

A Snapshot of Precarious Academic Work in Canada

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Abstract: In much of the developed world, tendencies associated with neoliberalism, the “corporatization” of the university, and cuts to government funding have led to a growing reliance on contingent or “non-regular” faculty. The vast majority of these academic workers are in the Social Sciences and Humanities. Precariously employed, these non-regular faculty constitute a reserve of low-paid and marginalized academic workers, and an increase in the number of doctorates granted each year in Canada guarantees a continuous supply of highly exploitable workers. While many books, articles, and blog posts discuss this phenomenon in the United States, less information is available for Canada. Using data collected by the Canadian Union of Public Employees and other published literature, this paper will measure the extent of the reliance on precariously employed contract faculty across Canada and offer suggestions for further research on the plight of these workers in Canada.

Keywords: Academic Labour, Precarious Work, Corporatization, Neoliberal University, Non-regular Faculty

Introduction

In much of the developed world, tendencies associated with neoliberalism, the “corporatization” of the university, and cuts to government funding have led to a growing reliance on contingent or “non-regular” faculty. Precariously employed, these non-regular faculty constitute a reserve of low-paid and marginalized academic workers, and an increase in the number of doctorates granted each year in Canada guarantees a continuous supply of highly exploitable workers. While many books, articles, and blog posts discuss this phenomenon in the United States, less information is available for Canada. This paper will measure the extent of the reliance on precariously employed contract faculty across Canada, where it is “estimated that more than half of all undergraduates are taught by contract faculty” (Basen2014). Research by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) supports this figure. It shows that

for the past decade, 54 percent of faculty appointments in Canadian universities are short term contract appointments, rather than permanent. Part-time, casual, or temporary terms of work are

also growing in support work as well. In some cases, universities and colleges are using attrition to get around collective agreement language preventing layoffs in order to replace permanent positions with casual and temporary positions. [CUPE 2018]

For the most part, contingent faculty, as a collectivity, are confined to teaching and often precluded from even applying for many of the larger, more prestigious research grants. Universities pay significantly lower salaries, provide fewer benefits, reduce reported employment time frames, and, as a result, reduce pensionable earnings. In short, contract academic faculty cost significantly less than their tenured counterparts, are often hired only to teach, and teaching is always considered less important than research. Contingent faculty are usually required to re-apply for their jobs every four months and spend a great deal of time in a demoralizing exercise. For these reasons, sessional faculty tend to have less robust publication records, and full-time faculty consider this a valid justification for denying full-time positions. When full-time, tenure track positions do become available, they rarely go to

members of this group. While there may be several reasons given to rationalize this on an individual basis, the fact of the matter is that the real underlying cause is a cultural misrecognition or stigma that is associated with sessional or non-regular teaching (Langan and Morton 2009).

The research report here aims to provide a concise quantitative analysis using the best available data that will contribute to our understanding of the extent of precarious academic labour in Canadian universities. I will draw some tentative conclusions about the spread or decline of these employment practices in the educational sector. The paper will include a brief examination of the use of non-standard employment in Canada for all industries and end with suggestions for future research.

Literature Review

The trend toward precarious employment, accompanied by an overall decline in the percentage of tenured faculty, is not unique to Canada (Altbach 2002; Baldwin and Chronister, 2001; Busso and Rivetti 2014; Childress 2019; Pratt 1997). Across the developed world, the reliance on lower-paid contract academic staff is growing, and the Social Sciences and Humanities seem to be particularly vulnerable to this shift (Busso and Rivetti 2014; Diciancomo 1997; Donoghue 2008; Walters, 2002). As Frank Donoghue writes: “The dismantling of the American professoriate is part and parcel of the casualization of labour in general, a phenomenon that began in earnest in the 1980s and has accelerated since then (2008, xiv).” Donoghue observes that the corporatization of the university resembles the Scientific Management of Frederick W. Taylor, “the architect of modern capitalist labour-management” who “figures as centrally in present-day universities as it did in the factories of the teens and 1920s (2008, xv).” He argues that the liberal arts model of higher education with a focus on humanities education as a path to ethical and moral citizenship is “crumbling as college credentials become more expensive and more explicitly tied to job preparation (2008, xvii).

