Buying-out teaching for research: the views of academics and their managers

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Abstract   This paper reports on the practice of buying-out teaching to create time for research. A study was carried out, at a regional university in Australia, with academics in receipt of research grant funds (and therefore with the means to buy out teaching), Heads of School, and the Deputy Vice Chancellors responsible respectively for research and for academic matters. We found that while eligible academics did buy out teaching by employing casual staff, most of them worried about the potential effects on teaching quality and students' learning. Heads of School were more sanguine about possible effects on teaching. Decision making by academics about whether to buy out teaching, and by Heads of School about whether to allow it in particular cases, took account of a number of factors. Some teaching activities were seen as higher-risk than others for buying-out. It was uniformly recognised by all parties that buying-out did not result in complete relief from the teaching activity that was bought out; a great deal of time and energy needed to be invested by the academic in making appropriate arrangements and monitoring the quality of work undertaken by the casual staff. The paper suggests that clearer policies need to be instituted in this area; academics were unsure what buying-out was allowed or acceptable, and would benefit from more discussion of the practice.

Keywords   Research · Academic work · Buying-out · Teaching relief

Introduction

The buying of teaching relief, or buying-out teaching as the practice has become known, is well-established in higher education. Academics are perhaps unusual among other groups of workers in their ability to choose to outsource parts of their own work in this way. There

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are many sources of funds that academics can use to buy out their teaching. These include research grants and consultancies that provide funds for researchers' salaries, which are used to buy out teaching, and internal grants and schemes that include a proviso for buying-out. Despite the widespread nature of this practice and the benefit that it may have for research productivity, on students' learning experiences, and on academics' daily work, there has been little research conducted on the issue. This paper reports on a case study undertaken at one Australian university.

Inland University (a pseudonym) was a large university with over 40,000 students. It had several campuses throughout the central and southern regions of an Australian State, and also taught through partner organisations in Australia and overseas. The bulk of its activities were delivered through three major locations in non-metropolitan areas, with 450 km between the two most distant from each other. Over half of its students studied by distance education. At the time of the research study, this took the form of the provision of printed learning materials supported by electronic support materials on-line and electronic communication systems such as student e-forums. Inland University was in the lowest quartile (although near the top of that quartile) of Australian universities in its research output, a result of its relatively recent establishment as a university, less than 20 years at the time of the study. The research project aimed to shed light on the buying of teaching relief at Inland University. As Inland University, like other universities, was seeking to increase its research effort significantly, the issue was becoming more pressing each year.

The research project was confined to the practice of discretionary buying-out with research funds. It was not about the employment of casual teaching staff as a normal part of the university's academic staffing mix or where individuals' teaching workloads exceeded those prescribed by their Schools.

The research questions were:

1. How do academic staff at Inland University make decisions to buy out teaching, and what parameters guide their decisions?
2. Is buying-out of teaching linked to a low valuing of teaching?
3. What is the nature and extent of the practice of buying teaching relief for research purposes?
4. What is the extent and effectiveness of the regulation of teaching relief practice at School and Faculty level?
5. What is the perceived impact of buying-out on the quality of learning and teaching at the university?
6. In what ways can teaching quality be maintained while increasing the research effort?

Background and literature review

In recent years, the performance expectations on academic staff in universities have grown considerably. The introduction of performance management systems reflects the growing pressure on universities from globalisation, declining government funding per student, the evolution of a more corporate management culture; increased student consumerism and a broader student base due to governments' participation agendas (Marginson 2000; Bryson 2004; Billot 2010). Performance management applies not only to individual academics but also to universities themselves, proportions of whose funding in many countries depends on meeting certain targets in relation to teaching and research (Houston et al. 2006). For individual academics the pressure on universities manifests itself as an increased

requirement for research and publication alongside the increased teaching commitments resulting from the rapid expansion of the sector. In Australia, as in other countries such as New Zealand and the United Kingdom (UK), this imperative has been underscored in the current decade by government research measurement initiatives. The Australian Research Quality Framework (Cheek 2007), developed throughout 2007 although not eventually implemented, and the Excellence in Research Australia exercise (Australian Research Council [ARC] 2009) implemented from 2009, have each been concerned with the counting and evaluating of publications, among other indicators, and have thus emphasised the importance of tangible research outputs for all academic staff. These performance demands have intersected with the changing nature of academic work (Billot 2010) to create considerable pressures on Australian academics.

