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## Seconding Teachers to the Academy: An Alternative to Traditional Approaches of Sessional Staff Employment

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*Abstract: There is a multiplicity of challenges related to employing, supporting and retaining quality sessional (casual) academic staff in higher education. An approach trialled in an Australian education faculty specifically addressed issues of quality and quantity, support and inclusion, motivation and engagement, efficiency and effectiveness. While contextually relevant to an education faculty, the learning gained has potential for other faculties/institutions to provide modifications to traditional models of employing sessional staff. Amongst the significant benefits of a seconded teacher approach were greater engagement in the faculty, enhanced continuity and consistency of commitment compared to traditional models of employing sessional staff. An understanding of their changing professional identity and the strategic benefit to the faculty are emphasised in this paper as these staff provide a bridge across professional/cultural boundaries.*

### Introduction

The employment of teaching staff on a sessional or non-permanent basis is characteristic of higher education in order to address the fluctuations of student enrolments and to fill the gaps where expertise may be temporarily lacking amongst the permanent staff. The establishment and maintenance of a satisfied and effective sessional workforce is essential amid the dynamic environment of the increasingly scrutinized workplace found in universities worldwide. Internal institution data gathered in an Australian university echoed the multiplicity of challenges related to employing, supporting and retaining quality sessional staff in higher education. In the Faculty of Education at this institution where the education of future teachers is core business, a different approach was introduced to address these challenges. The approach seconded school teachers for a two year period to provide greater connectivity between the teacher education courses and the learning that takes place during school placements (also referred to as professional experience, student teaching, practicum or work-integrated learning.) These staff were embedded into the culture of the faculty and thus embarking upon a new learning situation.

Studying the progress of the seconded staff initiative after its first year of implementation affirmed many findings of previous studies into the induction and support of sessional staff. However, whilst a number of operational decisions were also actioned as a result of the study, two areas receiving little attention in literature about sessional staff, but considered as highly relevant to the current dynamics of the context of teacher education, were investigated. These were specific to the approach where members of the teaching profession were seconded into the 'life' of the faculty rather than employed on a casual basis.

The two key questions identified for explicit investigation were a) what effect does this approach have upon the sessional staff members' sense of professional identity and engagement in the faculty, and b) what are the strategic and operational benefits of the approach for the faculty?

This paper demonstrates that this seconded approach is both more effective and more efficient through greater engagement and commitment by the seconded staff. It argues that seconding teachers into the faculty responds to the literature that emphasizes professional identity (Kosnik & Beck, 2008; Trede 2012) as one of the critical factors in the transition from school teacher to teacher educator (including Martinez, 2008; Ritter, 2007; Trent, 2013; Wood and Borg, 2010).

It is also suggested that while situated in a specific context, the concept of the seconded approach may offer wider potential if considered from the perspectives of other professions (Gilbert, 2012). Law, Medicine, Architecture and Engineering faculties, for example, engage professional practitioners as part-time tutors, guest lecturers and work placement supervisors. Therefore other disciplines may see applications in the secondment approach discussed in this paper.

### **The Challenges in Context**

A particular regional Australian university places emphasis on preparing graduates for professional employment. Professional bodies regulated by national standards accredit many of its courses, and comprehensive partnerships between the university and 'industry' are highly valued.

During 2012 the university's Human Relations division instigated an on-line cross-faculty survey of all sessional staff to better understand their demography, motivation, qualifications and experiences and to seek their input into an institution-wide view of their role. The scrutiny of academic qualifications of all teaching staff as announced by the Tertiary Education Quality Standards Agency (TEQSA, 2012), Australia's independent national regulator of the higher education sector, was certainly a sound reason for the university to collate this information, and to implement means of gathering and monitoring the employment of sessional staff. For this institution, there had been little of this type of information collected in the past. Data for the Education Faculty generally reflected the institution-wide trends in sessional staff demography, qualifications and motivation. Of particular note were responses to a question that sought suggested improvements to existing conditions. In the Faculty of Education, the three most frequent responses suggested a) more opportunities to provide feedback into the faculty (75%) b) increased opportunities for professional development (60%), and c) greater inclusion in the faculty community (40%). These responses were considered particularly relevant to teacher education where the relationship between university learning and school engagement is a crucial element (Basile, 2006; Clark, Foster & Mantle-Bromley, 2005; Marlow, & Nass-Fukai, 2000; Walkington, 2007).

