

# SESSIONAL ACADEMIC SUCCESS: THE QUT LAW SCHOOL EXPERIENCE

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## I INTRODUCTION

The literature tells us that across the university sector, both in Australia and overseas, approximately half of face-to-face teaching is undertaken by sessional academics.<sup>1</sup> Sessional academics are defined as ‘teachers, including any higher education instructors, not in tenured or permanent positions, and employed on an hourly or honorary basis.’<sup>2</sup> Sessional academics are an important part of the provision of legal education in higher education, and many institutions rely to a large extent on their sessional academics to deliver the teaching program, especially in the first year. This is particularly relevant to law schools, as many sessional academics are legal practitioners rather than higher degree research students; as a cohort their needs may be different from those of sessional academics in other schools.<sup>3</sup> Therefore it is important for both the staff and the student experience, as well as for attainment of learning outcomes, that consideration be given to the professional development and training of sessional academics:<sup>4</sup>

The links between teaching quality, student outcomes and a large casualised academic workforce are unexplored in the Australian context, although the recent American literature gives grounds for concern. This is not to suggest that casual academics are poor-quality teachers; rather, their conditions of employment appear to provide little basis for professional development and career advancement, and much cause for concern.<sup>5</sup>

The Queensland University of Technology (QUT) has more than 2000 sessional academics; in 2014 there are approximately 75 sessional academics in the Law School, teaching over 50 per cent of the undergraduate tutorials. It is important to professionally develop, train and support sessional academics to build confidence, improve retention rates and maximise teaching success.<sup>6</sup> This will ensure the best possible learning environment for students and attainment of learning outcomes.<sup>7</sup> The QUT Law School has been a participant in a university

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1 Colin Bryson, ‘Supporting sessional teaching staff in the UK — to what extent is there real progress?’ (2013) 10(3) *Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice* Article 2, 1; Robin May, Glenda Strachan and David Peetz, ‘Workforce development and renewal in Australian universities and the management of casual academic staff’ (2013) 10(3) *Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice* Article 3, 1; Marina Harvey, ‘Setting the standards for sessional staff: Quality learning and teaching’ (2013) 10(3) *Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice* Article 4, 1; Jill Cowley, ‘Confronting the reality of casualisation in Australia: valuing sessional staff in law schools’ (2010) 10(1) *Queensland University of Technology Law and Justice Journal* 27, 30.

2 Marina Harvey, ‘Setting the Standards’, above n 1, 1.

3 Jill Cowley, above n 1, 41.

4 Ibid 39.

5 Robin May, Glenda Strachan and David Peetz, above n 1, 20.

6 Graham Gibbs and Martin Coffey, ‘The Impact of Training of University Teachers on the Teaching Skills, the Approach to Teaching and the Approach to Learning of their Students’ (2004) 5 *Active Learning in Higher Education* 87, 98.

7 Jill Cowley, above n 1, 28.

pilot providing opportunities through the Sessional Academic Success (SAS) program for academic development, support and a sense of belonging for sessional academics.<sup>8</sup>

Over the last decade, government-funded projects have been investigating and publishing reports about the contribution of sessional academics to higher education, and highlighting issues such as recognition, enhancement, development, leadership and standards.<sup>9</sup> Reductions in government funding in conjunction with the increase in higher education participation—a result of government policy which has also resulted in an increase of socio-economic diversity amongst students—has only been made possible by sessional academics bearing the teaching burden.<sup>10</sup> The increased number of sessional academics, as well as the increased percentage of undergraduate tutorials being taken by sessional academics,<sup>11</sup> has resulted in concern about the quality of the student learning environment.<sup>12</sup> With the establishment of the Tertiary Education Quality Standards Agency (TEQSA), the government has demonstrated that assuring the quality of higher education is a priority. TEQSA has also identified that the ‘significantly high proportion of casual staff increases the risk of these staff not being appropriately supported and resourced to provide a continuity of support for students and is therefore a key risk in the higher education sector.’<sup>13</sup>

These projects have identified a number of gaps emerging in the support for sessional academics in the higher education sector:<sup>14</sup>

- Induction of sessional academics;
- Ongoing management and supervision of sessional academics;
- Moderation of assessment results;
- Professional development of sessional academics in an environment where sessional academics are generally not paid for attending sessions;
- Sessional academics continuing to feel undervalued; and
- Changes in the higher education sector — for example, flexible delivery, new technology, and Massive Online Open Courses.