The trend is exacerbated by the use of temporary foreign workers to fill contract faculty positions. As a 2018 response paper prepared by the Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT) observes

that between 2015 and 2018, “the average number of university professors and lecturers who held work permits under the International Mobility Program (IMP) in Canada in a given year was 5,412.” They further report that “the average number of university professors and lecturers who held work permits under the Temporary Foreign Worker Program (TFWP) in Canada in a given year was 295.” The numbers were lower among college and vocational instructors. Among this group, those 258 held IMP work permits, and an average of 93 held TFWP work permits.

The Temporary Foreign Workers Program (TFWP) is intended to fill temporary labour shortages across a wide range of skilled professions (Preibisch, 2010). However, David Robinson, the executive director of CAUT argued that universities were abusing the program. To quote Robinson, “Universities are using the program to side-step proper procedures for recruiting” (Usher 2015). A later statement issued by CAUT expresses similar concerns about the use of these programs and the impact on Canadian academic workers:

By the mid-1980s, at the largest institutions in the country the proportion of university professors who held a Canadian PhD reached a peak. That share, however, began to decline by the late 1990s, and has fallen further following a significant weakening of the rules in 2003. The growing underemployment and unemployment in the academic sector suggests that the use of both the Temporary Foreign Worker Program (TFWP) and the International Mobility Program (IMP), and short-term contract work more generally, must be more judiciously considered by all stakeholders. The Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT), an organization representing more than 70,000 academic staff at over 120 postsecondary institutions across the country, wishes to highlight in this publication the context of growing underemployment and unemployment at Canadian research institutions. [CAUT, August 2018]

In addition to faculty positions, universities are using the IMP and TFWP to employ post-doctoral and research award recipients. As the report states, “In the past three years, the average number of researchers who held work permits under the IMP in Canada in a given year was 523, and the average number of

researchers who held work permits under the TFWP in Canada in a given year was 32” (CAUT 2018). CAUT recommended that

since the number of university professors and lecturers, college and vocational instructors, and researchers who hold work permits under the IMP are much greater than those who hold work permits under the TFWP, we recommend that the IMP require a Labour Market Impact Assessment (LMIA). This way, the IRCC can best assess the impact of these programs on the academic sector. [CAUT 2018]

The difference is significant. Under the Temporary Foreign Worker Program, employers must obtain a Labour Market Impact Assessment (LMIA) and work permits may be issued or denied depending on labour market conditions in specific cases. By contrast, the International Mobility Program (IMP), has no such restrictions, meaning that employers in Canada may hire foreign workers on a temporary work permit without needing to obtain a Labour Market Impact Assessment (LMIA).

Indeed, Employment and Social Development Canada publishes specific details about the number of academic appointments that have passed the LMIA. The information is published quarterly as the *Temporary Foreign Worker Program (TFWP): Positive Labour Market Impact Assessment (LMIA) Employers List* (Government of Canada nd.). The data indicates how many people are hired through this program each quarter, and by which universities and colleges. What it does not tell us is whether these positions are tenure-track or temporary. More research is needed to determine whether this is a way to recruit the best scholars or whether there are also instances of exploitation and non-regular academic positions.

It seems clear from this brief discussion that the extent of this form of labour relations in the teaching roles in postsecondary institutions deserves attention. The remainder of this paper employs descriptive statistics to provide a “snapshot” of the extent of precarity in higher education in Canada.

Data and Methods

Due to the nature of contract employment, numbers are hard to pin down. How many academic

workers are in contract positions in any given year will shift according to the semester and hiring practices of individual departments. Moreover, as Jamie Brownlee (2015, 55) has observed:

The tenuous employment status of sessionals – in that they are not defined as “real” faculty in the institutional hierarchy – generally means that less care is taken in institutional record-keeping and information management, which has a range of implications for data collection.

“Invisible academic” is a term that has been used to describe this phenomenon (Vose 2015). Another difficulty with data collection is that many precariously employed academics need to teach at more than one university to cobble together a living wage, also known as “road scholars” (Kramer, Gloeckner, and Jacoby 2014, Mystyk, 2001). The difficulty is compounded by an apparent unwillingness on the part of many universities to make this information public (Brownlee 2015, 52-55).

