

# The frustrated career: casual employment in higher education

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The use of casual staff, including casual teaching staff, is a common practice in Australian universities and the numbers of casual staff in the sector has increased significantly in the last decade. The traditional profile for casual teachers was that of industry expert and students. Recent research has shown that the casual teacher is now more likely to be a person holding several casual jobs and seeking a career. Likewise, general staff in casual positions are often people who would prefer job security and a career. This research was conducted at a regional Australian university and used a questionnaire targeting staff in both the Technical and Further Education (TAFE) and higher education divisions in all occupational groups as well as in depth interviews of casual teaching staff. The findings show that the traditional profile no longer applies. Staff employed in casual positions often hold more than one job, at more than one institution and are seeking job security. They frequently, but unsuccessfully use casual work as a career strategy. The result is frustrated careers.

## Introduction

The use of casual employment in the wider Australian workplace, including in higher education, is a long-standing practice. It has risen, according to Burgess, Campbell and May (2008) from 15.8 per cent in 1984 to 26.9 per cent in 2006. They point out that the extent of casualisation varies by industry and exceeds 50 per cent in industries such as hospitality and retail. Through a cross-national comparison of modes of employment Campbell (2004) concluded that casualisation in Australia is distinctive in its restrictions of rights and benefits for casual employees, the high incidence and spread of casualisation and its long term nature. Whereas traditionally casual employment was used when there was a 'special' need such as covering peak periods, absences or unpredictable demands, in

Australia it is used by many employers for jobs that are predictable, long-term and on-going (Campbell, 2004).

The dominant characteristics of casual employees, according to the Australian Government Productivity Commission (AGPC), are that they work part-time, they are young (almost half are below the age of 25), they are female with care responsibilities and they are generally working in lower skilled occupations. Casual employment is more common in regional and rural areas influenced in part by the itinerant and seasonal nature of agricultural work (AGPC, 2006, p. xxi).

In the higher education sector in the ten years prior to 2005, casual staff numbers increased by 40 per cent, while overall university employment only increased by 11 per cent (DEST, 2006). Following a sustained push by the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) high levels of fixed term and casual employment in the

university sector led to the negotiation of the Higher Education Conditions of Employment (HECE) award in 1998, which limited the situations in which non-standard modes of employment could be used. However HECE was overridden by legislative reform and the Higher Education Workplace Relations Requirements (HEWRRs) in 2005 which prescribed that no restrictions could be placed on the number of casual staff employed by a university (Rood, 2005; van Barnveld, 2009). The present federal government abolished HEWRRs requirements. However, even prior to HEWRRs, casual employment periods of up to 10 years were reported in the higher education sector (Junor, 2004). It remains to be seen whether the new political climate and the *Fair Work Act (2009)* will see a decrease in the use of casual staff.

The positions for which casual employment is used in the higher education sector include teaching, research, administration and non-administrative roles such as cleaning and maintenance, overall a very different profile to that proposed by the Productivity Commission (2006). Research by Junor (2004, p. 277) shows that casual employment represents around 40 per cent of academic staff employment, which is significantly higher than the Australian average rate of casual employment. In the TAFE sector, more than 50 per cent of teachers are employed on a casual basis (Forward, 2007).

The traditional labour source for casual academic teachers was industry experts and students. In research conducted in the USA, Gappa and Leslie (1993) found that four categories reflected the casual academic workforce. These were the traditional *industry expert and professional* whose primary employment is a full-time job in industry; the *freelancer*, whose preference is to be employed in a variety of part-time casual jobs; the *career ender*, the person who has reduced their hours in their transition to retirement; and the *aspiring academic*, highly qualified people seeking academic work. According to Gappa and Leslie, in their sample, the aspiring academic was in the minority. Likewise Husbands and Davis (2000) nine-category typology is reflective of Gappa and Leslie's categories and includes postgraduate students, contract researchers and/or teachers, specialist teachers such as the industry expert, and early retirees. Former graduates who are seeking academic careers are included in 'postgraduate students'.

The typology put forward by Gappa and Leslie in 1993 does not seem to reflect the situation in the

2000s. The description of their categories suggests that the people in their sample freely chose their mode of employment. In the contemporary Australian context the degree of choice experienced by casual staff in selecting their mode of employment is questioned (Kimber, 2003; Pocock, 2003). Some take on casual work because of its part-time nature and opportunity for flexibility while bemoaning its insecurity; others accept casual work as a matter of survival (Kimber, 2003). For many, their casual academic position is their only source of income. Others still hold several part-time casual jobs in order to earn enough to survive, often at more than one university. This creates a somewhat different picture from Gappa and Leslie's *freelancer* who they claimed prefers to be employed in a variety of casual part-time jobs. A large number of casual teaching staff, according to Junor's (2004, p. 279) research, hold between two and five part-time and casual jobs, none of which was a primary job. These realities undermine the argument that casual employees gain flexibility and work/life balance and that casual work is their preference.

