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Casualisation of the teaching workforce: implications for nursing education

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Abstract

Internationally, nursing faculty shortages have been reported and there is a potential for them to worsen into the next decade as existing faculty age. To, in part, address this issue, across disciplines there is clearly an international trend towards the increasing casualisation of the higher education workforce. Despite the potential impact of this two-tiered workforce structure, there has been limited examination of the discipline specific issues related to the employment of a growing number of sessional nursing staff. This paper provides a critical review of the literature related to the employment of sessional teachers in higher education. The paper advances the discourse around the role and implications of employing sessional teachers in undergraduate nursing schools. Recommendations for supporting sessional staff and further research are presented.

Keywords

nursing, implications, education, workforce, casualisation, teaching

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Casualisation of the teaching workforce: Implications for nursing education

Summary

Internationally, nursing faculty shortages have been reported and there is a potential for them to worsen into the next decade as existing faculty age. To, in part, address this issue, across disciplines there is clearly an international trend towards the increasing casualisation of the higher education workforce. Despite the potential impact of this two-tiered workforce structure, there has been limited examination of the discipline specific issues related to the employment of a growing number of sessional nursing staff. This paper provides a critical review of the literature related to the employment of sessional teachers in higher education. The paper advances the discourse around the role and implications of employing sessional teachers in undergraduate nursing schools. Recommendations for supporting sessional staff and further research are presented.

Key words: sessional staff; higher education; nursing education

Introduction

Increasing casualisation in the higher education workforce is a worldwide phenomenon (Bauder, 2006; Brendtro & Hegge, 2000; Herbert, Hannam, & Chalmers, 2002; Smith & Coombe, 2006). Employment practices have been impacted upon by reduced government funding, the diversification of students and their expectations, rapidly expanding educational technologies, and globalization that has opened the doors to international study (Herbert et al., 2002; Joiner & Bakalis, 2006; Percy et al., 2008). Over time, the operational requirements of universities have evolved (Percy et al., 2008) and the pressures of corporatization and flexibilization are increasingly impacting on the higher education sector (Bauder, 2006). In recent years there has been an increase in the numbers of vocational courses offered by university's and a range of flexible modes of course delivery have been introduced, including off-shore, blended and distance delivery modes (Percy et al., 2008; Salamonson & Lantz, 2005).

Nursing is but one practice discipline that has moved into the tertiary sector and contributed to the changing landscape of higher education (Andrew, Ferguson, Wilkie, Corcoran, & Simpson; Barrett, 2007; Sellers & Deans, 1999). This move has involved the

transition of nursing education from a service-orientated course to an academic discipline (McKenna & Wellard, 2004). In addition to the need for the development of tertiary level nursing curricula, this transition has also placed a strain on the nursing education workforce. Currently, there is a worldwide faculty shortage of nursing faculty (Council of Deans of Nursing and Midwifery (Australia & New Zealand), 2008; Shipman & Hooten, 2008). This shortage has developed out of the global dearth of nurses in general, the aging of current faculty, higher salaries for clinical nurses and the relatively small number of nurses undertaking doctoral programs (Brendtro & Hegge, 2000; deYoung, Bliss, & Tracy, 2002). These faculty shortages add to the already existing pressures within the sector to increase the number of sessional teaching staff employed within undergraduate nursing programs.

Study of the literature identifies the inconsistent use of terminology in relation to academic staff. This review will focus on sessional or casual teachers. By this we mean staff involved in teaching who do not hold a continuing or tenured position in a university, and who are paid on the basis of actual hours worked (Herbert et al., 2002; Percy et al., 2008). A limitation of the existing literature is that despite the important differences between the groups, staff employed on continuing fractional appointments are often grouped together with those on temporary or fixed-term contracts (Brown & Gold, 2007; Johnson; Landrum, 2009). Combining such disparate groups together potentially masks important differences in terms of job security, access to physical resources and social and professional contacts with other academic staff. Therefore, literature referring to part-time academic staff without clarification about the nature of the employment of the included staff has been excluded from this review.

The literature suggests that in both Australian (Coombe & Clancy, 2002; Kimber, 2003; Percy et al., 2008) and American (Bauder, 2006) higher education, nearly half of all teaching-related duties are undertaken by sessional staff. This encompasses the full range of tasks, from face-to-face teacher, to casual marker and unit designer / coordinator (Percy et al., 2008). Brendtro and Hedge (2000) report these generic findings to be also true of nursing course delivery. Omiecinski (2003) reports that the majority (88%) of sessional staff are employed for teaching purposes only. Jacobs (2004) demonstrates that the academic workforce has distinctive gender patterns. Canadian data, for example, illustrates that whilst the full-time academic workforce comprised 26% women, some 42% of the part-time workforce were female (Omiecinski, 2003).

