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1-1-2010

### A comparative study of assessment grading and nursing students' perceptions of quality in sessional and tenured teachers

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Salamonson, Yenna; Halcomb, Elizabeth J.; Andrew, Sharon; Peters, Kathleen; and Jackson, Debra, "A comparative study of assessment grading and nursing students' perceptions of quality in sessional and tenured teachers" (2010). *Faculty of Science, Medicine and Health - Papers: part A*. 732.  
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# A comparative study of assessment grading and nursing students' perceptions of quality in sessional and tenured teachers

## Abstract

**Purpose:** Although the global nursing faculty shortage has led to increasing reliance upon sessional staff, limited research has explored the impact of these sessional staff on the quality of teaching in higher education. We aim to examine differences in (a) student satisfaction with sessional and tenured staff and (b) assessment scores awarded by sessional and tenured staff in students' written assignments. **Design:** A comparative study method was used. Participants were recruited from students enrolled in the three nursing practice subjects across the 3 years of the baccalaureate program in an Australian university during the second semester of 2008. **Methods:** This study collected student data via an online version of the Perceptions of Teaching and Course Satisfaction scale and compared the grades awarded by sessional and tenured academics for a written assessment in a single assignment in each of the nursing practice subjects. Of the 2,045 students enrolled in the nursing practice subjects across the 3 years of the bachelor of nursing (BN) program, 566 (28%) completed the online teaching and course satisfaction survey, and 1,972 assignment grades (96%) were available for analysis. **Findings:** Compared with tenured academics, sessional teachers received higher rating on students' perception on teaching satisfaction by students in Year 1 ( $p = .021$ ) and Year 2 ( $p = .002$ ), but not by students in Year 3 ( $p = .348$ ). Following the same trend, sessional teachers awarded higher assignment grades to students in Year 1 ( $p < .001$ ) and Year 2 ( $p < .001$ ) than tenured academics, with no significant disparity in grades awarded to students in Year 3. **Conclusions:** The higher grades awarded by sessional teachers to 1st- and 2nd-year students could be one explanation for why these teachers received higher student ratings than tenured teachers. Not discounting the possibility of grade inflation by sessional staff, it could be that tenured teachers have a higher expectation for the quality of students' work, and hence were more stringent in their assessment grading. Sessional teachers did not receive a higher rating from 3rd-year students, and this could be attributed to a change in student perception as they progress through the course, valuing a broader and more professional aspect of nursing knowledge, which is more likely to be the strength of tenured staff. **Clinical Relevance:** These findings highlight a need for the development and implementation of strategies to facilitate the inclusion of sessional staff teaching in a BN program, in order to prepare graduate nurses that are well-equipped for clinical practice.

## Keywords

grading, perceptions, assessment, tenured, study, comparative, students, teachers, nursing, quality, sessional

## Disciplines

Medicine and Health Sciences | Social and Behavioral Sciences

## Publication Details

Salamonson, Y., Halcomb, E. J., Andrew, S., Peters, K. & Jackson, D. (2010). A comparative study of assessment grading and nursing students' perceptions of quality in sessional and tenured teachers. *Journal of Nursing Scholarship*, 42 (4), 423-429.

## **Assessment grading and nursing students' perceptions of quality in sessional and tenured teachers: A comparative study**

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## **ABSTRACT**

**Purpose:** Although the global nursing faculty shortage has led to an increasing reliance upon sessional staff, limited research has explored the impact of these sessional staff on the quality of teaching in higher education. We aim to examine differences in: i) student ratings of their satisfaction with the teaching of sessional and tenured staff; and ii) assessment scores awarded by sessional and tenured staff in students' written assignments.

**Design:** A comparative study method was used. Participants were recruited from students enrolled in the nursing practice subjects across the three years of the baccalaureate program in an Australian university during second semester, 2008.

