

Shattering myths about contract academic staff | CAUT

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When CAUT conducted a national survey of contract academic staff last year, it was the first time this growing segment of the academic workforce was given such a voice. The survey aimed to hear about their working conditions, feelings and life goals.

The results reveal a dire picture, not just of the state of higher education at institutions in Canada, but also of the mental health of workers trapped in a “gig” lifestyle that is not of their choosing.

The more than 2,600 survey respondents challenged the institutional line that most low-paid, short-term and part-time teachers love the flexibility of their contract employment. Instead they have shed a gloomy light on exactly what it means to be a contract academic staff member.

“I don’t have access to basic things, such as chalk or markers for the classroom. No paper clips, no stapler, nothing.”

“The sessional office is shared by 18 people. It’s really just a place to get your mail.”

“I’m a professor. They’re always impressed, until I tell them that I work in three schools in two cities, and have no benefits whatsoever and no job stability.”

“There’s no access to computer technologies, printers, or phones.”

These survey comments may summon images of teaching conditions more akin to those of impoverished nations, but they are common for contract academic staff in Canada. The enormity of the situation becomes starker when set against the backdrop of the numbers. According to Statistics Canada, there was a 79 per cent increase in the number of university teachers working part-time, part-year from 2005 to 2015 while the ranks of regular professors increased by only 14 per cent. During the same period, the number of university students grew by 28 per cent. Although national data on course instruction is limited, a report released in January 2018 by the Council of Ontario Universities found that 50 per cent of undergraduate courses at 17 universities in the province were taught by contract academics.

The survey report, co-authored by Karen Foster, associate professor of sociology and social anthropology at Dalhousie University, and CAUT research officer Louise Birdsell Bauer, finds that “many contract academic staff are underpaid, overworked, under-resourced, and trying their best to provide an excellent education to students.”

Despite poor working conditions, many contract academics emphasized their commitment to the job, while hoping for better: “I teach at a university and love my job. I am devoted to the students and the institution.”

Still, the findings contradict assumptions that contract academics use their university or college appointments to pick up extra income while studying or working elsewhere.

According to the report, “over half (53 per cent) want a tenure-track university or full-time, permanent college job, and this desire holds even for people who have been teaching for 16–20 years.”

Additionally, “[o]nly 25 per cent said, unequivocally, that they do not want a tenure-track or permanent, full-time academic appointment. The remainder is unsure whether or not they want a tenure-track appointment.”

Birdsell Bauer asserts that the vast majority of contract academics are neither grad students nor happy moonlighters. “Contract academic staff do not largely work part-time hours, and they have no job security,” she says. “Contrary to popular myths that contract faculty only teach, the survey shows that a considerable percentage of respondents also participate in both research and service, although most are not paid for it.”

Job security is the top concern of contract academic staff. “Only 21 per cent of respondents had non-academic full-time, permanent work. If there is a ‘majority’ group among our respondents, it is people who are trying to make a full-time career out of working at a post-secondary institution,” the report concludes.

The survey results also reveal that “[w]omen and racialized contract academic staff work more hours per course per week than their colleagues and are overrepresented in low income categories; [t]wo-thirds (of respondents) said their mental health has been negatively impacted by the contingent nature of their employment; and [j]ust 19 per cent of those surveyed think the post-secondary institution where they work are model employers and supporters of good jobs.”

Many respondents detailed the toll their precarious employment has taken on their self-esteem and mental health.

“I don’t talk about my work much because despite being an expert in my field, my insecure working conditions devalue who I am — my social identity.”

“Contract work is unstable and unreliable. I work as much as possible in order to build up my savings in case one term or one year I do not get any work. I’ve given up all other parts of my life to work as much as possible out of fear and instability.”

“I have been teaching at this institution for almost 30 years and like other contract academic faculty have never been recognized for my years of service at the annual service recognition awards.”

“I have never had a ‘real job’ that’s full time with benefits. It is always precarious under-employment that takes more than 40 hours per week.

My wife is the main breadwinner. I have no way to say this to people that sounds good. It's becoming a major trigger for anxiety."

The survey results are unsurprising to CAUT Contract Academic Staff Committee chair Sarika Bose.

"From anecdotes I've heard for decades, and experientially, the results are spot on and the working conditions described aren't optimal for contract academic staff, or for students and learning," she notes. "The mental health of contract academics is being affected, with many burning out and leaving. The isolation provoked by the system is a huge problem, creating disengagement and making it difficult to supervise students and contribute new knowledge as trained researchers and scientists. It diminishes the integrity of the university as a whole."

Many respondents said they'd given up trying to self-fund and find time to do research, which is expected but unsupported by most institutions. One respondent described how their success in research was mainly due to support from academics outside their institution: "I have worked on a national and international research team for 10 years so I regularly lecture and contribute to international research. I regularly receive grants for projects and travel both nationally and regionally. My research is not supported by my university as I am a part-time faculty but instead by colleagues from other universities."

Bose says education and increased institutional transparency are needed in order to change the tide. "We need to feel we have a community of scholars. We can reverse the growing reliance on contract academics, but we need the support of all colleagues as a solid and unified voice."

The survey was open to contract academic teaching staff at Canadian

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post-secondary institutions who taught at least one course in the 2016–
2017 academic year.