The growing numbers of sessional staff has led to the formation of a two-tiered workforce. Kimber (2003) describes this as “the tenured core with security and good conditions and

the tenuous periphery with insecurity and poor conditions” (p. 41). Despite the expanding number of sessional teachers, there is a lack of accurate and comprehensive data about the numbers of sessional staff, and their employment conditions (Percy et al., 2008). Additionally, there is a paucity of published literature exploring the career aspirations, profile and experiences of sessional staff (Kimber, 2003). This absence of quality data has significant implications for policy making and the planning and development of quality improvement initiatives and risk management strategies (Kimber, 2003; Percy et al., 2008). In their analysis of policy and practices across Australian universities the RED Report (2008) found that “there is a lack of formal policy and procedure in relation to the employment and administrative support of sessional teachers...the ongoing management of sessional teachers is not well understood or articulated;....many sessional teachers continue to feel their contribution is undervalued” (p. 2). There is a real challenge for employers, unions and policy makers in terms of identifying how sessional staff fit into the tertiary environment and ensuring that they are not exploited (Percy et al., 2008).

Employment of Sessional Staff

Tertiary institutions have traditionally recruited sessional staff from the ranks of their postgraduate students with aspirations to enter academia or industry experts wanting to pass on their detailed knowledge of the profession (Kimber, 2003). However, the growing numbers of sessional staff are becoming an increasingly diverse group. Gappa & Leslie (1993) describe sessional staff as belonging to four categories; The first group is the *aspiring academics* who have recently completed a research higher degree program. Secondly, the *industry expert* maintains employments within the industry about which they teach whilst teaching. Next, the *career ender* is an individual near or at retirement age who seeks to remain in the workforce and gradually move towards retirement. The fourth group are the *freelancers* who take on a variety of part-time positions to support themselves and combine work and family responsibilities. Kimber (2003) argues that several additional groups can be seen in Australian universities and that these, and the categories put forth by Gappa & Leslie (1993), are not mutually exclusive.

There is limited literature that explores the career aspirations of sessional staff. Junor, Oxley, & Wallace (2001) identified that 50% of the participants in their Australian study had a desire for permanent full or part time employment. Similarly, Brown & Gold (2007) reported that only 20% of academics on non-standard contracts in UK universities would outright reject an offer of permanent employment, with the remainder willing to consider any offers.

Teaching Expertise

It becomes clear that sessional staff come to the role from diverse backgrounds (e.g. retired teacher with significant teaching experience, industry professional with high level practical skills, PhD student)(Coombe & Clancy, 2002; Herbert et al., 2002; Percy et al., 2008). It has been identified internationally that, on some occasions, sessional staff are not subject to the rigorous recruitment and selection processes faced in order to gain permanent positions, but rather can be employed on an 'ad hoc' basis associated with factors such as personal relationships and urgency of staff recruitment to 'fill the gaps' (DeYoung & Bliss, 1995; Herbert et al., 2002; Rothwell, 2002). This may result in some sessional staff being recruited who have significant knowledge of the discipline area in which they are employed, but limited or no knowledge of adult teaching and learning principles (Brendtro & Hegge, 2000; Coombe & Clancy, 2002). Despite the lack of formal teaching qualifications by many sessional staff, compulsory training prior to employment would likely be a disincentive to seeking employment in the sector (Rothwell, 2002). This creates significant challenges in terms of identifying those who require assistance in developing adequate teaching and learning skills and developing appropriate strategies to recognise their discipline expertise, yet provide education and training to enhance their teaching practice. In many institutions, sessional staff are marginalised in terms of their access to paid professional development (Rothwell, 2002). Although strategies likely need to be implemented to manage this at a local level (Percy et al., 2008), the development of basic standards across the sector may be helpful in setting benchmarks for quality teaching practice.

