

Rebekah Willson
McGill University, Montréal, Québec, Canada

Heidi Julien
SUNY University at Buffalo, Buffalo, New York, USA

PRECARIOUS ACADEMICS: INFORMATION PRACTICES AND CHALLENGES (Paper)

Abstract:

This paper reports the results of a small-scale study of the information practices of contract academic staff in the United Kingdom, which is being used as the basis for a broader study in the Canadian context. Neoliberal approaches to the management of higher education across the globe, including Canada, are contributing to a highly challenging environment for contract academic staff, who face marginalization, insecurity, and significant stress. The study seeks to give voice to this growing complement of contract academic staff, to identify practical responses to these challenges.

1. Introduction and Goal of the Study

A significant divergence in academia is evident between tenure-track faculty members who enjoy full-time salaries, benefits, and job security, and contract academic staff (also called adjunct faculty, contingent faculty, etc.) who enjoy none of these. In Canada, academic employment is increasingly precarious, with 29% of academic staff working on temporary contracts (CAUT, 2019). The precarious academic workforce reports feeling insecure and marginalised (e.g., Brown et al., 2010; Dolan, 2011; Lopes & Dewan, 2014), and prevented from working to their full capacity (Brady & Briody, 2016). Contract academic staff write about the stress and anxiety that results from precarity, low pay and lack of benefits, as well as their desire to seek longer term contracts (Harper, 2018). They may also be significantly undercompensated for their actual hours worked (Carver, 2017). These negative experiences contribute to the loss of valuable academic staff (Brady & Briody, 2016), which has significant economic impact, as costs for hiring workers ranges from 10-17 weeks' pay, increasing with more skilled positions (Blatter et al., 2012).

Kezar's (2013) and Dolan's (2011) studies of contingent faculty suggests that they suffer from a lack of information and communication, as well as misinformation in many departments. Marginalised and excluded, a major challenge for casualized academics is a lack of workplace information required for day-to-day activities (Willson, 2018). Universities are knowledge-intensive organisations that require not only disciplinary expertise but large amounts of information about policies, procedures, and practical aspects of the job. Dolan (2011) found that contract academic staff seek communication via face-to-face meetings and gatherings.

The failure of universities to be inclusive of contract academic staff and acknowledge the spectrum of their information needs significantly contributes to the issues they experience. Academia is a complex, information-intensive field and universities are complicated

workplace environments. Learning how to do academic work is challenging; added to this, finding necessary workplace information in universities is difficult (Willson, 2016). The extent of this set of challenges, and the opportunity to ameliorate these, will only be understood when the voices of contract academic staff are fully heard. This study therefore aimed to examine:

- the lived experiences of academics with precarious working conditions;
- the influence of on how workplace information is found, shared, used, and created; and
- the possible practical strategies to provide necessary workplace information to contract academic staff.

2. Methods

A small-scale, qualitative study was conducted in Scotland and England to better understand the experiences of contract academic staff in the UK research context. The study included focus groups with 12 academic staff on contracts of two years or less (with one exception, one participant had a 3-year contract) at one technological university and one ancient university (research-intensive university founded in the middle ages). Focus groups lasted 72-98 minutes. Nine participants were on research-only contracts, two were on teaching-only contracts, one was on a teaching and research contract. Participants included nine women and three men, with a range of disciplinary backgrounds and experience levels.

This information behaviour research employed a social phenomenological approach, part of the phenomenological tradition of examining lived experience (Adams & van Manen, 2008). Preliminary data analysis was done using qualitative content analysis, which categorises data into patterns, conceptual categories, and themes to derive meaning from and relationships between data (Julien, 2008). Initial coding included a close reading of focus group transcripts and coding for general actions and topics. The initial codes were then grouped into categories and examined for fit.

3. Findings and Discussion

Scrabbling for practical information

[I]t took us probably four months to figure out which template we should fill in, because we kept emailing to the people who are responsible for it and asking ... So it's not only that there is no induction and no training on how are things to be done, but when you request information, it's also quite challenging to get answers... –“Anne”

Contract academic staff had a wide variety of information needs, particularly when starting new positions. Much of the information needed was practical, needed to carry out their day-to-day work, such as information about contracts and bureaucratic information. Contract staff described having challenges in determining where to find information, discussing issues of not being provided with necessary information, and not receiving orientation (also called induction). While colleagues are an important source of workplace information (Willson, 2016), contract academic staff mentioned being uncertain of who to ask for help. These issues are not unique to contract academic staff but frequently stem from not being a regular member of staff, marginalised within

a department. The information needs of contract academic staff were often complicated, requiring them to scabble to get the workplace information they need, having been provided with few information resources. In this context, information needs are created by the situation contract staff find themselves in, which then influences information seeking (Savolainen, 2012).