The experiences discussed in this paper came from a larger study in a regional Australian university, which explored the reasons people take on casual work in the university, the extent to which this type of employment is a choice and the extent to which it provides job and income security and work/life balance. We expected that many teachers in particular, but also general staff in casual positions, would indicate a preference for more secure part-time work or for full-time work. The experiences of those casual staff whose preference was for a secure career in the higher education sector is the subject of this paper. The findings from this sample are compared against the categories identified by Gappa and Leslie and explore the relevance of those categories in the current Australian higher education context. This paper proposes that the *Aspiring Academic*, that is those seeking a career, is no longer a minority among part-time casual workers in the higher education sector.

## Literature

Australia has seen a change in the profile of casual employees. There is a trend away from the traditional idea of young women with care responsibilities and students, as stated in the AGPC (2006), to people engaged in work that is on-going in nature and where employers employ people on a casual basis, for jobs

that would have previously been permanent. Buchanan (2004, p. 11) attributes this trend to gaps in labour laws that have enabled employers to create jobs with 'lower levels of employer obligation'. The recent changes in the profile of casual employees in the wider context has happened during a time of a reduction of rights for the group that Buchanan (2004, p. 7) refers to as 'permanent casuals' especially with regard to unfair dismissal laws. Junor (2004, p.277) too has argued that casualisation of university staff is a result of political regulation more so than market freedom, a point subsequently proven to be true with the introduction of the HEWRs.

### **Why casual employment: the rhetoric & reality**

One of the reasons for the enduring popularity of casual employment practices proposed by Burgess *et al.* (2008, p. 172) is that the rhetoric of casualisation has 'been caught up in the ideology of choice, individualism and labour market flexibility', especially as it provides some flexibility, if not security or career, for some casual workers. Students and people with care responsibilities, usually women are examples of this latter group. Chalmers and Waddoups (2007, p. 4) note that these sizable cohorts are in casual employment for 'transitory reasons' such as family responsibilities or education, but do not seek to be in casual employment permanently.

Arguments that are put forward in support of a deregulated labour market and for casualisation, is that casual employment benefits employees as well as employers. Casual employment is said to provide greater flexibility, work/life balance and choice for both. Some would argue though that the advantages are greater for employers than employees (Campbell, 2001; Forward, 2007; Pocock, 2008). The drivers behind the increasing use of non-standard employment practices, in particular casualisation, are more likely to be industry demand for flexibility and reduced labour costs (Forward, 2007; Brown, Goodman & Yasukawa, 2008). Campbell (2001, p. 81) cites the advantages to employers to be cheaper labour costs, convenience, control and ease of dismissal, as was also noted by Buchanan (2004). Pocock, Skinner and Ichii (2009) refer to employer-centred versus employee-centred flexibility. Casual employment provides a great deal

of flexibility for employers and not infrequently poor flexibility for employees.

In a study on the impact of *WorkChoices* on low paid female employees, Pocock (2008) found that instead of greater flexibility, the participants in her study suffered loss of control and conflict over their working time, and Hosking and Western (2008) in their recent study on non-standard employment on work/family conflict found that casual employment did not reduce such conflict.

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### **Preferences: hours and modes of employment**

Casual employment is often presented as a personal preference or choice and for certain groups, it often is their choice. However, the rhetoric of choice

is problematic. It is more likely that the choice is for flexibility but that casual work is the only work available that provides the flexibility they need (Kimber, 2003; Kryger cited in AGPC, 2006; Buchanan, 2004).

Junor (2004, p. 284) is critical of survey-based studies that infer preferences for casual employment by asking respondents questions about their reasons for working as a casual employee. She asked instead for participants' 'first preference' if they had a choice of different modes of employment. She found that only 28 per cent of academic staff and 40 per cent of general staff chose casual employment as their first preference and that most sought long-term careers in a university or other education field while only 9 per cent preferred to stay in casual positions for the longer term. The desire of casual academic staff for an on-going academic career in tertiary education was a strong finding in Junor's study (2004). Indeed their desire for an on-going university career was as strong in casual staff as it was in non-casual/on-going academic staff.

Buchanan (2004) pointed out that many casual employees wanted more hours of work, 43.2 per cent according to statistics from the Australian Bureau of Statistics. However, Wooden, Warren and Drago (2009) argue that it is not the number of hours of employment per se that is at issue, but whether this is consistent with the employee's preferences. They refer to this as 'working time mismatch' (2009, p. 149). They conclude that 'overwork', that is, working longer hours than preferred, is equally problematic as not having enough hours and maintain that the offer of flexible

work arrangements by employers is a way to reduce the degree of mismatch. Pocock, *et al.* (2009) also found a mismatch in preferred hours and actual hours with many wishing to reduce their hours, although it was part-timers in her research who were more likely to want to increase their hours.

A common belief is that casual work is a pathway to a career in higher education. The initial reasons for taking on casual teaching work given by participants in a study by Wright, Williamson, Schaubert and Stockfeld (2003) were twofold: a combination of economic reasons, and because they enjoyed the work they were engaged in. Furthermore, they felt it would be useful for career development and hoped that the experience gained in casual jobs would help them gain more permanent employment in the tertiary sector. None of them saw casual teaching as a career in itself. However, Kryger (cited in AGPC, 2006) argues that a strategy of gaining casual work in order to progress into a permanent career is not necessarily successful and that most casual employment is largely involuntary and motivated by scarcity of desired employment, a point that supports Junor's (2004) assertion.

