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Leadership and development versus
casualization of language professionals in
Australian universities:
Mapping the present for our future

Abstract

This contribution reports on on-going research on staffing issues in languages and cultures programs in Australian universities. As part of the 2011–2012 Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) / Office for Learning and Teaching (OLT)-funded project 'Leadership for future generations: A national network for university languages', it posits a strong emphasis on research, and argues that the erosion of senior positions and the growth of casualized teaching militates against a fundamental principle of our work as language academics. It also acknowledges the need, in order to counter both trends, to collect accurate hard data, and proposes a template for doing so.

1. Background

On Wednesday 21 September 2011, *The Australian's* Higher Education Supplement published an alarming report about the rapidly growing extent of casualization in the academic workforce in Australia (Hare 2011). Inspired by the release of a study conducted by Emmaline Bexley for the Centre for the Study of Higher Education at the University of Melbourne (Bexley 2011; hereafter referred to as the 'Bexley Report'), this press report was generic in nature, and did not address the particular situation of languages and cultures programs. It nonetheless provides an important context for the languages-specific research of the same problem undertaken by members of the project team of the 2011–2012 Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) / Office for Learning and Teaching (OLT)-funded project 'Leadership for future generations: A national network for university languages'.¹

This research has grown out of other work we have been involved in over the past several years, including in particular the two Australian Research Council (ARC)-funded projects undertaken for the Australian Academy of the Humanities (AAH) on beginners' languages and attrition and retention issues (Nettelbeck et al. 2007 and 2009). The place of this current research in the ALTC/OLT project is as follows. While the central objective of 'Leadership for future generations' is the creation and establishment of the Languages and Cultures Network for Australian Universities (LCNAU), the project, as its name implies, also has a clear focus on developing and maintaining leadership in languages, something we hope can be achieved through more systematic mentoring, and also through a strong and continuous emphasis on research, which for all sorts of reasons, we see as a fundamental underpinning of all university education.

Our work is thus based on a *commitment* expressed in the LCNAU principles (see the Appendix to the Introduction to this volume). The principle most essential to our present project is No 3:

LCNAU embraces the principles that tertiary languages and cultures programs constitute a distinctive and important academic discipline and that continuing research is an inalienable dimension of the maintenance and development of the discipline in Australian universities.

The demand that the work of language and culture academics be recognized as a true and full discipline, and the acknowledgement of the centrality of continuing research for the maintenance and development of that discipline should, of course, be uncontroversial. Yet in many Australian universities, they have often been subject to morale-destroying undermining and disputation by others.

2. The research masterplan

Our present work on leadership, juniorization and casualization is the first part of a two-pronged project. In this initial phase which we focus on here, our goal is to

explore the extent and interaction among these three critical elements for languages staffing and profiling in the tertiary sector. It is on this phase that this contribution focuses. In the second phase, we hope to put the network itself to use to address the challenges. For the latter to occur successfully, strategies might involve greater information sharing, dissemination, strategy identification and implementation. As we see it, such processes (which of course are not intended to be exclusive or prescriptive) contain strong potential for mentoring — to assist with orderly career development across languages around the country, including increased permanent staffing and better working conditions. We can note that such a proposal is broadly convergent with a number of principles enumerated in the Bexley Report, particularly those which stress stability of employment, the reduction of casualization, and the need for support of both junior and senior staff. Moreover, the Bexley approach, like the one taken here, recognises the need to operate on a national scale.

2.1 A methodological proviso

One of the problems we face, when investigating workforce issues, is that much of the existing evidence is anecdotal, especially for the past decade. The Bexley Report offers some invaluable contextual hard data, but as we have noted, it does not address the languages sector explicitly. A key task for us, therefore, within that specific context, is to effect a shift from anecdotal to data-based understanding through directed and systematic research. We are seeking to develop an accurate account of each of the three elements (leadership, juniorization and casualization) over a period of time — retrospectively from the present 2012 to 2005 if possible — and across the nation. And we want to examine the impact of each of the factors on the programs that are offered, on staff workloads, and on research profiles. As indicated below, these are no small tasks.

