexts locally and globally. This research can highlight global principles

that apply widely, and the type of adaptations required in different local contexts. Furthermore, we can use the proposed workshop as a starting point to track sessional staff development and satisfaction across semesters. These can lead to better working relationships and training to enhance the sense of belonging, quality of marking, and sessional staff retention in the industry of higher education.

## **Conclusion**

Sessional staff who engage in marking are a vital component of the teaching and learning experience for students and are important colleagues of permanent course staff. We sought to understand our markers better and design an activity to begin addressing their needs. Reflecting on our markers' views of the BLASST framework standards and their own experiences working with us helped identify positive areas and points for immediate improvement in our local context. We understand the neoliberal imperative for efficiency and productivity should not be at the expense of collegiality and care. We have focused on several possibilities for current implementation and invite permanent staff to consider a similar process in their local contexts. Future research could evaluate and share the results of these activities. Creating educational and socially inclusive environments for sessional staff will assist their contributions and recognition. This benefits the quality of teaching and learning and enriches our shared context. In Aotearoa/New Zealand we treasure the integration of *aroha*, *pono* and *tika* in relationships. All higher education institutions should be mindful of their local cultural values when developing policies and practice with sessional staff.

## **Conflict of Interest**

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare. The authors report artificial intelligence was not used to generate data or author this manuscript.

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## Appendix

This conference incorporates each theme of PD, infrastructure and resources, and personal motivation. Each session focuses on one theme with an activity that contributes to achieving the needs identified by markers. This event would enable us to also address the noted inconsistencies identified in our marker training practices.

### Proposed activity - Markers' one-day conference schedule

#### Set up

Book a room and set date. Construct and send session information. If funding is available, the lunch could be catered, otherwise a shared lunch is a cost-effective alternative.

#### **Session 1 (60 minutes): Enhancing Personal Motivation**

The motivation-enhancing session would enable markers to feel appreciated as well as part of the teaching team. Providing a platform where they can share their experiences and provide suggestions and recommendations would enable markers to feel as part of the teaching community, thereby enhancing their motivation. All shared feedback would be reflected upon by the course teams.

| Activity  | People          | Minutes |
|---|-----------------|---------|
| Thanking the markers for their efforts and time   | Course staff    | 10      |
| Sharing student feedback and future course plans  | Course staff    | 10      |
| Seeking marker experience on the course   | Staff & markers | 20      |
| Congratulating long-term markers and felicitate with experience certificates/other awards | Staff & markers | 15      |
| Seeking expression of interest for next semester  | Leader          | 5       |

#### -Morning tea-

#### **Session 2 (90 minutes): Professional Development**

Sessional staff have less access to professional connections and opportunities to develop academic portfolios (Hamilton, 2013). Sessional markers are a diverse group of people with different aspirations and some desire for permanent academic work (Bexley et al., 2013; Crawford & Germov, 2015; Knott et al., 2015). Some of our markers expressed an interest in academic progression and they could become involved in research publications to develop academic portfolios.

| Activity  | People          | Minutes     |
|---|-----------------|-------------|
| Social introductions                            | Staff & markers | 20          |
| Brief overview of research interests & projects | Staff           | 20 (2 each) |



Markers approach staff they are interested in working with. Staff & 45  
Those less interested in research can talk with each other. markers

|                 |        |   |
|-----------------|--------|---|
| Closing remarks | Leader | 5 |
|-----------------|--------|---|

### -Lunch break-

#### **Session 3 (60-90 minutes): Feedback on Infrastructure & Resources**

Consultations and debriefs after marking could be semi-structured to get feedback on aspects of concern for permanent staff and leave space open for markers to bring up any issues themselves. The markers can also form groups during the meeting and share good marking practice. This would enable course teams and sessional staff to learn from each other. This approach will underscore the collegial and reciprocal nature of the permanent-sessional staff relationship, concurring with the process of reciprocal partnership designed by Chester (2012) to ensure a “genuinely collegial exchange” (p. 96).

| Activity  | People          | Minutes           |
|---|-----------------|-------------------|
| <b>Set up:</b> Divide the sessional staff into groups (new and experienced markers + facilitator)   | Staff markers & | 5                 |
| Have 3 tables with A3 paper and pens  | Staff           |                   |
| <b>1. Resources</b> – Discuss usefulness of ppt, readings, recordings, model answers, communication channels (excel sheets, notes) etc.                     | Markers         | 15                |
| <b>2. Processes</b> – Rubric use, academic integrity, grade recording, LMS use, X-mark requests, pre-moderation approvals, recon feedback, marking timeline | Markers         | 15                |
| <b>3. Moderation</b> - quality and tone of feedback pre and post, channel (meeting, email),   | Markers         | 15                |
| <b>Presentation</b> – markers present each theme back to staff for discussion (or email if needed).   |                 | 15 (5 each theme) |
| <b>Closing</b>  | Staff           | 5                 |

### -Afternoon tea-

Final session is an evaluation form of open- and closed-questions about their experience of the workshop.