



# POSTGRADUATE ONLINE PROGRAMS WITH SESSIONAL STAFF



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## - Priority Focus and explanation of PATS variation

The focus was Quality Assurance. The two postgraduate online programs for which PATS was customised are taught predominantly by sessional staff, who identified three priorities for the programs:

1. Increased program coherence and consistency as staff are predominantly employed sessionally
2. Consistency in the structure and layout of unit learning management system sites for online learning
3. Commitment to inclusive curriculum supporting the advancement and leadership of Indigenous education. This included:
  - a. establishing culturally safe learning environments
  - b. adopting culturally appropriate pedagogies
  - c. including indigenous content.

The engagement of the program's teaching academics was supported to meet these three priorities by:

1. Meetings of the teaching team focused on developing program coherence through giving sessional staff the opportunity to introduce themselves and the units they teach to each other, and to develop a shared sense of priorities for assuring the quality of the postgraduate online programs
2. Meetings with instructional designers focused on defining a shared vision for a unit learning management system template using a common structure and layout and some generic content
3. Meetings with colleagues from The Wollotuka Institute focused on options for indigenizing unit content, pedagogy and learning management system sites. The Wollotuka Institute's drives the advancement and leadership of Indigenous education and consolidates all Indigenous activities of the University under one strategic and operational body.

This PATS variation was facilitated by a PATS champion (alumnus) with the Graduate School, who customised and facilitated activities in broad alignment with the PATS process.

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### Why

PATS provided the opportunity to improve an already strong program and at the same time build collegiality in the teaching team. Varying PATS for use in this context provided a framework for accommodating sessional staff in the design and review of units in the program, as well as a way to support overall program coherence by building collective understanding of all the units in the program. It also allowed sessional staff to access the services of instructional designers, and allowed building working relationships with colleagues at The Wollotuka Institute.

### People

A teaching team that includes casual/ sessional, fixed-term contract and ongoing academic and professional staff.

### Timeframe

Trimester

### Scope: Unit

The focus was on individual units in the context of an overall degree program, and the collegial approach adopted by the teaching team demonstrated that focus.

## - Key Outcomes

### PATS Variation – outputs and outcomes

Program coherence has been increased through the fostering of collegial relationships amongst teaching colleagues, almost all of whom are employed sessionally (including one newly and remotely employed lecturer). The 'Postgraduate Online Programs with Sessional Staff' variation of PATS is yet to be evaluated formally; however, anecdotally, members of the teaching team report increased communications (emails, phone calls, etc) amongst some team members.

The teaching team noted the benefit of developing a shared vision for all units resulting in learning management system consistency using a common structure and template. Improvement was noted anecdotally through a number of unsolicited emails from students and in students' comments contributed to institutional student feedback surveys.

Indigenisation of courses with culturally safe learning environments, culturally appropriate pedagogies and indigenous content was partially achieved in the timeframe. This is an ongoing project that requires resourcing over a longer time frame.

PATS facilitated the beginning of what will need to be an ongoing conversation, and importantly professional relationships amongst teaching colleagues in the School and at Wollotuka have been established. The several initial meetings that were facilitated through the PATS variation 'Postgraduate Online Programs with Sessional Staff' achieved two things:

1. Articulation and progressing a number of innovative ideas for indigenising curriculum
2. Establishment of new professional relationships that can now be built on.

### System level impacts

Within Newcastle University, the PATS variation cases, Master of Environmental Management and Sustainability and Master of Environmental and Business Management (both in the School of Environmental and Life Sciences), aimed to have impact at IMPEL levels 1, 2, 3 and 4.

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1. **Team members:** collegial culture supports program coherence, support of sessional staff, and consistency in the learning management system for online learning, and commitment to inclusive curriculum supporting the advancement and leadership of Indigenous education.
2. **Immediate students:** delivering quality and consistency in learning management system for online enables course and unit outcomes to be met by students. Inclusive curriculum supports students' learning Indigenous education.
3. **Spreading the word:** dissemination of this practice through the production of guidelines will assist in this progression. Faculty awareness of the success of this trial supports the replication of this approach to other postgraduate online programs.
4. **Narrow opportunistic adoption:** as part of the trial, the partnership contributed evidence of the success and impact of PATS. Following the trial, the Faculty of Information Technology was the first to implement recognition of the time and support required by PATS and the value to teachers and students alike: the Faculty has endorsed the Scheme by offering coffee vouchers supplied to both mentees and mentors, academic funding of \$500 per mentee and mentor and adjustment of workload to recognise 30 hours commitment to program during the semester.
5. **Narrow systemic adoption:** uptake of collegial practices in other courses and in subsequent offerings of courses. For example, the remotely located lecturer is now engaged in regular collegial interaction with peers as required.

In particular, communicating that the team-based approach to PATS can be implemented relatively easily and at low financial and time cost by other teaching teams across the institution will shift PATS from Level 2 impact towards Level 4. Dissemination of this practice through the production of guidelines will assist in this progression towards IMPEL Level 4: "Changes by opportunistic adopters at participating institutions leading to changes for students who are directly influenced".

### - Learning

#### 1. Barriers and opportunities

A key barrier is funding. Funding is needed to ensure that members of the teaching team who are employed on a sessional basis can engage in personal professional development as well as development of unit and course quality assurance activities. The Faculty of Science and IT provided funding to cover 30 paid hours for each sessional staff person participating and coffee vouchers for all teaching colleague participants.

#### 2. What worked well

The collegial, shared leadership, approach was suitable as a way to open up discussion of teaching practices, to collectively define priorities to focus on, and as a way to foster greater program coherence through introducing members of the teaching team and their individual units to each other. This PATS variation also supported the teaching team to establish working relationships with institutionally employed specialists (instructional designers for learning management system site consistency and colleagues at The Wollotuka Institute for the development of inclusive curriculum supporting the advancement and leadership of Indigenous education).

#### 3. What didn't work well

Despite support and incentives, one sessional staff member typically working off-campus had difficulty with access and having time to participate. Development of an inclusive curriculum supporting the advancement and leadership of Indigenous education is a significant, long-term undertaking that remains to be achieved. The ongoing nature of this initiative requires ongoing

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resources to be made available, as paid time available through the 'Postgraduate Online Programs with Sessional Staff' programs has currently been fully allocated.

### 4. What was learnt

This is a valuable, important approach that can support the development of quality curricula (which enhances student experience, learning) but also valuable in building collegial relationships amongst sessional (and other) staff.

### 5. National System Impact

IMPEL Level 3: Contributions to knowledge in the field; growth or spread of disseminated ideas; serendipitous adoption/adaptation by people beyond the project's intended reach.