One response by academic staff to cope with these demands is to use discretionary funds to buy out teaching activities in order to create the time for research and publication. Inevitably, though, the buying-out of teaching commitments leads to the proportion of teaching delivered by casual staff increasing (Smith and Coombe 2006). Casualisation has been the focus of much debate in the higher education sector in recent years (Kogan et al. 1994). Nevertheless, despite the controversy surrounding the issue, the process of casualisation in higher education has been a relatively under researched phenomenon (Kimber 2003). Accurate figures on the level of casualisation are not available for the Australian higher education sector; government data for 2007, the latest publicly available, show that 14.9% of university full-time equivalent academic staff were casuals, although no figures were provided for numbers of staff as opposed to full-time equivalent, and the 2008 data do not include casuals (DEEWR 2010). Halcomb et al. (2010) suggest, based on available research, that almost half of teaching-related duties in universities are undertaken by casual staff. The extensive use of casual teaching staff has important consequences for the permanent academic staff who supervise them and for students. In a study of the use of casual staff for marking and assessment at two Australian universities, for example, Smith and Coombe (2006) show that practices with regard to recruitment, training and communication vary considerably, with some permanent staff paying little attention to the needs of the casual staff that worked for them. Feedback on performance to casual staff is unusual, and outside the teaching semester casual staff 'disappear' from the institution (Coombe and Clancy 2002). There may be adverse effects on students. Smith and Coombe (1998) surveyed and interviewed students about the use of casual staff for marking and assessment and found that while many students did not know that their work was being marked by casual staff, some were unhappy with the inconsistency of marking and the perceived lack of expertise of casual staff. Although these studies made no measurement of teaching quality, clearly the use of casual staff for teaching and assessment raises significant issues for the quality of learning and teaching for universities. However, Percy and Beaumont (2008) suggest that the problemitisation of casual teachers is not always an appropriate response, and Halcomb et al. (2010) propose a more strategic approach to the utilisation of casual staff.

In addition to academic performance expectations, casualisation and teaching quality, another important issue is that of the relative status of teaching and research, and the relationship between the two. It has frequently been noted that research is viewed as a higher-status activity than teaching. Research success is generally the basis for promotion for academics, particularly to the more senior grades, despite efforts at individual institution level and national level to encourage and reward good teaching and an increased emphasis on student evaluation data in promotion systems. As Wolverton (1998) argues, it is easier to base reward systems on research because its outputs can be clearly measured;

and senior academic managers are 'steeped in the traditions of research' (Wolverton 1998, p. 68). Young (2006) adds that research outputs provide universities with important shares of contestable funding from governments, while funding for teaching is generally formula-driven (i.e. numbers of students). Young's study shows, however, that many academics are unhappy with the low status accorded to teaching, including academics who are successful researchers. The relationship between research and teaching is a contested area. A systematic review of the literature (Jenkins 2004) on the relationship between teaching and research indicates that while a correlation between research achievements and teaching quality can neither be proved nor disproved, it is clear that many academics (but not all) value the teaching-research nexus. An Australian study at three universities found that staff who integrated their research into their teaching appeared to be more satisfied with their work than those who did not (Zubrick et al. 2001, p. 86). It might therefore be safe to say that many academics want to pay attention to the quality of their work in both areas.

It has already been mentioned above that buying-out is a possible response to academics' need and/or wish to create time to focus on research. Buying-out is not confined to Australia; many universities' web sites in the UK and in the United States of America (USA) contain references to internal schemes allowing academics to buy out their teaching for various research purposes. For example, the University of Bath in the UK has a specific scheme to enable buying-out teaching to create time for researchers to work with academics from other disciplines (www.bath.ac.uk/rseearch/bridging/opportunities/buy-out. html) and the University of Montana in the USA has a similar scheme—the BEST program (Buy-out for Enhancing Scholarship and Teaching) that covers a much wider range of research and scholarship-of-teaching activities (http://www.montana.edu/wwwvr/osp/ msugrants.html). The University of Vermont in the USA has a general policy permitting buying-out of teaching using external grant money down to a minimum of 20% of a normal teaching load (http://www.uvm.edu/~cems/employee/policies/CEMSBuyout_0902-05.pdf).

There is only limited scholarly literature on the topic, and this limited collection tends to refer to buying-out as part of broader arguments about the relative status of teaching and research. While Werk (2009) refers to buying-out as assisting the establishment of a research career, Lemass and Stace (2009, p. 23) bemoan the fact that teaching excellence awards in Australia 'paradoxically take the recipients further away from teaching or, to put it more bluntly, reward excellent teaching by "buying-out" teaching time'. Davies and Salisbury (2009) mention, in passing, the practical buy-out difficulties faced by academics using funds from a project designed to establish a research network. Warton (2005) is a rare example of a study specifically about buying-out. She asked academics about their buying-out preferences, but even then the focus of her study was not on buying-out per se; she used the activities preferred for buying-out as a proxy for the extent to which different aspects of academic work were valued (Warton 2005, p. 129).

Finally, literature on academic workload more generally has some relevance. Houston et al. (2006) note that academics have generally absorbed the additional workload associated with changes to the higher education environment, rather than directly challenging them. The use of buying-out—i.e. of an individually-negotiated and case-by-case workload solution—could be seen as one manifestation of the acceptance of personal responsibility for adaptation. Houston et al. (2006) note that academics' satisfaction with workload allocation models increases where models are transparent, developed with full consultation among managers and staff and regularly reviewed. The implications of this observation for buying-out are that policies need to be clearly stated, and that private arrangements for individuals may not be healthy from a department or organisational point of view.

