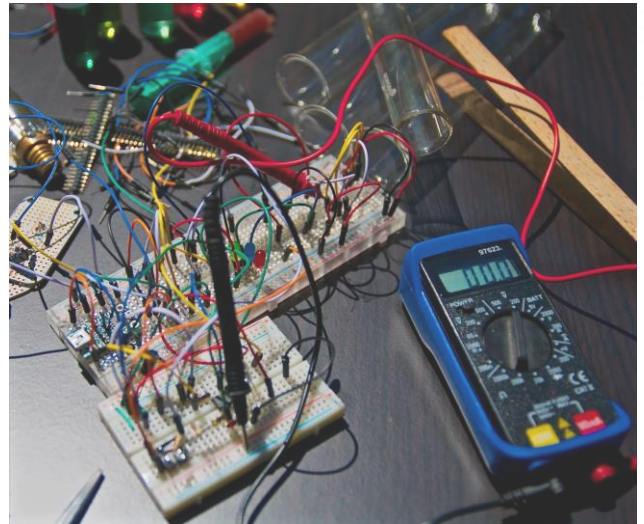




Managing a large number of casual academics

The School of Electrical Engineering & Telecommunications (EE&T) has a large number (100+) of casual academics being recruited from a pool of around 300 in any given term – most are returning, but a significant number are new academics who need training and considerable support.

- Before 2019 there was overreliance on PhD students who were teaching well above the recommended 6hr per week.
- To avoid negative impact on research performance and take advantage of the benefits of peer mentoring, the number of undergraduate students used as casual staff considerably increased in 2019.



As EE&T Laboratory and Casual Staff Coordinators, we aimed to:

- Ensure that casual staff are properly managed, supported & trained, regardless of number/experience.
- Respond to feedback and improve the existing training by providing lab demonstrator-specific training in addition to the existing OH&S and Faculty (or tutor-specific) training.
- Identify the benefits and challenges of peer mentors from the perspective of undergraduate students who were peer mentors and mentored by a peer.

In order to achieve our objectives, the following actions were carried out:



Training

- Casual staff training was re-designed and facilitated in response to feedback, with lab demonstrator needs in mind.
- Re-designed training is now 4 - 4.5 hrs long. It is delivered every term to new recruits (~30-40) and consists of:
 - **Health and Safety Training** (1 hr) - Run by Faculty OH&S representative (became video presentation with questionnaire in 2020).
 - **Lab demonstration training** (2.5 - 3 hrs) - Run by Laboratory and Casual Staff Coordinators. Includes information related to School administrative matters and a workshop. Workshop consists of activities and small group discussions covering learning and teaching issues, and a Q&A expert panel led by senior lab demonstrators (presented via slides and self-reflection piece in 2020).
 - **Local lab induction** (30 min) - Run by Technical Officers.

Management

- Streamlined new recruitment of lab staff (200-300 EOI's submitted from which to select).
- Shared email account for centralising communication with coordinators (recruiters).

Support

- Periodic monitoring of casual staff and students' learning experience through anonymous surveys.
- Conducted and consulted surveys specific for casual staff. Feedback was used to identify further support needed and enhance training.

Peer mentoring

- Identified benefits of peer mentoring in the literature.
- Surveyed undergraduate students/casual staff who identified benefits and challenges of peer mentoring.



As a result of these actions:

- The new training was complimented and could (with permission) substitute Faculty compulsory training.
 - Lab demonstrators felt better equipped for the teaching tasks they were being employed to undertake.
- There was a high degree of satisfaction with management and support strategies at the School level.
 - Anonymous survey results showed that casual staff were extremely satisfied with their role (4.52/5 average rating), as well as with the application processes (4.5/5), selection processes (4.41/5), and especially the level of support received from the Laboratory and Casual Staff Coordinators (4.64/5).
- Undergraduate students who were both peer mentors and mentored by a peer, reflected on a significant benefit in terms of reinforcing learning and supporting students.
 - Relatability was identified as the main advantage of peer mentoring and having authority undermined as the main disadvantage.

Some challenges and work in progress include:

- Challenges to training format during 2020 were remedied by adopting use of training video recordings, slide presentations and questionnaires/self-reflection pieces.
- Further consideration might be given to automating comments on candidate applications and use of Discussion Forum as a way of fielding student feedback on lab work.
- Welcome feedback on other people's experience of using undergraduate students in peer mentoring context.

Further information

- Scaling Education Workshop: 'Managing a large number of casual academics – How to survive and succeed', 31st March 2020. Link: <https://thebox.unsw.edu.au/video/scaling-education-workshop-01-part-2>
- UNSW Engineering Education Showcase: 'Students mentoring students: Use of undergraduate students as casual academics for learning enhancement', 16th August 2019. Slides available upon request.

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