3. Leadership and juniorization

For the topic of leadership,² we have set as our starting-point the *Widening our Horizons* report done by Barry Leal and others in 1991. This substantial document already drew attention more than thirty years ago to the paucity of senior staff in languages, when compared to other humanities areas. Individual languages reports done for the NLLIA in the course of the 1990s similarly described declining numbers of Level E and D appointments in languages over a period of time (see, for example, Cryle, Freadman and Hanna 1993: 109–111 for French). And today, the anecdotal evidence from across the sector is that the trend has worsened.

To test that anecdotal evidence, we carried out a head count of all Level Es (full professors) in languages/cultures programs found in Australia's eight leading universities, known as the Group of Eight (Go8). We chose the Go8 because, as a group, they have a strong rhetorical support for languages,³ and because we expected that they would give the rosier possible picture for recognised leadership positions

in languages. What we found was not at all rosy. There are indeed comparatively broad languages offerings in Go8 universities, but there are a total of just 26 Level Es. Of those, 18 are in the Asian area (in which we include Arabic, by convention), and eight in the non-Asian area. Disturbingly, almost half of all Level E appointments (12/26) are concentrated in two universities. There are at most three Level Es in any of the other six universities, and four of those institutions have no Level Es in European languages at all. Any residual rosiness of the picture is further diminished by the fact that many of the professors in the Asian area are not involved directly in language teaching, and that several, in both areas, have broad briefs such as Asian or European Studies, rather than being attached to a particular language—culture discipline.

We are, in this way, beginning to establish data to track a systematic tendency towards juniorization: which we can define as the paucity of senior positions (Levels D-E) coupled with a marked tendency to replace them, if at all, with staff at more junior levels, typically Level A or B. The Bexley Report backs our presumption that this pattern stems primarily from financial constraints rather than from any academic or discipline-related reasons. While it is repeated nationally across the tertiary sector, we have every reason to believe that the trend is even stronger in languages than in other disciplines.

Of course, there is always the question of the need for senior staff in languages. From within the languages profession, the question comes up sometimes in relation to the occasional bad appointment or in relation to their perceived financial cost. But mostly, it arises from outside our profession, from those university administrators or representatives of the nation's monolingual ethos who fail to understand what is needed to foster and maintain that discipline and are more concerned about financial short-termism at the expense of the benefits of long-term presence, leadership and viability. In other words, the level of senior staffing we have is a key measure of how seriously we are taken, or not.

In practical terms, not only do senior staff have the capacity (and one might add the duty) to use their experience and achievements to serve as models and mentors to more junior staff, Level E Professors, more than any others in our universities, have the authority and the power to speak effectively for their fields in the forums where decisions are made about budgeting, staffing and curriculum matters. They also have a power of advocacy beyond the university, in all kinds of social and political settings. While their presence may not necessarily guarantee the wellbeing of a field of study and teaching, their absence is an incontrovertible sign of vulnerability.

4. Casualization

Our second category, casualization, includes both people who work by the hour — 'sessionals' — and those on short-term contracts, typically under a full year.

As the Bexley Report shows, there are legitimate reasons for some level of casual staffing, including flexibility requirements for both employers and employees. But the report also shows that in the 1990–2007 period, the percentage of casual to permanent staff has more than doubled, from 10% to over 20% across the tertiary sector. We have good reason to believe that these figures are much worse for languages: our hypothesis, based on both hard knowledge and anecdotal evidence, is that in most languages programs, casual staff typically outnumber permanent staff, that is, that they represent more than 50% of the workforce. However, we do not yet have up-to-date information about this critical cohort, and one of our goals in this phase of our research is to gather recent data from as many institutions as possible.

There is no shortage of reasons why we should be worried about the massive increase of casualization across the sector. Increased insecurity, reduced morale, and sheer exploitation are obvious ones, and they underpin the finding of the Bexley Report that two out of five academics under the age of 30 are planning to leave the sector: which is 40% of the new blood presently in a rapidly ageing workforce. There are all sorts of practical problems, too: with timetabling, the daily management of casuals, and the monitoring of curriculum, marking, and of quality of teaching, etc. All of these elements impinge directly on the workload of coordinators. They also lead to difficulties in maintaining continuity in program design and offerings (which can lead to student disaffection). Even more importantly, the excessive casualization of work in languages cannot but lower research expectations in relation both to individuals and to languages and cultures programs, further sapping the notion of an academic discipline.