### ***Transitioning to career***

Buddelmeyer and Wooden (2007) hold a more positive view of casual employment. Contrary to Junor (2004) and Pocock, *et al.* (2009), they suggest casual jobs might be useful for entry or re-entry into the workforce or might be useful in obtaining more secure employment. Buddelmeyer and Wooden (2007) maintain that for some people casual work seems to be a successful means of transitioning from unemployment to employment and part-time employment to full-time employment. They found that women in casual employment had a 23.1 per cent chance of gaining an on-going position and that men were even more likely to transition to an on-going position (36.8 per cent).

While this is true for some people, for others casual work becomes a 'trap' (AGPC, 2006, p. 95). Such employment leads to a person being seen as a 'casual worker' rather than a person engaged in casual work and thus a less attractive permanent worker. Casual employment also disadvantages workers by marginalising them from the mainstream. Most casual academics are caught in a cycle of short-term contracts with on-going feelings of insecurity and the frustration and anxiety of not being able to plan for their future. They find the lack of security and the uncertainty of short-term contracts demoralising (Gottschalk, 1998, p. 215).

The AGPC (2006) report found the greatest transition success rate was for those who have a preference for working full-time hours, however noted that those who prefer part-time hours may have little choice other than to engage in casual employment.

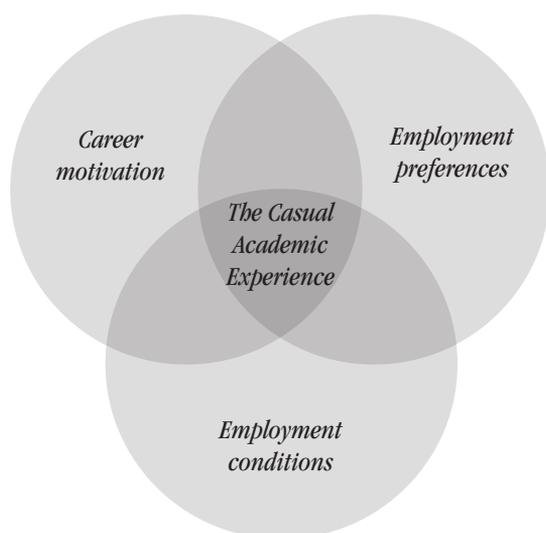
Chalmers and Waddoup (2007) who asked whether casual employment is a 'bridge' to on-going employment or a 'trap', were unable to answer this question definitively but concluded that the ability to move from casual to more permanent work declines the longer a person is in casual employment. This was especially so for young women who were primary carers of children. In the higher education sector, according to Junor (2004), when an academic works on a casual basis for a longer period, it becomes an incentive for the university to keep them in casual positions. To the university an experienced casual staff member is highly valuable and cost-effective because it is cheaper to employ an experienced casual worker than inexperienced staff who may need training and who are less productive due to their lack of experience.

For those in casual work in the higher education sector the opportunity to transition to more secure academic careers seems problematic. Despite being experienced teachers academic staff are normally expected to hold doctorates. However, professional development for casual staff that might enhance their opportunity to articulate into careers is limited (Rice, 2004) and they are usually expected to undertake scholarship in their own time (Brown, Goodman and Yasukawa, 2006). Their situation is exacerbated by the fact that casual teachers work largely in isolation and are not able to interact with permanent staff and benefit from networking with them. Their working conditions are such that they are also often out of the communication loop. Indeed, staff employed in casual positions have made representation to the NTEU about their conditions of employment and lack of career opportunities. Representing casual staff poses some difficulty for the NTEU because most members are on-going staff. Nevertheless, in the 2008 round of enterprise bargaining the NTEU adopted a major campaign to improve conditions for casual staff (Gibson, 2008) and in one university successfully negotiated a career path for qualified casual academic staff.

An examination of the relationship between casual employment and career opportunities in higher education is timely, especially by focussing on career options and experiences of aspiring academics, who Gappa and Leslie (1993) claim to be in the minority.

### Conceptual framework

The above literature highlights three core aspects of the casual academic experience in Australia: motivations to work as a casual academic, preferred modes of employment and conditions of employment. These three elements converge to produce the work situation of the casual academic, represented in Figure 1. As noted by Kimber (2003) and Bryson and Scurry (2002), there are distinct variations in the motivations of casual academic staff which influence the ways in which they organise their preferences for employment in higher education. These then are also moderated by the availability of particular employment options within the institution (or institutions) in which they are working.



**Figure 1: Influences on the casual academic experience**

The methods of identifying employee preferences used in this research draw on studies in Australia, the USA and the United Kingdom, which have developed a categorisation or typology of casual and temporary academic staff in higher education. In Australia, Kimber (2003) articulates and critiques the various managerial explanations for the growth of casualisation in Australian universities, along with elements of the Gappa and Leslie typology of *industry expert, freelancer, aspiring academic* and *career ender*. Kimber finds evidence of the four Gappa and Leslie types, but with a tendency for there to be overlap between types where the individual has multiple positions across institutions. Similarly, Husbans and Davis (2000) in their eight category typology noted regular overlap where individuals move between positions to improve their labour market opportunities.