The survey findings requesting greater engagement were affirmation of the concerns of faculty leadership. Permanent staff in the faculty had expressed negativity about the lack of engagement of sessional staff generally (those that don't turn up to induction, don't answer emails, miss team meetings or lack engagement beyond the classroom). This potentially 'clouded' the efforts and enthusiasm of those who genuinely want to have greater engagement.

Generally, the main tasks of sessional staff across the university include tutoring classes, marking, moderating and perhaps attending team meetings. They have limited engagement with the courses beyond the specific subject they are teaching. This is understandable if that is all they are paid for. Often this work is in addition to a full-time workload elsewhere making further engagement with the faculty difficult. Additional sessional staff are often employed in Faculties of Education to liaise with staff in schools and to monitor school placements. As most interaction with the faculty by sessional staff is piecemeal, they normally lack an overall understanding of university courses and have limited engagement with faculty culture and practices (Gravatt & Petersen, 2007; Murray & Male, 2005; Staniforth & Harland, 2006). The resulting discontinuity is not conducive to maximum student learning and productive industry partnerships (Walkington, 2007). For this institution, this is no longer necessary as the seconded teachers fill this role.

In the semester before the seconded approach was introduced, the faculty, recognising the need to address issues of limited engagement and consistency, initiated a number of new strategies. Traditionally employed sessional staff were paid to attend induction and communication, and documentation for them was improved. Professional development was provided for subject conveners about team leadership to better support sessional staff, and 'just-in-time' mentoring was offered. The success was limited as permanent staff reported little increase in engagement. It was the trial introduction of a different type of sessional staff that showed potential – a trial of seconding practicing school teachers as 'resident' in the faculty.

Regular performance and development reviews of academics' work are institutionalized practice in most Australian universities for reviewing evidence of achievements, goals and aspirations. This is rarely available for the sessional teacher, meaning that no evidence is formally collected about the effectiveness or efficiency of their work (McCormack & Kelly, 2013). Accountability and the task of ensuring quality teaching and learning are variable and often reside solely with the team/subject leader. Conscious of their reputation against national key indicators and ensuring high student satisfaction, universities do not demonstrate consistent means of monitoring the contributions of sessional staff. This is surprising as Student Satisfaction Surveys regularly completed in the institution show that the impact of sessional staff upon student learning is as significant as that of permanent staff. The institution-wide survey conducted by HR mentioned earlier focused on a human resources perspective. Questions to illuminate aspects of quality in sessional teaching were not included. The institutional data however affirmed the faculty's decision to trial another approach that would provide greater accountability and continuity – the full-time secondment of school teachers into the faculty.

### **Analysing the Context – Design of the Study:**

This paper acknowledges what is a limited body of literature about seconded sessional staff. Work carried out by Allen, Butler-Maer and Smith (2010) described a model of seconding school teachers into a Faculty of Education and placed particular focus upon developing quality learning through school partnerships. Reupert and Wilkinson (2011) discussed a seconded staff case study in which they emphasised the challenges of working 'between two worlds' (p.38). These authors place emphasis on the expectations of sessional staff particularly in relation to research. With limited contemporary literature regarding sessional staff, alignment of the various underpinning factors is discussed more thoroughly in this paper. In particular, it emphasises the effect that a seconded approach has on the professional and personal identity of the seconded

staff and how this role impacts upon the strategic directions of the faculty. Underpinning the argument is the belief that the traditional sessional staff model, while it has a place, does not fully meet the faculty needs or interests.

My role as Associate Dean at the time of the research needs to be made transparent at this point. Being responsible for the quality of teaching and learning, it was appropriate that I continually seek ways to improve the quality of the student learning experience. While the introduction of the seconded approach was not solely my initiative, it became my responsibility to take forward and enhance. Monitoring the approach was necessary to gauge its success and identify challenges for continual improvement. A study was initiated to identify the approach's contribution to the quality of teaching and learning and also to identify its contribution to the growing understanding of sessional staff in universities more broadly. It is an area of investigation that is only emerging in educational literature.

