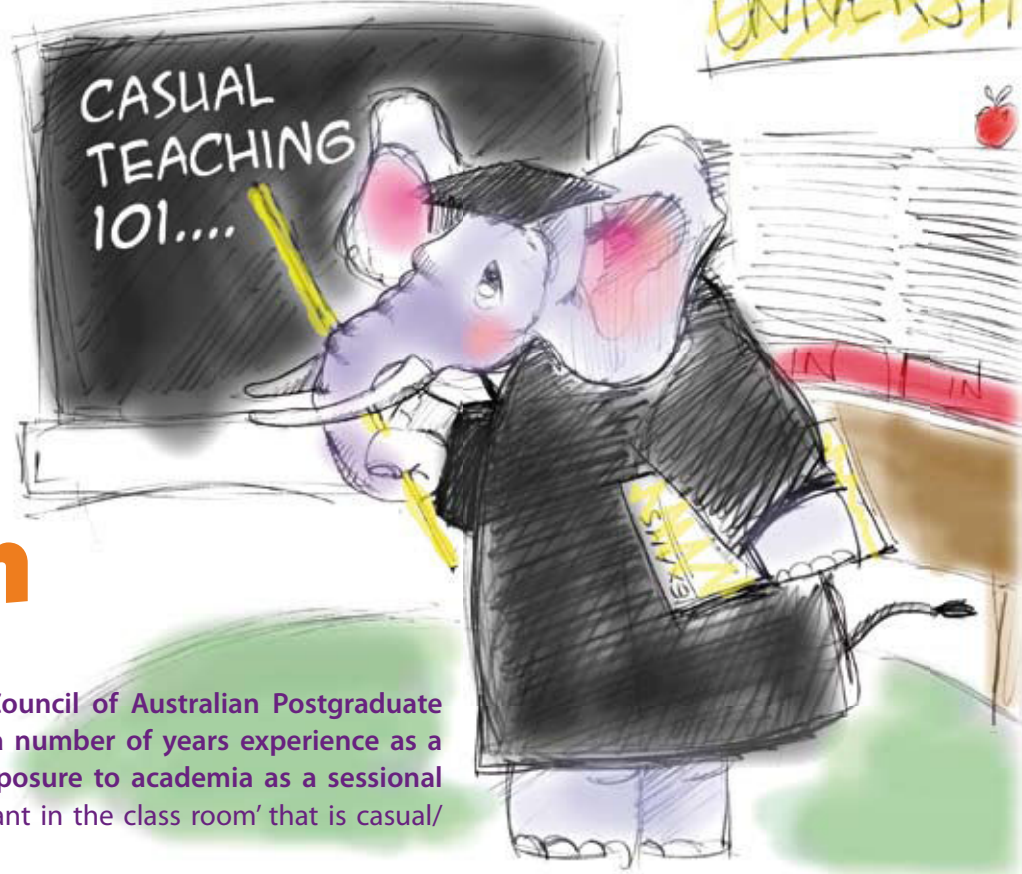


The Elephant in the Classroom



Nigel Palmer is President of the Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations (CAPA). He also has a number of years experience as a casual academic. He retells his exposure to academia as a sessional lecturer, and talks about the 'elephant in the classroom' that is casual/sessional teaching.

My first experience as a casual teacher was on very short notice. One of the other tutors had quit in week three of first semester. For me it felt like a great honour, and I set about preparing as best I could for hosting my first tutorial in two days time.

There was an induction for casual teachers run by the staff development unit which had occurred several weeks earlier. I went to visit them anyway to see if they had any materials on how to run an effective tutorial, and anything else which may be handy.

There was a handbook, which included lots of useful information on how to call security and what to do in the event of a fire. It had some points on teaching as well, some basics regarding assessment and how to work with large tutorial groups.

All of this was good stuff, but I felt I needed a little more before I confronted (or was confronted by) my first class of students. Despite all the preparation I managed to squeeze into the time that I had, at the opening of that first class I was terrified.

Regardless, I pushed through and by the end of this, and every class since, one thing became clear: I loved it, I absolutely loved teaching at university.

Later on during that first semester another tutor quit, and I was approached to see if I wanted to pick up some more hours. By this time I was really on top of things – tutorials were running smoothly and I was confident working with the material.

I had even begun developing my own teaching materials in addition to those already available, on assessment, on paragraphing and expression, on referencing, on structuring an argument, etc. I could also do with some extra cash.