Research method

The research project was undertaken through a case study at one university. Case studies are valuable in under-researched areas as they allow investigation into the important issues while also accounting for the importance of context (Yin 1994). Case studies provide depth of analysis and investigation of ambiguities (Flyvberg 2006). The case study was mixed method and involved four separate components, and the fieldwork took place over a period of 15 months (Table 1). Ethics approval was gained from the University's Ethics Committee.

A mixed-method approach was selected, in order to capture both practices and the reasons for practices; as Yin (1994) states, qualitative methods investigate the 'how' and 'why' issues, while 'what' issues are addressed by quantitative methods. The four-pronged method also enabled several points of view to be accessed: those of academics, their managers and senior managers at the university.

Academics' survey

Using a list provided by the university's research office, we surveyed all academic staff at Inland University who had received external grants or consultancies over the previous 3 years ($n = 175$, approximately one-third of the permanent academic workforce) and who therefore had potentially received funds that enabled them to buy out some of their teaching (including marking) by employing casual staff. A draft survey instrument was piloted with 14 academics at the university. The responses they gave to some questions were used to create a series of questions on attitudes towards buying-out. These questions were included in the final survey instrument, which was six pages long and included 25 questions. The survey had four sections: (1) biographical details; (2) 'about your academic work', covering the amount of time spent on each of four activities—research and publishing; teaching; administration and academic leadership; and community/professional involvement—and the perceived importance of each; and the distribution of work between internal and external teaching; (3) 'your attitude to buying-out', and (4) 'your buying-out practices'. Section 3 consisted of a series of twelve statements about buying out, developed from the pilot process, with Likert scales of five possible responses ranging from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree'. Examples of the statements are as follows:

• Buying out enables the school to introduce new people to teaching.
• Buying out results in wasted time trying to find casual staff and to manage them.

Table 1 The four components of the research project

Component	Number of responses and response rate
Survey of all academic staff at Inland University who received research grant funding, both external and internal, in the years 2002–2006	45 (out of 175), 25.7%
Survey of all Heads of School	11 (out of 24), 45.8%
Semi-structured interviews with academics drawn from those who completed the survey	7
Semi-structured interviews with the Deputy Vice-Chancellors responsible respectively for academic matters and for research	2

- Buying out results in my losing contact with students and with teaching.
- Buying out teaching allows me to do what I am really good at.

Section 4 was the longest, and asked about the extent of buying-out, the policies of the School within which the academic work, participants' perceptions about the risks associated with the buying-out of different academic activities, actions that could be taken to minimise risk and maintain teaching quality, and suggestions for improvement in university policies.

Forty-five academics replied, across a range of discipline areas and academic levels. This represented a response rate of 25.7%, which is a reasonable for a mailed survey considering that no incentives were provided and follow-up reminders were not sent (Fox et al. 1988). One-third of the academics were from the Faculty of Science and Agriculture with the remainder distributed almost equally across the other four Faculties. Nearly two-thirds of the respondents were male. Just over two-thirds were at levels B (Lecturer) or C (Senior Lecturer), with the remainder consisting of five each at level D (Associate Professor) and level E (Professor) and one at level A (Associate Lecturer). There were no research-only academics among the respondents.

Heads of School survey

Between the date of the academics' survey and that of the Heads of School survey, there had been a restructure resulting in four rather than five Faculties. Five of the 11 responses were from Heads of School in the new Faculty of Science, which now incorporated the former Faculty of Health, with the other six distributed equally among the remaining three Faculties. Seven respondents were male, three female and one chose not to record his/her gender. The survey instrument was fairly similar to the academics' instrument, but with a focus in some areas on actions taken at a School rather than individual level. There were 19 questions.

Academic interviews

The following staff were interviewed face to face in their offices (Table 2). They were members of a population of 12 that had responded positively to an invitation at the survey stage. Only seven of the 12 volunteers were successfully accessed for interview. In most cases interviews were taped, with permission, and transcribed. The interviews focused on the processes of decision-making about buying-out.

Table 2 Staff members who participated in the face to face interviews	Faculty	Campus	Gender	Academic level
	Arts	A	Male	C
	Arts	B	Male	C
	Business	A	Male	D
	Education	B	Female	C
	Science	C	Male	C
	Science	C	Female	B
	Science	B	Male	C

Interviews with senior managers

The two Deputy Vice-Chancellors were interviewed in their offices, with interviews taking between 30 and 60 minutes. One interview was taped and transcribed and the other was recorded in notes. The interviewers were asked questions relating to the appropriate balance of teaching and research in academic workloads, the extent of buying-out in the University and related policies and policy directions, and their views on the effects of buying-out on the quality of research and of teaching.