It is acknowledged that generalizing beyond the immediate context has limitations. Lincoln and Guba (2000) propose arguments for and against such practice, but purport that 'naturalistic generalizations' are appropriate in embedded reflection and evaluation because of the importance of considering the perspectives of the 'users' of the generalisations. The approach used here incorporated the multiple lenses of the 'users'. These lenses included:

- My own experience and knowledge as Associate Dean,
- The experience and reflections of the seconded staff gathered through a focus group interview and individual responses following the focus group,
- The expectations and experiences of sessional staff from the institutional survey,
- The views of my colleagues who acted as mentors for the seconded staff as expressed in written contributions to me in my role as Associate Dean, and
- The ideas expressed in a review of the growing literature in the area.

Like studies by Martinez (2008) and Reupert and Wilkinson (2011), a case study approach was chosen here as an in-depth and appropriate method for contextual analysis into selected themes for deeper discussion.

Core data was collected from the seven seconded staff employed during the first year to gain rich description of their experience. They contributed through responses to a semi-structured set of questions conducted as a focus group. Questions sought to reveal the experience of being a seconded staff member from initial expectations, to revelations, affirmations and challenges (informed particularly by Martinez, 2008). *Verbatim* notes were taken then shared for participants to read and amend as necessary. Focus group participants were invited to provide further individual written elaborations and reflections to provide clarity and greater depth where relevant. No differentiation was made with regards to age or gender of the participants. The participants' teaching area of focus (for example, primary/elementary, secondary) was also not considered, as it was believed that such factors of differentiation would be invalid with such a small cohort.

Permanent staff identified as mentors for each seconded staff member were invited to provide written responses about their expectations and experiences and also to compare the seconded staff with the traditionally employed sessional staff. As the request for this information was quite unstructured it was simply used to assist in interpretation and not for specific analysis. All contributors gave permission for the data they supplied to be used beyond the 'internal review' of the program.

The data, when analyzed alongside the institution-wide survey findings, provided specific feedback for the local program and also supported broader thinking about sessional staff

employment. The institution-wide survey collected broad descriptive data at a point in time, but the case study of the seconded staff enabled greater understanding of how the employment was experienced over a period of time. Themes of 'purpose/value for the faculty', 'relationships/connections within the faculty', and 'learning/induction of the seconded staff' were identified in order to manage the data. These themes were chosen to focus upon deeper understanding on aspects of the seconded teachers experience, and also to investigate the value of the employment approach compared to previous methods.

### **A 'Seconded Staff Approach'**

An agreement between the university and major employer of the faculty's graduates was reached to trial the secondment of quality school teachers to the teacher education programs. While retaining status as employees of the government education department, teachers became wholly engaged in faculty tasks, were housed within the faculty, and generally were considered as members of the faculty for a two-year period. As well as teaching tutorials in teacher education subjects, working closely with the professional experience placements in schools was a substantial element of their role. Their liaison role with schools was to ensure a shared understanding of placement expectations, monitor and provide feedback back to the university, assist teachers in the evaluation and reporting techniques of students and to intervene and support when problems occurred with the students' in-school placement.

Recruitment was through expressions of interest and ensuing interviews. Successful applicants were required to demonstrate experience with pre-service/student teachers and also enthusiasm for pursuing their own learning. In the first recruitment round, numbers were low. Teachers appeared unsure about the commitment and future benefits. This was 'unknown territory' for them. The following round twelve months later attracted scores of applications indicating a positively changed perception about the role developing within the professional community. The seconded position was entitled 'Clinical Teaching Specialists' to respect the unique contribution to the faculty. This title remains the official one in documentation, but in practice and therefore in this paper they are referred to as seconded staff.