**Methods:** This study collected student data via an online version of the Perceptions of Teaching & Course Satisfaction scale and compared the grades awarded by sessional and tenured academics for a single written assessment in each of the nursing practice subjects. Of the 2045 students enrolled in the nursing practice subjects across the three years of the Bachelor of Nursing (BN) program, 566 (28%) completed the online teaching and course satisfaction survey, and 1972 (96%) of assignment grades were available for analysis.

**Findings:** Compared to tenured academics, sessional teachers received higher ratings on students' satisfaction with teaching satisfaction by students in Year 1 ( $P=0.021$ ) and Year 2 ( $P=0.002$ ), but not by students in Year 3 ( $P=0.348$ ). Following the same trend, sessional teachers awarded higher assignment grades to students in Year 1 ( $P<0.001$ ) and Year 2 ( $P<0.001$ ) than tenured academics, with no significant disparity in grades awarded to students in Year 3.

**Conclusions:** In nursing practice subjects, first and second year students were significantly more satisfied with sessional staff than tenured staff. Additionally, sessional staff awarded statistically significantly higher grades to students in years one and two compared to their tenured colleagues. Students in third year reported no significant difference in satisfaction between sessional and tenured staff. Although sessional staff generally awarded higher grades than tenured staff to third year students, this difference was not significant.

**Clinical Relevance:** These findings highlight a need for the development and implementation of strategies to facilitate the inclusion of sessional staff teaching in a BN program, in order to prepare graduate nurses that are well equipped for clinical practice.

## **KEYWORDS**

Sessional teachers; undergraduate nurse education; higher education; nursing workforce; teaching quality.

## **Introduction**

Economic rationalisation and higher educational reforms resulting in the corporatisation of universities have markedly changed the landscape of universities internationally over the last two decades (Australian Council for Educational Research, 2008; Cleary & Skaines, 2005). Internationally, one of the significant changes is an increase in the teaching-related activities being undertaken by sessional teaching staff (Anibas, Brenner, & Zorn, 2009; Percy et al., 2008). This growing number of sessional teachers, is accompanied by a decline in the number of tenured academics, particularly in practice-based disciplines such as nursing (Kovner, Fairchild, & Jacobson, 2006; Thedwall, 2008). Despite this increasing reliance on sessional teachers, the quality assurance process and policies to ensure students receive good quality teaching from sessional teaching staff is lagging in many tertiary institutions. Consequently teaching quality and institutional risk management could be compromised (Anibas et al., 2009; Christensen, 2008).

Individuals are recruited into sessional teaching positions from diverse backgrounds and with disparate motivations for undertaking these roles (Kimber, 2003). The literature describes the recruitment of sessional staff as being often less rigorous than the processes used for recruitment to permanent positions (Herbert, Hannam, & Chalmers, 2002; Rothwell, 2002; XXXX, 2010). Factors such as the urgency to staff scheduled classes and personal networks and relationships have been identified to impact on selection processes for sessional teachers (Herbert et al., 2002; Rothwell, 2002). Whilst some sessional teachers may have prior teaching experience or qualifications, others may not; instead bringing a wealth have industry expertise and practical skills but limited understanding of teaching and learning principles (Anibas et

al., 2009; Herbert et al., 2002; Percy & Beaumont, 2008; XXXX, 2010). At the same time, these sessional teachers are often marginalised in terms of their access to professional development programs (Rothwell, 2002).

Though the impact of this skill mix on the quality of teaching and learning in the tertiary sector is poorly understood (YYYY, 2010), concerns have been raised in the literature about the perceived poor commitment, and lack of preparation, appropriate qualifications and performance management that surround the employment of sessional staff (Anibas et al., 2009; Percy & Beaumont, 2008; YYYY, 2010). Furthermore, high numbers of sessional staff within a Faculty has been associated with poorer teaching quality, especially for those institutions failing to make professional development available, or evaluate teaching performance of sessional staff (Jensen & Morgan, 2009).

