



# Expert guide: Sessional staff and embedding employABILITY thinking

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## ***Sessional Staff /sessional stáéf/ noun.***

*Any teachers in higher education employed on a casual, short-term contract, or sessional basis. This may include lecturers, tutors, unit, program and subject convenors, demonstrators and markers. (BLASST.edu.au)*

## Why are sessional staff important?

Nationally and globally the majority of teaching at universities is undertaken by sessional staff. In the Australian context, over the period 1989-2013 Andrews et al. (2016) found that the reliance on sessional staff across the higher education sector grew by 221%. As a result, the teachers who carry the responsibility for engaging students in employABILITY thinking, literacies and capabilities are likely to be sessional.

Sessional staff are not a homogeneous group. The six key groups of sessional staff in Australia are

- undergraduates,
- postgraduates,
- staff who have recently completed their PhDs,
- industry professionals,
- retired academics, and
- staff who teach wholly online.

Industry professionals offer a particularly strong link to employability.

**EmployABILITY** is the ability to find, create and sustain meaningful work across the career lifespan.

**EmployABILITY thinking** engages students in their cognitive and social development as capable and informed individuals, professionals and social citizens.

(Bennett, 2017)

## Sessional staff and employABILITY thinking

Many industry professionals are employed as sessional teaching staff. They bring to higher education a body of knowledge and real-world or authentic experience that is up-to-date, even 'cutting edge', together with links to professional networks and associations. These contributions position industry professionals as legitimate and valued teachers and also as staff with current knowledge about a diverse range of employability issues and thinking in their field. As such, industry professionals can offer a broad range of support for employability. These include

- input into curriculum design and development groups,
- providing authentic, real-world examples or case studies in classes,
- extending invitations for other industry colleagues to provide guest lectures, group mentoring, industry visits or placements, and
- judging student presentations and/or awards.

Any higher education institution that is committed to developing the employability of its students needs to ensure that all sessional staff share an understanding of employABILITY thinking and have the resources to embed it into their teaching activities. To achieve this, the organisation must provide all sessional staff with professional development and resources on employability and its value in learning and teaching.

Higher education institutions have a role to play in valuing industry aware learning and teaching. This could be achieved by recognising excellence in the development of employability through

- learning and teaching awards (at department, faculty and/or institutional levels),
- showcasing good practice at seminars and learning and teaching events,
- rewarding good practice through promotions criteria and career advancement, and
- introducing industry led awards for good practice (engaging students to vote on the awards).

## Top tips

Institutions need to provide

1. professional development on employability for all sessional staff. This should support sessional staff to embed employABILITY thinking and literacies into teaching strategies and learning activities;
2. structured learning opportunities for industry professionals to share with students and other teachers their authentic insights and knowledge into employability in their field of expertise. These opportunities can be both formal and informal; and
3. invitations to sessional staff who are industry professionals to be members of curriculum design, development and review panels, to enable their input into new ideas for contemporary employABILITY thinking.

## Things to avoid

Sessional staff are often only paid for their teaching hours on campus and may have many other commitments away from campus. Avoid assumptions that sessional staff including industry professionals are available at all times to support the university's employability agenda or strategy.

Avoid offering professional development to sessional staff that is inflexible in terms of days, time and delivery offered, and which is unpaid.

## Further reading and resources



[www.blasst.edu.au](http://www.blasst.edu.au)

- Andrews, S., Bare, I., Bentley, P., Goedegebuure, L., Pugsley, C. & Rance, B. (2016). *Contingent academic employment in Australian universities*. Melbourne: LH Martin Institute and Australian Higher Education Industrial Association. <http://www.lhmartininstitute.edu.au/documents/publications/2016-contingent-academic-employment-in-australian-universities-updatedapr16.pdf>
- Harvey, M. & Fredericks, V. (eds). (2015). *Quality learning and teaching with sessional staff*. HERDSA Guide. Milperra: HERDSA.
- Harvey, M. (2017). Editorial: Quality learning and teaching with sessional staff: Systematising good practice for academic development. *International Journal of Academic Development*, 22(1), 1-6. doi: 10.1080/1360144X.2017.1266753

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