On joining the faculty all sessional staff are offered induction. Seconded staff took advantage of professional learning opportunities willingly. It was the intention to initially allocate a 'mentor' for each seconded staff member; however natural partnerships developed around the teaching allocations and formal approaches to mentoring were delayed. There was still a limited need to employ sessional staff on an hourly basis for teaching in subjects for which there were insufficient permanent faculty personnel. In addition to the data collected of the seconded staff's experience, anecdotal comparisons made by the permanent faculty staff between the traditional and seconded staff approaches could not be ignored. It was these initially informal comparisons that began to reveal critical differences in impact.

Table 1 is a comparison of characteristics between seconded and traditional sessional staff. The table is a synthesis of data collated from the institutional survey, written and anecdotal responses from colleagues, verbal and written responses from seconded staff, and my documented experience. The obvious differences between traditionally employed sessional staff and seconded teachers inform the following discussion about the two major previously identified themes of professional identity and strategic value to the faculty.

|   | Traditionally employed sessional staff  | Seconded teachers  |
|---|---|--|
| Who they are  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>School teachers taking on extra working after hours</li> <li>Teachers from non-school environments</li> <li>Retired teachers</li> <li>Higher degree students</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>School teachers at both classroom and leadership levels</li> <li>Some are also higher degree students</li> </ul>  |
| How they are selected   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>From a central database</li> <li>Known/recommended by a staff member</li> <li>Employed at some time earlier</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Expressions of interest</li> <li>Interview</li> </ul>   |
| Why they undertake non-permanent roles                          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To complement their chosen career</li> <li>To contribute to retirement</li> <li>To provide work/life balance</li> <li>To support post graduate studies</li> <li>Few have aspirations to become permanent staff</li> </ul>        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>To contribute to the development of new teachers</li> <li>To find new horizons, challenges in education</li> <li>To contribute to professional partnerships</li> <li>To pursue a career in the academy</li> </ul> |
| Nature of engagement  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Hourly rates for teaching, marking, and supporting work-integrated learning</li> <li>Some return over many semesters</li> <li>Peripheral/low level of understanding about policies and courses</li> </ul>                        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Full-time engagement in the faculty for a 2 year period</li> <li>Teaching, marking, school liaison, troubleshooting</li> <li>Involvement in faculty projects</li> </ul>   |
| Induction into the faculty/university                           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Tailored faculty workshops</li> <li>Individually and randomly by permanent staff members</li> <li>University professional learning – challenging because of ‘inconvenient timing/didn’t need them/too busy to attend’</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Tailored faculty workshops</li> <li>University professional learning</li> <li>Mentor relationships (normally subject coordinator)</li> </ul>  |
| Connections with the faculty                                    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Invited to faculty events</li> <li>Connections mainly with the subject coordinator</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Immersed and housed in the faculty; available to attend meetings and events</li> <li>Membership of course teams</li> </ul>  |
| Accountability  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Relies upon the supervision of the subject coordinator</li> <li>Not documented</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Relies upon the supervision of the subject coordinator initially</li> <li>Performance review related to substantive employment</li> <li>Formative evaluation of teaching</li> </ul>                               |
| Added value to the faculty’s strategic direction and operations | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Operationally convenient; fill gaps in faculty expertise; do not add value beyond the teaching of content.</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Operationally convenient; provide current professional knowledge; become ‘boundary spanners’ between faculty and profession both operationally and strategically</li> </ul>                                       |

**Table 1: Comparison of staff characteristics: traditional sessional staff and seconded teachers**

### Professional Growth and Identity of Seconded Staff

Kosnik and Beck (2008) clearly articulate that components of professional identity align with learning and growth, a sense of belonging and acceptance, commitment and engagement, and a sense of purpose. They note that the role of teacher educators in general is rated lowly, stating that being a ‘non-tenured’ teacher educator is seen in North American literature as even

lower. Reupert and Wilkinson (2011) refer to non-permanent staff as 'second-class academic citizenship' (p.29). This general indifferent or negative opinion expressed of sessional/casual staff provided motivation to better understand the seconded teachers' perspectives and experience with the aim of continual improvement for the seconded staff themselves as well as the wider faculty.