While poor teaching can occur in both tenured and sessional staff, tenured staff are more likely to be scrutinised for teaching quality, and held accountable for perceived poor teaching and low student satisfaction, including poor student outcomes (Jensen & Morgan, 2009; Percy & Beaumont, 2008). Factors contributing to teaching quality such as experience, appropriate qualifications and collegial support and access to ongoing professional development are more likely to be more closely monitored within tenured faculty (Jensen & Morgan, 2009).

Many universities require tenured staff to regularly engage in monitoring processes through mechanisms such as formal student evaluations for curriculum content, implementation and teaching quality. Thus, tenured staff are held more accountable for the evaluation of their teaching and the performance of their students. However, while sessional staff are also able to receive student feedback on their teaching if they so choose, there is no obligation for them to do so. Additionally, the short-term nature of

their employment means that their term of employment is often concluded before findings of teaching evaluations are made available. There is still relatively little known about the impact of increasing numbers of sessional staff on the quality of teaching and learning. Some studies have demonstrated that sessional staff award higher grades than tenured academics (Cavanaugh, 2006; Kezim, Pariseau, & Quinn, 2005). Cavanaugh (Cavanaugh, 2006) argue that sessional staff are more lenient in their marking of assessments as a strategy to reduce the potential for complaints about their teaching and improve student evaluations, although this hypothesis is not always supported (Landrum, 2009). Given the lack of job security afforded by the short term contracts that often characterise sessional employment it is understandable that sessional staff may experience some anxiety about ongoing prospects for work (Kimber, 2003). Few studies, however, have explored the relationship between staff employment status and grading practices or student satisfaction.

For the purpose of this study, sessional staff were defined as individuals who provided face-to-face classroom and clinical laboratory teaching in the undergraduate nursing program, employed on an hourly basis, or short-term contract of less than 12-month duration (XXXX, 2010). The aims of this study were to examine differences in: i) student ratings of their satisfaction with the teaching of sessional and tenured staff ; and ii) assessment scores awarded by sessional and tenured staff across the three years of an undergraduate nursing program in a single Australian university.

## **Methods**

### ***Design and setting***

A multi-method study was undertaken with a convenience sample of students enrolled in the nursing practice subjects within the undergraduate Bachelor of Nursing (BN)

program at a single Australian university during the second semester of 2008. This work was undertaken as part of a larger study that sought to explore the impact of sessional staff teaching with the undergraduate program (AAAA; XXXX, 2010; YYYY, 2010; ZZZZZ). This university offers the undergraduate Bachelor of Nursing (BN) program across multiple campuses with approximately 2,700 students enrolled across the three years. During the semester when the study was conducted, there were approximately 60 full-time equivalent tenured and 30 sessional teaching staff employed with the nursing school.

## **2.2 Participants**

We surveyed nursing students in their second, fourth and sixth semesters of their BN program between September-November 2008. Nursing practice subjects included theoretical content about the fundamentals of nursing. These subjects were selected as the focus of this study due to the high proportion of sessional teachers and the consistent assessment patterns across subjects. All students enrolled in these subjects across the three-years of the BN program were invited to participate in the study.

## **2.3 Data collection tools**

Two concurrent methods of quantitative data collection comprised this study. The first type of data collected was students' perception of teaching and course satisfaction. Students were invited to participate in an online survey using the 'Perceptions of Teaching and Course Satisfaction (PTCS) scale, the same measure was used in The First Year Experience in Australian Universities report by Krause, Hartley, James & McInnis (Krause, Hartley, James, & McInnis, 2005) to enable benchmarking of the findings our study with this report. The PTCS scale is a 12-item measure, participants were asked to respond to statements relating teaching satisfaction (e.g. *'My tutor is good at explaining*

things') or relating to course satisfaction (e.g. '*I am finding this unit intellectually stimulating*'). The response format for each item ranged from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 5 (*strongly disagree*). The items were reversed scored, for higher scores to reflect higher levels of teaching or course satisfaction. Potential scores of the PTCS scale range from 12 to 60. The second type of data collected was students' written assessment scores. These assignment scores were matched to the staff member who marked the students' assignment. According to the findings of Krause et al. (2009), the internal consistency of the 9-item 'Teaching Satisfaction' subscale was 0.88 and the internal consistency of 3-item 'Course Satisfaction' subscale was 0.81. We selected the PTCS tool, which assessed both teaching and course satisfaction because this tool has been widely used in national student surveys in Australia.