Data analysis

The data from each survey were analysed separately, and then responses to similar questions from both surveys (academics and Heads of School) were compared to draw out similarities and differences between the viewpoints of workers and managers. The data were also analysed by gender. The two sets of interviews were analysed separately and then responses brought together with the survey data to draw out major themes.

Limitations

A number of limitations need to be acknowledged. The study is a case study of one university and this necessarily limits its generalisability (Yin 1994). The case study was undertaken at Inland University because that was where the authors worked at that time, and they received internal funding from the university to undertake the research. It cannot be claimed that this particular case study was purposefully selected as, for example, 'critical' or 'paradigmatic' (Flyvberg 2006, p. 230). Its representativeness is further limited by the fact that Inland University was not a research-intensive university. However, this limitation is tempered by the fact that academics may be assumed to have brought their experiences at other universities, some more research-intensive, to bear on their responses (and indeed referred to these experiences explicitly, during the interviews), and since the participants were academics who had received research funding there is no reason to assume they differed greatly from such academics at other universities. The case study may also provide particular insight into the rural or regional university situation. In Australia, as elsewhere, universities in rural areas face some particular challenges compared with urban universities, both in lifting their research performance and in finding high quality teaching staff, although they are significant contributors to their regions (Garlick 2000).

Other limitations can be identified. Only academics recently eligible for buying-out were contacted, meaning that the views of those who had not recently had this option were not recorded. The numbers of Head of School responses were low, although the response rate was high, meaning that it was not possible to perform statistical testing on the findings, merely to report frequencies. Finally, the results might have been improved by a greater response rate from the academics.

Findings

Findings are reported, firstly of the academics' survey and then of the Heads of School survey. Following a summary of each set of data, a comparison is provided between the two sets of responses. The tables provide frequencies for both sets of responses.

Findings of survey of academic staff

Of the respondents, 31 had bought out teaching and 13 had not done so. Of those who had ever bought out any teaching, only one respondent had bought out more than 50% of his/ her teaching over the previous 3 years. Approximately 83% had bought out less than 25%. The following activities had been bought out by more than 20% of academics (in descending order of frequency): marking external students' work, marking internal students' work, tutorials, lectures, and administrative work associated with teaching. Qualitative comments indicated that marking was the most commonly bought-out activity. Decisions about what to buy out seemed to be taken in a policy vacuum; academics reported that there were few rules and procedures in place about how much buying-out was allowed or acceptable. Qualitative comments on this issue included the following:

> There are no School rules as such. The decision to allow or not to allow is made in discussion with HOS [Head of School].

> I think that it depends on the amount being bought out and the quality of the alternative teaching.

Opinions were quite divided about whether buying-out teaching was generally a 'good thing' or a 'bad thing', with most people appearing to hold quite mixed views. Some stated that they bought out teaching only when their research workload simply became too great, or when they knew that there was a very high quality casual teacher available. While 77.8% agreed that buying-out teaching allows academics to get more research done, over half (53.3%) said that buying-out teaching had a negative impact on the quality of teaching in their School. Typical comments included:

> Depends on the availability of suitable staff - we are often forced to use poor quality staff because that is all we have.

> Students often comment that they wished I marked assignments.

However, other comments included the fact that professionals from the field and experienced retired academics might provide valuable input to students, and that if an academic is stretched, even a poorer quality 'bought-in' person might provide closer attention to students than he or she could do. One academic noted that if he or she was undertaking a research project involving a great deal of time absent on fieldwork it was better for students to have a consistent 'bought-in' person.

A very large percentage (77.7%) said that it was difficult to find suitably qualified staff to cover their teaching and 60% said that managing casual teachers and markers created a high workload in itself. Comments on the time needed to manage markers included:

> Often takes a good deal of work to set up replacements; they can't just step in and do it.

> I have had more complaints, therefore using up more of my time to resolve.

When the data were analysed by gender, it was found that males were more likely to consider research the most important activity of an academic, and were more likely to spend most time on it. However, in fact females were more likely to have bought out teaching, and were less likely to think that buying-out had negative consequences on teaching quality. They were also less likely to say that buying-out involved a great deal of administrative time involved in managing the casual staff.

The highest risk teaching-related activity for buying-out was seen to be writing distance education subject materials, with 89% seeing this as a high or medium risk activity. Marking was viewed by 50% as a high or medium risk activity. The lowest risk teaching-related activity was reported to be administrative work associated with teaching (39.1%).

A range of quality control mechanisms was used by academics, including careful selection of staff, full briefing and training, limitation of amount of teaching bought out, provision of marking guides, moderation of assessment, and regular contact with casual staff during the semester. Others that were suggested but had not been implemented, mainly due to lack of time, included the following suggestions:

Video taping lectures, receiving copies of powerpoint slides.

Double marking, surveying students, viewing online student evaluation.

Blind mark assignments to see if the marks are close.

Team teaching initially then gradually withdrawing.