I was confident at that time that I had it sussed with respect to the effective use of

At the end of semester I added up the actual hours I had worked. My conclusion? I was working for the equivalent of five dollars an hour.

my time. The high hourly rate as I saw it enabled me to work the minimum number of hours for a reasonable rate of pay, leaving as much time free as possible to continue with my own research. I happily took on the extra hours, and it was around this time that the first wave of assessment came in.

I was told by my supervisor that it should take around twenty minutes to mark a 2,500

word paper. I couldn't understand then, why it still took me over an hour in many cases, reviewing the paper, writing comments and feedback, and, often, just trying to figure out what the hell it was this student was trying to say.

I found very quickly that there were two kinds of papers that were easy to mark: those that were very good and those that were very bad. The hard ones (and the most time consuming) were those in the middle.

I was very conscious however that this is what I thought teaching was meant to be about. The whole idea, as I saw it, was to identify and encourage talented students, reward those who worked hard to do well, and support those who had the chance to improve their skills with the kind of feedback and resources that would help them do so.

Around this time I began tracking my hours. Not because I thought I was being ripped off; I still felt privileged to be given the opportunity to teach.

I started tracking my hours so I could track my performance on working my way through the piles of essays that now seemed so much a part of my life. Before long I began tracking my times for other things too; consultation times, email contact, reviewing drafts, requests for high distinctions and so on.

It ended up that I also had to factor in one thing that I did not anticipate - the time consuming task of tracking down and responding to repeated, and rather astonishing occurrences of plagiarism.

At the end of semester I added up the actual hours I had worked. My conclusion? I was working for the equivalent of five dollars an hour.

It occurred to me, in what I now look back on as my darkest moments of marking despair, that many of those with secure employment in the university may not have had the opportunity to mark an undergraduate paper in years; the majority of this work, along with the hosting of labs and tutorials and the bulk of the contact with students was all being done by casual employees.

Many of them were postgraduate students like myself who had to balance teaching work with their own research. I was also aware that many other casuals had completed their degree and were dependant on teaching work as their sole source of income. Many of these had families to support.

It struck me as terribly unfair that all of these hard working and committed individuals were carrying the higher education sector on

their backs - for the equivalent of five dollars an hour. It also struck me that this was in sharp contrast to the kind of salary that the vice chancellor would have enjoyed.

It then occurred to me that if a group of casuals got together and discussed their concerns, they would resolve that the most sensible thing to do would be, around the eve of the marks closing off, to march down to the administration building in full academic dress, preferably with a megaphone, and put to the VC that, for five bucks an hour he/she could "mark their own damn papers" and leave them all right there on the doorstep.

I believe the compelling thing about this story is not that this could be possible, but rather the reasons why this could never happen.

It is not that casuals could not get together to share their concerns. It is not as if their concerns don't point to a scandal, and the best kept secret in higher education. It is rather that casuals care enough about their duty as teachers that they would never abandon their students' papers on the Vice Chancellor's doorstep.

It is enough of a scandal that casuals carry the sector on their backs for the equivalent

of five dollars an hour. But a further tragedy is that the context they are working in is actually engineered against both quality and equity. Both teacher and student are being ripped off; it should not be an act of charity just to do your job properly.

Casual teachers should be paid for the work that they do. They should also be able to do the best job they can for their students without digging deeper and deeper into their own pockets to do so.

If casuals didn't care about what they did then there would be no problem - they would simply run poorly prepared sessions and dish out arbitrary assessment without feedback.

Casuals would never settle for that, and students shouldn't either.

If there is an "elephant in the room" in higher education then this is it. The moment casuals start getting together and realise how many others share the same concerns, how deeply into the sector this problem runs, and what might happen if they choose to no longer suffer in isolation, that elephant is going to get pretty cranky indeed...

Know Your Rights!

Take on Semester 2 with the NTEU's Casual and Sessional Website

Do you know what your letter of appointment should say?

Do you know which duties attract lecture rates and which are at tutorial rates?

Do you know about your superannuation contributions?

For information about all these issues and much more, visit the NTEU's new web site for casual and sessional academics.

Unicasual.com.au has important information on every aspect of academic casual/sessional employment, including the difference between being on the union negotiated collective agreement or an Australian Workplace Agreement (AWA), OH&S issues, collegiality in your workplace and looking after your career.

We would like to hear your experiences as an academic casual/sessional staff member. Tell us what you think with our 15 minute survey, where we ask about your working conditions, how you feel about your role in the academic community and if you believe casual/sessional teaching has benefits for your long term career.

To complete the survey go to www.unicasual.com.au and follow the links.

