

Developing Part-Time Teachers in Higher Education

Implications and future directions

Implications for learning and teaching: Academic leadership: strategies for building effective teams of all staff

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Introduction

This chapter considers some tried and tested ways of integrating part-timers into a team. Some of these approaches can benefit all staff regardless of their full-time/part-time status (for example, by encouraging flexible working across the team, by recognising the need to plan explicitly, and by encouraging regular, clear, effective and timely communication to all team members). Some processes need to be adapted specifically to ensure that part-timers feel that they are valued and integrated fully; for example, by allocating bursaries in a departmental/conference budget to support part-time staff who wouldn't otherwise be able to attend events and meetings, by explicitly encouraging part-time staff to apply for grants, awards and projects, by being prepared to organise partially at least around part-timers' availability, or by holding special events which bring part-time staff together. Some of the suggestions here for building effective teams which include part-timers will also work for staff returning from an extended period of absence, for whatever reason (e.g. ill health, a secondment, or maternity leave). The chapter also recognises some of the management challenges to watch out for, and identifies how to mitigate or evade potential problems.

Why managers should welcome part time and flexible working

I lead two service departments in a large arts University in London, where many staff working part time or flexibly. Art and Design, as discussed elsewhere in this book, has an extensive culture of employing part-time tutors who combine their teaching with their creative practice or work in industry. While service departments in Universities do not necessarily normally employing large numbers of part-timers, at University of the Arts London many do, and I attribute that to several causes. One is the analogous effect from academic departments: we think it is 'normal' here to work part time. Secondly, we sometimes attract practicing artists to roles in our services, and they wish to allocate some of their working week to their creative practice so are actively seeking part time employment to enable this. Thirdly, we have sometimes had enough money for one full-time post, but wanted to draw in a range of skills or expertise that can't be found in a single individual, so we have split the funding to provide two part-time roles, increasing the range of expertise the department can call on. Fourthly, in some roles, the size of pool of staff from which you are recruiting increases substantially if you offer a post as part-time. The proportion of well qualified staff in the pool sometimes increases too. We have found this to be particularly true in administrative roles, where two skilled and motivated part-timers provide much more effective support than a less skilful, less motivated full-time staff member. And finally, we aim to recruit and retain excellent staff, and in the process of retaining staff over several years, life happens (to all of us!). People who started work as full-timers on normal office hours seek changes in the terms of their employment to take a PhD or be with their children, reducing their hours, or working 'compressed hours' (e.g.. four long days instead of five regular days).

We have a number of different kinds of part time contracts in the departments, including:

- Fractional contracts (e.g. 3 days week)
- Compressed hours (e.g. full time in four longer days)
- Staggered hours (e.g. early start and early finish)
- Secondments across two roles (so the person is only available to a particular role for some of their time)
- Working from home for one day or half day a week

Having a large proportion of your staff working part-time or flexibly in some way puts particular demands on team building. However, I think the benefits are so great to individuals, leading to a greater potential to recruit and retain great staff, and a possible reduction in sickness and stress amongst staff, that on balance I prefer to work with the complexities of part-timers, and I would never welcome a return to a 'normal' full time culture now. On this basis I would hope always to approach the development of a job description with an open mind about whether the post holder needs to be full time or not.

The next section of the chapter deals with some evident issues for building effective teams that include part-timers, and possible solutions or mitigating approaches.

Seeing the big picture

One challenge for part time staff, and their managers, is that it is harder to be clear about big picture at work, and understand how your role and contribution fits in with those of others. This is partly a logistical difficulty, from having less time available to spend on general understanding or organisation. It can also relate to professional identity, which can be more complex and ambiguous for part-timers than full-timers, with the consequence that they may be less interested in the overall purpose and strategy of the University or their particular area. This is by no means always the case, but the possible variation in levels of interest for aspects of the organisation beyond the staff member's immediate role, as a consequence of a complex professional identity, is something to bear in mind.