This article will explain the SAS program which has been piloted in the QUT Law School and the initial outcomes, as well as report on the results of surveys and focus groups. The article will conclude with an analysis of the program, reflect on program challenges, and consider the effect of the program in relation to sessional academics, students and the Law School as a whole.

## II THE PROGRAM — SESSIONAL ACADEMIC SUCCESS

The SAS program was developed in early 2013, as an initiative of the Learning and Teaching Unit, to complement the existing QUT Academic Development Program<sup>15</sup> for sessional academics.

8 Jillian Hamilton, Michelle Fox and Mitchell McEwan, ‘Sessional Academic Success: A distributed framework for academic support and development’ (2013) 10(3) *Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice* Article 9, 7.

9 Alisa Percy et al, *RED Report: Recognition, Enhancement, Development: The contribution of sessional teachers to higher education* (2008) Australian Learning and Teaching Council <<http://www.olt.gov.au/resource-red-report-sessional-teachers-unsw-2008>>; Marina Harvey, *The blasst report: Benchmarking leadership and advancement of standards for sessional teaching* (2014) Office for Learning and Teaching <<http://www.olt.gov.au/project-building-leadership-sessional-staff-standards-framework-2011>>; Mary Heath et al, *Smart casual: towards excellence in sessional teaching in law: Final report* (2014) Office for Learning and Teaching <<http://www.olt.gov.au/resource-smart-casual-sessional-teaching-law>>.

10 Robin May, Glenda Strachan and David Peetz, above n 1, 1.

11 For example, increase of 15% from 1996 to 2005: see Alisa Percy et al, above n 9.

12 Marina Harvey, ‘Setting the Standards’, above n 1, 1.

13 Tertiary Education Quality Standards Agency, (2014) *Risk Assessment Framework*, 13 available to <[http://www.teqsa.gov.au/sites/default/files/publication-documents/TEQSARiskAssessFramework2014\\_0.pdf](http://www.teqsa.gov.au/sites/default/files/publication-documents/TEQSARiskAssessFramework2014_0.pdf)>.

14 Alisa Percy et al, above n 9; Geraldine Lefoe et al, Subject coordinators leading professional development for sessional staff final report (2011) Australian Learning and Teaching Council <<http://www.olt.gov.au/resource-subject-coordinators-leading-professional-development-sessional-staff-2011-0>>; Mary Heath et al, above n 9.

15 Existing Academic Development Programs for sessional staff include: AD1 Introduction to Learning and Teaching at QUT; AD2 Strategies for Student Success; AD3 Assessment, Feedback and Evaluation; and AD4 Strategies for Academic Success.

It was coordinated by the (then) Associate Director, Academic: Sessional Development.<sup>16</sup> The program was carried out by the Law School Sessional Academic Success School Facilitator<sup>17</sup> and two Sessional Academic Success Advisors (SASAs).<sup>18</sup> The role of SAS School Facilitator involved providing support, advice, championing and facilitation in the School, and was nominated by the Assistant Dean for Learning and Teaching.<sup>19</sup> The SAS School Facilitator, in consultation with the Associate Director, Academic: Sessional Development, selected the SASAs after a call for expressions of interest in the position. The selection criteria included experience and expertise, demonstrated support of peers, evidenced teaching innovation and initiative, and willingness to learn, develop leadership capacity, experiment and document outcomes. The project was not intended to duplicate or replace existing support structures, such as those provided by unit coordinators, schools and faculties, but to supplement them.

### *A Purpose of SAS*

The intention of the SAS program was ‘to enhance the capacity of students, sessional academics and the broader community of academics’<sup>20</sup> by facilitating ‘contextual, timely, needs-based support for QUT’s sessional academics’.<sup>21</sup> In particular, the role of the SASAs was to mentor and advise sessional staff, build upon local academic development and initiate community building with a view to creating or improving a ‘sense of belonging’. It was proposed that this be achieved through: welcomes and check-ins; face-to-face advice; online support; development of resources and guides; sessional-to-sessional training; peer feedback and mentoring; and community-building activities. The longer-term aim of the pilot was to evaluate approaches to building a sustainable, distributed model for supporting sessional staff at QUT. It also provided an opportunity for SASAs to develop leadership skills.