Furthermore, when we can find reliable information, what do these numbers really tell us? Some of the sample will be graduate students who are not yet eligible to apply for tenure-track positions; some will be professionals with other sources of income who teach “on the side.” And others will be long-term members of the “irregular” employment category. This short chapter will bring together information to help to quantify the job category and make some general observations about the university sector. Finally, we will compare the data for postsecondary academic workers with the data for workers in Canada more generally.

The sources of data for this article are the CUPE Database on Academic Employment in Canada, updated May 2019, and Jamie Brownlee (2015). Of these, the database compiled by CUPE is the most comprehensive.

Statistical Data and Analysis

The Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) is the second largest union in Canada, and a significant number of sessional lecturers are members of CUPE locals, including myself. CUPE funded and executed a nationwide research project. Every postsecondary institution and research facility was served with a Freedom

of Information and Protection of Privacy Act (FIPPA) request. The requests asked for the employment status for every department, broken down by Tenure/Tenure Track, Fulltime Contract, and Part-time contract. I contacted the CUPE National research office and requested a copy of the database. The database (over 550,000 cases) was recorded in Excel.

To analyze the data, I converted the categorical variables to facilitate descriptive statistical analysis using SPSS. Where the values appeared as words (string variables), I converted them to numerical code. The conversion was necessary to ensure a higher degree of accuracy. Blanks, or missing values, were retained as I believe them to be valid variables. The blanks indicate one of two things: the institution in question does not have a tenure system, or the institution was unable or unwilling to accommodate the FIPPA request.

In most cases, it was the former. Research Institutes and Community Colleges, for example, do not have a tenure system but do hire both full-time and part-time faculty, so this information is essential to my goal of providing as complete a picture as possible. To manage the extent of the database, I made some decisions about which years and regions to select.

For this study, data for the years 2011-2017 were analyzed nationally and for the province of Ontario. Jamie Brownlee's data focuses only on Ontario and covers the years 2001 – 2010. For comparison with employment beyond the academic sector, I relied on the National Graduate Survey (NGS) for the years 2011 and 2018. The purpose of this article is to answer, using the best available data, the following questions:

How many positions are tenured or tenure track?

How many are contract, whether full-time or part-time?

What is the connection between discipline or faculty and employment potential?

And, finally,

How do these numbers compare with Canadian employment statistics outside of academia?

The base population for each data set is somewhat varied. As mentioned, Brownlee's data only considers postsecondary institutions in Ontario. The CUPE

National database is the most extensive survey available that focuses on the employment status of academic workers in (almost) all of the postsecondary institutions in Canada. The study focuses on job security, and the results are limited rather than comprehensive as the focus was on job security and a simple differentiation based on employment status. Information by faculty is illustrative, but there is no information on the highest degree, gender, ethnicity, or other variables that might have an impact on a person's likelihood of securing a tenure-track position.

What is the extent of precarious academic employment in Canada?

Data supports the contention that there was a growing reliance on contract faculty in universities in Ontario between 2000 and 2010. This data focused mainly on the Social Sciences and Humanities departments (Brownlee 2015, 55). Figure 1 (page 11) summarizes Brownlee's (2015, 58) findings.

The bars on the left indicate the number of people employed in Tenure Stream positions in Ontario for the years 2001, 2004, 2007, and 2010 while the bars on the right show the number of contract positions held for the same years. The data indicate a clear pattern for the institutions that provided the data requested by Brownlee. It is interesting to note that most universities were not willing to give this information until presented with an official request under the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act (FIPPA). While there is growth for both tenure-stream and contract employment, the ratio between the two types of employment status shifts significantly during this period. Looking at another data set, also for Ontario, the growth in non-tenure stream employment in Ontario has continued to increase (see Figure 2 below). The left-most bar indicates missing data, which we can infer is primarily non-regular employment status. The growth of full-time contracts is higher than the growth of tenured or tenure-track employment, and the increase in part-time contract work continues to outstrip both.