As part of developing and integrating your team, you may hold departmental away days, or strategic planning events which you will want all your team to attend, and some of them will be unable to do so, due to being part time. There is no ideal way of addressing this, but if you are considering trying to ensure everyone is there, it may help to remember that even when full-timers commit to attending an event, things happen to prevent this. Public transport incidents, babies born early, or burst appendices do not respect institutional planning. As far as possible, relax about not being able to get everyone there, while doing what you can to include everyone, for example by:

- Giving clear advanced warning about the purpose of event and the relevance of the activities, so they can judge the necessity of attending.
- Check whether there is anything they wish to raise, or have covered, at the event, if they cannot attend
- Make a record of the event available – technology means this can easily be via video, blogs or tweets, as well as by a written record.
- Depending on the nature of the event, consider briefing them in person about what went on

Professional Development

Another difficult area to ensure all staff can participate appropriately in, regardless of whether part-time or full-time, is professional development. For your team to grow and be effective, group and individual professional development is a necessity, not a luxury, regardless of the full-time or part-time status of individuals.

Some of the key considerations are:

- 1) Whether part-time staff members have access to the full range of development activities which full-time staff can access;
- 2) Whether part-time staff end up doing a greater proportion of their professional development on their own time, rather than on paid work time.
- 3) Whether funds set aside for staff development are made available in proportion to the fraction of the contract (e.g. someone with a .5fte contract could access only 50% of the staff development budget of a fulltime staff member).

These are genuinely difficult issues to resolve fairly, but my opinion is that, through mutual flexibility on both sides, staff members should be able to access as wide a range of professional development as possible. If a full time staff member would normally be able to participate in professional development on work time, than a part-time staff member should be paid to participate too. While it would certainly be possible to make an argument for only making 50% of the staff development funds available to someone with a 0.5fte contract, this suggests that the value of individuals to the institution is measurable in the number of hours they work. While this is a logical and fair assumption from some perspectives, sometimes I would consider it reasonable to spend a greater sum on a part-timer's professional development, and anticipate seeing the investment pay off in the contribution to the institution of the individual, irrespective of the number of hours for which they are contracted.

It is also important to consider allocating additional staff development funds for part-timers which can provide bursaries for additional hours or days if needed. I appreciate this may seem difficult in a world of very restricted funding for staff development, but it is certainly one of the most important areas for allocating resources to.

It is also important to include and encourage part-timers explicitly to participate in activities such as internal grant applications, and development projects.

Social activities

Successful teams are often built on extra-curricular networking. Part-timers will want to be involved in social activities and opportunities for networking, but they may feel under much greater pressure than their full-time peers to get their job done and meet deadlines within working hours and they may experience a great deal of tension when invited to events or activities which are not part of their core job during their working day. Also their other commitments may prevent them attending events outside their normal working hours. It helps to be clear what team members are expected to attend, because it is essential to the work of the team, and what is down to individual choice. The most important thing as a manager is to be aware that they may be experiencing this tension, and seek ways to alleviate it when possible, for example, by building in time for socialising into work events.

Communication

A question you must ask about your team is whether people know each well enough to collaborate on tasks, share information, advise or point out problems, or ask each other for help. A major potential problem with part time working is that colleagues do not know each other well enough to operate as effective team members. Where this is the case, it will manifest itself as coolness, and a tendency to mistrust others or think the worst, particularly in a crisis. This will mean that crucial information about risks or problems is not shared, opportunities for collaboration and sharing intelligence and expertise are not taken, potential solutions are not identified, and rather than working effectively together to address problems when things go wrong, the team will fall into mutual recriminations. Over time, this can lead to a ratcheting-up of mistrust, dislike and blame between sections and individuals. This can of course happen in any dysfunctional team, but part time working can exacerbate the problem, by reducing opportunities for communication, on which effective teams depend.

Communication is vital in all well-functioning teams, and can be broken down into different categories. Communicating effectively TO people requires different approaches from facilitating communication BETWEEN people, and both matter.

Communicating TO people is necessary at times of emergency, or when there are announcements, structural changes, new starters and retirements, or University news which it is essential to communicate to everyone. If the whole team is seldom or never all in the office, the following are worth considering:

- 1) Establish email lists which include the whole department, to avoid people you see less often being missed off a circulation
- 2) Send letters to home addresses, so everyone receives them at the same time
- 3) Ensure departmental or other important meetings are well-trailed beforehand with clear published agendas (ideally on a wiki, so it can be accessed online from home), so people can decide if they want or need to reorganise their time to attend

To support communication amongst team members, effective approaches include:

1. Establish a department wiki, where meeting agendas can be developed with everyone's input, notes can be published, viewed and amended, images published of events which not everyone could attend, and so on. We did this, and people were soon adding images from the Christmas lunch, and the video of a long standing member of staff's leaving do. It also facilitated the introduction of a rotating chair for staff members, since everyone had access to the same documents.
2. At intervals, and as needed, you may want to hold 'get to know you', and planning events.

