

ABSTRACT

Looking back to trends over the past decade, listening to policy announcements and predictions, and considering the structural changes in Australian higher education, it's hard to avoid concluding that the future of academic work will be predominantly of a precarious nature. This paper reports on case study research examining the extent to which sessional teaching academics are willing and able to join the permanent workforce. Based on an online survey of sessional academics in a faculty of business and law, findings highlight half the sample was willing and able to do this but university systems conspired against them. Without recruitment of sessional academics to replenish an aging and strained academic workforce, the march toward a sessionalised future for academic work will continue.

Keywords: future of employment; risk; talent management; aging workforce.

As this conference is concerned with the future of work, we should look no further than our own university and business school backyards to see our work has not only been changing constantly but is about to undergo further major change in the near future. Although multiple factors are affecting academic work, not the least of which are technology, globalisation and the corporatisation of the university, the focus of this paper is on the changing nature of academic employment from permanent to precarious. Contradictions in the Australian higher education system, as elsewhere, are leading to crises within universities so that the future of our work could never be more uncertain. On one hand, the Government is insisting on further expanding the number and diversity of domestic students by 82 percent with an additional 195,000 domestic undergraduates by 2025 and at the same time wanting to improve the quality of learning (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent & Scales 2008). On the other hand, the Government is also insisting on world class research outputs through its Excellence in Research Australia policy (Australian Research Council (ARC) 2010). These pressures come at a time when staff-student ratios are at their highest, the academic workforce is aging and has not been replaced with full-time academics for over a generation (Hugo 2008), workloads are reaching the stage of being in breach of Occupational Health and Safety standards (Trounson 2011) and Australian academics are among the least satisfied in the world (Coates, Dobson, Edwards, Friedman, Goedegebuure & Meek 2009). Much of this situation is explained by the failure of universities to recruit permanent academics in line with increases in student enrolments. In the period 1989 to 2007,

student numbers increased by 107 percent while academic numbers, including sessional academics, increased by 34 percent (Coates et al. 2009). In sum, the “capacity of the workforce is shrinking relative to almost linear growth in the size of the system” (Coates & Goedegebuure 2010:1). Not only is the work of full-time academics increasingly being divided into teaching or research intensive, academic work itself is being ‘unbundled’ with the rise of para-academics (Macfarlane 2011) to shore up the overload on a system with almost twice as many sessional academics as full-time academics (May 2011). This is a system in which “all the indications are that academic work is ... less likely to lead to a real career than in the past” (Coates, Goedegebuure, Lee & Meek 2008:53).

The sessionalisation of academic work is not limited to the university sector but extends to the private and non-self accrediting higher education providers that are increasingly entering the higher education system. It is estimated that by 2020, 30 percent of higher education enrolments in higher education will be outside the formal university system (Winchester 2011). These non-university providers rely extensively on contingent academic labour and are outside the formal reporting systems. Thus, on current figures and trends, it appears that the sessional academic will be the norm unless urgent action is taken to boost the permanent academic workforce. Although seemingly an obvious source of immediate recruitment for permanent positions, sessional academics have been overlooked in discussions of workforce planning, often on the basis that not enough is known about them and, as a result of this, assumptions and generalisations are made about their unsuitability for permanent academic work (Coates & Goedegebuure 2010; Hugo & Morriss 2010). The aim of this paper and its research is to examine the supply side of academic labour from the perspective of sessional teachers, in particular, it examines the willingness and ability of sessional academics to arrest the march of sessionalisation within the academic profession. We do this through a case study of sessional academics in a faculty of business and law to understand who the sessional academics are, their career expectations, motivations, qualifications and frustrations. The paper proceeds with an overview of the literature before presenting the research methods, results and discussion. We conclude there is no shortage of willing and able sessional staff and that questions of willingness and

ability to recruit permanent academics would be better directed at the institutions to avoid a sessionalised future for academic work.

LITERATURE

Although more than 53 percent of university classes are taught by sessional academics, very little is known about them or their impact on the quality of teaching and learning (Anderson 2007; Percy et al. 2008). They are largely 'invisible' (Andrew, Halcomb, Jackson, Peters & Salamonson 2009) as they are employed to teach, or tutor, in a particular course over a particular time period and nothing else. Even official statistics on sessional academics are notoriously unreliable (Anderson 2007; Coates & Goedegebuure 2010). Although sessional academics have the potential to help resolve the shortage of tenured academics, their suitability to become tenured academics has been questioned as most are denied access to the 'institutional learning community' necessary for academic development (Anderson 2007; Coates & Goedegebuure 2010). Paradoxically, the increasing sessionalisation of the academic workforce undermines the attractiveness of the profession, especially for young research students (Bradley et al. 2008). Sessional academics are disproportionately represented in certain disciplines, in particular the emerging professions such as business schools (Percy et al. 2008).