A question asking for suggestions about policy changes drew responses that academics would prefer more discussions about, and guidelines for, acceptable levels and modes of buying-out, and more systematic involvement of university management in recruitment, management and quality control of casual staff so that the academics themselves did not have to shoulder the burden of managing the process.

Findings of survey of Heads of School

Heads of Schools' primary managerial responsibilities were clearly reflected in their view that teaching was a more important academic activity than research, although research came second in all cases. None of the respondents had been 'frequent' buyers-out of teaching before becoming a Head of School, although five of the nine that responded to this question had bought-out teaching occasionally. Buying-out was viewed favorably by most Heads of School, for its efficacy in helping academics to research. There was also a view (held by almost all) that buying-out was of benefit in allowing the School to introduce new people to teaching. Real concerns about effects on quality appeared to be limited to between two and four of the group of 11, although there were some variations among responses to relevant questions.

Responses to the qualitative questions indicated that buying-out varied in intensity among Schools but there were no quantitative questions about the extent of buying-out. Questions were asked about what activities were allowed to be bought-out, according to School rules. The only activity that was ever prohibited from being bought-out was subject co-ordination, and this was prohibited only in two of the 11 Schools. Other activities were recorded as permissible to buy-out or as 'no rules in place'. It was thus evident that at School level there was very little formal regulation of buying-out. This does not mean of course that academics in these 11 Schools had *carte blanche* to buy-out, although one Head of School did say 'The decision to allow buying-out of teaching is not the Head of School's. Individual academics make that decision.' Qualitative responses were quite varied; for example several Heads of School said that as long as the proposed replacement person was acceptable, they would approve buying-out, whereas others thought very carefully about all requests. Two made comments, when answering a question about circumstances where they would not allow buy-out, about the research outcomes that would flow from the buy-out, rather than about potential effects on teaching quality:

[I would not approve a request] when I doubted the capacity of the staff member to complete the research project to requisite standard or because I believed that they could complete the research activity within the general scope of their duties.

Inadequate outcomes from the research.

The three highest-risk activities for buying-out were perceived by Heads of School as being (in order) subject co-ordination (six of the ten respondents to this question listed this as high risk), lecturing (five of ten listed as high risk) and writing distance education materials (five of ten).

Qualitative responses indicated that Heads of School thought about several issues when deciding whether to allow buying-out. They might think about the availability of appropriate casual staff, about an appropriate balance of teaching and research, the experience of the academic and whether it would be more beneficial for them to teach a subject, and whether the research activity for which buying-out was sought was likely to be completed effectively. A poor teacher who was a good researcher might get approval, for example. One Head of School commented that while buying-out on a single occasion generally did not impact on quality, the cumulative effects could be unfavourable.

Comments about the risk attaching to different teaching activities reflected careful thought by Heads of School about the possible adverse consequences. For example although marking (i.e. assessment) was often bought out, it potentially had the greatest implications for the university in terms of appeals. One Head of School commented that careful preparation by the academic could considerably reduce risk. One respondent summed up views expressed by several Heads of Schools with the comment:

I think it is viewed as a quick and easy means of improving research outcomes with too little regard for teaching quality, reputation of university for teaching, and management of Schools.

Some suggestions from Heads of Schools to maintain teaching quality included the following:

- banning buying-out;
- discussion among academic staff about buy-out limits;
- ensuring that casual staff worked with the relevant academic first in a 'staged transition';
- better training of casual staff;
- better moderation of assessment/auditing of marking;
- written agreements about maintaining the quality of teaching and assessment; and
- using buy-out money for research assistance rather than teaching.

When asked why the suggestions they made had not been implemented, some referred to potential opposition; one respondent said 'They [presumably the academic staff within the School] would lynch me!' Others mentioned the additional strain on resources that would ensue.

Suggestions for policy changes at the University level included:

- a policy about the responsibilities of permanent staff in relation to subject management and quality moderation;
- greater transparency across the University about buying-out policies and practices;
- clearer expectations about research outcomes where buying-out was permitted;

- more emphasis on what one Head of School described as 'equity and due process' in funding buy-outs; and
- a limitation on the extent of buy-outs.

Comparison of academics' responses with Heads of School responses

Many of the questions were paralleled between the two surveys. This enabled responses to be compared. These comparisons are interesting. In general there was broad agreement between the two groups with some differences exhibited only in relative weightings of *strongly agree/disagree* or *agree/neutral*. However, there are some cases where it was clear that the academics worried much more about the impact on students and the quality of teaching than did Heads of School. For example, 53% of academics believed that buying-out had a negative impact on teaching (*strongly agree* or *agree*) whereas only 36% of Heads of School had this opinion. There could be varying interpretations of this finding. It could be that, since the academics are at the coal face, they see the adverse results of buying-out more than Heads of School, who are likely to be involved only when there is a student appeal or complaint. Or it could be that Heads of School, in balancing their School's performance requirements for both research and teaching, tend to overlook minor quality problems if there is a good research result. Interestingly, Heads of School were more confident (54.6% agree or strongly agree) than were academics (26.7% agree or strongly agree) that buying-out results in uninterrupted time for research and writing.