The Australian and USA research suggests that the categorisations themselves are informative for providing broad generalisations of particular forms of attachment to the academic labour market among casuals, but do not always reflect the dynamic nature of that relationship, and the attempts by individuals to improve their position and opportunities.

This tendency for shifting between situations and overlap of positions is important to this research which seeks to examine and understand the patterns of employment and motivation among Australian casual higher education staff, and also the frustration that they experience in trying to maximise their career opportunities. To capture the complexities of the casual worker's experiences a mixed methodology was adopted for this research.

### Methodology

Survey research was used to explore the broad categorisations of the casual academic labour force in a regional Australian university, for the larger study from which the data for this paper was taken. The questionnaire was based on the idea of choice, flexibility and work/life balance, which was the rhetoric around the introduction of legislative changes introduced by the previous government to deregulate the workplace and employment practices. To determine respondents' reasons for taking on casual employment, we drew on the literature about casual employment, anecdotal comments about the link between casual employment and care responsibilities, and political rhetoric.

The questionnaire sought to identify the experiences of casual staff on a number of variables and so provided a broad overview across these variables rather than in-depth information on a few. The main categories in the questionnaire were:

- demographic data
- information about current employment status
- income and job security
- reasons for working as a casual employee
- general attitudes about work and work/life balance.

We wanted respondents to elaborate on their responses in order to gain greater depth of information, therefore the respondents also had the opportunity to include qualitative commentary in the questionnaires. Open-ended responses were sought in each of the categories. Analysis of these responses revealed that teaching staff in particular spoke of their desire for a university career. In-depth interviews

were therefore sought with a small number of teaching staff.

As a second source of data, in-depth interviews were used to clarify, validate and extend the information in the questionnaires from the perspective of casual teaching staff in both higher education and TAFE divisions. In-depth interviews are used as a research method when the researcher is attempting to gain an understanding of the respondents' own perspective of their lived experiences and how they give meaning to those experiences (Reinharz, 1992; Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2007).

From the questionnaire responses, themes to be explored in the interviews were identified and highlighted. The main themes that emerged from the questionnaire data and explored in greater depth in the interviews were:

- reasons for working as a casual teacher
- advantages and disadvantages of casual employment
- preference of employment mode and career aspirations
- the employment relationship, inclusion and collegiality, and
- the social implications of being in casual work.

Responses from each of the above themes is drawn upon in this paper as they all elicited comments from interviewees that demonstrated clearly the desire for more secure employment and the opportunity to pursue an academic career.

**Ethical considerations**

Approval for this research was gained from the University's Human Research Ethics Committee. Assurances of confidentiality and anonymity were given to respondents. Where respondents have been quoted, minor changes may have been made, to avoid the possibility of identification. Pseudonyms have been used where interviewees are quoted.

**Analysis of data**

We used cluster analysis to identify particular 'types' of casual employees present within the sample, particularly to determine whether the casual employee types identified in work by Gappa and Leslie (1993) were present at this institution. The qualitative comments from the

questionnaire were transcribed and organised according to the questionnaire's pre-determined themes. The interviews were audio-taped and transcribed verbatim and a thematic analysis of the interviews was conducted according to pre-existing themes.

**The sample**

Staff employed as casuals during 2006, including teaching, academic and general staff occupation categories constituted the population for this study. The human resources office provided the names and contact details of all casual staff for the year 2006 and invitations to participate and a copy of the questionnaire were posted in reply paid envelopes. Email addresses

**Table 1: Demographic characteristics**

		Count	Col %
<b>Age (category)</b>	18 - 29	38	19.4
	30 - 39	36	18.4
	40 - 49	40	20.4
	50 - 59	30	15.3
	60 or greater	20	10.2
	No response	32	16.3
<b>Sex of respondent</b>	female	129	66.2
	male	66	33.8
<b>Current relationship status</b>	living with partner and dependants	77	39.7
	living with partner and no dependants	58	29.9
	not living with partner but with dependant	12	6.2
	single living alone	24	12.4
	other	23	11.9
<b>Age of youngest dependants</b>	No dependants	103	52.6
	Under 6	28	14.3
	6-12	27	13.8
	13-18	22	11.2
	Greater than 18	12	6.1
	Adult	4	2.0
<b>Highest education level</b>	TAFE certificate or diploma	38	19.9
	Bachelor degree	41	21.5
	PhD or Professional doctorate	13	6.8
	Masters Degree	29	15.2
	Graduate certification/diploma	36	18.8
	currently studying	26	13.6
	other	8	4.2

were not used because it was recognised that many casual staff hold other work and might not access their university email accounts. Approximately 600 questionnaires were posted, but many were returned marked 'return to sender' as human resources records were found to be out of date. It is not known how many questionnaires were received by potential participants. Overall, 196 completed questionnaires were returned.

Eight women and seven men volunteered to be interviewed after a follow-up email was sent inviting participation by teaching staff who had completed the questionnaire. More volunteered over time, but they were not able to be interviewed due to time constraints. Three female interviewees were from the TAFE division; all other interviewees were from higher education.

It was not possible to compare the representativeness of the study sample against the total casual pool. The University's casual staff records were found to be inaccurate in that the list included people no longer employed by the University and even a small number who were on-going employees. Table 1 depicts the demographic characteristics of the questionnaire respondents.