### *B SASA Training*

SASAs were trained and supported to ensure they were equipped to identify School-specific needs, address those needs and then undertake the necessary reporting. In particular, training included sessions designed to identify which sessional inquiries were within the scope of the program and establish avenues for referrals where inquiries were outside its scope, and to build upon existing interpersonal skills to ensure sessional inquiries were dealt with appropriately. Early in the pilot the School Facilitator and SASAs participated in a workshop led by the (then) Associate Director, Academic: Sessional Development. The workshop introduced the School Project Plan Workbook (‘the workbook’).<sup>22</sup> The workbook was divided into 11 steps, including needs analysis (step 3), defining objectives/evaluating (step 7), targeted communication (step 10) and evaluating success (step 11). The School Facilitator and SASAs completed the workbook to identify the parameters of the program. The team considered the core principles of communication following the guidelines provided in the workshop and determined that the needs analysis would take the form of an informal introductory email with open-ended questions relating to the needs of sessional academics. In turn, the needs analysis formed the basis of the implementation plan. The SASAs were otherwise supported by comprehensive project documentation including the ‘QUT Sessional Academic Success Advisor’s Guiding Principles, Advice and Question Guidebook’, and periodic meetings.

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16 Professor Jillian Hamilton is now the Director, Student Success and Retention, Chancellery, QUT.

17 Jennifer Yule, Director, Undergraduate Programs, Faculty of Law, QUT.

18 Justine van Winden and Rachel Hews, Sessional Academics, Faculty of Law, QUT.

19 Jillian Hamilton, Michelle Fox and Mitchell McEwan, above n 8, 8.

20 Sessional Academic Success School Facilitator — Description of Role.

21 Jillian Hamilton, Michelle Fox and Mitchell McEwan, above n 8, 8.

22 Sessional Academic Success Pilot, 2013, School Project Plan Workbook, Prof Jillian Hamilton, Associate Director, Academic: Sessional Development, Learning and Teaching Unit, Chancellery.

### *C Needs Analysis by Email Survey*

The email survey was undertaken to identify needs specifically relating to: support as a sessional academic; academic development (both development that engages teachers in learning and curriculum that engages students in learning); and community building (sense of belonging). Sessional academics were asked to provide responses to five questions, all of which required a written response. Questions were kept deliberately open to avoid pre-empting responses by, for example, providing multiple choice or pre-determined selections. The questions asked were:

- 1 What were your primary needs as a new sessional academic in the School of Law?
- 2 What are your primary needs as an ongoing sessional academic in the School of Law?
- 3 What key problems (if any) have you encountered?
- 4 Is there anything specific you would like the SASAs to do?
- 5 Would you be interested in taking part in a focus group with the SASAs to assist in identifying the needs of Sessional Academics?

The SASAs received 19 responses to this survey, which represented a quarter of the sessional academic cohort. Although this number is quite small, the recurring issues identified within the responses were consistent, suggesting those who did not reply may also relate to the same experiences and issues. One of the most significant issues raised by many respondents was the need for more training on teaching techniques and student engagement. Beyond training, the main needs identified included: difficulties accessing information and resources; orientation for new sessional academics; availability of mentors; and information on pathways to full-time employment. There were also a number of key problems encountered by sessional academics including feeling a sense of isolation, the amount of marking required, access to buildings, and receiving contracts and pay in a timely manner. This broad range of identified needs provided a meaningful starting place for the SASA initiatives.

### *D SASA Initiatives*

The SASA initiatives ranged from very minor, such as distributing chocolates mid-semester, to more significant initiatives such as holding sessional academic functions and the creation of an online 'Go-To' guide. The most significant initiatives are outlined below. The outcomes and effectiveness of each initiative are discussed later in this article.

#### *1 Sessional academic end of semester function*

At the end of Semester 2, 2013, the SASAs held a sessional academic end of semester function. This was a catered social event that included introductory games to 'get-to-know' others, an overview of the SAS program and a mini-professional development session on personal evaluation strategies. There were 20 attendees, representing about a quarter of the sessional cohort.

#### *2 Attendance at orientation*

During Semester 1, 2014, a SASA attended the Faculty of Law orientation for new staff which is offered before the commencement of first semester each year. The inclusion of SASAs in the pre-existing orientation session enabled sessional academics to gain a full appreciation of the SAS services and support available to them. All new sessional academics were invited to the orientation, and payment was provided. Twelve attended.

#### *3 The Broadcast*

An early initiative was the inclusion of a SASA section in the Broadcast: a Law School internal electronic newsletter distributed to staff throughout the year. Sessional academics were not previously included as recipients of the newsletter, and their inclusion was a simple but powerful means of connecting them to existing communication channels. The SASA section

of the Broadcast provided timely information to sessional academics on matters relating to frequently asked questions such as marking, information technology and administration of contracts. This publication is distributed to all sessional academics by email.