Initially seconded staff were asked in a focus group about their expectations of the job and whether these expectations were realized. All agreed that they expected to be challenged, but while there was some trepidation about the move, they all felt that they brought the experiences and capacities to adapt and learn. They acknowledged that their perceptions of being in, and contributing to, teacher education were not the 'natural transition' they had anticipated.

While coming to terms with the content of the course they would be required to teach, they were open about the challenges and how their practical experience was helpful but not sufficient; for example:

"I needed to interrogate my practical knowledge through the lens of theory and research such as the students are encountering. What a journey! Exciting, but daunting!" (Seconded teacher 'Lisa')

This demonstrates a cognitive shift (Martinez, 2008) that results from the confrontation and challenge of a move from being a teacher in a teacher education program, to being a teacher educator with expertise about teaching. In 2005, the journal *Teaching and Teacher Education* dedicated an issue to the topic of this transition, but little was mentioned about the transition for sessional staff. "..., there is a need for .... skills, expertise and knowledge to be carefully examined, articulated and communicated so that the significance of the role of the teacher educator might be more appropriately highlighted and understood," (Korthagen, Loughran, & Lunenberg, 2005, p.107). Wood and Borg (2010) refer to it as 'a rocky road'. Trent (2013) summarizes the transition as 'problematic' and 'uncertain'. The explicit engagement with propositional knowledge (about making sense of things) is required as well as the initial mostly procedural knowledge (the situational, tacit and practical) that teachers bring to the academy (Gravani, 2008; Trede, Macklin & Bridges, 2012). It is arguable that these sentiments are just as relevant for the sessional staff member as they are for someone making a permanent move from school teaching into teacher education.

Seconded teachers admitted that it was difficult to move on from the 'teacher in a teacher education program' perspective. The way they viewed student learning was very much through the eyes of 'how to be a good practitioner'. Being in the faculty environment full-time, they described how they gradually examined their recent practical experience through the broader lens of teacher education. This transition to teacher educator does not occur in a short time frame. Early days in the academic environment present other issues that are more explicit or have a pragmatic nature.

'Claire' related the challenge of stepping into the culture of universities:

"I was taken aback by the student diversity. I hadn't realized....or hadn't considered student motivation, interests, needs and abilities sufficiently. I made inaccurate assumptions and discovered there was much to learn about strategies for engaging young adults instead of children." (Seconded teacher 'Claire').

"Acknowledging that teaching diverse adults in non-compulsory settings requires a different set of strategies and skills marks this as a key transition challenge..." (Martinez, 2008 p. 39). The learning curve was described as "the steepest I have encountered in my professional career as a teacher" by one seconded teacher (Brett) as he explained how his self-confidence was



often challenged. The transitional effects on teacher identity were both personal (such as challenging self-confidence) and professional (becoming familiar with the course content and pedagogy).

Being a good school teacher does not necessarily make a good teacher educator (Kosnik & Beck 2008, p. 197). Explicitly confronting this with the seconded teachers as part of their professional development led to constructive learning opportunities. They were overtly addressing the transition. It highlighted for me that there is much that is not known about the potential disconnection when traditionally employed sessional staff are taking classes with little or no monitoring.

The Canadian work of Kosnik and Beck (2008) and of Martinez in Australia (2008) demonstrate that an understanding of the transition from teacher to teacher educator is of interest both in the employment of permanent and sessional staff. Gilbert (2012) suggests that this is a characteristic of other disciplinary professional preparation when she refers to examples from architecture, medicine and law. When these disciplines draw upon their profession for expertise in the preparation of future practitioners do they contemplate the transition from say, architect to architect educator?

New workplace discourses and the understanding of new norms are negotiated in the navigation of a different work culture (Gravett & Petersen, 2007). Reupert and Wilkinson (2011) refer to this as “a whole new language and a whole new world” (p.33). As quoted earlier by ‘Lisa’, the reality of working in a university setting was expressed as ‘exciting’ because of the personal and professional boundaries that were being tested. Each of the seconded teachers expressed a sense of novelty as work practices and routines changed from their previous roles, but a commonly echoed challenge was the lack of structure they experienced in their new role. As Martinez (2008) comments “...the new campus rhythm of days without bells or clear start and end of terms is sometimes accompanied by a new uncertainty about what exactly one should be doing during the non-contact times” (p.40).