The study took place during the second semester (July-December) in 2008. Ethical approval was obtained from the University Human Research Ethics Committee prior to the commencement of the data collection. Owing to the potentially sensitive nature of the data, confidentiality was maintained by de-identifying the names of both students and teaching staff prior to data analysis.

## **2.4 Procedure and Response Rates**

Students were informed and invited to participate in this study through the e-learning site that all students who were enrolled in the subject were expected to visit, at least on a weekly basis. Academic staff were also informed about the study by email from the research team. Students' surveys were uploaded for 4 weeks on the e-learning site of each nursing practice subject. In addition to the PTCS scale, students were also asked to identify their tutorial class to link this information so as to permit identification of the tutor as a permanent or sessional appointee. At the third week following the opening of

the online survey, students were reminded to participate in the study using a text banner on the e-learning site. At the same time, students' written assessment scores, matched to the staff member who marked the assignment were also collected. All these assessment items require the academic staff to be well-versed in the assignment topic and rely on them to make subjective judgement on the quality of students' work. Staff and students' names were removed and replaced with a study code. The assignment marker was coded into two categories: sessional or tenured teaching staff, by an academic not associated with the study.

Of the 2045 students who were enrolled in one of the three nursing practice subjects, 566 (28%) of students completed the online survey related to their perception of teaching and course satisfaction. At the end of the semester, a total of 1972 (96% of students enrolled) assignment scores were available for data analysis. The results of the other 4% were not available due to non-submission of assignment due discontinuation in the subject or approved special consideration (e.g. misadventure, sickness) for a deferred submission.

### ***Data analysis***

We used the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 17.0.1 for all statistical analyses. The psychometric properties of the PTCS scale were examined using principal component analysis with oblique rotation. Using scree plot, the number of component was determined and Cronbach's alpha of the total scale and subscales was calculated for internal consistency. To assess for differences between sessional and tenured staff in teaching and course satisfaction, as well as assignment marks awarded, the Mann-Whitney *U* test was used as none of these continuous variables were normally distributed.

Using G\*Power 3.1.1 program (Faul, Erdfelder, Lang, & Buchner, 2007), post hoc power analysis for sample size calculation based on Cohen's method of small effect size (0.3) indicated that the current sample size for the online survey had a power of more than 0.92, two-side *P* value of 0.05.

## **Results**

### ***Sample characteristics***

A total of 2045 students were enrolled in one of the three nursing practice subjects across the three year of the BN program, ranging from 758 in Year 1 to 625 in Year 3 (Table 1). The number of teaching staff in each subject ranged from 10 to 16. More than half of teaching sessions across the three years were staffed by sessional teachers, ranging from 63% to 80% of total contact hours in these subjects. Of the total 566 (28% of total students enrolled) online survey completed, surveys related to sessional teachers ranged from 42% to 87% (Table 1). Of the 1972 (96% of total students enrolled) assignment scores available for analysis, 57% to 87% of these assignments were marked by sessional staff.

**\*\*INSERT TABLE 1 HERE\*\***

### ***Validity and Reliability of the PTCS scale***

The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure of sampling adequacy was 0.95 and the Bartlett's test of sphericity yielded a Chi-Square result of 5423.75,  $P < 0.001$  indicating that the 12-item PTCS was factorable. Two unrotated components, accounting for 73% of total cumulative variance, the first factor '*Teaching Satisfaction*' with a factor loading ranging from 0.51 to 0.92 and the second factor '*Course Satisfaction*' with a factor loading ranging from 0.82 to 0.97. The Cronbach's alpha was 0.95 for the total 12-item scale,

0.94 for the 9-item '*Teaching Satisfaction*' subscale and 0.89 for the 3-item '*Course Satisfaction*' subscale, indicating high internal consistency.