Case study

As a result of restructuring, two departments were brought together - the Centre for Learning and Teaching in Art and Design (CLTAD) and Student Enterprise and Employability (SEE). The goal of the co-location was to support the development of student enterprise and employability in the curriculum, using the careers expertise of the one team combined with the change management and curriculum development expertise of the other. To achieve this possible synergy, we needed get the teams working together. We agreed we'd hold a 'get to know you' half day event, with the purpose of finding out more about one another as the basis for

future collaborative working. We identified two staff members good at organising events, one a full-timer in SEE, one a part-timer in CLTAD. The two organisers had to identify the day of the week when most people could attend (a Thursday), and get it in diaries, which of course always takes longer than anyone expects. They were given parameters (e.g. timing, length, budget, things that have to happen), and came back with the programme below:

Time: Thursday 9.00 – 1.00

Outline:

Breakfast, roundtable introductions, people bingo [i.e. questions on little known facts about individuals]

Presentations by department head & teams (5 – 10 mins each)

Group activity 1: Groups of 10 – identify/summarise core activities across CLTAD & SEE

Group activity 2: Groups of 5 – identify broad areas for cross service initiatives/collaboration

Group activity 3: Groups of 3 – develop and present 1 potential project

VOTE: all vote for the best suggestion & give prize to winner

Lunch – each area/team designated a food to bring

This programme achieved many of the desired objectives:

- 1) The event planning process introduced two dynamic, positive staff members to each other, who would be able to work together in future, and link up other staff across the two departments
- 2) It involved a part timer centrally in a departmental planning event, who would be able to bear the perspective of other part time staff in mind during the planning
- 3) It combined a necessary, and potentially dull, process of sharing basic information about the structures, staff and purposes of both departments, where senior staff would take a lead, with some lively, fun, personal activities which would involve everyone in both departments
- 4) It explicitly focussed on our goal for joint projects across the two departments, with the potential to identify viable projects at the event
- 5) It communicated aspects of the desired culture of the two departments – focussed, purposeful, professional, inclusive and fun.

Beginnings and Endings

New starters, and leavers, can both present challenges to team building, and in each case, the presence of high numbers of part-timers present additional challenges. There are also particular considerations around communication and team building.

New Starters

When new people start, in a team with part-timers, it can take longer to assimilate them, because some people in the normal course of things may never meet if their times in the office do not overlap. As a part-timer, if you come into the office after someone new has

started who is also on part-time hours, it can seem that everyone's talking about someone you have never met, and it can make you feel peripheral from the rest of the team.

To avoid this situation, consider taking some of the following actions:

- 1) Before the new member of staff starts, ensure that everything is in place to ensure they have the equipment, facilities and information they need (e.g. a telephone extension, an email address, IT logon and password)
- 2) When a new member of staff joins the team, prepare an email introducing them by name, when they work & how to contact them, what their role is, their start date, whether they will be working with particular people & how their area of work interacts with others.
- 3) Arrange a morning coffee, lunch or afternoon tea, a drink after work, whatever is most applicable in your organisational culture, for a day when a large proportion of staff are available to enable the newcomer to meet as many of their colleagues as possible

Leavers

Although someone leaving the institution may not present the obvious challenges of a new starter, it is in fact very important to many team members, who will need to mark the departure of a colleague in an appropriate way, in order for the team to continue to function well. Again, marking a departure is much harder if you have a high proportion of part timers on the staff.

We have tended to hold events, at lunch time, or tea time, on days of the week when the majority of staff are in. These are low key, but give people a chance to say their farewells, and for staff who are leaving to hear from people who have appreciated them and valued working with them. When one particularly long-serving staff member left, her leaving do was videoed and stills and the video published on the departmental wiki. We usually do a collection and sign a card, which includes comments from people who can not be present at the event itself.