Recognizing what is the same or different, comparing beliefs, values, artifacts and practices are all characteristic of moving into different professional cultures and community. Forming different objectives and purpose, confronting different perspectives and utilizing different expertise and knowledge, assists a new staff member to interpret the context and to learn how to fit in (Boyd & Harris, 2010; Staniforth & Harland, 2006). This ‘turmoil’ typifies the factors underpinning an evolving professional identity.

Seconded teachers needed to reassess their taken-for-granted practices around responsibility and autonomy. Changes were not only professional but also personal as ‘Jenny’ states:

“I found I really needed to examine my understandings of tertiary teaching the first time I failed a student’s assignment. That was emotionally confronting.” (Seconded staff ‘Jenny’).

This learning typifies the roller-coaster-like journey of moving from expert to novice again and gradually to changed expert (Kosnik & Beck 2008, p.188). It is not comfortable to have one’s sense of identity challenged. Seconded teachers expressed feelings of discomfort as they ‘re-purposed’ themselves, experiencing different senses of who they were and what they could do. Kosnik and Beck (2008) argue that sessional staff are unable to participate fully and therefore are unable to develop a ‘robust identity’ as a teacher educator, and that permanent and sessional staff don’t really know each other. Experience with the traditional model of employing sessional staff characterizes this view. The seconded staff approach reduced these barriers as greater acceptance

was evidenced through full immersion in the faculty. A distinct identity was encouraged that respected professional status and a sense of belonging through ‘residence’ in the faculty. The goal was not to have them be like the other academics, but rather to create a different role with added value – a different and respected identity.

Changing professional identity was expressed positively by seconded staff as learning and growth, and as having a concentrated and deliberate opportunity to become part of the faculty. They noted their contribution was appreciated and unique because of current school experience and the capacity to provide enhanced insights for the faculty practices and courses. However this was not the total picture. Feelings of ‘them and us’ and ‘being treated as gap fillers’ were evident in the seconded staff interactions with some permanent staff. This indicated that some ‘cultural’ disposition needed to be addressed in the permanent staff too as their work practices and expectations changed with the inclusion of the seconded staff.

Appropriate induction is essential for the support of new academic staff (Gravett and Petersen, 2007; Murray, 2005; Staniforth & Harland, 2006; Trowler & Knight, 1999). However these authors focus mainly upon the induction of new permanent staff and the issues relating to sessional staff receive little attention. Beaton and Gilbert’s publication *Developing Effective Part-Time Teachers in Higher Education* (2013) positions the sessional academic within the wider literature. The chapter by McCormack and Kelly (2013) describes leadership of a focused program of induction and professional development designed to meet the needs of part-time academic staff. New permanent and sessional staff remain only partly effectual as teacher educators without appropriate induction (Murray & Male, 2005). Thus the faculty was motivated to embed mandatory induction into approaches to employing sessional staff. Identifying the specific induction needs of the seconded team was assisted by focus group responses. For example, all participants identified induction about university assessment as critical.

“I don’t think that any of us anticipated the challenge of marking university assignments. This has been our greatest challenge and having some professional development around this has been appreciated” (Seconded staff ‘Claire’).

Staniforth and Harland (2006) promote the notion of a community approach to supporting new staff where collective social practice is developed. As the nature of academic work can be fragmented, the full-time seconded approach provides greater opportunity for collective social practice than a traditional approach. In the study context, the seconded staff developed their own community within the wider faculty – part of, rather than apart from. This community is evidenced by requests to be physically ‘housed’ together, and the observed patterns of working collaboratively and supporting one another. There is a unique professional identity developing that is not exactly like the permanent academics but reflects their transitional state and legitimizes their status.

Transition however is not just about what they can learn, but also about what they can contribute. The currency of teaching practice provided by the seconded teachers contributes to curriculum evaluation of the teacher education courses. They bring both expertise and cultural capital (Staniforth & Harland, 2006). However the path to utilizing their expertise is not necessarily straightforward. In the study, they commented that they felt that they had, as yet, greater untapped potential; especially their experience in the delivery of workshops that prepare student teachers for their school placements. Their feedback indicated that they would like greater contributions of this kind.