5. First steps in addressing these challenges

On the question of how the issues related to leadership and casualization can be addressed, our first step has been to gather together the people most concerned, in order to initiate serious and on-going discussions and the formation of a permanent network. Within the inaugural LCNAU Colloquium held in September 2011 in Melbourne, a special Forum for sessionals was held, from which a partial report is published elsewhere in these proceedings (see Ferrari and Hajek, this volume). The online questionnaire developed to gain insight into the experiences of these teachers can, we believe, serve as a model for broader collection of data of this kind.

A second step, for both the leadership and casualization issues, will be the systematic collection of statistical and trend data from as many languages programs from across the nation as possible. As previously noted, we hope to go back to 2005 to build a national picture of staffing profiles, including the proportion of sessionals; enrolments; teaching hours; and the way they are divided across sessional and more permanent staff. We are also interested in the relationship between these questions of teaching delivery and the research outputs of individuals and programs. In line with what is stated above, there is likely to be an inverse relationship between increasing casualization and overall research output.

The reason why we have chosen 2005 is because there is an existing survey up to that period, conducted by Baldauf and White (2010). That survey is only a partial one, however, and it has a number of gaps through no fault of the authors. Our aim is to establish and gather something more complete, and to institute a process that can continue indefinitely. We believe that the knowledge gained and shared will be an ongoing source of strength for our sector.

6. The data template

The template that has evolved had its beginnings in a pilot collection of data done by Greg Hainge at the University of Queensland. This work looked at large issues, such as staff-student ratios and staff establishments, and comparative staffing levels among the Arts Faculty and other Faculties, over a ten-year period. The figures were based on data collected by the University, and while enormously valuable in terms of major trends, they did not, in the end, allow us to answer the questions we wished to ask in relation to senior-junior and continuing-casual staff ratios.

A second pilot collection was therefore conducted, based on a template of our own design. A copy of the template is provided in the Appendix. It seeks to register data semester-by-semester, and subject-by-subject. It records total student load for the subject, and the total teaching commitment in hours. It shows the proportion of teaching done by different levels of permanent and contract staff, and the proportion done by casual or sessional staff. It allows a distinction between Teaching and Research, Research Only, and Teaching-Focused staff.

The template was trialled in three different programs — French, Indonesian and Italian — in two different universities. Detailed feedback from respondents helped refine the template, and pointed out the dangers of considering any single semester snapshot as typical. Even taken with extreme caution, however, the indicative results reveal the potential interest of the data-gathering project.

The French example was based on a significant cohort of first-year Semester 1 beginners. It showed that 16% of the teaching load was carried by a continuing Level C, with the rest (84%) being shared among seven different casuals.

The Indonesian example covered four different small enrolment first semester language subjects. Over 60% of the total teaching load was carried by contract staff at Level A or by casual staff, the remainder being done by continuing Level A staff. (An accompanying explanatory note suggested that a more normal pattern in the particular program would be a sharing among a Level C, a Level B, and ‘some sessionals’.)

With respect to Italian, for a mid-level, middle-sized subject, the casual load was 46% (2 persons), with 31% covered by a contract Level A, and the remainder (23%) covered by a Level E. In a larger first year course, only 13% was in the hands of a permanent staff member (Level A), the remaining 87% was divided amongst five sessionals.

Even these few examples — drawn randomly across three languages — highlight the dependence on casual staff for teaching delivery.

Only when much more information has been gathered will it be possible to begin to frame conclusions that might inform the kind of national report that can include guidelines and recommendations for sector-wide improvements. We do however expect that this template will be found by colleagues to be a useful tool for tracking the staffing profiles in their programs over time. We also believe that sharing of such data, while it will undoubtedly require respecting the anonymity of individual institutions,⁴ will be of benefit to everyone: to individuals, to programs, and indeed to universities themselves, which will be able to compare their performances and situation to national trends.

We consider it to be uncontroversial that for genuine, positive change to be effected in the nature and quality of staffing in languages education in Australian universities, then real, up-to-date and quantifiable national data are essential to make our case.