The trend toward increasing numbers and proportions of sessional academics in higher education is a global phenomenon, but it is especially high in Australia (Higher Education Statistical Agency (HESA) 2010). Sessional academics as a proportion of the total higher education teaching workforce increased from approximately 13 percent in 1989 to 22 percent in 2007 (Hugo 2008). Recent estimates based on more accurate superannuation data indicate that 61 percent of Australia's total academic workforce of 110,000 persons are employed on a sessional basis (May 2011) and even these figures are an estimate as an unknown number of sessionals are employed as sub-contractors without superannuation payments (Coates & Goedegebuure 2010) or earn under \$450 per fortnight (May, Strachan, Broadbent & Peetz 2011). Indications are that sessional teachers may be responsible for up to 50 percent of the teaching load in Australian universities, including up to 80 percent of undergraduate teaching load (Percy et al. 2008) and outnumber full-time academics at several

institutions (Coates & Goedegebuure 2010). Despite evidence that sessional academics make a substantial contribution to teaching load and are committed to their teaching and students (Thirolf 2010; Junor 2004; Brown, Goodman & Yasukawa 2010), their impact on the quality of teaching and learning is less certain. The Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) has increasingly identified ongoing issues with the management of sessional academics and their exclusion from quality assurance measures, including academic development (The Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) 2004; The Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) 2006a; The Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) 2006b). Indeed, on the issue of academic development, research on early career academics, those already employed, demonstrates that relationships with other senior academics and colleagues are the key to academic career development (Adcroft & Talyor, 2011). The 'invisibility' of sessional staff precludes the development of such relationships and opportunities for academic development.

Barriers to improving the quality of sessional teaching include: underpayment and limited time for preparation (Brown, Goodman & Yasukawa 2008; Lazarsfeld Jensen & Morgan 2009; Kimber 2003; Barnes & O'Hara 1999; Barrett 2004); lack of input to curriculum development (Lazarsfeld Jensen & Morgan 2009); lack of development opportunities, formal and informal (Percy & Beaumont 2008; Anderson 2007; Knight, Baume, Tait & Yorke 2007); and poor management of sessional academics (Allen 2001) including exclusion from mainstream teaching discussions (Lazarsfeld Jensen & Morgan 2009; Junor 2004; Barnes & O'Hara 1999). Few universities have formalised policies and procedures governing recruitment and support of sessional academics (Allen 2001). Further, precarious employment adversely impacts on the ability to effectively plan ahead and develop teaching materials (Morahan 2010; Percy & Beaumont 2008).

Despite the barriers for sessionals and risks for institutions, universities have continued to expand the sessional workforce at the cost of the permanent workforce (Coates et al. 2009). In a large scale survey of sessional academics at five Australian universities in 2001, Junor (2004) demonstrated that at least a third of the sessional workforce would prefer a permanent academic position and were appropriately qualified. Junor further found that academic casualisation was a gendered issue

whereby 25 percent of all women academics were employed as sessionals compared to 15 percent for men and such gendered casualisation did little to address the gender imbalance among permanent academics (Junor 2004). In 2011, both casualisation in the form of sessional academics and gender imbalances within permanent academic staff remain but what we know now that was not known by Junor a decade before, is that 50 percent of the permanent academic workforce can expect to retire in the coming decade or before (Hugo 2008). Replenishment of the academic workforce is a pressing issue for which the role of sessional academics cannot continue to be overlooked. Following Junor (2004), we pose questions of who among the sessional academics is willing and then able to take on permanent academic positions and the barriers to achieving this.

METHOD

The case study for this research is a faculty of business and law with two schools, Business and Law. The faculty is located in a large regional university. Teaching is conducted over four Australian and two offshore locations as well as online. While undergraduate offerings are restricted to three Australian campuses and one offshore location, postgraduate coursework offerings are available at all six campus locations and online. Differences in teaching locations are reflected in the nature of the students. A majority of undergraduate students are Australian born and English speaking and the majority of postgraduate students are from non-English speaking Asian countries. In order to service the teaching demands, the faculty, particularly the business school, relies extensively on sessionally employed teachers to lecture, tutor and mark. Sessional tutors are commonly found in undergraduate courses while sessional lecturers/course coordinators are most commonly employed to teach in postgraduate courses where they have full responsibility for course preparation, delivery and assessment. There were two components to the research, a comparison of the scores of sessional and full-time academics on official student course feedback surveys and a survey of sessional academics.

