Governing Precarity: The “Problem” of Sessional Lecturers and the Role of University Governance

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Problems and Solutions

1. What are the problems associated with sessional teaching as a form of precarious work?

2. What role might university governance (broadly defined) play in addressing these problems?
The Problems

- Precarious work problem: Contractual nature of employment relationship
- Quality of teaching problem: Employing sessional lecturers lowers the quality of teaching or academic programs
- Support of teaching problem: Sessional instructors do not receive the support they need
- Academic working environment problem: Sessional instructors are not regarded as legitimate members of the academic community.
Precarious Work Problem

- The problem is embedded/framed in the contractual relationship between the University and the employee.
- A function of neo-liberal reforms
- Labour issue
- Governed by management, labour relations, governing boards
Quality of Teaching Problem

– Assumption that hiring sessional faculty will reduce the quality of teaching
  • Because full-time, permanent faculty are better teachers (in the classroom)
  • Because the part-time nature of their work means that students have less contact and receive less support (outside the classroom)

– Major concern of public, government, accrediting bodies
Little research to support assumption that sessional lecturers are “Second-class teachers”

Sessional faculty report that there may be access/support issues given limited availability
This is a researchable problem that should be taken up by academic governance (department, faculty, senate)

What does the employment of increasing numbers of sessional instructors mean for the quality of our programs?

What can we learn from peer and student evaluations of teaching?

Do students perceive differences?
Sessional instructors do not receive the support that they need:
  – Ongoing access to LMS/email/library
  – Space to meet students
  – Educational development

Some responsibility must be assumed by departments, faculties, support units
Sessional lecturers are “invisible”
Often excluded from program/department meetings
May not be regarded as legitimate members of the academic community of the unit
Requires action at the department level
The Problem

– Positioning the problem as a labour issue leads to the assumption that it can only be addressed as a labour issue (management, governing boards)

– Many of the problems need to be considered at the unit level (quality, support, working environment) by department chairs and collegial processes

– Voice in governance (at the local, faculty and central levels)