Teams are always changing, with people joining them and leaving. Individuals deal with this differently, but it seems to me to be important to the functioning of the team and the satisfaction of individuals within the team, that both arrivals and departures are dealt with formally, that information is available about both, and the emotional issues of meeting new people who will disturb existing patterns of working and loyalties, and saying goodbye to people who have been part of the fabric of our working lives need to be dealt with attentively.

Quick check list for communicating within teams with part-timers

- Always include part timers in all communications and correspondence
- Formally introduce part-timers (name, role, the hours they will work) to the rest of the team
- Clarify with staff members from the beginning of their contract your expectations of them attending team events, and clarify whether they are able and willing to change

their days or hours of work if needed to attend a particular activity or event, provided enough notice is given

- Involve people in different groupings on projects, or organising staff development and social activities, wherever possible
- Send round announcements and updates regularly about starters, leavers, achievements and other news.
- Involve people across levels in tasks to ensure you don't have divisions caused by hierarchies
- Give people responsibility for cross team tasks, and working in cross team groupings wherever possible

What can go wrong with part time working in terms of team building?

A surprisingly important issue is around expectations of working hours and the culture around unexpected absences. This applies across all teams, regardless so whether predominantly full time or part time, but as with other issues discussed in this chapter, some of the issues become particularly pertinent when many staff are part time.

Formal flexible working agreements should be available for the whole team in the interests of fairness, with parameters around start and finish time and the proportion of time normally spent in the office, so there is a degree of transparency and fairness about arrangements and the need to have formal meetings and casual conversations is recognised.

Case Study

When I started in my current post, there were a number of practices which made effective team working difficult (as well as presenting challenges to the effective, professional running the department in other ways). There was a great deal of variety in how often staff came into the office, in normal working hours, and in how 'working from home' and sickness absence were managed. A few staff had a tendency towards so called 'duvet-days', i.e. taking a day of unplanned absence due to oversleeping or feeling slightly unwell, sometimes in combination with a request to 'work from home'. There were two negative effects on team working and general effectiveness resulting from these patterns of behaviour. Firstly, teams do depend on regular contact (at least initially) and secondly, if some team members suspecting others of slacking, it is detrimental to trust and respect. However, in mitigating the negative effects on the team of unregulated flexibility, we did not want to prevent or reduce appropriate flexible working.

What we did was to consider the parameters to flexible working in a management team meeting, and identified limits which we felt would be conducive to good team working, as follows:

- 1) Core day of 10am-4pm; no one can start their regular day in the office later than 10am, nor finish earlier than 4pm
- 2) No more than one day a week working from home

All staff in the department were then invited to apply for flexible working if they wished, within those parameters. Staff who were already working flexibly were asked to reapply within the agreed parameters, and some staff who had never applied were encouraged to do so. The management team reviewed the applications and most were approved, although some staff members were asked to submit revised proposals that would comply with the agreed parameters. This equalised out the variations in working across the department, reduced the sense that some staff were taking advantages of others, and made organising meetings easier. One member of staff who had previously had a high number of 'duvet days', ringing in at short notice to ask to take a day's leave when he'd overslept or felt under the weather, changed his working week from five normal length days to four longer days and had Fridays off, which significantly improved his sickness absence and efficiency at work. Over a three year period, average sickness absence in the department decreased from an average of six days a year per person to three days per person per year, equivalent to a saving of £18,000.

Managing part-time staff

Most people at some point will be unclear about how to progress their work, or will lack the skills they need to complete an activity. This can happen when someone is new in a post, or when their responsibilities change or increase. It is not unusual to recruit someone into a post where it appears they have done something very similar before very competently, and to find that in the new environment, they struggle (either because there is less similarity between the previous role and the present one than it appeared, or because the standards or expectations are different). It is very stressful for most people to feel they do not understand or are not sufficiently skilled to undertake their new role, and as a consequence, they may well instinctively try to cover up their problems.