Comparison of student feedback on courses

The first component of the research was a comparison of student evaluations of graduate business courses held over the period, January 2009 to June 2010. Although course evaluations are not

explicitly about teaching, a number of items refer to the individual teacher and these evaluations were compulsory for all postgraduate courses, thus providing a strong data base. Additionally, the sessional lecturers were fully responsible for the courses without support from supervisors. A total of 118 evaluated courses were identified of which 47 were delivered by sessional staff. The mean of responses for two questions on the official University Student Feedback form were compared: overall satisfaction with the quality of the course; and availability of lecturers to provide assistance and advice. A comparisons of means was made on the basis of: same course; same delivery modes (face-to-face or online) and overall mean scores. Despite our use of student course evaluations as a proxy for quality of teaching, we are aware of the dangers in doing so and acknowledge that such evaluations are only one aspect in the measurement of quality and, a contentious one at that (Bedggood & Donovan 2011). Within these evaluations, “there are other factors apart from quality of teaching that will influence students’ scores” (Morahan 2010:3). Nonetheless, the advantage of using student evaluations is that they are a unique set of objective and official data allowing comparison between permanent and sessional lecturers. It is also relevant, whether we agree or not, that these scores are used as official evidence of teaching quality, at least within the case study institution.

Survey Sample

The second component of our research was an online survey of the population of approximately 130 sessional academics employed in the faculty. The faculty, at the time of the survey in 2010, employed 67 full-time academics, essentially half the number of sessional employees. Because sessional employment varies within and between teaching terms, the population of sessional academics for the period January 2009 and May 2010 was chosen for the survey. University email addresses of all sessional academics were supplied by the administrative staff and used to issue invitations to participate in an anonymous online survey. Of the 127 emails issued, 13 were returned as undeliverable giving a total of 114 successfully issued responses. The response was 64, of which 57 surveys were complete, providing a final response rate of 50 percent which we consider more than reasonable given difficulties in establishing accurate email addresses and the probability that those not employed at the university at the time of the survey would not check university emails. The spread of

respondents across locations and modes of study was generally reflective of the concentration of sessional academics within the faculty. A profile of the participants is contained in Table 1 below.

Among the more striking characteristics of this sessional group of employees are their age range, qualifications and experience. Seventy percent of the cohort were aged over 40 years, (50 percent were aged over 50) and a similar percentage held a doctorate or masters degree or were Research Higher Degree (RHD) students in the process of undertaking a doctorate. Nearly 80 percent had more than three years experience working in sessional employment (approximately half having had more than five years experience) and 44 percent were reliant on sessional employment for over 60 percent of their income. While the sample covered markers, tutors and lecturers, the majority (62 percent) held full lecturing positions. Gender balance slightly favoured males (52.5 percent) which differs from recent aggregate findings by May (2011) where women constitute 57 percent of the casual academic workforce. It is uncertain whether this gender composition is common to business faculties generally or a reflection of this particular faculty and institution.

Survey Instrument and Data Collection

The survey instrument was developed as an online survey adapted from several earlier surveys by Junor (2004), Coates et al (2009), Smith and Coombe (2006) and Knight (2007). It included 43 items across five sections: employment information (10 items); academic development and support (7 items); academic practice (16 items); motivation and satisfaction (2 items); and demographics (8 items). For the purposes of this study, the focus is mainly on the academic development and support section.

Data Analysis

A combination of descriptive statistics and regressions were used to analyse the data. Following (Fukukawa, Shafer & Lee 2007), in order to examine the relationship between various demographic data and factors affecting support and development, a two-step data analysis procedure was undertaken. In the first step, responses to scale items by the respondents were analysed sub group wise for first, Adequacy of Processes and Resources and second, Degree of Inclusion and Skill

Development. These dependent variables were selected as indicators of potential barriers to professional development and hence employment. Mean scores of the scale items have been used to graphically present the variables following Coates et al. (2009). In the second step, a multivariate Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) approach was used to determine which personal attributes are associated with professional development (adequacy of processes and resources; degree of inclusion and skill development) and their significance level. The following multiple regression model is estimated:

$$FI_i = \beta_0 + \beta_{i1} (\text{Gender}) + \beta_{i2} (\text{Age}) + \beta_{i3} (\text{Education}) + \beta_{i4} (\text{Income}) + \beta_{i5} (\text{Experience}) + \beta_{i6} (\text{Employment})$$

Where:

FI_i = Mean total score on teaching development; academic support; processes and resources; inclusion and skill development or total (combined);

Gender = gender of the respondent

Age = age in years of the respondents; represented by five groups

Education = highest educational level already attained by the respondents; represented by four categories.