Information seeking and monitoring: Constantly chasing up and staying on top

You just have to chase it every time you renew or get a new contract. If you were a full-time, permanent member of staff, once you were set up, that would be you until something big changed, but for us, it's every time a project comes to an end. –“Jonathan”

The information needs of contract academic staff mean that they have to actively monitor their situation and seek out information, as information needs fluctuate over time. Information seeking and monitoring was particularly needed when there were problems with contracts, payroll, and finding new employment. In addition to chasing up information, staying on top of situations was important. Several contract staff members described a process of learning how to manage their contract work and applying that information to their next contract position. This included knowing which information to keep track of for auditing purposes, knowing who to talk to about problems with contracts, and beginning to look for new employment when contracts were running out. Contract staff start positions over and over again, meaning information needs are recurring. Actively looking for information and then returning to that information to monitor the situation, reminiscent of McKenzie's (2003) active scanning, was an important part of gaining agency over their situation.

Uncertainty as a barrier

And I just think it's not necessarily a good way to live: it's really stressful and anxiety-inducing, and it's just really difficult. And I think just in terms of my age and the stage I'm at you just can't plan anything ... –“Sophie”

Uncertainty permeated discussions of the experiences of contract academic staff, including information regarding their roles, how to find information, their status within the university, and their career development. The precarious nature of contract employment means that professional (and personal) planning is difficult, if – at times – impossible. It also influenced the approach that contract staff took to their jobs, discouraging some from participating in activities such as departmental meetings, university events, and professional development, reducing their understanding of and integration into the university. Stress and anxiety were apparent in how many contract staff members discussed their current employment and future job prospects. Uncertainty, which is associated with feelings of anxiety, comes from “a lack of understanding, a gap in meaning, or a limited construct” (Kuhlthau, 1993, p. 347). For some contract staff members, this situation was untenable and there were discussions of leaving academia.

4. Implications

Surprisingly, despite the issues associated with contract academic staff being widely recognised, there is a dearth of research within the Canadian higher education context. Thus, the findings from the UK study are being used to inform a similar study of Canadian contract academic staff. Around the world, academics are being challenged by neoliberal trends in higher education (e.g., Giroux, 2007; Taylor, 2014; 2018) and the accompanying managerialism (e.g., Deem, 1998; Deem et al., 2007; Ginsberg, 2011). The systemic managerial constraints that modern universities exert on academics dictate how they accomplish their work and shape their information practices (Willson, 2018). Neoliberal policies entail decreased government funding, intensified accountability requirements, higher workloads, increased hiring of administrators, and a move to a casualized workforce.

Within academe casualization has typically been examined as a systemic issue (e.g., Gill, 2014; Giroux, 2014), lacking empirical explorations of the phenomenon from the perspective of those most directly affected – contract academic staff. Some researchers have begun to explore these academics' experiences empirically, notably in Australia (e.g., Brown et al., 2010; Kimber & Erich, 2015; Klopper & Power, 2014) and recently in the UK (Jones & Oakley, 2018; Locke et al., 2018; Loveday, 2017; 2018). This research will address the deficiency of empirical research in the Canadian context, providing a systematic examination of the lived experiences of contract academic staff, focussing on casualization, and accounting for systemic and contextual factors of the Canadian higher education sector. The findings of this research will inform Canadian policy and practice by developing 'best practices' for universities to work with contract academics in Canada and beyond.

Reference List:

- Adams, C., & van Manen, M. (2008). Phenomenology. In L. M. Given (Ed.), *The SAGE encyclopedia of qualitative research methods* (pp. 615–619). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412963909.n317>
- Blatter, M., Muehlemann, S., & Schenker, S. (2012). The costs of hiring skilled workers. *European Economic Review*, 56(1), 20–35. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.eurocorev.2011.08.001>
- Brady, M., & Briody, A. (2016). Strategic use of temporary employment contracts as real options. *Journal of General Management*, 42(2), 31–56.
- Brown, T., Goodman, J., & Yasukawa, K. (2010). Academic casualization in Australia: Class divisions in the university. *Journal of Industrial Relations*, 52(2), 169–182.
- Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT). (2019). *CAUT almanac of post-secondary education 2019*. Retrieved from: <https://www.caut.ca/latest/publications/almanac>
- Carver, L. F. (2017). My experience as an under-paid Ontario college instructor. Retrieved November 4, 2019, from The Conversation website: <http://theconversation.com/my-experience-as-an-under-paid-ontario-college-instructor-87486>
- Deem, R. (1998). 'New managerialism' and higher education: The management of performances and cultures in universities in the United Kingdom. *International Studies in Sociology of Education*, 8(1), 47–70. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0962021980020014>