#### *4 Welcome back for sessional academics*

At the commencement of Semester 1, 2014, the SASA team organised an informal welcome back evening and invited both permanent and sessional staff to attend. In addition to the social aspects of the evening, the SASAs delivered a professional development session on implementing a tailored teacher survey. There were 19 attendees, representing about a quarter of the sessional academic cohort.

#### *5 Sessional Teaching and Reflection Showcase (STARS)*

In Semester 1, 2014, as part of the SASA program, the QUT Learning and Teaching Unit introduced the Sessional Teaching and Reflection Showcase (STARS). STARS was designed to celebrate and recognise excellence in teaching, and to showcase good teaching practice initiatives developed and used by sessional academics. The showcase was to include three-minute Pecha Kucha<sup>23</sup> presentations which might encompass: innovation within the framework of the sessional teaching context; ways of engaging students in learning; effective approaches to communication and teaching practice; and/or inspiration of peers/colleagues. Two Law School sessional academics were shortlisted for the showcase and competed in the grand final as two of 13 grand finalists from five faculties.<sup>24</sup>

#### *6 Law School Retreat*

In December 2013, SASAs presented at the Law School Retreat (attended by all Law School staff). The presentation was aimed both at providing feedback to, and seeking feedback from, members of the School. As a result of feedback from sessional academics and permanent staff, the SASAs developed a sessional academic checklist to be used by unit coordinators in consultation with sessional staff at the beginning of each semester. The checklist contained information for new sessional academics about the commitment required and about the way to mark assignments and exams, and sought to address issues raised in the focus group by including the issues as points of discussion in the checklist.

#### *7 Online 'Go-To' guide for sessional academics*

Using feedback both from sessional academics and from members of the Law School, the SASAs developed a Frequently Asked Questions or 'Go-To' guide, which has been added to the Faculty of Law intranet. This was in response to recurring issues or difficulties raised by sessional academics. The 'Go-To' guide, which can be accessed by the entire faculty, provides a centralised hub of sessional staff information in a way that complements (but does not duplicate) existing support.

#### *8 Email, phone and face-to-face support*

The most fundamental level of support provided by SASAs was by phone, email or face-to-face, in response to requests by sessional academics, both new and experienced. Issues raised ranged from clarification of contracts and pay to other more significant issues that affect teaching and learning. SASAs responded to between 40 and 50 requests for individual support.

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23 Pecha Kucha presentations are a type of PowerPoint presentation designed to make presentations concise by forcing the presenter to move from slide-to-slide at set intervals. Traditionally, the presentation took the form of 20 PowerPoint slides set to auto-advance every 20 seconds; the entire presentation would take 6 minutes and 40 seconds. See: Debi West, 'Presenting Pecha Kucha' (2011) 110(8) *School Arts* 8.

24 Faculties represented in the STARS Grand Final included: Science and Engineering; Creative Industries; Health; Business; and Law.



### 9 Posters, chocolates, bookmarks and a 'check-in' letter

When the SAS program commenced, the SASAs prepared a number of posters which included photos, contact details and services provided, and these were positioned in locations most likely to be seen by sessional academics. They also identified the SASA motto: *'If we can't help you, we'll find out who can'*. Mid-semester, as a gesture of 'fun' support, SASAs placed an envelope containing a SASA bookmark (again with photos, contact details and services provided), a short letter checking on the progress of the semester, and a Freddo Frog in the pigeon hole of every sessional academic.

## E Evaluation of Initiatives

The SASA initiatives appear to have been an effective starting point for meeting the needs of sessional academics, although the effectiveness of the SASAs communication strategy (developed as part of the workshop) is an area requiring further development. Functions such as those held at the beginning or end of semester provided an opportunity for community building and for sessional academics to engage in professional development through evaluating their teaching. SASA attendance at the Faculty of Law orientation session was also well received by sessional academics. Those who attended appreciated the opportunity to meet a peer and 'put a face to the name' of the SASAs. Throughout Semester 1, 2014, sessional academics who attended orientation used the services of the SASAs more frequently than those who did not attend. They were also more inclined to stop for a 'social chat' with the SASAs, and this built upon the sense of community.