Income = % of yearly income from teaching or marking; represented by five groups

Experience = working at this university in terms of years;

Employment = Preferred employment type in five years time

FINDINGS

The findings are divided into four sections. First, descriptive statistics are used to find the extent of willingness to be employed as permanent academics. Second, results from the comparison of student evaluation scores between sessional and permanent academics are reported. Third, among those willing and wanting to be permanently employed, descriptive statistics are used to discover whether this group is suitably qualified and experienced. The final section, reports on regression analyses aimed at ascertaining the barriers to development and employment.

Descriptive Analysis: Willingness for Permanent Employment

First, the 'willingness' of our participants is indicated through a question on preferred employment where 46 percent of our respondents reported a preference for full-time academic employment, almost twice as many as the 26 percent who wished to remain in sessional employment. Unfortunately, the question did not allow for a 'part-time permanent' response which three of the four respondents in the 'other' response category indicated as a preference in written comments. Hence, if

this option had been available the percent preferring permanent employment would increase to 50 percent.

Comparison of Student Course Feedback: Quality

Second, addressing the question of ability through quality of teaching, the comparison of student evaluation of course scores revealed no significant differences between the two groups of academics. The lack of significance applied to the same courses taught by the two groups, to the same modes and locations of delivery, and to the individual group means compared to the overall mean scores. Although not significant, two trends did emerge: permanent academics scored more highly in terms of availability and sessionals scored more highly for online delivery. If we take these results as a proxy for quality of teaching, then we conclude that the quality is equal, at least as perceived by students, between sessionally and permanently employed teachers.

Descriptive Analysis: Ability - Qualifications and Experience

Third, to further examine the 'ability' or suitability of those willing to hold permanent position, we compared various personal characteristics and perceptions of the 'willing' group with the total sample as an indicator as to whether or not this group was appropriately qualified and experienced, at least for a permanent teaching position as consideration of research ability and record was outside the scope this research. We can see from the results in Table 2 that in the categories of qualifications, duties, and autonomy, this 'willing' group was more qualified, engaged in higher duties and exercised greater autonomy than the overall sample. Additionally, the group was similar to the sample in both age and experience having had more than three years employed as a sessional teacher. The group is further distinguished by having more females, being more reliant on income from sessional work, containing more RHD students and being less satisfied overall with their current teaching position. Given Junor's (2004) comments on the gendered nature of contingent academic employment, we looked more closely at women within the sample and found the following.

- 52% of women compared to 36% of men would prefer permanent employment
- 61% of those in lecturing positions were female
- 33% of women were RHD students compared to 10% of men

It would seem that although women were not the majority of respondents, they are more likely to be both willing and potentially able to join the permanent workforce.

Regression Analysis: Barriers to Career Development

Fourth, to examine the extent to which sessionals were facilitated or hindered in their personal and career development we carried out regressions on perceived adequacy of support processes and resources both administrative and developmental and the perceived degree of inclusion and skill development, both formal and informal.

Process and Resources

The adequacy of administrative and developmental processes and resources to assist sessional academics in their work is to an extent indicative of the institutional or school recognition of their presence and the value of their contribution. As can be seen from Figure 1, the mean responses for each item, the adequacy of administrative processes and resources is viewed as 'reasonable'.

To go further and examine whether processes and resources were deemed more adequate by some sessionals than others, we used the means in Figure 1 as the dependent variable to regress against the independent demographic variables (see Table 3 for results). Gender was the only demographic variable with a significant influence at the .05 level, although there was a trend toward education. It would appear that women are more critical of the adequacy of processes and resources with a similar trend among those with higher qualifications.

Inclusion and Skill Development

The second development dimension tested was the perceived extent of inclusion and skills development, both formal and informal. We considered the items under this dimension, listed in Figure 2, were again indicative of formal recognition of the need for and value of sessional academics. Overall the mean responses for this dimension were lower than for processes and resources reinforcing that while administrative processes might be in place, formal development opportunities and recognitions were lacking.