The issue of University policy on buying-out provided interesting comparisons. The vast majority of academics did not know if there were any rules about the amount of buying-out allowed. Most Heads of School said there were no rules in place but even one of those did not know if there were any rules. It seemed that a quarter of the Heads of School would allow academics to buy out all of their teaching, while only 11.6% of academics thought that this was possible.

As distance education predominated at Inland University, questions were asked comparing subjects taught by distance with internally-delivered subjects. Both groups appeared to think that buying-out had a more unfavourable impact in internal subjects than external; but also, interestingly, there were small percentages that thought it might have a favourable impact on quality, more so in internal than external subjects. For academics and Heads of School alike, buying-out was more likely to be perceived as neutral in its quality impact for distance subjects compared with internally-taught subjects.

The final set of comparisons looks at the relative risk to teaching quality of buying-out different types of teaching activities. It should be noted that not all respondents answered this question, and in some cases numbers of responses were particularly low, presumably because specific activities such as laboratory demonstrations did not apply in some Schools. The activities, in descending order of 'high risk' in the view of academics, were writing distance education learning materials (52.8% of academics viewed this activity as high risk), residential schools (45.5%), subject co-ordination (40.0%), lecturing 35.9%), tutorials (27.0%), and laboratory work (20.8%. The following activities were regarded by fewer academics (15–20%) as high-risk: electronic forum (discussion board) management, and administrative work associated with teaching. Marking (grading) of external and internal students' work alike was regarded by less than 10% as high-risk. There were few major differences between the two groups, with the main variation being that Heads of School appeared to regard buying-out lecturing as higher risk than academics did, with the reverse holding true for tutorials. Heads of School were more likely to regard marking as

being high-risk, but the numbers of Heads of School in this category were so small that no definite conclusions can be drawn. Heads of School were also more likely to see subject co-ordination and consultation as high-risk.

Academic interviews

Academics' responses provided an interesting insight into the thought processes in which academics engage when making decisions about buying-out. In general the academics that were interviewed bought out teaching reluctantly, feeling that casual people coming into teach or to mark would not provide the same level of expertise as themselves. They also did not like to lose contact with students, enjoying the contact and learning from it. In many instances, they reported that buying-out money was left unused because there were no suitable and available people of appropriate quality to employ as casuals. The one exception to the general caution about buying-out was an academic in a School where there were a large number of full-time on-campus doctoral students who, it was felt, would be adequate teachers. However, even in this case, the academic felt that students perceived that they were being short-changed through the use of non-permanent staff.

Decisions about what to buy out were generally dictated by value for money; a great deal more marking than lecturing or tutorials could be bought out for the sums of money involved (typically less than $5,000). But quality issues also came into the equation; low risk activities such as demonstrating (in appropriate disciplines) were preferred above what was received as higher-risk lecturing or writing learning materials for distance students. Those who were reluctant to buy-out marking were very clear about its place as a central part of the teaching–learning process. Academics generally thought that it was lower-risk to buy-out marking for on-campus students than distance students because of this.

One academic referred to distance students and her reluctance to buy-out residential schools:

> A few of them (distance students) were very, very grateful that the lecturer was actually at the residential school. And, you know, you get that sort of feedback and you think, mm, you're asking them to take time off work, to leave their families to come down to try, may be more symbolic than anything else, but [it is important]to actually be there and not to palm it off onto other people.

Other academics said:

> The biggest problem, and it's been a perennial problem that comes with every student evaluation, is that students feel cheated if I'm not marking their assignments.

> I have seen the most horrendous incidents of DE [distance education] students' assignments going back with a mark on it and nothing else. I mean this is atrocious, absolutely atrocious

Most academics interviewed—experienced researchers—spent about 50/50 of their time on teaching/research and all worked well above the allotted hours in order to fit in both. The conversations very clearly reflected the enormous stress that many of the people were experiencing. Because of their professional approach to their work they were reluctant to compromise teaching for research and hence what gave way was their own free time and sometimes family life and/or health. They were concerned not only for the quality of teaching but also about the quality of their research, knowing that they often skimped

research to meet deadlines because of teaching or administrative commitments. One academic, concerned about the latter issue, thought that buying-out was at times beneficial:

> because you are able to have a better continuity in the research, and I think through that, you end up having better quality, I think … If you're looking at research being the main objective, well then teaching seems to sort of interfere, and I think, in some ways, depending on your teaching calendar, you might be, in some instances, rushed, or you take shortcuts in some of your research because you're trying to meet research objectives, such as publishing, and things like that.