The STARS event provided a different type of outcome, with its success relating more to professional development and the opportunity to be noticed. In terms of professional development, the teaching and learning initiatives presented in the Pecha Kuchas were innovative and thought-provoking. They included teaching techniques and ideas for student engagement which was particularly relevant for sessional academics who had indicated they would like further training in that area. Also, the skills of participants improved significantly through each stage of the process, especially from the semi-final to the grand final. Participant development included learning about and understanding the Pecha Kucha style<sup>25</sup> and becoming increasingly competent at delivering such a unique presentation. The Law School participants' PowerPoint skills also benefited greatly through the training provided as part of the STARS program. Extensive feedback was provided by the STARS coordinator, who has a creative industries background, and this cross-faculty advice provided lessons not normally covered in legal training. Further, the opportunity to be noticed or become known cannot be underestimated in a large academic environment. The grand final was attended by two Deputy Vice Chancellors (Academic and Learning and Teaching) as well as a number of Heads of School, Directors and other senior faculty staff. Exposure in these circumstances was especially valuable for those sessionals who, as indicated in the email survey, wanted more information on pathways to full-time employment. In the Law School, the Head of School has invited the participants to deliver a Pecha Kucha at a School meeting later this year. The final benefit of STARS was the opportunity for interfaculty collegiality and exchange of expertise.

Connecting sessional academics to the Broadcast has been a simple but significant outcome of the SAS program. Not only does this connection enhance the sense of community for sessional academics, it also provides them with knowledge about Law School events, policies and other significant matters, allowing them to better serve the needs of students. The online 'Go-To' guide is an invaluable resource and the fact it is enduring means its effectiveness will be long-term. The ability to update the guide regularly makes it an invaluable tool for the broad dissemination of information to sessional academics in the faculty, not just the School. It is also useful for unit coordinators to assist staff in their unit or as a further reference point which they can make available to members of their team.

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The individual benefits of email, phone and face-to-face support for sessional academics is substantial. Anecdotal feedback suggests sessional academics feel embarrassed to ask 'silly' questions and fear their credibility (or career prospects) may be compromised if they appear ignorant. The SASAs provide a source of information that is neutral and unrelated to any particular sessional role, thereby allowing sessional academics to circumvent these challenges.

Finally, the distribution of a 'feel-good' letter, bookmark and chocolate is not something commonly associated with an academic program. It provided sessional academics with a reminder that the Law School acknowledges their contribution, even if few people see them as they travel to and from campus between other work or family commitments. While undertaken as an aside, this initiative was clearly valued by sessional academics and therefore worthwhile.

### III SURVEYS AND FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS

As part of the project, the SASAs sought feedback from both sessional academics and permanent staff to determine the impact of initiatives in addressing the identified needs. Contacting sessional academics can be challenging, as in most cases they have primary employment external to the university. As a result, online methods were considered the approach most likely to reach the greatest number of sessional academics, and this was the basis for the use of a preliminary email questionnaire and a later online survey. The SASAs also held a small focus group with sessional academics and a subsequent focus group with permanent staff.

#### A *Email Survey*

The initial email sent to sessional academics in August 2013 was designed to inform the needs analysis process, and the findings of that survey were discussed earlier in this article. In addition to identifying the key needs of sessional academics, the email survey also provided some early and valuable feedback on the SASAs and the SAS program. It included comments such as: *'I am very pleased that there are now Sessional Academic Success Advisors. It is great to know that there is someone I can come to as a first point of call';*<sup>26</sup> *'I believe that the Sessional Academic Success Advisors will be an invaluable aid ... They have already done much for me. I believe the SASA to be a very worthwhile initiative';*<sup>27</sup> and *'I think the project is a great initiative as it can be very daunting taking on teaching at a Tertiary level for the first time'.<sup>28</sup>*

#### B *Sessional Academic Online Survey*

At the end of Semester 2, 2013 the SASA team distributed an online survey to assess the effectiveness of its early initiatives. Questions were designed to obtain both quantitative and qualitative data. Twelve responses were received. This represented about 23 per cent of the sessional academic cohort. Questions and responses are presented in Appendix 1. Of the 12 respondents to the survey, five attended the sessional academic end of semester function. All attendees responded positively to the material provided at the event, with 100 per cent finding it very or somewhat helpful in their role as a sessional academic; one respondent noted that *'It all was helpful.'* Attendees collectively agreed that the SAS program overview and introductory games were the most helpful segments of the evening. In relation to training, all (except for one respondent who did not comment) attendees agreed they would definitely or very likely set up their own personal evaluation strategy as a result of the mini-professional development session. From the results of the evaluation it is apparent that attendees engaged with the training and were keen to implement it as part of their own teaching practice. Feedback provided on the Broadcast was mostly positive, revealing that over 72 per cent of respondents

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26 Email response dated 6 August 2013, in response to SASA email distributed on 3 August 2013 (used with permission of email author).