When we look more closely into the possible differences between groups in their judgement of inclusion and skills development through the regression analysis (see Table 4), we see a stronger pattern emerging whereby gender ($p < .05$), education ($p < .05$) and a trend toward income ($p < .10$) all influence the perceived extent of inclusion and skill development. Women with higher qualifications and greater dependence on sessional work for their income are more likely to be critical of the extent of inclusion and skill development offered by the faculty.

DISCUSSION

Our research results show quite clearly that there is a considerable group of sessional academics who are potentially both willing and able to join the permanent academic workforce if openings were available. Compared to Junor's (2004) survey almost a decade earlier, the percentage of sessionals aspiring to permanency has increased from a third to 46 percent as has the average age of sessional academics and their time in sessional employment. This is not surprising given the percentage of sessionals within the national academic workforce has increased and the percentage of full-time teaching-research and teaching only academics has decreased (Coates et al. 2008). In other words, full-time positions involving teaching have been replaced with sessional employment so that the queue of sessionals willing and able to enter the system has grown and aged but become more experienced. Within the queue, it also seems that women predominate as they continue to do among the lower ranks of permanent academics (May et al. 2011).

The ability of those sessionals wanting to enter the system has been shown in two ways. First, student perceptions of quality among sessional teachers are not significantly different to that of full-time academics. Only on the issue of being available to provide help and advice to students in face-to-face teaching are their evaluation scores slightly poorer, however constraints on availability are inherent in sessional employment rather than quality. We cannot but wonder if sessionals were afforded the same opportunities as full-time academics in terms of course development and preparation time, whether their teaching evaluations would be superior. Second, when we examine the qualifications and experience of those wanting permanent work, we find they are sufficiently experienced in years and

teaching responsibilities and their qualifications, excluding research considerations, are acceptable for teaching. Compared to Junor (2004), the percentage with higher degree qualifications has increased from 42 percent to 72 percent for the total sample and the percentage with more than six years of experience in sessional employment has increased from 18 percent to 48 percent. The increase in qualifications and experience confirms Hugo's (2008) observation that permanent academic work has been replaced with sessional work for over a generation so that sessional staff are now better qualified and experienced. Additionally, our research finds the barriers to professional and career development have not changed as our results are similar to those described in previous research. Sessionals, especially those aspiring to be full-time academics, perceive themselves as poorly resourced and excluded from mainstream development activities and opportunities. Such exclusion from relationships with senior academics is a major barrier to career development (Adcroft & Taylor 2011) including opportunities to engage in research. "If today's sessional academics are to underpin academic work into the future then it is far from optimal that they can practice – potentially for an extended period of time and perhaps years – without management and development" (Coates & Goedegebuure 2010:21).

The recruitment of appropriate sessional academics appears as an obvious solution to problems arising now and in the future from a shortage of full-time academics. As Coates and Goedegebuure (2010:31) claim, "engaging these staff effectively in the academic workforce is one of the core challenges and opportunities facing higher education". If we were to conservatively halve the 46 percent of sessionals aspiring to permanency from our case study and generalise it so that 23 percent to the estimated 67,000 sessionals currently in the workforce (May 2011) could be employed, then we would have over 15,000 people available for full-time academic employment, about a 30 percent increase on the current full-time workforce of 43,000. Such an increase would make a significant contribution to the current shortfall and toward the 82 percent expected increase in domestic undergraduate numbers (Bradley et al. 2008). Of course, we can't do this as our study is limited to a single faculty in a single university and its results cannot be generalised, but the possibility is too big to ignore. To allow such generalisations to be made, further large scale research across faculties and

universities is required. However, perhaps the more important research would be to inquire why universities are either unwilling or unable to address the shortfall of full-time academics and its consequences. A failure of institutions to do so will guarantee a sessionalised future for academic work. The contribution of this paper has been to present a timely reminder of an obvious solution to the crises facing Australian universities by confirming and updating Junor's (2004) seminal research on sessional academics but in a context of even more urgent need to resolve problems of increased student numbers on an already overstretched and under staffed higher education system.