7. Conclusion

The creation of an LCNAU database for mapping the staffing of courses we teach will require work, funding, consultation and careful logistical planning; but the existence of such a cross-sector data-base is, in our view, an essential element in the sector's self-definition and defence. We are of course aware of the difficulty of asking colleagues to undertake any additional administrative tasks. For this reason, it is pleasing that the pilot data-gathering was able to be carried out with very little stress. We anticipate that retrospective data-gathering will be more time-consuming, but believe that if we can at least get broad acceptance, through existing LCNAU contacts, of the importance of getting the process under way in 2012, we will have a very solid basis for a national report with a promise of institutional and political impact.

LCNAU is the emanation of a grass-roots response to a sense of crisis and urgency in the tertiary languages and cultures sector in Australia. While recognising how much the sector has been weakened over past decades, it is committed to articulating the most effective collaborative ways to foster and develop continuing strengths, to resist further erosion, and to assert its voice in the public sphere. The greatest strengths in the sector are the academic staff who compose it, and this project has as its *raison d'être* the fullest possible development of their potential as leaders, teachers and researchers. We know that the stakes are very high, and we believe that it is important to harness both collective memory and energy if we are to wrest back, for our profession, the status and the influence it should have, and that our nation needs it to have in the globalizing century that is already upon us.

Notes

1. Australian Learning and Teaching Council, now replaced by the Office for Learning and Teaching (OLT).
2. This section draws in part on Nettelbeck, Hajek and Woods (2012).
3. For example:
 “Learning to speak a Language Other Than English (LOTE) is increasingly important for effective participation in a globalized world. Group of Eight universities play a vital role in the delivery and support of languages education in Australia. All 29 languages currently available at tertiary level in Australia are offered at Go8 universities. In addition, a wide range of LOTE incentives are available both for entry to and while enrolled in programs of study at Go8 universities. The Go8 welcomes the opportunity to work with government, schools and other higher education institutions to promote and encourage the study of Languages Other Than English.”
 (Group of Eight, *Go8 LOTE Incentive Schemes*, 2009: 1)
4. As was done, for instance, in the LASP projects (see Nettelbeck et al. 2007, 2009).

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Appendix: The template

Template for languages and cultures programs

Please fill in **one** form for **each** semester-length subject. Add any additional notes in the blue box below which might help clarify the figures you provide in the table.

UNIVERSITY: _____ YEAR: _____
 SCHOOL: _____ SEMESTER: _____
 SUBJECT: _____ EFTSL TOTAL for this subject: _____
 TOTAL TEACHING COMMITMENT for this subject (hrs per semester, adding together all types and levels of employment): _____

Employment Type	Employment Function	Employment Level					
		Level E			Level D		
Continuing		Total number of staff	Total number of teaching hours for the semester (all staff)	Average weekly teaching hours for each staff	Total number of staff	Total number of teaching hours for the semester (all staff)	Average weekly teaching hours for each staff member
		Teaching & Research					
		Research Only					
		Teaching Focussed					
		<i>Total</i>	0		0	0	0
Contract (> 12 months)		Total number of staff	Total number of teaching hours for the semester (all staff)	Average weekly teaching hours for each staff	Total number of staff	Total number of teaching hours for the semester (all staff)	Average weekly teaching hours for each staff member
		Teaching & Research					
		Research Only					
		Teaching Focussed					
		<i>Total</i>	0		0	0	0
Short-term & casual		Total number of staff	Total number of teaching hours for the semester	Average weekly teaching hours for each staff member	Comments:		
		Teaching & Research					
		Research Only					
		Teaching Focussed					
		<i>Total</i>	0				

* Average teaching hours per staff member = Total number of hours divided by total number of staff divided by number of weeks in the semester.

Employment Level								
Level C			Level B			Level A		
Total number of staff	Total number of teaching hours for the semester (all staff)	Average weekly teaching hours for each staff	Total number of staff	Total number of teaching hours for the semester (all staff)	Average weekly teaching hours for each staff	Total number of staff	Total number of teaching hours for the semester (all staff)	Average weekly teaching hours for each staff member
0		0	0		0	0		0
Level C			Level B			Level A		
Total number of staff	Total number of teaching hours for the semester (all staff)	Average weekly teaching hours for each staff	Total number of staff	Total number of teaching hours for the semester (all staff)	Average weekly teaching hours for each staff	Total number of staff	Total number of teaching hours for the semester (all staff)	Average weekly teaching hours for each staff member
0		0	0		0	0		0



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