The total number of responses was 196 (66 men and 129 women). One respondent did not indicate their sex. The age distribution of casual employees is evenly spread between the ages of 18 and 59 with the peak occurring in the 40 to 49-year-old bracket. Forty-six per cent had dependants, 73 per cent of these being women.

The demographic variables of age and sex in particular, determined the employment needs and preferences of the respondents which is reflected in the discussion below.

## Findings and discussion

People have many reasons for taking on casual work. In this study, the desire to build a career was one important motivator for women and men, with and without dependants. Many saw casual work either as a means of gaining experience and transitioning into a full-time career with the University, or staying in touch with the workforce whilst taking time out for care responsibilities. The desire for a career with the University was mentioned frequently by the interviewees, and commented upon in the questionnaire. Frustration with the lack of opportunity to gain more secure work and to build a career was very evident.

We used a cluster analysis as a tool to understand the characteristics of people who take on casual work and the different factors that motivate them, including the importance of a career or more permanent work to them.

### *Characterising casual staff*

A series of questions was analysed on different forms of motivation among casual employees, to determine whether the types of casual employees could be distinguished by their motivations to work as a casual employee, age or sex. The cluster analysis identified four distinct groups of staff according to their motivations. The distribution of respondents across these clusters presented in Table 2 is described further below.

**Table 2: Distribution of respondents by cluster**

Cluster	N	% of Combined	% of Total
1. Young mothers: Career maintainers	32	16.6	16.3
2. Career developers	63	32.6	32.1
3. Early careerists	47	24.4	24.0
4. Late career transitioners	51	26.4	26.0
Combined	193	100.0	98.5
Excluded Cases	3		1.5
Total	196		100.0

To characterise the clusters it was necessary to look at the distribution of demographic characteristics and motivations within each cluster. Below is a summary of the clusters differentiated in terms of demographic characteristics.

#### *Cluster 1: Young mothers: Career maintainers*

This cluster comprises young women, aged 30 - 39, with pre-school children. Their primary motivation for taking casual employment is flexibility in order to meet childcare needs. Whilst members of this group preferred shorter working hours to be with their young family many nevertheless are career conscious and work to stay in touch, hoping to resume careers as their children grow older.

#### *Cluster 2: Career developers*

Members of cluster two are primarily parents (male and female), aged 40 to 49, with school-age children. They demonstrate a focus on career development

rather than family obligations. They are distinguishable from the *Young Mothers/Career maintainers* group in that they are no longer motivated by work/life balance needs, nor is casual work a preference. They are career oriented and their motivation instead is career development.

**Cluster 3: Early careerists**

Members of cluster three, the *early careerists*, are young postgraduate and trainee staff (female and male), aged 18 to 29, who have traditionally made up a large part of the casual university workforce. They have few or no family responsibilities. They are primarily engaging in casual work to gain experience and career development, potentially to move into permanent employment with the university or other industry.

**Cluster 4: Late career transitioners**

Members of cluster four are aged between 50 and 69 with no dependants. Nineteen of them are female and 32 are male. They demonstrate little interest in future career opportunities and are motivated only to maintain income and interest into retirement.

The clusters of employees in this sample are similar to, but distinct from, those types identified by Gappa and Leslie (1993) and Husbands and Davis (2000). It can be seen that of the four cluster groups identified, two are motivated to develop careers, and one group is career conscious and hopes to resume full-time careers after their care responsibilities ease. It is only the last group, the *Late Career Transitioners*, who are not interested in career development. Furthermore each group, except the *Late Career Transitioners*, showed a preference for secure employment.

**Career orientations among casual staff**

The desire to build a career was seen to be an important motivator for women and men, with and without dependants, who saw casual work as a means of gaining experience and transitioning into a full-time career

**Table 3: Motivations for casual employment by sex**

Motivation to work casually	Sex of respondent		Total	
	female	male	Per cent	Count
	Per cent	Per cent		
additional income	49.2	50.0	49.5	96
flexibility	54.7	30.3	46.4	90
<i>gain experience</i>	44.5	33.3	40.7	79
<i>useful for career development</i>	42.2	34.8	39.7	77
<i>deliberate career strategy</i>	32.0	22.7	28.9	56
prefer casual work	23.4	30.3	25.8	50
higher hourly rates	30.5	16.7	25.8	50
work/life balance	30.5	16.7	25.8	50
<i>only work I could get</i>	21.9	24.2	22.7	44
<i>prefer full-time but can only get casual part-time</i>	23.4	18.2	21.6	42
doing post-grad study	25.8	12.1	21.1	41
prefer to be with young family	25.0	9.1	19.6	38
less stressful	15.6	7.6	12.9	25
<i>cannot find full-time work</i>	7.0	16.7	10.3	20
<i>until full-time with University</i>	5.5	13.6	8.2	16
young children need parent at home	10.2	4.5	8.2	16
<i>interim until full-time</i>	6.3	10.6	7.7	15
own business but extra income	3.9	10.6	6.2	12
<i>to test suitability of this job</i>	5.5	6.1	5.7	11
other	12.5	24.2	16.5	32

*Note: the italicised items are those that are related to career and full time work.*

with the University. In the questionnaire, we asked respondents to identify the various reasons why they engaged in casual employment. The values in this question focussed on employment related issues, work/life balance and care responsibilities. The distribution of these reasons is included in table 3 below.