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TABLES AND FIGURES

Table 1: Summary of Respondent's Characteristics (n=57)

	Attributes	Number	% rounded
Gender	Male	30	52.5
	Female	27	47.5
Age	20 - 29	3	5.5
	30 - 39	11	19.5
	40 - 49	12	21.0
	50 - 59	19	33.5
	60 and over	9	16.0
	Not stated	3	
Education	Bachelor degree	14	24.5
	Bachelor degree (Honours)	2	3.5
	Masters degree	20	35.0
	PhD/ PhD student	21	37.0
Years in sessional employment	Less than 3 years	9	16.0
	3 years – 5 years	17	30.0
	6 years – 9 years	13	23.0
	10 years and above	14	25.0
	Not stated	2	
% of income from sessional employment	Less than 20%	13	23.0
	Between 20% – 40%	10	17.5
	Between 40% – 60%	9	16.0
	Between 60% – 80%	4	7.0
	Greater than 80%	21	37.0
Preferred employment	Sessional teaching	15	26.0
	Full- time academic	26	46.0
	Researcher	7	12.0
	Career outside university	5	9.0
	Other	4	7

Table 2: Comparison of Descriptive Statistics between those Preferring Permanent Academic Employment and the Total Sample

Descriptor	Percentage Preferring Permanent Work No =26	Percentage of Total Sample No=57
Gender Female	54	47.5
Age under 40	29	24.5
Postgraduate Qualifications	96.5	72
More than five years as a sessional academic	36.5	48
Proportion of income from sessional teaching greater than 60%	57	44
Typology: RHD Student	38.5	21
Qualified Academic Job Seeker	23	13
Lecturing Duties	73	61
Main duties as lecturer	60	40
Frequent control over what is taught	60	42
Frequent control over what is assessed	50	38
Assessment are moderated	33	60
Main motivation to work as sessional:		
To gain teaching experience	58.5	33
Career strategy to gain permanency	58.5	31.5
Satisfaction from teaching	54	61.5
Overall satisfaction	42	66

Table 3: Dependent Variable – Adequacy of Processes and Resources

Independent variables	Beta	T-Value	Sig. Level
Gender	-.322	-2.478	.017*
Age	.004	.033	.974
Education	-.201	-1.495	.141
Income	.083	.632	.530
Experience	.053	.382	.704
Preferred Employment	.053	.406	.687
Model F-Value	1.763		
Significance of F-Value	.126		
Model R ²	.175		

* $p < .05$ **Table 4: Dependent Variable – Extent of Inclusion and Skill Development**

Independent variables	Beta	T-Value	Sig. Level
Gender	-.304	-2.489	.016*
Age	.021	.169	.866
Education	-.255	-2.015	.049*
Income	-.238	-1.921	.060
Experience	-.178	-1.375	.175
Preferred Employment	-.107	-.876	.385
Model F-Value	3.090		
Significance of F-Value	.012		
Model R ²	.271		

* $p < .05$

Figure 1: Adequacy of Processes and Resources

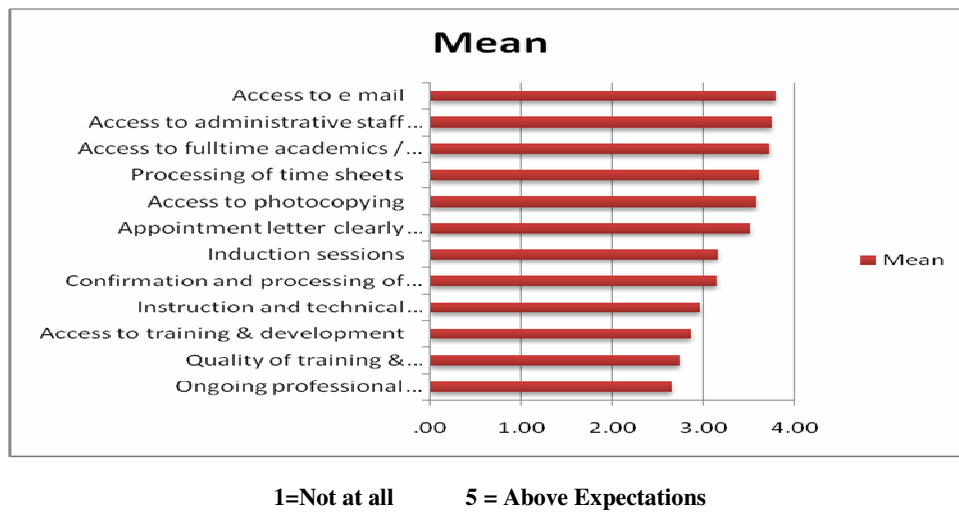


Figure 2: Extent of Inclusion and Skill Development