Table 1 (page 12) summarizes the data for academic employment broken down in terms of temporary or tenured/tenure stream faculty for Ontario from Fall 2006 to Spring, 2017. It shows that, when we consider

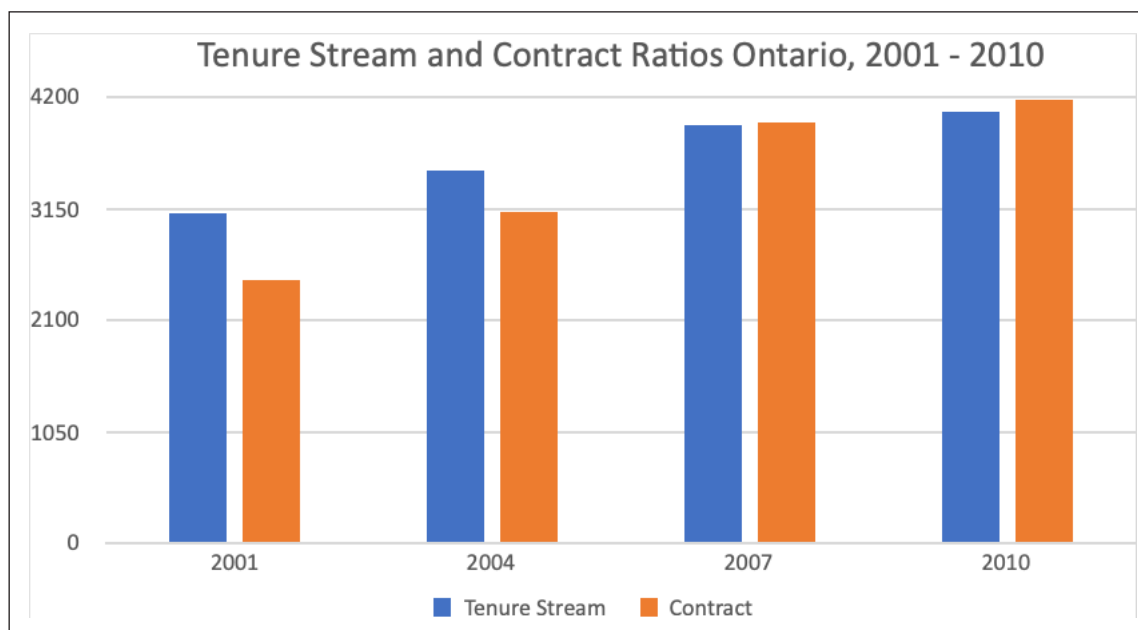


Figure 1. Source: Adapted from Brownlee 2015, 58

permanent, tenured, or tenure-stream appointments compared to contract positions, whether full-time or part-time, a slightly different picture emerges. We can see that the reliance on non-tenured faculty continues to increase, rather dramatically, in the province of Ontario. Data for this analysis comes from a country-wide research project conducted by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE). This database, updated May 19, 2019, reflects data obtained through Freedom of Information requests to all publicly funded universities in Canada. For comparison with Brownlee's data, I used SPSS to select only data for the province of Ontario.

The CUPE research team requested information on full-time tenured and tenure track faculty, full-time contract faculty, and part-time contract faculty. The researchers note that:

Not all universities have a tenure system. We included permanent or regular faculty who have the same status as tenured faculty at other schools in the category of tenured and tenure track faculty. Additionally, a small number of universities with tenure also have non-tenured faculty with permanent contracts. Since our primary interest for this project was in the question of job security, we included these faculty with the tenured and tenure-track faculty in our database. [CUPE 2019]

A further consideration, and as already noted in the introduction, is that “Contract faculty are known by many different terms: sessional, adjunct, contingent, instructor, lecturer, or limited-term appointment. In this database, all non-permanent faculty, regardless of title, are included in the category of contract faculty.” The numbers indicate a dramatic increase in the numbers of contract appointments as compared with Tenured and Tenure-Track appointments in the Province of Ontario, with 4819 Tenured or Tenure-Track compared to 9780 on some form of “Contract” appointment between 2011 and 2018. In Ontario, again, contract work, including both full-time and part-time positions, outstrips tenured or tenure-stream positions, as the following bar chart for Ontario illustrates (Figure 2, page 13).