Individual perceptions of experience in teacher education at the half way mark of their secondment have illuminated varied responses about their professional future. Realization that

there may be other career paths is evident. Two have taken the opportunity to begin higher degree study motivated by both financial support from the faculty, and alternative career potential. Another with a Masters degree is contemplating a doctorate and a career in higher education. Whether they seek career change, or whether they return to their substantive positions in the school system, all participants in the focus group agreed that immersion in the role was providing them with a heightened awareness of the ways they could contribute to the teaching profession now and in the future.

“Higher degree study is rather bewildering, but at the same time an exciting prospect when I know now that I have support around me.” (Seconded teacher ‘Lee’).

“I am learning so much about preparing teachers for the future. I am learning so much about myself. I’m not sure what I want to do, but I am certainly enjoying the ride.”(Seconded teacher ‘Jenny’).

As these various factors are exposed through the on-going analysis of the seconded teachers’ reflections, there is a concern when considering how the traditionally employed sessional staff member might perceive their professional identity and experience in the faculty. The institutional survey did not pursue this avenue of enquiry and is therefore a potential path for future research.

### **Strategic Outcomes for the Faculty**

A reduction in the employment of traditionally employed sessional staff was an obvious effect. Previously the faculty had regularly experienced a ‘last minute’ search to fill teaching requirements, often resulting in employing ‘in desperation’. The flexibility to carefully choose seconded staff meant disparity and disconnection was reduced and facilitated longer term planning.

The sheer diversity of the teaching content needed in teacher preparation courses in a relatively small institution means that the need to employ sessional staff in the traditional manner was not eliminated. Rather the opportunity to be more selective was enabled as the seconded staff found their niches in the teaching programs. In reality, many sessional staff in teacher education programs are sourced from the schools, but the seconded approach allows full commitment to the faculty rather than as an addition to their substantive work. The prospect of the seconded staff being in the faculty for a two-year period provided greater long-term ‘security’ for course planning decisions. From a purely pragmatic perspective, there was less need for timetabling tutorial classes outside of school hours to accommodate sessional staff availability.

Being full-time, seconded staff were able to attend faculty and institutional events and meetings, whereas sessional staff understandably are only present for the hours paid. An obvious benefit was the greater understanding of policies and practices within the faculty and the university. While permanent staff are responsible for the leadership around teaching policy, seconded staff have demonstrated that they too can assist in the consistent execution of policy. This was reported positively by the permanent staff and evident in anecdotal comments by students. Consistency was also evident in a more comprehensive understanding of whole programs in which they taught thus providing a coherent and informed interface for the students. ‘Jenny’ reported that they could contribute to an enhanced understanding of the students’ learning experience.

“I think we get a better understanding of the student experience than many of the permanent academics because we teach across subjects and placements” (Seconded staff ‘Jenny’).

This broad view is valuable in informing course review processes. When these staff talked to school teachers during student school placements, they were able to provide consistent and informed support because they were immersed in the student experience in the faculty. This was a definite improvement on the previous approach to school liaison that engaged large numbers of disconnected sessional staff.

When seconded teachers were first employed, the number was quite small – 5 staff (3.2 EFT - effective full time teachers). During the first year this grew to 7 staff (5.2 EFT). In the second year, the numbers increased to 14 staff (10.6 EFT) consolidating an identifiable subgroup within the faculty. They speak of themselves as ‘the seconded team’. The seconded staff agreed that the sense of team and team support was a great motivation. Their capacity for flexibly picking up an array of tasks they had not encountered before expanded their own professional boundaries and provided the faculty with a valuable and reliable resource.

As mentioned earlier, success with a number of induction strategies for assisting the sessional staff had been limited. The strategies engaged the committed sessional staff and failed to engage the more elusive. Conversely, being committed to full-time engagement in the faculty, the seconded teachers all participated. They were willing participants in both faculty and institutional professional learning opportunities offered. After all, they were already of a culture in the teaching profession where professional development was expected, in fact required. As a result permanent staff expressed greater confidence in the seconded staff members’ capacity to work independently than many of the other sessional staff.