Characteristics of Sessional Staff

There is limited published literature describing the characteristics of sessional staff. Those investigations that have been undertaken report workforce profiles across disciplines, thus potentially hiding interdisciplinary differences. One study that does provide an overview of these issues in UK universities was published by Brown and Gold (2007). Before considering the findings of this study, however, it is important to understand that the 1300 academics who participated in this investigation included those employed on temporary (41%) and fixed-term (36%) contracts as well as permanent staff employed on a part-time basis (23%). In reality those employed part-time may be quite different to those employed on a temporary or fixed term basis, in terms of their perceived job security, access to resources and inclusion within the workplace. The gender of participants was predominately female (62%) both in the entire sample and within each institution. The

largest groups of participants were aged 35-44 years (29%), 45-54 years (29%) and under 35 years (16%). Despite popular perceptions about the casual workforce, only 40% participants had dependant children. Sixty-one percent participants had chosen their contractual status, with only 39% being compelled to accept this type of employment contract. One quarter of participants had a Bachelors degree as their highest educational qualification, with 14% having a PhD and 40% a Masters degree. However, 16% reported holding a professional qualification and 6% some other type of accreditation. Two-thirds (65%) participants had some other form of paid employment in addition to their academic role. Those with another job were most likely to be some type of health professional or work in the field of education. In terms of continuity of employment, 63% participants identified that they had had their contract renewed.

Participants demonstrated having mixed feelings about their current position, with widespread agreement with statements *'I can engage in a variety of occupations'* and *'No other type of contract was available'* and disagreement with the statements *'I earn more money with this type of contract'* and *'The contract enables me to avoid administrative duties'*.

In terms of control over their job, participants in Brown and Golds' (2007) study reported feeling the least control over pay (86% reported no control, 11% some control) and length of employment contract (70% reported no control, 17% some control). There was variation in the perceived degree of control across hour worked (28.5% none / 28% a lot), timetabling (29% none / 24% a lot) and training (39.5% none / 17% a lot). The perceived degree of control was demonstrated to be greater as participants rank increased. Professors and senior staff were more likely to exert greater control than those working in more junior roles.

Joiner & Bakalis (2006) surveyed 72 casual academics employed by eight schools within a single Australian university to explore antecedents of organisational commitment (response rate 28%). Participants in this investigation were predominately female (64%) and had completed an undergraduate degree (54%). Almost half (46%) participants reported that they were studying at the employing university, with 74% reporting the casual teaching as a second job. Findings of this study demonstrated that personal demographics, employment characteristics (support, role clarity and availability of resources), and the nature of the employment (studying at same institution, second job) all impacted upon the individuals organisational commitment (Joiner & Bakalis, 2006).

Cost-Effectiveness

Some authors have described the increase in sessional teachers as being a cost-effective method of program delivery (Coombe & Clancy, 2002; DeYoung & Bliss, 1995; Kimber, 2003; Moore & Trahan, 1998; Percy & Beaumont, 2008). Moore & Trahan (1998) assert that “by not providing employee benefits” (p. 776) to sessional staff, that would be provided for permanent employees, substantial cost savings can be achieved. Whilst the cost-effectiveness of sessional staff has not been clearly demonstrated in the literature, care needs to be taken to consider the many hidden costs of workforce casualisation. Such issues include the burden on permanent staff to develop course materials and provide supervision to sessional staff, the administrative burden of processing employment contracts, students’ reduced access to sessional staff compared to full-time staff and staff turnover related to feeling undervalued (Coombe & Clancy, 2002; Kimber, 2003; Percy & Beaumont, 2008).

Whilst calculations of staff FTE are often used to describe the workforce, such data can serve to actually hide the full picture of the staff profile. For example, the RED Report (2008) identified that 69 sessional staff spread across a multi-campus Australian institution accounted for 9.25 FTE whilst, in another institution, 62 sessional staff represented only 2.64 FTE (Percy et al., 2008). Calculations of FTE, therefore, can hide both the size of the sessional workforce and the associated supervisory load on permanent staff (Percy et al., 2008).

Access to Resources

Despite the growing number of sessional staff, Kimber (2003) identifies that many have difficulties accessing basic resources fundamental to their teaching, such as email/computer facilities, library, professional development, office space, office equipment (e.g. mailbox, telephone), library services / text books. Restrictions placed on access to such resources can subtly communicate a lack of organisational commitment to the sessional staff (Joiner & Bakalis, 2006).

Kimber (2003) describes sessional staff as being an “underclass”, who lack job security, have poor wages, inferior working conditions, few benefits and experience limited integration into the departments in which they work. In her study of British sessional staff, Rothwell (2002) identified that sessional staff were concerned about job security and lack of paid staff development. The pay and conditions of sessional staff are worse than full time staff, with few prospects for promotion and limited access to training (Rothwell, 2002).

Junor, Oxley, & Wallace (2001) identified areas in which sessional staff were dissatisfied, including; a lack of control over hours, days and times of work, increased workload, increased class sizes, lack of paid sick leave, limited advance notice of potential contracts / non-engagement and feelings of marginalisation, not included in decision making forums, insufficient constructive advice from supervisors regarding career options, lack of information about mandatory entitlements.