Finally, I would like to include a bar chart that depicts postsecondary academic employment for all of Canada for the 2016-2017 academic year (see Figure 3, page 13). The data for British Columbia, Manitoba, Nova Scotia, Ontario, and Quebec show four bars rather than three. The leftmost bar represents “missing” data, which either represents contract workers or comes from institutions that do not have tenure or tenure-stream positions. These institutions include research institutes, polytechnics, and universities that have not

Table 1: Contract (full-time and part-time) and Tenured or Tenure Stream Employment in Postsecondary Institutions in Ontario, 2006 -2017

		Employment Status			Total
		FT Contract	PT Contract	Tenured/TT	
2006 - 07	72	255	268	255	850
2007 - 08	72	299	318	306	995
2008 - 09	72	343	372	314	1101
2009 - 10	76	336	355	313	1080
2010 - 11	76	371	387	351	1185
2011 - 12	290	376	389	353	1408
2012 - 13	280	431	456	401	1568
2013 - 14	277	437	465	410	1589
2014 - 15	275	434	469	410	1588
2015 - 16	276	432	468	411	1587
2016 - 17	273	449	492	434	1648
Total	2039	4163	4439	3958	14599

Source: CUPE 2019

yet complied with the FIPPA requests. Overall, the data shows that the reliance on Part-time contract academic workers is highest in Ontario and British Columbia and all provinces evidence some degree of reliance on non-regular faculty for the delivery of their curriculum.

Most of the universities reported the main or primary department for each sessional or regular faculty member who may be cross-appointed. The numbers, therefore, do not indicate the total number of sessional lecturers teaching at any given institution as some may teach for more than one department at the same university or college. An additional complication lies

in the fact that some sessional lecturers teach at more than one institution, and duplication may occur in that context. That said, the numbers do reveal trends and tendencies that are significant and important, as is made clear when we break the data down by faculty.

Is there any difference in terms of discipline or faculty?

To address this question, I relied on the CUPE National database referred to above. In the methodology section of the database, the authors explain that this data was collected using the following parameters:

