Supporting sessional staff – an 8 step guide

Sessional staff play an important role in teaching, and need to feel welcome and supported. If you work with sessional staff as a unit coordinator or in another leadership role, then read on for some suggestions and resources. Feedback on this guide is very welcome, please contact Amani Bell.

1. Induction

Local induction is important for new sessional staff as they often aren’t aware of university- or faculty-wide induction programs, or aren’t able to attend. There is a helpful checklist here, along with other induction information. Induction could be completed with the whole teaching team in your initial meeting.

2. Communication

This is the most important aspect of working with sessional staff. You need to have clear, regular channels of communication – which could be a combination of emails, online or face to face team meetings, lesson plans, marking moderation meetings, and inviting sessional staff to observe lectures. Provide sessional staff with clear explanations of their roles and responsibilities, how the unit is taught, and how the assessment works. Communication goes both ways, so make sure sessional staff feel that they can give you feedback on how the unit is going.

3. Mentoring

New sessional teachers often appreciate advice on good teaching e.g. on how to provide useful and timely feedback, clear explanations, and motivate students. This guidance can be given during teaching team meetings, hallway conversations and e-mail correspondence. More experienced sessional teachers may also be able to provide some support and leadership to new sessional teachers. In large units of study, consider setting up a buddy system for sessional teachers. Peer observation of teaching can be a useful way to support teaching, and it can be done by pairs of tutors, or with your involvement.

4. Inclusion
Sessional staff often feel isolated. You can help sessional staff feel welcome by ensuring they have access to the resources and support that they need, and by including them in departmental activities, and on the Faculty email list, and so on.

5. Professional development

After attending a faculty-based introduction to university teaching, sessional teachers may be keen to find other opportunities for professional development. Here are some ideas:

- Participate in a short, fully online program ‘An Introduction to teaching at Sydney’
- The ITL offers a 2 day program on university learning and teaching, which is free for all University of Sydney staff
- Attend teaching and learning workshops held in your Department/School/Faculty
- Explore programs and resources on eLearning.
- Discover the resources on the ITL website.
- The National Tertiary Education Union has a comprehensive handbook for casual academics at Sydney.
- Be on the lookout for other professional development opportunities for your staff e.g. giving a guest lecture.

6. Evaluation of teaching

You may wish to encourage your sessional staff to order a teacher feedback survey. Although the results are confidential, sessional staff may find it helpful to interpret results by sharing them in conversation with a trusted colleague. You may also wish to advise staff about informal ways of seeking student feedback. Consider including staff in the closing the loop email that you send to students after the USE results are released.

7. Rewarding excellent sessional teaching

Many faculties have teaching awards, and sometimes there will be a dedicated category for sessional teachers. Sessional teachers may also be eligible to apply for the University-wide teaching awards - please check the information sheet for each award.

8. Further resources for unit coordinators leading sessional staff

The university’s website for coordinators of first year units has some useful advice on working with sessional staff, relevant for any UG or PG units.

Here are some video triggers that get you thinking about common scenarios when leading sessional staff, and some best practice exemplars from 6 Australian universities across a range of disciplines, from the Coordinators Leading Advancement of Sessional Staff (CLASS) website.

And finally, here are some resources from the ‘Just in time, just for me’ narrative support for unit coordinator’s website.
If you have any comments or questions about supporting sessional staff, please contact Amani Bell.