27 Email response dated 11 August 2013, in response to SASA email distributed on 3 August 2013 (used with permission of email author).

28 Email response dated 12 August 2013, in response to SASA email distributed on 3 August 2013 (used with permission of email author).

read (or sometimes read) the publication, with over 88 per cent finding it very or somewhat helpful. However, one respondent noted that they had *'never heard of it'*.

When asked whether the SAS program was meeting the sessional academics' needs in relation to training, support and advice, results were mixed. Slightly more than 50 per cent were satisfied in all three areas, but percentages ranged between 31 and 42 per cent for those who responded neutrally or negatively. In particular, 25 per cent (that is, 3 of the 12 respondents) were dissatisfied in all three areas of training, support and advice. In relation to training, at least, it was felt this dissatisfaction rate was consistent with, and reinforced, feedback from the email survey which suggested more training is needed. When asked which types of training sessional academics would like in future, the majority identified teaching techniques and student engagement as most preferred. These have provided the basis for the development of future professional development workshops for sessional academics in the Law School. As discussed earlier, the Freddo Frog initiative was met with a positive response. A surprising discovery was that some sessional academics did not realise they had a pigeon hole. Three respondents who did not respond to this question may have fallen into this category. Further information regarding pigeon holes was subsequently distributed to sessional academics. Of all respondents, just over half had felt some increased sense of belonging, while almost half had not yet felt a change.

### *C Sessional Academic Focus Group*

In November 2013 the SASAs held a focus group with six sessional academics (representing about 8 per cent of the cohort). The aim of the session was to provide feedback on the initiatives and also to seek ideas on the types of information or messages sessional academics wanted the SASAs to relay to permanent staff at the Law School Retreat. The responses comprised both positive messages and constructive ideas for improving the sessional experience. Sessional academics at the focus group were particularly positive about having an opportunity to provide and discuss their ideas and concerns. Many felt they had not previously had a forum in which this could be done in a purposeful way. All concerns raised were shared with permanent staff at the Law School Retreat and have been directed to the relevant unit coordinators, human resources personnel, and Law School management to be addressed. The main areas raised were:

- Importance of open channels of communication with unit coordinators;
- Timely provision of course material to allow time for preparation;
- Clear understanding of expectations;
- Feedback on teaching and marking performance;
- Early contact for future work appointments;
- Lack of communication from full-time staff about staff entitlements;
- Payment for only one team meeting per semester;
- Sense of isolation;
- Sessional academics enjoy the work;
- Concerns about future work and budget cuts — lack of information for sessional academics on this subject; and
- Sense of giving back to the Law School or profession.

### *D Permanent Staff Focus Group*

Presenting at the Law School Retreat allowed the SASAs to serve as a conduit between sessional and permanent academic staff, and provided a unique forum for the transfer of information and ideas. Communication channels are critical to any employer–employee relationship, particularly for sessional academics, who are often isolated. To have those channels opened up in a positive environment where time was specifically set aside for broad discussion resulted in a significant and purposeful exchange of information. The main result was that permanent staff provided comprehensive feedback on the sessional academic checklist. By engaging with



the development of the document, permanent staff committed to some degree of ownership and authority over the document and its future use.

### *E Analysis of Surveys and Focus Groups*

A consideration of the findings of the needs analysis survey, follow-up survey and focus groups demonstrates a number of advantages that can be derived from a peer-to-peer program such as the SAS program. Many approaches to supporting sessional academics are created using a ‘top-down’ approach and are often related to reporting, education quality and standards.<sup>29</sup> This approach is obviously critical to the appropriate functioning and demonstration of accountability of any university. However, the SAS program took the opposite approach, and could be described as a distributed-leadership approach.<sup>30</sup> It was developed by, implemented by and relied upon by sessional academics and their peers. The program was targeted at the needs identified by sessional academics themselves, and was unrelated to the broader quality and standards requirements of the School or faculty. In taking ideas to the Law School Retreat, sessional academics were able to influence upwards and engage those above in the development of the sessional academic checklist. In this way, the program was able to achieve benefits for sessional academics that are different from those achieved by a ‘top-down’ approach.