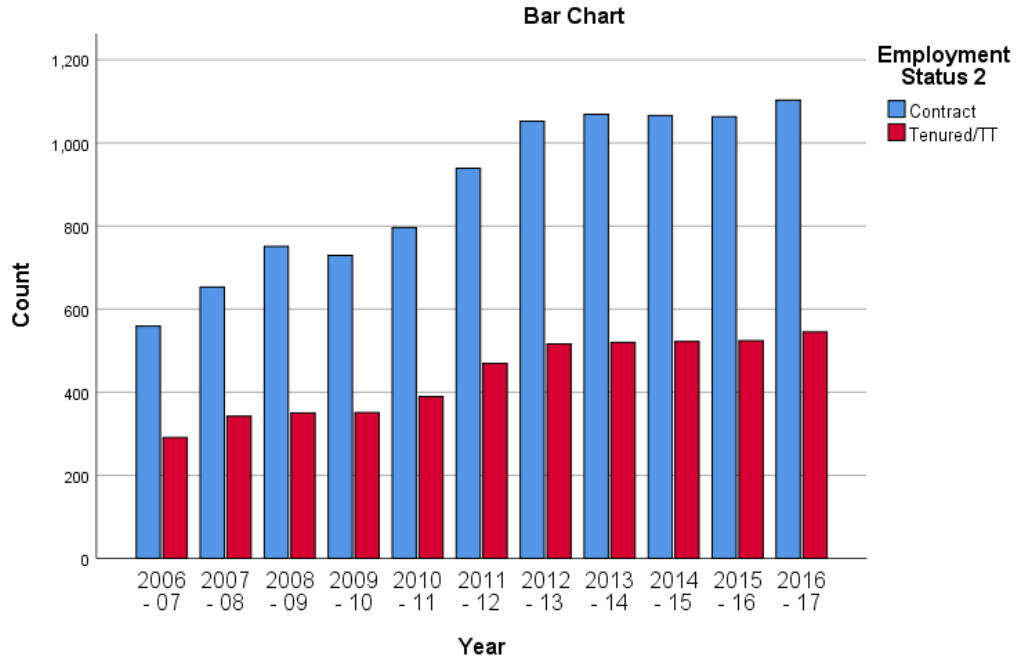


Figure 2: Bar Chart, Employment Status Ontario 2006-2017,

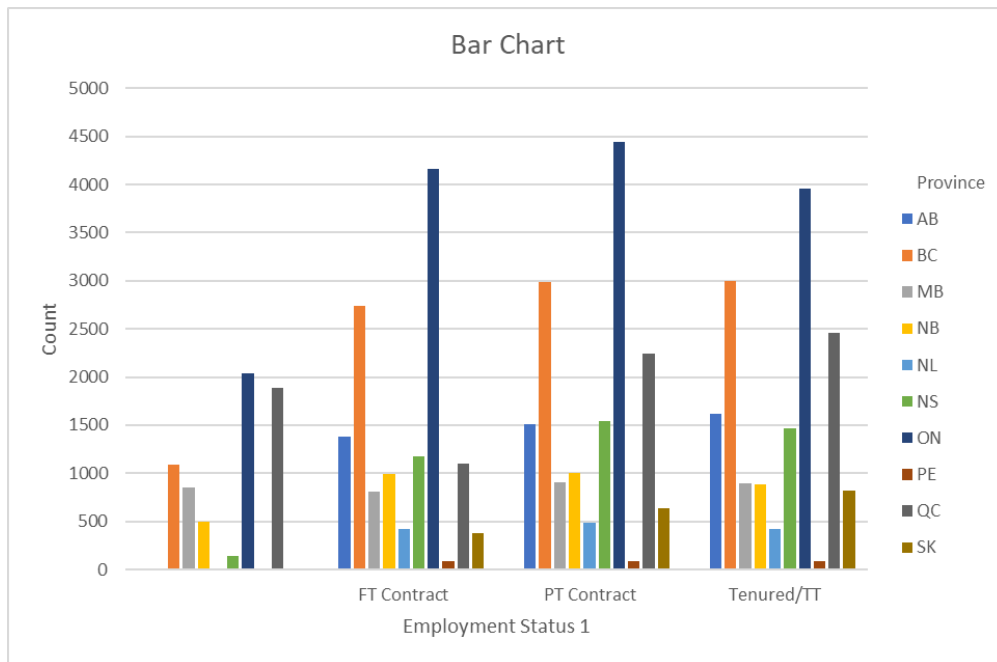


Figure 3 Full-time contract, part-time contract, and tenured or tenure-track employment in Canada 2016-2017

Source: CUPE National Database 2019.

Table 2 Faculty Type, Employment Status Crosstabulation By Faculty

Faculty Type		Employment Status 1			Total
		FT Contract	PT Contract	Tenured/TT	
	124	72	83	84	363
Agriculture	22	220	281	314	837
Architecture	88	166	210	205	669
Business	379	898	1143	1048	3468
Continuing Education	160	195	278	120	753
Education	296	603	756	572	2227
Engineering	270	641	913	885	2709
Health Sciences	942	2695	2621	3286	9544
Humanities	1633	2647	3311	3019	10610
Law	90	166	138	168	562
Library Science	44	12	44	44	144
Multiple	363	729	942	844	2878
Other	149	108	192	137	586
Science	785	1862	2276	2296	7219
Social Sciences	1027	1938	2360	2242	7567
Trades and Technology	98	216	218	215	747
Veterinary Medicine	33	79	74	123	309
Total	6503	13247	15840	15602	51192

To look at trends by discipline, we assigned each faculty and department a type. For instance, in the case of faculties, the types include Agriculture, Architecture, Business, Continuing Education, Education, Engineering, Health Sciences, Humanities, Law, Library Science, Multiple, Other, Science, Social Sciences, Trades, and Veterinary Medicine. In cases where we had information on both faculty and department, we assigned the faculty type based on the department, rather than on the name of the faculty. This eliminates the difficulty of knowing where to assign faculties which combine multiple types, such as Faculties of Arts and Science. [CUPE 2019]

Table 2 (page 14) shows that Social Sciences and Humanities Departments rely most heavily on the exploitation of non-tenured and part-time faculty. Blank columns represent information reported in a way that was not consistent with the request or not shared at all. In either scenario, the absence of data is significant and indicates either a situation where there are no full-time positions or where a department of university president refused to comply with the request for information.

The faculty types and rates of employment according to the CUPE data are illustrated in Table 2.