Table 3 shows the variety and complexity of motivators to work as a casual staff member. A major reason given by both men (50 per cent) and women (49.4 per cent) for working in casual jobs is to provide additional income, an unsurprising finding. Even though respondents were asked to tick as many motivators as apply for them, 'carer' items, (such as a preference to be with a young family) had a relatively low response from women (25 per cent). This was surprising given that the common rhetoric by employer groups for offering casual work is that it is desired by carers, mainly moth-

ers with young children (Buchanan, 2004). Flexibility on the other hand was rated highly for both women (54.7 per cent) and men (30.3 per cent). It may be that flexibility for women included opportunities to combine caring and employment which was supported by some qualitative comments from the questionnaire and the interviews. Buchanan (2004) points out that many casual workers took on casual employment because it is the only way that they can combine paid work with other responsibilities such as care or study. This premise was confirmed in this study, both in the interviews and in the qualitative comments in the questionnaire. That flexibility then was found to be more important for women is not surprising given women's dual roles of caring in the private sphere as well as paid work in the public sphere. As one woman

said, 'The flexibility to work partly from home suits my needs with a young family' and 'I can work for the proportion of time I want to in the week.'

However, the desire for flexibility, even for women with care responsibilities, did not mean they were not interested in a career. Casual work and the flexibility it provides was seen as a desirable option for parents, especially women, because it allowed them to retain and develop work skills which they felt would facilitate their re-entry into a future career. As one female questionnaire respondent wrote:

Assists the balance by 'keeping a foot in the door' for future return to the workforce but enables the family unit (all dependants) to operate with minimal stress and outgoing childcare costs.

Another woman commented, 'With a young family and a 'busy' 'out of town for work' husband. This university work offers flexibility but enables me to continue gaining experience.' It was important also for this woman to work so that she could remain in the paid workforce and eventually pursue a career, rather than take a longer and complete break from paid work.

Responses related to career were additional strong motivations for both women and men. It is interesting also to note that although a major reason for women is flexibility, the career factor was actually stronger for them than it was for men. Responses for the 'to gain experience item' in the questionnaire were 44.5 per cent for women and 33.3 per cent for men. More

women (42.2 per cent) than men (34.8 per cent) were using casual work for career development and 32 per cent of women saw it as a deliberate career strategy compared to 22.7 per cent of men. This is consistent with the results of the cluster analysis, which indicated that the 'young mothers' cluster was interested in developing a career even though they are carers.

The flexibility they sought however was often thwarted by employers' inflexibility of hours. Furthermore, the desire to pursue a career eventually did not necessarily eventuate. Chalmers and Waddoup (2007) found that young women who were primary carers had difficulty transitioning from casual to permanent work, as did Buddelmeyer and Wooden (2007) who found that women had only a 23 per cent chance of transitioning to full-time employment compared to

men at 36.8 per cent. This was also the experience of women in this sample one of whom had done six years of casual work, confirming that casual employment can become a trap as well as a means of transitioning to a career.

This research asked respondents for their first preference of mode of employment if they had a free choice, as recommended by Junor (2004). We found that 30 per cent indicated that they were satisfied with their current mode of employment whereas 45 per cent indicated a preference for permanent part-time work with security and career options and 19 per cent preferred full-time ongoing work. A gender breakdown of these figures showed that 74 per cent of women and 45 per cent of men wanted some form of on-going work. These figures are consistent with the Junor's findings (2004) where only 28 per cent of academic staff preferred casual work.

### ***Seeking opportunities for a career***

Those who saw their casual work as a career strategy commonly viewed casual teaching as a way of keeping in touch with the workforce or as a type of apprenticeship that would help them to get on-going work eventually. Disillusionment resulted when their expectations of transitioning into more permanent and secure employment were not met. Qualitative comments from the women and men who answered the questionnaire revealed this dissatisfaction, as casual

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**Casual work and the flexibility it provides was seen as a desirable option for parents, especially women, because it allowed them to retain and develop work skills which they felt would facilitate their re-entry into a future career.**

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staff came to believe that the University's use of casual employment was purely functional, and did not lead to full-time or more secure careers for individual casual staff.

(Female) I see sessional work as a means to an end but I will leave the organisation if there is no defined place for me here.

(Male) For ten years I have worked in many capacities across (the University), gained many qualifications and skills along the way but have not 'cracked' into permanent work. I used to labour under the theory that if you say 'yes' to anything and everything in the way of casual work, and had appropriate qualifications and skills, eventually you would be rewarded. I feel naive and duped.

(Female) This was originally a deliberate career strategy however now after 6-7 years as a casual I have huge doubts that a permanent position will ever be available to me.

(Male) The amount of 'career' support is almost non-existent. Even though as a casual it is well known by my department heads that I need more work, I occasionally find out about opportunities too late because I am not there enough and therefore isolated.

The casual teaching staff who had been interviewed, experienced similar frustration. For example, Kelly, a casual teacher in higher education (HE) said,

Kelly (HE): The culture was that I was given subliminal messages like 'people did casual for 6 years before they got on a contract'. I could afford to do it for 18 months because I had some savings but even last year I dipped into my savings but now I have no savings left.