Assessment Grading

A key area in which there has been research interest in sessional academics is the grading practices of fulltime and sessional staff. In several studies sessional staff have been demonstrated to give higher grades than their full time colleagues (Fedler, Counts, & Stoner, 1989; Goldberg & Callahan, 1991). It is believed that sessional staff may be more lenient in order to improve students evaluations of their work and reduce the likelihood of complaints about their teaching (Moore & Trahan, 1998). The importance of evaluations and minimising complaints is highlighted when one considers that subsequent employment of the sessional staff member might be dependant upon such factors.

If we accept that sessional teachers may be responsible for varying degrees of grade inflation, the growth of sessional staff numbers has significant implications for assessment quality and student learning outcomes. Further research is required across institutions to explore the extent of this phenomenon. Such research needs to consider the prior teaching experience of various staff groups, variations in assessment practices between courses and the links between grading practices and student evaluations (Moore & Trahan, 1998).

Sessional Staff in Nursing

Currently, there is very limited literature that addresses the issues related to sessional staff in undergraduate nursing education. Most of the published literature that does exist in this area relates to staff involved in clinical practicum (de Guzman et al., 2007; Dickson, Walker, & Bourgeois, 2006; Duffy, Stuart, & Smith, 2008; Kelly, 2007; Williams, 1999), rather than the delivery of on-campus components of the curriculum. Whilst studies that have explored the transition from the role of nurse clinician to nurse academic may provide us with insights into some of the potential issues, this literature is also sparse (Dempsey, 2007; Hand, 2008; Siler & Kleiner, 2001).

The nature of nursing as a practise-based discipline means that nursing programs invariably encompass clinical practicum and laboratory simulation in addition to theoretical

components of the curriculum. Despite the complexity and the many challenges associated with teaching pre-registration nursing courses, nursing faculties often rely on a casualised workforce to staff their on-campus and clinical programs (Duffy et al., 2008). Although discussing part-time clinical teaching staff, Duffy et al. (2008) identifies similar concerns about the wider group of sessional staff that have been identified in previous literature. That is, that clinical expertise does not necessarily equate to teaching effectiveness. Indeed, the transition from clinician to educator requires the individual to engage with an completely different body of knowledge (Dempsey, 2007). Duffy et al. (2008) describes a reluctance by their part-time faculty to fail students and identifies that they are not always committed to essential aspects of their teaching role such as documenting student progress, attending meetings or engaging with educational technology. Such issues pose significant difficulties for tenured staff, who need to develop strategies to manage such issues within their programs.

From the perspective of the new faculty member, there are considerable challenges faced during the transition from clinician to academic. These challenges are portrayed in a metaphor by Anderson (2008) who reveals that transition experiences from clinician to academia are characterized by a sink or swim approach. Anderson (2008) describes the transitioning individual as often feeling largely overwhelmed and unsupported as they traverse the treacherous waters of the Sea of Academia. The sink or swim image conjured by Anderson (2008) is reflective of previous research that indicates support for sessional staff is less than optimal (Joiner & Bakalis, 2006; Kimber, 2003).

Hand (2008) presents a framework for a formal orientation program for new academics that was developed in the USA. Hand (2008) acknowledges that many clinical nurses may have difficulty adapting to an academic role, recognising that clinicians, despite their level of clinical competency, may not necessarily be equipped with the knowledge or skills for classroom teaching. The provision of teaching strategies, preceptorship in the class room and effective orientation programs are considered essential to the recruitment and retention of competent academics (Hand, 2008). Whilst Hand (2008) refers to the many challenges associated with recruiting new academics and provides strategies to enhance transition and performance in this group, the focus is primarily on teaching and learning. Yet the role of the nurse academic is far broader and encompasses not only teaching students how to provide nursing care, but also the intellectual work of nursing knowledge development (research)(Andrew et al., 2009; Schriener, 2007). Within the literature around sessional staff these broader academic roles remain largely ignored. With nursing striving to grow and develop as a profession, it is essential that rigorous research be undertaken in

this area to support the development of well rounded academic staff (Watson & Thompson, 2004). Without such faculty development there is the inherent danger that nursing as a discipline will revert back to the task orientated approach of the 1960s and 70s that it strove so hard to cast off (Andrew et al., 2009).