### ***Comparison of students' rating of sessional and tenured teachers***

Of the 566 teaching evaluations that were completed by students, 339 (60%) related to sessional teachers and 227 (40%) evaluated satisfaction with tenured staff. Students' perception of good teaching as indicated by the '*Teaching Satisfaction*' subscale was high (mean: 36.4; *SD*: 7.6; range: 9 to 45). Overall there was no significant difference between students' perception of good teaching between sessional (mean: 36.9, *SD*: 7.5) and tenured (mean: 35.7, *SD*: 8.1) teachers ( $P=0.057$ ). However, subgroup analysis revealed that although there were no difference in student ratings of teaching satisfaction in Year 3 ( $P=0.348$ ), sessional teachers were rated significantly higher by both Year 1 ( $P=0.021$ ) and Year 2 ( $P=0.002$ ) students (Figure 1). Overall, there was no statistical difference in course satisfaction scores between students who were taught by sessional or tenured staff ( $P=0.598$ ). Subgroup analyses by years of study also did not reveal any statistical group differences in course satisfaction ratings between student groups who were taught by sessional or tenured staff.

\*\*\*INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE\*\*\*

### ***Comparison of grades awarded by sessional and tenure teachers***

Of the 1972 assessment grades available for analysis, 1346 (68%) were marked by sessional teachers and 626 (32%) by tenured teachers. The overall mean assignment score was 59.1% (*SD*: 12.2; range: 6 to 94). Sessional teachers were more likely to award higher assignment marks (mean: 60.1, *SD*: 11.8) compared to tenured teachers (mean: 57.1, *SD*: 12.8) ( $P<0.001$ ). Subgroup analysis revealed that this trend of statistical significant higher grades awarded by sessional staff persisted in Year 1 ( $P<0.001$ ) and

Year 2 ( $P < 0.001$ ). In the Year 3 group, although sessional teachers continued to award higher grades than tenured teachers, this gap was non-significant (Figure 2).

\*\*\*INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE\*\*\*

## Discussion

The factor structures of the PTCS scale uncovered in this study to assess students' perception of teaching satisfaction and the internal consistency of the total scale and subscales align with the values reported by Krause et al. (2005), support the validity and reliability of this scale for the study setting. In addition, the levels of internal consistency of both the 'Teaching Satisfaction' and 'Course Satisfaction' subscales (Cronbach's alpha: 0.94 to 0.89 respectively) in this study are higher than those reported by Krause et al. (2005), suggesting greater scale reliability in this study sample.

The limitations of this study are predominately related to the sample size and the single site used. Despite 566 students completing the PTCS, this represented only an overall 28% response rate. Given the ethical issues around identification of individual staff, demographic information such as years of teaching experience, and qualifications that was collected in other components of this study were not matched to these study data. Therefore, there was a degree of heterogeneity of sessional and tenured teaching staff as we were unable to control for demographic variables. Further studies should investigate way of addressing this limitation. The results, however, suggest that further work should be undertaken to explore the impact of sessional staff on student satisfaction and assessment grading within undergraduate nursing programs.

Although there was no overall difference in students' perception of teaching satisfaction using the PTCS scale, closer examination using subgroup analysis of students' ratings by

year revealed higher ratings of sessional teachers by both Years 1 and 2 nursing students, but non-significant difference by Year 3 students. This finding supports that of Landrum (Landrum, 2009), who maintained that sessional teachers often received equal or superior student evaluations to their tenured counterparts. One explanation for the significantly higher levels of teaching satisfaction for sessional staff teaching in the first and second year of the BN program could be the nature of the subject in which we conducted our study. In a practice discipline such as nursing, sessional staff are more likely than tenured staff to hold concurrent employment in the health industry, which enables them to maintain clinical currency, an important characteristic when teaching in a nursing practice subject (XXXX, 2010).