Discussion

A recent Statistics Canada Report (May 2019) indicates that the number of Canadian workers employed in temporary positions has risen an average of 1.5 percent between 1998 and 2018, with Ontario showing the highest increase at 3.1 percent. The three sectors with the highest levels of this type of non-standard employment are Agriculture, Information Culture and Recreation, and Educational Services. Temporary and contract workers in Educational Services are disproportionately women (68%), while men dominate in Agriculture and Information, Culture, and Recreation. Nationally, more than 1 in 8 people worked a temporary job, women were more likely to hold more than one job, and the majority of temporary workers held contract positions (StatsCan May 2019). The use of the TFWP and other govern-

ment-sanctioned programs that enable employers, in this case, universities, to employ non-Canadian faculty on short-term contracts is another contributing factor, as is shown in the CAUT (2018) response paper.

Kalleberg and Vallas (2018, 1) define precarious work as “work that is uncertain, unstable, and insecure and in which employees bear the risks of work (as opposed to businesses or the government) and receive limited social benefits and statutory protection.” For over a decade, sociological theorists have placed the concept of precarity at the center of their analyses of contemporary society (Kalleberg and Vallas 2018). Beck (1992; 2000) believes that rampant economic growth has led to the emergence of what he calls the “risk society,” while Zygmunt Bauman (2000) laments the erosion of the solid, stable institutional structures that undergirded industrial capitalism. This erosion is resulting in a new era of “liquid modernity” which is marked by the condition of “precariousness, instability, vulnerability is the most widespread (as well as the most painfully felt) feature of contemporary life conditions” (Bauman 2000, 160–161; cf Kalleberg and Vallas 2018).

Pierre Bourdieu sees the spread of labour market uncertainty as shifting the ground on which workers stand, weakening their possibility of engaging in collective action:

Casualization profoundly affects the person who suffers it: by making the whole future uncertain, it prevents all rational anticipation and, in particular, the basic belief and hope in the future that one needs in order to rebel, especially collectively, against present conditions, even the most intolerable. [Bourdieu 1998, 82, cited in Kalleberg and Vallas 2018].

“Some theorists have developed this last point, viewing precarious work as constituting a new type of regime that implicitly exercises social and political control over a widening swath of the labour force” (Kalleberg and Vallas 2018: 4). The same has been said, in various ways, by a growing number of authors who focus on the casualization of academic labour (Brownlee 2015; Childress 2019).

Conclusions and Further Research Questions

The research presented here suggests that it is not correct to say that there are no jobs in academia. Indeed, there are plenty of jobs for “Sessional,” non-regular,” “adjunct,” or “Other” faculty. This small majority constitutes a reserve of low-paid and marginalized academic workers who occupy more than half of all teaching positions in postsecondary institutions in Canada, particularly in Ontario and British Columbia. What does this mean for the job prospects of current and future graduate students? A recent study by Brittany Etmanski, David Walters, and David Zarifa suggests that very few of these young scholars are likely to obtain full-time work within three years of graduation (Etmanski et al, 2017).

Furthermore, full-time work is not the same as tenured or tenure-track as full-time contracts often expire with no guarantee of renewal after the limited-term stated in the agreement. Additional data needs to be collected around issues relating to intersectionality. Future research needs to further explore the impact of variables such as class, race, and gender. Regarding socioeconomic status, for example, an article by Langan and Morton (2009) draws on the concept of cultural capital to argue that their working-class upbringing led them to misunderstand the path to a tenure-track job (Morton is now tenured at the University of Guelph). They provide a good discussion/overview of the corporatization of the university and the associated devaluation of teaching in Canadian universities. What is the gender breakdown? Existing information indi-

cates that a disproportionate number of precariously employed people are women; more research needs to be done (Burns 2019; Statistics Canada 2019). The question needs to address the highest level of education or degree obtained, the nature of the employment contract, and the discipline in order to find out whether or not the gender disparity found outside of academia is also present in academic employment. The same holds for all axes of intersectionality. While it is my impression that a significant proportion of non-tenured faculty in Canada belongs to either a union or faculty association, this needs to be confirmed. The working conditions, job security, and likelihood of benefits and pension are deeply connected to such membership. Finally, why does the myth that “there are no jobs” in academia persist? The reality is that there is no shortage of jobs, but there is a shortage of secure, tenure-track, research-intensive positions. What are the implications of the decline in research-intensive careers and the devaluation of the role of teaching in higher education in Canada? And finally, how will the recent Covid-19 pandemic affect the employment status for precariously employed academics in Canada?

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