- Deem, R., Hillyard, S., & Reed, M. (2007). *Knowledge, higher education, and the new managerialism*. Oxford University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199265909.001.0001>
- Dolan, V. L. B. (2011). The isolation of online adjunct faculty and its impact on their performance. *The International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning*, 12(2), 62–77. <https://doi.org/10.19173/irrodl.v12i2.793>
- Gill, R. (2014). Academics, cultural workers and critical labour studies. *Journal of Cultural Economy*, 7(1), 12–30. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17530350.2013.861763>
- Ginsberg, B. (2011). *The fall of the faculty: the rise of the all-administrative university and why it matters*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Giroux, H. A. (2014). Austerity and the Poison of Neoliberal Miseducation. *Symploke*, 22(1), 9–21.
- Giroux, H. (2007). Marketing the university: Corporate power and the academic factory. In *The university in chains: Confronting the military-industrial-academic complex* (pp. 98–127). New York: Routledge.
- Harper, K. (2018, March). Working part-time in name only. *Canadian Association of University Teachers Bulletin*. Retrieved November 12, 2019 from <https://www.caut.ca/bulletin/2018/03/commentary-working-part-time-name-only>
- Jones, S. A., & Oakley, C. (2018). *The precarious postdoc: Interdisciplinary research and casualised labour in the humanities and social sciences* (Working Knowledge: People & Roles). Retrieved from http://www.workingknowledgeps.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/WKPS_PrecariousPostdoc_PDF_Interactive.pdf
- Julien, H. (2008). Content Analysis. In L. M. Given (Ed.), *The SAGE encyclopedia of qualitative research methods* (pp. 121–122). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.
<https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412963909.n65>
- Kezar, A. (2013). Examining non-tenure track faculty perceptions of how departmental policies and practices shape their performance and ability to create student learning at four-year Institutions. *Research in Higher Education*, 54(5), 571–598.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-013-9288-5>
- Kimber, M., & Ehrich, L. C. (2015). Are Australia's universities in deficit? A tale of generic managers, audit culture and casualisation. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 37(1), 83–97. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1360080X.2014.991535>
- Klopper, C. J., & Power, B. (2014). The Casual Approach to Teacher Education: What Effect Does Casualisation Have for Australian University Teaching? *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 39(4). <https://doi.org/10.14221/ajte.2014v39n4.1>
- Kuhlthau, C. C. (1993). A principle of uncertainty for information seeking. *Journal of Documentation*, 49(4), 339–355. <https://doi.org/10.1108/eb026918>
- Locke, W., Freeman, R., & Rose, A. (2018). *Early career social science researchers: Experiences and support needs*. Retrieved from Centre for Global Higher Education website: <http://www.researchcghe.org/perch/resources/publications/ecrreport-1.pdf>
- Lopes, A., & Dewan, I. (2014). Precarious pedagogies? The impact of casual and zero-hour contracts in Higher Education. *Journal of Feminist Scholarship*, 7(8), 28–42.
- Loveday, V. (2017). 'Luck, chance, and happenstance? Perceptions of success and failure amongst fixed-term academic staff in UK higher education': Luck, chance, and happenstance? *The British Journal of Sociology*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1468-4446.12307>

- Loveday, V. (2018). The neurotic academic: anxiety, casualisation, and governance in the neoliberalising university. *Journal of Cultural Economy*, 11(2), 154–166. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17530350.2018.1426032>
- McKenzie, P. J. (2003). A model of information practices in accounts of everyday-life information seeking. *Journal of Documentation*, 59(1), 19–40. <https://doi.org/10.1108/00220410310457993>
- Reevy, G. M., & Deason, G. (2014). Predictors of depression, stress, and anxiety among non-tenure track faculty. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 5. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2014.00701>
- Savolainen, R. (2012). Conceptualizing information need in context. *Information Research*, 17(4). Retrieved from <http://informationr.net/ir/17-4/paper534.html#USrIAqXWFHc>
<http://informationr.net/ir/17-4/paper534.html>
- Taylor, Y. (Ed.) (2014). *The entrepreneurial university - engaging publics, intersecting impacts*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Taylor Y. & Lahad K. (Eds.) (2018). *Feeling academic in the neoliberal university: Feminist flights, fights and failures*. Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-64224-6>
- Willson, R. (2018). “Systemic Managerial Constraints”: How universities influence the information behaviour of HSS early career academics. *Journal of Documentation*, 74(4), 862–879. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JD-07-2017-0111>
- Willson, R. (2016). *Information in transition: Examining the information behaviour of academics as they transition into university careers*. (Doctoral thesis, Charles Sturt University, Wagga Wagga, Australia). Retrieved from <https://researchoutput.csu.edu.au/ws/portalfiles/portal/9316538>