The SAS program can be likened to mentor schemes conducted with staff, but again this program offered something different. Mentor schemes generally include the fostering of a professional relationship between a senior faculty member and a junior faculty member, where the senior person tends to be the teacher and the junior person the student. In this instance, the program was offered by level-equivalent sessional academics (peers) to other sessional academics. SASAs were facilitators, not teachers, and sessional academics were part of the program, not students. Thus, the benefit of this program includes the targeted nature of its approach *to* sessional academics, *by* sessional academics. It has filled gaps in areas of sessional academia which have not been filled by existing support services. In particular, the program has resulted in some improvement in professional development of sessional academics, and for those involved, a greater uptake, for example, of creating personal evaluation strategies.

The social aspects of this program were key to improving a sense of belonging for sessional academics. Interfaculty and intra-faculty collegiality has been fostered by the simple fact of sessional academics now knowing a greater number of other sessional academics. The sharing of experiences flows automatically through conversations that follow these introductions, and these are of benefit both to teaching practice and to the learning experience for students.

## IV REFLECTING ON PROGRAM CHALLENGES

The key challenge of the SAS initiative related to the low number of sessional academics engaging with the program. Attendance at events was generally around 25 per cent of the sessional cohort, and response to surveys and focus groups ranged from 8 per cent to 25 per cent. While initial findings support the continuation of the SAS program, greater sessional engagement would provide stronger results. It is thought that these challenges arose primarily due to the large numbers of sessional academics working remotely from the university. Simple problems such as sessional academics not checking university email addresses (or not setting a forwarding email address for university emails) may have caused a communication problem. Further, attending on-campus events when not otherwise attending campus on a given day is often time-consuming and difficult.

During events, SASAs sought general feedback from attendees aimed at identifying how attendance rates might be improved. In response to the feedback received, the Law School intends to trial payment of sessional academics to participate in professional development training. Payment will be provided for attendance at face-to-face training, as well as for the completion of three online modules.<sup>31</sup> This will provide some indication as to whether payment

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29 Marina Harvey, ‘Setting the Standards’, above n 1, 3.

30 Jillian Hamilton, Michelle Fox and Mitchell McEwan, above n 8, 11.

31 Mary Heath et al, above n 9.

is a motivating factor for sessional academics to attend training. It will also provide some feedback on response rates for face-to-face training versus online modules.

Further consideration is also required in terms of marketing strategies, timing of events and ensuring the content of events is of sufficient value to sessional academics to warrant their participation. It is accepted that sessional academics may have difficulty attending campus for face-to-face training, given that many work full-time in law firms. Again, in response to feedback, the Law School is currently considering trialling a lunch-time professional development session for sessional academics at a city law firm, rather than on-campus, to improve accessibility to training. The SASA team is also considering hosting a face-to-face event which is simultaneously available by webinar, to determine whether this improves accessibility and engagement. Some of these challenges will also be overcome with time, as sessional academics become more aware of the program and what is on offer. Word-of-mouth is a powerful approach, and as those who are receiving the benefit of the program continue to share this with others, it is hoped larger numbers of sessional academics will avail themselves of the SASA services and the benefits of the SAS program.

A number of other strategies are being developed to address issues identified during the SAS program. Thirty percent of survey participants have not read the Broadcast, meaning they may not be privy to timely information regarding their sessional employment and teaching role. Further research is needed to determine the reasons for this result, particularly whether the issue is one of access, lack of perceived benefit, lack of time, or some other reason. Feedback also needs to be obtained regarding the online 'Go-To' guide for sessional academics, and efforts are being made to arrange electronic statistical capture to identify the number of times the document is viewed. Further surveying may also assist in understanding the benefit or otherwise of this initiative.

The survey results of most concern are those regarding dissatisfaction with training, support and advice, and those indicating that 45 per cent of respondents felt no increase in their sense of belonging as sessional academics in the Law School last year. Further surveying or interviewing of sessional academics is required to consider the basis for these feelings and to determine whether there are means of addressing these at a Law School level.

## V CONCLUSION

From the evaluation and analysis of the program it can be demonstrated that there have been benefits for sessional academics, students and the Law School as a whole. The initial benefit to the Law School was in identifying how many sessional academics were employed by the Law School, who they were, and how best to communicate with them. This was then followed by identifying leaders among the sessional academics for the purpose of selecting the SASAs.

The surveys and focus groups provided a better understanding of the needs of sessional academics so they could be addressed. One of the major benefits of the program has been meeting those needs through provision of support and better communication. The focus group with permanent staff had the effect of providing feedback to, as well as gathering comments from, the permanent staff about the sessional academic experience.