Consistent with previous studies in other disciplines, this study revealed that sessional teachers in undergraduate nursing were more likely to award higher assignment grades compared to tenured teachers (Cavanaugh, 2006; Kezim et al., 2005). One possible explanation for this discrepancy is the inexperience of sessional staff, who may award higher grades as they are not skilled at differentiating between work of variable quality. Interestingly, the standard deviation of marks in this study for sessional and tenured staff was very similar. This indicates that both sessional and tenured staff are awarding a range of marks, however, the sessional staff are starting at a different point. Smith and Coombe (2006) described that whilst tenured staff were more concerned about being able to defend their marking decisions to fit into the university assessment systems, sessional staff were concerned about what students thought about them and their comments.

The second explanation could be that sessional staff are more enthusiastic and vibrant than their tenured colleagues and that students may actually learn more in their classes.

From other aspects of our study it was apparent that sessional teachers may identify more strongly with students than tenured faculty (XXXX, 2010). This may lead to them to be more lenient when grading students' assignments.

The final explanation for grade inflation is the notion of awarding higher grades in an attempt to gain more favourable student evaluations and fewer student complaints (Cavanaugh, 2006; Kezim et al., 2005). For sessional staff, positive evaluations, high student pass rates and low numbers of negative student comments can impact on their continued employment (YYYY, 2010). The finding that those students who had received significantly higher assignment grades from sessional staff were also those who were reported being significantly more satisfied with teaching quality supports this assertion. However, the value of student evaluations to tenured staff should not be discounted. The teaching performance of tenured academics for purposes of performance appraisal and promotion is all too often measured by student evaluation, and not related to what students learned (Clayson, 2009).

## **Conclusions**

This paper has provided a comparison of students' satisfaction with sessional and tenured teachers and examined how assessment marking in an undergraduate nursing course may impact on this satisfaction. While students have provided positive evaluations of sessional staff, this has been accompanied by significant grade inflation. In light of the increasing dependence on sessional staff within undergraduate nursing programs, and given the findings of this and other investigations in this area, there is a need for the development and implementation of strategies to facilitate the inclusion of sessional staff teaching in a BN program, in order to best utilise their experience while maintaining equivalence in quality of teaching and marking, between sessional and

tenured staff. Additionally, the development of clear strategies to do this has the potential to optimise student satisfaction, whilst maintaining academic rigour.

## **Clinical Resources**

- Website for Australian casual and sessional academics  
<http://www.unicasual.com.au/>
- University World News report on casualisation of the academic workforce  
<http://www.universityworldnews.com/article.php?story=20100205110147448>
- Better pay and conditions for casual and sessional academics  
<http://www.ouruniversitiesmatter.com.au/2008/07/better-pay-and-conditions-for-casual-and-sessional-academics/>
- Assuring quality in the casualisation of teaching, learning and assessment:  
Towards best practice for the First Year Experience.  
<http://ultibase.rmit.edu.au/Articles/march03/kift1.htm>