Academics set a variety of quality processes in place when buying-out teaching. One was certain that most of his colleagues did the same; he did not think anyone took the process lightly. Some of the processes used by the academics were:

- meetings of casual teachers and markers;
- moderation of marking;
- templates for marking;
- building up a pool of experienced teachers and markers;
- providing training and induction packs for markers within Schools;
- using buying-out money in innovative ways, e.g. monitoring electronic forums;
- visiting lab sessions unannounced to check that demonstrators were performing appropriately;
- seeking feedback from students about how they were going with the casual staff;
- living with quality compromises caused by buying-out but inviting students to talk to the academic for assistance (knowing that only the more able students would do so);
- ensuring that activities and/or subject bought out were lowest risk in terms of possible complaints from students; and
- ensuring that casual staff attended basic teacher-training sessions run by the university; this was only really feasible for local people.

All said that managing quality processes created a great deal of extra work in itself. Words such as 'nightmare' were used by several respondents on this issue. It almost seemed as though the major advantage gained from buying-out was the illusion of workload reduction, because the actual reduction was small. Academics sometimes undertook creative actions such as pooling buying-out money with others in a teaching team and adding buying-out money to 'above-load money', in order to engage people on contracts with larger numbers of hours.

Buying-out was not viewed entirely unfavourably. Academics acknowledged that buying-out was the only way in which excessive workloads could be managed, and that sometimes employing casual teaching staff who were practising in the appropriate occupation was not only beneficial for students but also for the academics themselves. Also, academics stated that there did not seem, in their Schools, to be any perceived unfairness attached to staff who were able to buy-out.

Suggestions made by academics to improve processes were as follows

- talking about buying-out in School meetings and other fora to make the process more transparent and share ideas;
- making sure that any debate about buying-out stressed the importance of quality teaching
- looking explicitly at student feedback in bought-out subjects to see what effects there are on student learning;

- managing buying-out more systematically, for example making it part of performance management that the HOS and academic would look at workloads for the next year and consider how best to use any buying-out money;
- closer monitoring by HOS of quality processes (although not to the extent of creating new bureaucratic procedures);
- employing somebody to manage quality processes (e.g. in the School); and
- allowing complete subjects to be bought out (if appropriate casual staff available, e.g. ex-academics) to remove the administrative burden of subject co-ordination.

One academic said:

There needs to be in place a set of baseline, if you like, expectations; that is, 'What does [Inland University] expect from all of its markers, whether they're in chemistry or commerce or vocational education and training?' What do we expect them to do? We expect them to regard each student as an individual, we expect them to take the students' work seriously, we expect them to provide them with high quality, constructive feedback and we expect them to grade the students work equitably, fairly, transparently and reliably. So those basic levels of expectation should be there, and they're not, I don't think, in my experience.

However the same person, who had previously been a casual academic, as had several others interviewed, also said:

I think the other issue too, is that sometimes this casual marking seems a bit like piece-rate work; you could be working in the textiles industry sewing in zippers. I think that sometimes markers are poorly regarded. There's a sort of esteem issue that doesn't help anybody very much, least of all the people who are doing the marking.

Interviews with senior managers

The relevant Deputy Vice-Chancellors reported that the University was attempting to move towards a situation where, rather than relying on buying-out, academics would be allocated workload allowances for research, and workloads would be calculated over a full year allowing uninterrupted time for research at certain times of the year. These plans were in line with some of the suggestions made by the academic interviewees. As this policy moved forward, it was suggested that there would be fewer University schemes that provided funds for buying-out. However, discretionary buying-out, using, for example, consultancy earnings, would remain, and there were no plans to remove this opportunity from academics. The ability to buy-out was seen as being a reward and a motivator for academics, and a chance for them to carve out extra research time. It was pointed out that the University had a lower rate of teaching delivery by casual staff than many other universities, and so that, in a sense, there was some room for manoeuvre in terms of the permanent/casual ratio. However it was also recognised that other universities were more likely, because of location and the presence of a greater proportion of full-time research students, to have access to high-quality casual staff than this university. Thus, in a sense, buying-out could be viewed as a higher risk activity here than in some other universities.

There was divergence between the two senior interviewees about whether any limitation should be placed on the amount of discretionary buying-out that could be allowed. The Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Research felt that this was a matter for negotiation between the academic and the Head of School, while the Deputy Vice-Chancellor Academic felt that there should be 'floors' of teaching for academic staff. The latter opinion was based on

a belief that all academic staff (that were not research-only) had a duty to teach, and that all students had a right to be taught by leading academics. A firm rule would also enable Heads of School to negotiate more effectively with some staff who might otherwise exert some pressure to be removed from teaching. There should also be guidelines in place about what activities could be bought out. The Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Research thought that academics should use their buying-out money to gain the maximum amount of time for their research, and therefore should buy out marking and retain lecturing:

> The best value for money is marking; the least value for money is lecturing, and, as a lecturer that's what I'd be passionate about and wanting to keep engaged with the students about, and if I'm across my field and I'm on top of it, I'd want to do that.

From a different viewpoint, the Deputy Vice-Chancellor Academic came to the same conclusion:

> In European universities, you have an obligation to teach. Students are entitled to meet good academics.