A manager would normally hope to pick this up on these situations and deal with them (by providing more support, clearer guidance, mentoring, resetting the objectives, and so on) but particularly with many part-timers, an unclear system of recording absences lends itself to covering up problems and can make it much harder for the manager to spot problems early enough to sort them out. Someone who would have thrived if given clear guidance or support when they needed it, though working in a collaborative environment, may become a stressed, evasive and disgruntled colleague who has neither the skill nor the motivation to do their job because they were allowed to become too isolated. A very small number of people appear to exploit unclear systems in order to do their own work (e.g. run a separate business) or just not to work at all. From a team working perspective, it is very important that team members trust one another to work hard and be reliable. No one wants to feel they are carrying an unfair workload, or being taken advantage of. These are complex issues requiring complex solutions, but one aspect which is fundamental is to be clear and consistent in the way different kinds of absence are described and recorded, and being clear about differentiating different kinds of leave, particularly between those which are planned in advance with the approval of the line manager, and those which are unplanned.

Again, these are issues in any team, but with large numbers of part time staff, it is normal to have many empty chairs at work. This can make it harder to identify staff who are having some kind of personal or professional troubles which manifest themselves through absence, or possibly are taking advantage of the arrangements to avoid working.

Clarity around the following helps:

- 1) Annual leave (holidays) are planned in advance, and must be approved by the line manager. The line manager has the right to refuse annual leave requests which interfere with operational needs (e.g. you can't plan leave to the middle of the busiest time of your year).
- 2) Working at home is arranged in advance, and is either part of a formal flexible working arrangement, and on a specific day of the week or part of a day, or is an occasional event which relates to a specific activity (such as a report which must be written). Again, the line manager can refuse the right to work at home based on operational need.
- 3) An unplanned absence must normally be taken either as sick leave or as 'special leave'.

We have found this is important to prevent people from becoming too casual about coming to work, and to be clear that it matters to their colleagues that we see them in the office.

Technology and part time working

Technology brings dramatic possibilities for facilitating part-time working, and integrating individuals into teams. Telephones, chat, texting, emails, wikis, document sharing, and video conferencing can all enable staff in different locations to participate in an event synchronously, or those working different hours to participate asynchronously. However, it is important to have a discussion about boundaries and expectations beforehand, to be sure that technology is not a stressful intrusion on their life outside work hours. The negative side of technology and flexible working is often documented in the press. One person's dedication and perfectionism is another person's pressure and harassment. While it may sometimes be convenient to work late at night, if you are working in the hours when other people are asleep, you may want to consider the effect of sending very late or early emails, and delaying until a more civilised hour. Middle of the night emails can make the sender appear very anxious, and the recipient can be made to feel lacking because they are not working at 2am, or bullied because they are being asked for responses at 11pm or 5.30am (as the occasional sender, and recipient, of emails during the wee hours).

While it is important to recognise and welcome activities done outside work time, and see the other activities of part-timers as valuable, it is also important to find out how all your team prefer to communicate, and what boundaries they expect around communication outside office hours/off site. Also be clear if you expect staff to keep electronic diaries up to date, and to share these with the rest of their team, to facilitate arranging meetings and conversations, to know when to expect someone to be back in contact, if you need to ask them something.

Individual support and interventions

Not all the actions you can take to ensure successful teams revolve around whole teams. Sometimes individuals need personal support to help them participate fully in terms.

For example, when staff who previously worked full time return to work after maternity leave, it may be appropriate to offer them personal coaching. There are a number of common fears on returning to work following maternity. One is that one has forgotten all one's professional expertise and one's brain will no longer conduct the necessary speedy and fine-tuned actions required of the role (and this will be obvious to everyone!). One is that one will never manage the demands of the job in balance with motherhood. And a

further possible fear is that one cannot take part in the activities which establish a successful career trajectory. Having had three periods of maternity leave, and witnessed other colleagues make this transition, I would say that the feelings are real and terrifying, but that the transition is utterly possible. However, it is the kind of life change that coaching is very very useful for, in terms of reducing the returner's anxiety, and in terms of speeding up their developing of coping mechanisms.

Conclusion

As discussed at the outset of this chapter, there are few aspects of team building which are unique to teams with a high proportion of part-time staff, but some issues become exacerbated, or harder to fix, with part-time staff. Part-time staff can be an enormous asset to a team, and nurturing them with appropriate activities to integrate them and give them opportunities for development will pay off in the quality of their work. Clarity of communication and expectations goes a long way to reducing potential problems.