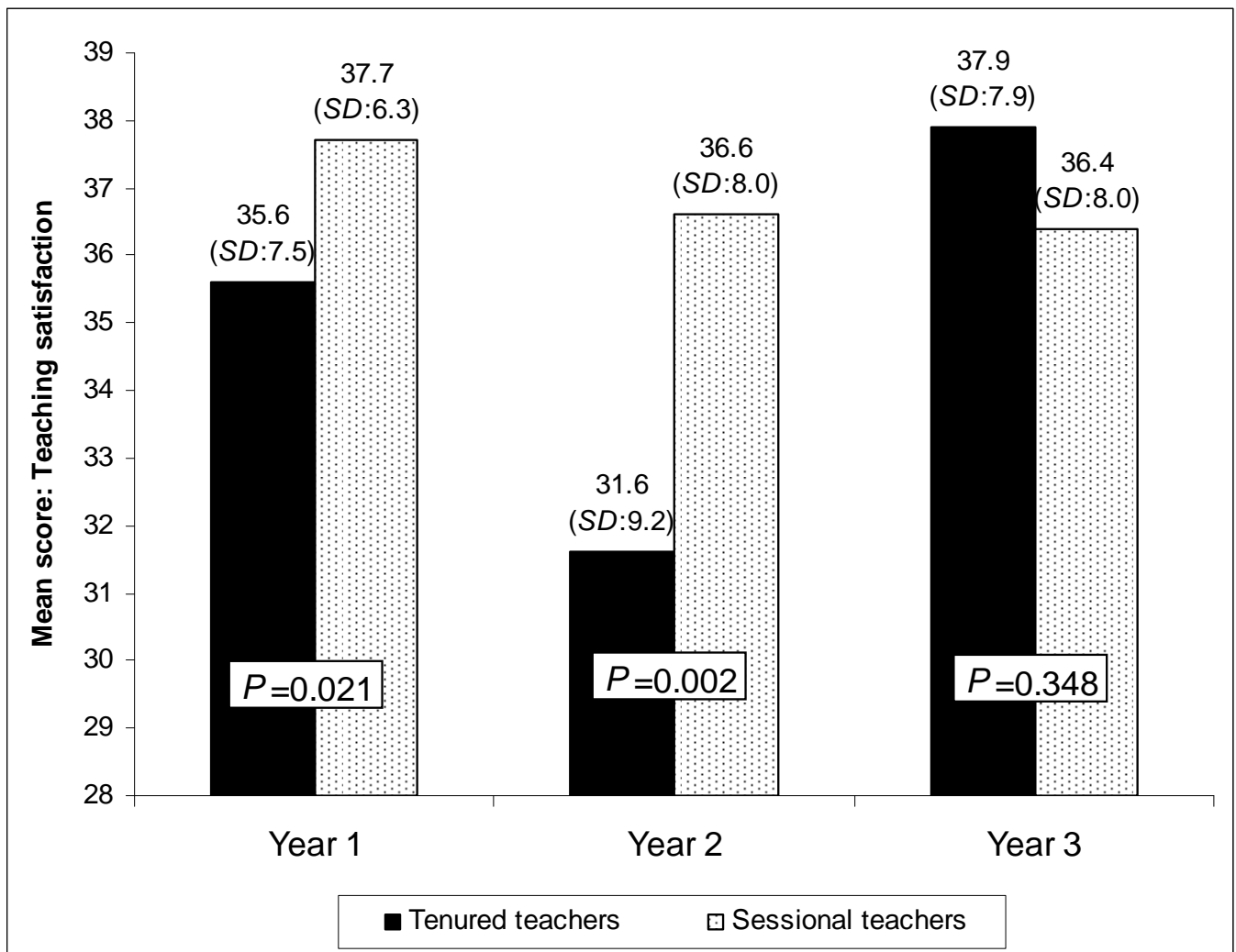
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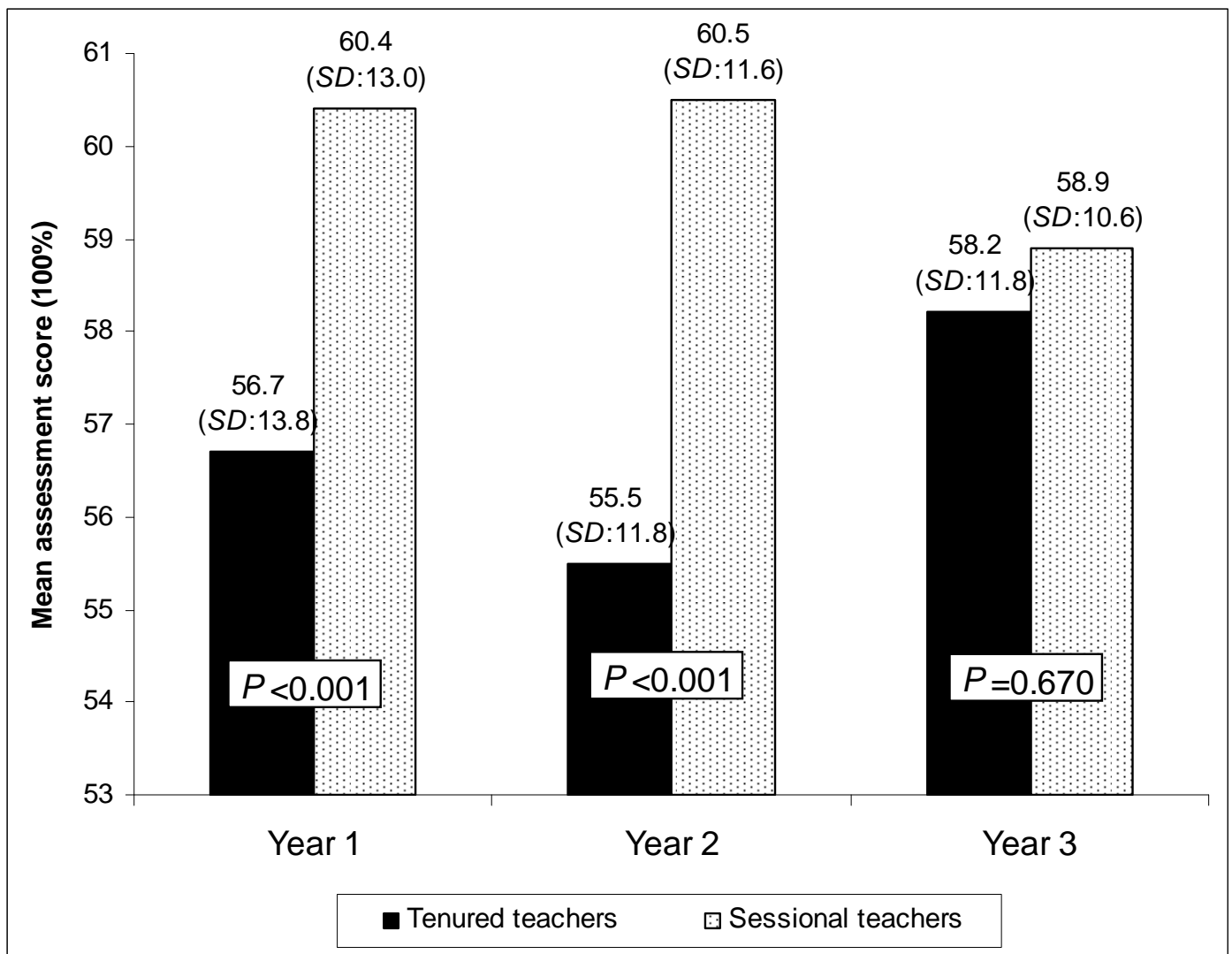
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**Figure 1 Students' rating of teaching satisfaction across the three years of the nursing program: Comparison between sessional and tenured teachers**



**Figure 2 Comparison of assessment scores awarded by tenured and sessional teachers across the three years of the nursing program**

**Table 1: Percentage of sessional staff teaching in the nursing practice subjects, students' ratings of received and assignments marked**

	<u>Nursing practice subject</u>		<u>Sessional Teaching Staff</u>		
	Students enrolled	Total staff	Teaching subject	Online ratings received	Assignments marked
<b>Year 1</b>	758	16	63%	42%	57%
<b>Year 2</b>	662	10	80%	87%	87%
<b>Year 3</b>	625	11	64%	44%	61%
<b>Overall total/ average</b>	<b>2045</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>68%</b>	<b>60%</b>	<b>68%</b>