It was recognised that currently academics did not experience full 'relief' from the teaching that they bought out, due to the necessity of managing the 'bought-in' staff and assuring quality. It was suggested by the Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Research that a useful way for academics to conceptualise the process would be that buying-out funds did not mean 100% relief from what was being bought out, but perhaps nearer 60%. It was also suggested by this interviewee that academics might try to value the empowerment of administering and managing the buying-out process, rather than resenting the time spent on this task.

Conclusions

Any conclusions drawn from the data must acknowledge that the study was confined to one institution, and therefore cannot be claimed to be representative. However, nearly all of those interviewed, and probably most of those surveyed, had worked at more than one university, and were presumably (and sometimes explicitly) bringing those previous experiences to bear on their responses. The most obviously non-generalisable feature of the study was that Inland University had a particularly high proportion of distance education teaching. In this context it might be expected that marking would be viewed as a particularly high-risk activity for buying-out (since it is distance students' main human contact with the University), and yet that did not seem to be the case.

The findings indicated that most research active academics cared deeply about the quality of their teaching and the experiences of their students. They often used the practice of buying-out teaching to free time for research, but it was often done somewhat reluctantly. In most cases academics tried to ensure that they minimised the impact on their students by buying-out what they considered to be low risk activities including marking. They were less likely to use funds to buy out face to face teaching activities or subject coordination. Research active academics would also tend to put in place safeguard mechanisms to make sure that the quality of teaching was not being compromised. These safeguards included moderation of marking, and meeting regularly with casual teaching or marking staff. They were also concerned about what it was like to be a casual academic; in fact some had fulfilled this role in the past. Decision-making processes about buying-out were complex and often fraught with stress; they were sometimes taken in conjunction

with other academics, with groups combining to do what they saw as the best by their students.

There was virtually no evidence in the data that the practice of buying-out was linked to a low valuing of teaching. The results show that the reverse was often the case. Research active academics seemed to value their teaching very highly and were very concerned with the quality of what they do. Research active academics used buying-out as it was a convenient mechanism for creating time for research. But these views about the desirability of buying-out for research purposes changed further up the academic hierarchy. Heads of School, whilst they shared the concerns of research active academics about the possible negative consequences of buying-out, were on balance more relaxed about its impact on teaching quality. Heads of School were reluctant to buy out subject co-ordination, but generally felt that buying-out of most other teaching activities would not have a strongly negative impact on teaching quality. This presumably reflected a managerial imperative for Schools to attain research goals as well as teaching quality indicators. However, there were some variations, with a minority of Head of School respondents showing great concern about quality. The Deputy Vice-Chancellors displayed the least concern about the effects of buying-out on teaching quality, one in particular assuming that it would be relatively easy for academics to manage those who had been brought in through buying-out.

Buying-out was a fairly widespread activity among research active academics. In the survey, over two-thirds of the research active academics used buying-out, and the practice involved the buying-out of all types of teaching related activities at one time or another. However, there appeared to be virtually no regulations in place on the use of buying-out. Academics were uniformly unaware of any school level rules or policies governing the practice of buying-out and Heads of Schools said that there were no existing policies in their Schools. Many academics said that there was a need for more regulation of this practice. Qualitative responses in the academics' survey in response to the question 'What changes or additions, if any, would you like to see to policy at university, Faculty and/or School level in this area?' included:

Control of the extent of buyout.

Clear policy developed and outlined to staff.

Guidelines for buying out teaching.

Clear policies about what you can buy out, under what circumstances and how much.

Limits on amount of teaching that can be bought out.

Clear, consistent policies.

Heads of School felt that policies should be developed at the university level to cover the practice of buying-out, although they also recognised that heavy handed regulation would be unpopular among academics. The lack of regulation in an area that clearly caused concern among academics indicates that buying-out policies are necessary. These should be developed with full consultation, as suggested by Houston et al. (2006). It is suggested that such policies should include stated limits on the extent of buying-out, and the types of teaching activities that could be bought-out. Administrative work associated with teaching seems a particularly safe option for buying-out, although it is acknowledged that separating out administrative work from teaching is not always easy. These areas of regulation, together with better induction, training and monitoring of casual staff, should help to

ensure that teaching quality can be maintained. Regulations on buying-out should also extend to the expected results from buying-out in terms of the research output generated by academics, although this would not impact on teaching quality.

The findings from the surveys reflected the ways in which academics and their managers were juggling the demands placed upon them in the competitive and resource-poor higher education environment described in the literature. They were attempting to improve research as well as teaching quality. They were aware of the quality problems that might ensure from employing casual staff and were very open to being 'regulated' in these practices, recognising the importance of transparency and fairness. Finally, academics were keen to maintain their role in both teaching and research. As one respondent said:

> I think the universities are the wonderful institutions they are because of the research-teaching interactions at individual and school level. I consider each to be as important as the other, and that together they are more than just the sum of the parts.

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