In a small qualitative study, Dempsey (2007) explored the experiences of Irish nurses who had undergone the transition from clinician to educator. Although these nurses had recently completed a formal education course, they felt largely ill-equipped to perform as nurse lecturers, and emphasised the role change from clinician to educator was initially difficult and stressful. Further negative aspects of their transition were associated with the heavy workload allocation and a lack of orientation to essential aspects of their role. These participants expressed the importance of collegial support throughout their transition and identified the need for effective mentorship to enhance the experiences and professional development as new academics (Dempsey, 2007). Similar difficulties with role transition from clinician to educator were identified by American participants in a study by Schriener (2007). Participants articulated a lack of orientation to the faculty and a knowledge deficit related to teaching strategies and preparation. Furthermore, participants described feeling devalued due to the disparity between the status they were assigned in the clinical area (that is, an expert) and how they were viewed in relation to faculty (that is, a novice)(Schriener, 2007). Whilst this nursing literature relates to clinical teachers or new faculty the findings demonstrate clear parallels with the broader body of literature related to sessional staff in higher education.

Discussion

Despite the paucity of literature that describes the profile of sessional teaching staff, particularly within the discipline of nursing, it is clear that individuals come to these roles with diverse teaching and professional experience. Rather than being a purely reactive strategy to fill teaching vacancies, the employment of sessional staff should be undertaken strategically, to enrich the staffing profile and enhance course delivery. The practice based nature of the nursing curriculum lends itself to seeking clinical experts to provide high quality learning opportunities in various course components. However, this has not been a strategy that has received much attention in the literature. Clinical experts and faculty members should be encouraged to work together to share knowledge and expertise in mentoring partnerships. Whilst clinicians could assist faculty to gain contemporary clinical expertise, faculty members could mentor clinicians to develop teaching expertise.

It is clear from the literature that currently, although there have been some successes at a local level, there have been limited formal attempts to integrate sessional teaching staff within higher education across the sector (Percy et al., 2008). To optimise the experience of sessional staff and maximise the value from these individuals, planned efforts need to be made to enhance the integration of sessional staff within the sector, individual institutions and the faculty. Such programs should, as described by Hand (2008), be considered essential and not an optional activity. Strategies to enhance integration require further investigation but could include; participation in social functions, facilitating contributions to curriculum development, specific remuneration for sessional staff to attend meetings, and active encouragement of sessional staff to participate in school activities. For new sessional staff, formal paid orientation should be provided to identify the expectations of sessional staff and discuss curriculum, administrative and resource issues. Continuing sessional staff also need to be formally updated on a regular basis regarding changes in curriculum, processes or expectations. Consideration also needs to be given to the provision of ongoing professional development opportunities and to providing a formal mentoring program for sessional staff, particularly those who identify themselves as aspiring academics.

Priorities for Further Research

Research into the general sessional workforce in higher education has elucidated a number of important issues that are important to the work of sessional staff in nursing education. However, given the somewhat unique practice-based nature of nursing as a discipline, there is a need for further research to explore the issues related to sessional staff teaching in undergraduate nursing programs. Further research needs to be conducted in a range of areas. Initially, there is an urgent need to develop a greater understanding of the workforce profile of nurse academics and the contribution of sessional staff to undergraduate nursing education. This will assist in providing a baseline from which to draw conclusions about a range of workforce issues including recruitment, retention and organizational commitment. Exploring the career aspirations of sessional staff, could be valuable in gaining a greater understanding of the motivations of sessional staff and their professional needs. Investigating the experiences of sessional staff and permanent faculty, in relation to working together to deliver undergraduate nursing programs, is vital to elucidating the issues faced by staff and can assist in developing strategies to improve work practices and enhance job satisfaction. Given the previously identified gap between clinical and teaching practice, further research needs to explore the

issues related to ensuring teaching quality amongst sessional staff and exploring ways to best utilise their expertise. Finally, although previous research has evaluated grading practices in written assessments between sessional and permanent staff (Moore & Trahan, 1998; Smith & Coombe, 2006), further research needs to be undertaken to explore grading practices in clinical skills assessment.

Conclusions

Casualisation of the academic workforce brings a range of challenges to the delivery of high quality tertiary education. To address these issues the sector needs to adopt proactive policies to manage the impact of the growing sessional workforce on teaching, learning and workload. Such policies need to be informed by rigorous research rather than anecdote and personal experience. Regardless of the nature of the policy or workforce model developed from these data, to be effective it needs to be embedded within the culture of the department within which sessional staff are employed to promote a systematic shift in the way in which sessional staff are engaged, supported and evaluated within the workplace.

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