Two interviewees, Shannon and Barney felt that the insecurity of their employment conditions was clearly not because of uncertainty about whether their contribution would be needed on an on-going basis as both were employed year after year to teach the same courses.

Shannon (HE): I see other casual staff, especially a friend of mine has been here for years and always teaches the same subjects. I thought jobs like that were supposed to become permanent. We don't belong we are cheap labour.

Barney (HE): There was work every single year and it reached a point where at one point in time, to be able to get more work, they capped the amount of hours you were able to do to ten, I think at the time, so the way round it was to set up your own

business and outsource yourself. So I was on two or three casual contracts at a time. Those contracts enabled me to go into as much casual work at (the University) as I wanted. And it was ongoing, it was the same work, the same teaching the same units year after year after year. It was full-time because I was also working in other areas.

Barney's story confirms Pocock's (2003) point that many casual jobs are predictable and could become permanent full-time work, or on-going work. These findings also show that the idea that casual employees are used mainly to cover peak or unpredictable demand (Campbell, 2004) is a spurious one in the contemporary higher education context.

Previous studies have shown that casual employees value the flexibility of having reduced hours which enables them to combine work with other activities, such as studying or caring, but it is the flexibility of reduced hours that is valued and not the casual nature of the mode of employment. Furthermore, reliance on casual work for an income usually drew complaints of poor income and job security. The comments below from the questionnaire show the strong desire for the job security that is provided by either full-time or part-time employment.

(Female) Extremely dissatisfied with future job security and income security – particularly concerned that I will never be offered a permanent position at this University after 6-7 years as casual at between 9-12 hours per week.

(Female) I want to work and I want more work but I'm unable to and feel restricted, manipulated and not in control of my work life at all.

(Male) [The University] should offer a permanent part-time or full-time agreement so employees can plan their own lives with some confidence.

(Female) [There needs to be] a clearer path to permanent work with the University. More easily assessable access to permanent full-time employment for suitably qualified staff.

One rather disgruntled male respondent wrote,

How about some help with how to enter 'the club'. I'm sick of the dregs (low hours) and 'getting fired' just because holidays and breaks occur.

Many respondents found that their income from the University was insufficient to meet their financial needs (82 per cent of women and 91 per cent of men) and had sources of income other than their casual university employment (30.6 per cent). The

qualitative comments and interviews revealed that often these jobs were other casual jobs as was also found by Pocock (2003), Junor (2004) and reported by AGPC (2006). Many felt insecure about their employment future at the University and about their future income. The exceptions to these trends were mothers of young children, and men late in their career. The young mothers/career maintainers either had access to other income or were the secondary income earner in their households, thus reducing the level of dependency on the income from the University. Nevertheless, despite being financially secure, they were still career minded.

Many of the qualitative comments in the questionnaire seemed to refer to casual teaching. Analysis of these responses revealed that the experience of casual employment is very different for general staff and teaching staff and that while a desire for more secure and on-going employment was an issue for respondents in all occupational categories, teaching staff in particular spoke of unsuccessful efforts to transition into a more permanent and secure career with the University. For this reason the uniqueness of the casual higher education and TAFE teaching experience was explored further in the interviews of casual teaching staff.

### ***Casual teaching as a career strategy***

Casual teaching is distinct from other casual work for a number of reasons, the major factors being the periodic nature of university teaching semesters and the long summer break. Casual teachers in higher education essentially get work for only 24 to 26 weeks of the year. In TAFE, casual teachers are also employed on a casual basis, however for a longer period, usually for four ten week periods of the year.

The majority of the casual teachers interviewed have career aspirations and saw their casual work as a 'stepping stone' into an academic career. This includes the women currently engaged in care work, consistent with the findings of the cluster analysis. They too saw their casual work as a way of staying engaged in the workforce with the intention of eventually making a career. The following comments are from interviewees who were expecting their casual work and the experi-

ence they were gaining to help them to enter an academic career eventually.

Fazza (TAFE): I do have career in mind beyond what I am doing now. Yes, yep definitely, the work I am doing now will help me achieve those goals.

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**...casual employees value the flexibility of having reduced hours which enables them to combine work with other activities, such as studying or caring, but it is the flexibility of reduced hours that is valued and not the casual nature of the mode of employment.**

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Great grounding and experience. At the present, I'm happy with the hours and the situation where I am at the present. I love the work and the flexibilities are the main priority, but say in two years time when the girls are at school, when that will become more important.

Kelly (HE): I saw it as a step in the door and I guess I just worked hard but kept low profile but strategically it was a foot in the door. I was also studying and I could ask my timetable to fit around my study timetable. The career advantages: it has given me the chance to become known and make me more competitive for a lecturing position. I want job security and a career.

Lily (HE): I've been here for about four years now doing casual work and in that time I've done a couple of research projects for the School of (name). So it's allowed me to do a teaching load and explore other avenues and get my research profile up in a variety of ways. Yeah I think it's important to have that visibility that you're seen as participating. You just have to know where to look. I think that's the way to go, absolutely. And you talk to the right people at the right time and you get on various committees, which I haven't done any of that. I don't have time, I barely have time to work, you know with my teaching at two universities and my studies.