Not all feedback from the sessional academics was positive, and it became clear that sessional academics wanted more opportunity to participate in professional development, particularly teaching techniques and student engagement, and considered it would be appropriate for them to be paid for attending such sessions. As a result of this feedback, the SAS program intends to offer paid professional development to attend both face-to-face and online sessions. It will be interesting to see whether more sessional academics attend professional development sessions when payment is offered.

Of the initiatives explored, the outcomes which suggest long-term benefit for sessional academics in the future include the sessional academic checklist for unit coordinators and receiving the Law School newsletter, as well as having access to the Frequently Asked Questions 'Go-To' page on the Faculty of Law intranet. There are also benefits for existing sessional staff from the individual support and functions. These have improved the sense of belonging and assisted sessional academics to feel part of the Law School and valued as members of

staff. Sessional academics have stated that they appreciate the opportunity to meet with other sessional academics as well as permanent staff. Arguably one of the most important benefits is the provision of professional development opportunities to sessional academics. Examples include personal evaluation strategies and training. It is through the professional development of sessional academics that students also benefit from the program.

The program has been beneficial for permanent as well as sessional staff. The Law School has been recognised at the university level as undertaking good practices with sessional academics, including the process of appointing sessional academics, understanding who they are, the leadership of the SASAs and the feedback from sessional academics about the support provided by the SASAs. The Law School will continue to build on what has been achieved so far, particularly with regard to communication and access to professional development opportunities. This will assist the Law School to improve the experience of staff and students.

APPENDIX 1: SESSIONAL ACADEMIC ONLINE SURVEY RESULTS

**Q1** *Was the material provided at the School of Law Sessional Academic End of Semester Function helpful in your role as a Sessional Academic?*

Response	% of respondents	No. of respondents
Very helpful	25%	3
Somewhat helpful	16.67%	2
Not helpful	0%	0
I did not attend	58.33%	7

**Q2** *What part of the presentation was most helpful?*

Response	% of respondents	No. of respondents
Introduction/Get to know you activities	25%	3
Presentation of SSA Program	33.33%	4
Mini-PD developing your personal evaluation strategy	16.67%	2
Gift bag	8.33%	1
I did not attend	58.33%	7

**Q3** *Following the MINI-PD at the School of Law Sessional Academic End of Semester Function, do you now intend to set up your own personal evaluation strategy?*

Response	% of respondents	No. of respondents
Definitely	18.18%	3
Very likely	18.18%	2
Possibly	0%	0
Unlikely	0%	0
I did not attend	63.64%	7

**Q4** *Do you read the Friday Broadcast?*

Response	% of respondents	No. of respondents
Yes	54.55%	6
Sometimes	18.18%	2
No	27.27%	3

**Q5** *How helpful do you find the content of the Friday Broadcast?*

Response	% of respondents	No. of respondents
Very helpful	33.3%	3
Somewhat helpful	55.56%	5
Not helpful	11.11%	1

**Q6** Overall, are you satisfied with the training, support and advice provided to you as a Sessional Academic?

	Very satisfied	Somewhat dissatisfied	Neither satisfied or dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Total
Training	41.67% (5)	16.67% (2)	16.67% (2)	25% (3)	12
Support	33.33% (4)	25% (3)	16.67% (2)	25% (3)	12
Advice	33.33% (4)	33.33% (4)	8.33% (1)	25% (3)	12

**Q7** What were your first thoughts when you received your Freddo Frog and bookmark in your pigeon hole?

- Chocolate! I love Rachel and Justine!
- Much needed — there is a God!
- I didn't — I don't have a pigeon hole.
- This was a positive first step.
- Which student has set me up.
- Live at the Sunshine Coast so have not gone in.
- Received nothing.
- Cool — chocolate!
- I don't have a pigeon hole. (Sad face).

**Q8** In Semester 2, 2013 have you felt any increase in your sense of belonging as a Sessional Academic in the School of Law?

Response	% of respondents	No. of respondents
Yes	45.45%	5
Somewhat	9.09%	1
No	45.45%	5

**Q9** If you were to undertake academic development in your role as a Sessional Academic, what types of training would be most useful to you? (please select all relevant choices).

Response	% of respondents	No. of respondents
Student engagement	58.33%	7
Teaching techniques	75%	9
Reframe (personal evaluation strategy, pulse, insight etc)	41.67%	5
Using classroom technology	33.33%	4
Academic writing and publication	16.67%	2
Career development	50%	6