A significant proportion of the seconded team role is to liaise with teachers during school placements, acting as a ‘bridge’ between the profession and the teacher education programs. This role appeared more effective than any previous approach and reinforced the unique sense of identity for the seconded team. Effectiveness was evidenced by the greatly reduced requirement for permanent staff to be involved in resolving issues with students in schools. Previously this space was filled by academic staff whose current school experience was limited, or retired teachers who had little engagement in the faculty’s courses. The seconded teachers were well placed to be accepted by the student teachers, the school mentors and the academic staff as providing a suitable liaison and support role. While some seconded staff said they felt somewhat overwhelmed and perhaps lacking in confidence in the tutor role on campus, their overall feelings of importance and position were enhanced by fulfilling this important liaison task in schools at which they excelled.

Allen et al (2010) note that “teaching and teacher education continue to be seen as separate and unequal by policy-makers and K-12 practitioners....in-field and on-campus components of teacher education will remain disjointed while they are taught and overseen by people who have little ongoing communication with each other” (p.617). The seconded teacher role traverses the worlds of teaching in schools and universities in a genuine way. As “boundary spanners” (Basile, 2006; Utley, Basile & Rhodes, 2003) or “hybrid educators” (Clark et al., 2005) they have a professionally accepted ‘foot in both camps’. This outreach from the university into the professional field promotes additional benefits that come from sustained engagement. The recognition of the complementary contributions that each make is strategically productive (Marlow & Nass-Fukai, 2000; Walkington, 2007). The seconded staff are able to share accurate information and ‘cultural values’ across the university-professional boundaries.

Both during their secondment and when they return to their substantive positions they are a catalyst in breaking down any barriers of misunderstanding or lack of understanding. Thus far this has been evidenced in the positive communication with senior members of the employing authorities as well as those engaged at classroom level.

### **Conclusions with Implications for Further Practice and Investigation**

The review of the seconded approach has demonstrated a way to supplement the teaching needs of a faculty in a more efficient and effective manner than the approach of employing individual sessional staff. It is acknowledged that the traditional approach will always fill particular niches, but that the development of an engaged team of closely linked professional colleagues has much to recommend it in a strategic sense.

A seconded staff team adds value in the establishment of a community of practice with identifiable characteristics. This is lacking with traditional sessional staff who are seen as adjunct to the main game. Professional identity for seconded staff is strengthened through the development of a team experiencing a unique role as opposed to individuals. For the faculty leadership, the challenges related to supply and quality of sessional staff have been better addressed with this approach. More consistent motivation and engagement are evident. Additional benefits realized from this community of 'boundary spanners' are valued.

Thorough induction and support becomes more manageable when there is reduced turnover of sessional staff. By staggering the employment contracts, group mentoring can occur to induct new recruits. This reduces potential anxiety often expressed by sessional staff (Staniforth & Harland, 2006) and just-in-time advice is readily available. An indicator of the acceptance of the role by the profession was the high interest in the second recruitment round. Over 50 expressions of interest were received when seeking four positions.

Can the greater efficiencies and effectiveness experienced in teacher education be translated into programs that prepare the future professionals in other fields? Work-integrated learning strategies abound in many other disciplines where there is the engagement of university academics and professional practitioners (Billett, 2006). The seconded approach is one of greater commitment by all stakeholders and therefore more deeply embedded in partnerships rather than mere 'liaisons' or 'guest lecturers'. The challenge is for others to consider the alternatives.

It is acknowledged that limitations of this study are the small sample size and the single site for the investigation. However this focused investigation was instrumental in determining the future of the seconded staff approach. On the journey to better understanding the seconded professional role, issues of cultural transition, adaptation of professional identity and added value to the strategic direction of the faculty are apparent. The effect that this group has on the work of the sessional academic staff still needs to be measured. Future research will investigate the longer-term effect of how their work lives have changed; what other opportunities are yet to be revealed.

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