The interviewees strongly reinforced the opinion expressed by questionnaire respondents for a desire for either full-time work (16 per cent) or permanent part-time employment (45 per cent) and a desire in their current situation, which includes being a full-time carer, to build a career some time in the future. Overall, there was a sense of disillusionment as most are eventually disappointed. Longer-term casual staff found that they remained casual.

### ***Discussion***

The profile of the casual employee in this University sample does not match the AGPC profile of people who are under 25 and women with care responsibilities working in unskilled occupations. Furthermore,

one of the major findings from this research was that the traditional categories identified by Gappa and Leslie (1993) do not apply in this sample and may no longer apply to the higher education sector in Australia. In our sample Gappa and Leslie's *Aspiring Academic* and the *Career Enders* were present but the *Industry Expert* was not represented. Furthermore, the *Freelancer* was not present in the way that Gappa and Leslie described this group, that is, as a person whose *preference* is multiple part-time jobs. Their profile did not include higher education workers' who desired a career and used casual, mostly part-time work as a career strategy.

In our sample, there was a group of casual staff who, like the *Freelancer*, were employed in a variety of part-time casual jobs, however, this mode of employment was not their preference. The group we named *Career Developers*, generally aspired to secure part-time or full-time work and were motivated by the opportunity to develop a career in higher education. They held multiple jobs not because it was their preference to do so but because they needed multiple jobs to earn enough to survive. Kimber (2003) and Junor (2004) had previously exposed this need for multiple jobs.

Kimber (2003) recognised that those in precarious employment such as casual teaching, including women with care responsibilities, usually show a preference for more secure employment. They find themselves in casual employment because it is often the only part-time work available and often held several part-time casual jobs. A large number of casual teaching staff in Junor's study held between two and five part-time and casual jobs, none of which, according to Junor was a primary job (2004).

One of the objectives for this paper was to explore the extent to which casual work was used as a deliberate career strategy. The motivation for both teaching and non-teaching staff to work as a casual employee centred on the desire for flexibility and career aspirations. Career related reasons such as a desire to gain experience and develop careers rated highly in the questionnaire responses and many saw casual work as a deliberate career strategy. Our cluster analysis showed that this was the case for casual staff in the

*Young Mothers: Career Maintainers* group, the *Early Careerists* as well as in the *Career Developers*.

A major finding was the plight of the *Young Mothers: Career Maintainers* and mothers with school age children who are present in the *Career Developers* cluster. Figures from ABS (2006) and research by Whitehouse, Baird, Diamond, and Hosking (2006) shows that close to 20 per cent women with young babies quit their job when they have a baby, rather than take parental leave. A number of the women who quit their jobs eventually return to paid employment and 39 per cent of those women return to part time jobs. They return for financial reasons however a second, if not primary purpose, might be that these women strategically target or choose the type of casual jobs they take on in order to enhance future career potential. This seems to be the case for women in our *Young Mothers: Career Maintainers* category.

Our sample of young mothers was particularly vocal about their interest in a career and their use of casual work as a deliberate career strategy. Parents in this sample, especially women, reported casual work and flexibility because it enabled them to retain and develop knowledge and skills to facilitate

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**In practice, however, the desire for a career was often frustrated and overall there was a sense of disillusionment as staff realised that the University's use of casual/staff was largely functional and that transitioning to full-time work, job security and a 'proper' career was for many an impossible dream.**

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re-entry into a career when their care responsibilities eased, usually when children reached school age. They made this desire clear in the motivations they nominated in the questionnaire (see table 3), in the qualitative comments in the questionnaire and in the interviews. Furthermore, the cluster analysis found that women with young children were present in two of the clusters that were characterised by a desire for a career.

In practice, however, the desire for a career was often frustrated and overall there was a sense of disillusionment as staff realised that the University's use of casual/staff was largely functional and that transitioning to full-time work, job security and a 'proper' career was for many an impossible dream. A thwarted career had become a reality for many *Career Developers*. Whilst the *Young Mothers: Career Maintainers* were generally optimistic about resuming careers in the future and generally convinced that their casual work would benefit them, many *Career Developers*

had become disillusioned after years of casual work with no prospects of more permanent careers in sight. Indeed, Chalmers and Waddoup (2007) found that young women with care responsibilities were the least likely to be able to make the transition from casual work to full-time work. The irony is that the currently optimistic young mothers are likely to move into the *Career Developers* category when their children reach school age.

## Conclusion

We proposed in this paper that for many, casual employment was a mode of employment that was used as a career strategy that was ultimately unsuccessful. Our findings confirmed those expectations.

Our expectations that casual staff in higher education generally preferred more secure part-time or full-time work was confirmed. We found that a significant group of people desired on-going work in higher education and thought that casual work would enable them to articulate into academic careers or other more permanent work in the University. The desire for a career was strong among this sample of university general and teaching staff. The groupings identified by the cluster analysis revealed that three of the four groups identified in this study had a focus on career development. Those transitioning to retirement or already retired were the only exceptions.

The realities of the labour market where employers use casual employment as a cost-saving measure undermine the argument that casual employees gain flexibility and work/life balance and suggest that they are jobs rather than careers. A major outcome for people in long term casual employment is frustrated careers.

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