**Australian Universities and the Casual Academic Underclass – 794 words**

**Purpose:** Despite their strategic value to the teaching mission of a university, little is known about the line management of the approximately two thirds of Australian academics who are employed on ‘casual’ employment contracts. Consequently, this study explores the ambiguous roles of formal and informal university line managers who supervise casual academic employees. Australian universities have undergone considerable restructuring over the past few decades. While student numbers have increased considerably, universities have become fully integrated into the international tertiary education market. Many now offer both offshore and online courses and recruit international students to study in Australia (Scott et al, 2008). Additionally, universities have had to contend with ongoing reductions in public funding and adapt to technological innovation such as online course delivery. The staffing profile has also changed considerably towards the greater use of short term and contingent employment arrangements, especially around course delivery (NTEU, 2011; Ryan et al, 2008). These changes have placed considerable pressure and responsibility on shrinking numbers of permanent staff to accommodate increased student numbers. In turn, new responsibilities and informal line management functions have evolved around managing the growing numbers of contingent workers (NTEU, 2011). The new line management position is that of a course or subject co-ordinator. Their functions are not documented in workplace agreements but an increasing number of academics are being asked to fill subject coordinator responsibilities and manage sessional staff. This has important implications for the career development of both the subject co-ordinators and the casual academic staff on contracts.

**Method:** Data is based on interviews conducted with a sample of formal and informal line managers who are responsible for casual academics. The data was collated from three separate, but related studies, undertaken within an Australian university between 2010 and 2012. The objective of all three studies was to better understand the management and experiences of casual academics through surveys, focus groups and interviews with casual academics and their managers.

**Findings:** This study found that the line management of casual academics is informally delegated to subject coordinators who accidently become responsible for the selection, recruitment, work allocation, and performance management of casual academic staff. The enactment of these tasks is highly individualised and inconsistent depending on the course co-ordinators’ workload, willingness and ability to undertake these roles with little or no support from either the university or their department. In general, it was clear that both heads of department and subject coordinators recognise the strategic role of casual employment in maintaining the university’s teaching function. Permanent staff were reliant on casual staff for running tutorials and their own career progression as subject co-ordinators as they could not find time to undertake their own research without them. In general these findings mirror those of previous landmark studies of casual academics conducted in Australia (Fine et al., 1992; Junor, 2004; Percy et al., 2008; Strachan et al. 2012) presenting an overall account of casual academics being invisible to formal university line management structures, policies and procedures.

**Practical implications:** Although this study indicated that both heads of department and subject coordinators were aware of issues with central systems negatively affecting the ability of casual academics to carry out their work effectively, there were no examples of action taken to correct these problems. From our findings, the consequences of lack of policy or policy knowledge are related to recruitment and performance development practices. Recruitment and the allocation of work hours for casual academics are highly dependent on personal networks and preferences and is largely unmonitored. Apart from personal preference in staff selection, reasons behind hiring decision are confused between providing academic experience and income support to research students and providing the best quality teaching experience. Performance development is similarly problematic, but for different reasons. Supervision, monitoring and the development of casual academics is time consuming, distracting from other tasks on which subject coordinators are judged, so it is afforded little attention (Percy et al., 2008). The extreme outcome of not having regular performance development and feedback is that a casual academic becomes the subject of a student complaint and is not employed again. Problems of inadequate budget allowances were frequently mentioned in relation to the lack of training and development; however, cost neutral practices - such as inviting casuals to join in mainstream academic meetings and workshops to develop tacit knowledge were rarely employed.

**Originality:** Although prior research has identified the problems and conditions faced by casual academics, little attention has been given to their day-to-day management and relationships from the perspectives of their line managers, the subject coordinators and heads of department which is the focus of this study indicating large gaps in relation to equality and inclusion for casual academic staff.

**Keywords:** casual academic; Australian university; line manager; SHRM

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