'There's no onboarding, no orientation:' the role of neoliberal university structures in the lives of precarious academics

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Abstract

Introduction. Increasingly, universities rely on casualised labour for teaching and research activities. Previous research demonstrates that the information practices of academics working in these conditions are significantly compromised, making their information work more difficult. This paper further explores the context in which contract academic staff work and provides a more holistic picture of their information environment.

Method. To gain a better understanding of the academic context, semi-structured interviews were conducted with twelve heads of academic units working in various disciplines and across Canadian universities.

Analysis. Interview data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis, informed by the theoretical frameworks of neoliberalism and information marginalisation.

Results. Two themes were generated from the analysis. 1. Casualisation destabilises and creates divisions. Relying on casualised labour means more and shifting work for permanent staff and the creation of unequal power relationships based between permanent and casualised academics. 2. Contractual status influences access to information and departmental engagement. Based on their contract status, casualised academics are often excluded from the places where workplace information, limiting their access to information.

Conclusion. Neoliberalism and information marginalisation provide frameworks to better understand complex information environments and the systemic issues that influence information practices.

Introduction and background

As the number of academics hired casually or on short-term contracts increases in universities across the Western world (e.g., Bolitzer, 2019; Parfitt, 2018; Ross et al., 2021), it is important to understand the larger structures and neoliberal contexts that influence this shift towards precarious employment. Within academia, shifts toward neoliberal policies have resulted in increasingly demanding hiring and working conditions, blurred boundaries between working and personal lives, demands for increased flexibility and quantification of activities, and growing labour precarity (Allmer, 2018). Rather than academics being provided with structures to support and foster their work, universities increasingly shift these responsibilities towards individuals, thus forcing them to self-manage their own career development, employment duties and personal security (Bone, 2020).

Contract academic staff (also known as adjunct faculty, contingent faculty, casual academics, sessionals, limited-term appointments and related terms), are increasingly relied upon for their inexpensive labour by universities (e.g., al-Gharbi, 2020). These staff make vital contributions to teaching and research but face increasingly challenging and precarious working conditions (Willson et al., 2024b). As academic work is information intensive, involving specialised needs, resources, knowledge and skills, many academics on short-term contracts face added challenges. Concerns include workplace marginalisation (Lopes and Dewan, 2014; Willson, 2016), gaps in accessing and understanding required workplace and career information (Dolan, 2011; Kezar, 2013; Willson, 2016) and being made to feel undervalued and insecure in their positions (Foster and Birdsell Bauer, 2018, Jolley et al., 2013).

The influence of neoliberal doctrines on professional areas of library and information science has been addressed, for instance in archival (Cifor and Lee, 2017) and library (Nicholson, 2019; Seale, 2016) work. However, direct discussions of how broader political-economic structures and theories shape information activities are largely absent from information practices-related research. Indeed, despite interests in the information practices of academics and researchers, few studies have explored the situations and experiences of those at the margins of academic work.

There are approaches to information practices that place greater emphasis on systemic forces (Costello and Floegel, 2021; Gibson and Martin, 2019), broader understandings of information experiences (Polkinghorne and Given, 2021), and influences of precarity (Espinoza Vasquez and Oltmann, 2023; Stewart-Robertson, 2022). However, the lack of attention to the role of neoliberalism in shaping information practices and information research may suggest an underlying need to shift from a focus on individual activities to one that also attends to the structural, political and economic aspects of information contexts.

This paper discusses findings from this nationally funded project, which focused on academic casualisation among academics on short-term contracts at Canadian universities. Previous papers from this study present results on the experiences of casual academic staff (Willson et al., 2023; 2024a; 2024b), suggesting the ways university structures isolate, individualise and immobilise their information practices. This paper extends that work and further highlights influences of neoliberal doctrines by drawing from the experiences of department chairs, working between administrative policies, educational mandates, departmental requirements and the needs of permanent and casualised academic staff.

Research aims and questions

The research aims are twofold. The first aim is to test the theoretical frameworks of neoliberalism and information marginalisation (described in the next section) in the contexts of higher education and academic casualisation. While the field of library and information science has a large body of literature examining academics within higher education, relatively few (e.g., Hammarfelt et al., 2016; Mehra, 2024; Willson, 2018) take a more critical stance about their position and their work.

The second aim is to explore the context and provide a holistic picture of the situation in which contract academic staff work. While it is important to document the voices of those working contract to contract (e.g., Willson et al., 2023; 2024a, 2024b), it is also important to hear from those working in management positions to better understand the systemic issues at play. As part of a larger study on academic casualisation, those with managerial responsibilities in academic units (typically called *chairs* in Canada) were interviewed about their work with precarious academics and the effects of casualisation, broadly.

The study addressed the following research questions:

1. In what ways do the application of neoliberalism and information marginalisation help to contextualise the information practices and experiences of academics on short-term contracts?
2. What information work is required of heads of academic units (i.e., chairs) when working with precarious academics?
3. What is the impact of casualisation, generally, on academic units (i.e., departments, schools)?

Research design

The study was conducted in Canada and used a qualitative research design. Following ethics approval, the team conducted in-depth online interviews with unit chairs (i.e., academic school and/or department heads).

Theoretical approach

This work used two theoretical frameworks to guide data collection and analysis. The first is neoliberalism, a hegemonic discourse defined as,

> A *theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can be best advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices.* (Harvey, 2005, p. 2)

Neoliberalism shapes the political and institutional conditions of academic work. For instance, governments require that universities demonstrate their economic contributions, and universities require academic programmes to prove their economic viability, particularly when government funding models are linked to student enrolments. Universities have moved '*towards a corporate business model,*' characterised by '*precarity*' and a focus on the '*bottom line*' (Chomsky, 2015, para. 1). Over the last two decades, many academics have pointed to neoliberalism as a major contributor to a crisis in higher education (Chomsky, 2015; Côté and Allahar, 2011; Ginsberg, 2011; Mintz, 2021; Morrish, 2020).

The second framework is information marginalisation, or '*the systematic, interactive socio-technical processes that can push and hold certain groups of people at social "margins," where their needs are persistently ignored or overlooked*' (Gibson and Martin, 2019, p. 476). Information marginalisation is founded on Chatman's (1996) notion of information poverty; however, rather than focusing on the behaviour of those experiencing a gap in their access to information, it highlights the systemic and institutional forces that create information gaps. In addition, information marginalisation examines factors that influence social marginalisation and the resulting information practices (Gibson and Martin, 2019).

Participants

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with academic chairs. The team used purposive and snowball sampling to select potential participants from across Canada. From lists

created by searching staff lists available from university websites, emails were sent to chairs inviting them to participate. Complementing earlier interviews with 34 casual academic staff, twelve key informant interviews were conducted with chairs from across humanities, sciences and social sciences disciplines. Their experience in their current chair positions ranged from 1.5 to 11 years. Participants were assigned pseudonyms.

Data collection and analysis

Interviews were conducted over videoconferencing and lasted between 18-54 minutes, averaging 33 minutes. The interviews explored: 1) how contract academic staffing is managed in the academic unit; 2) how workplace information is provided to contract academic staff (e.g., through orientation); 3) whether information provision differs for tenure-track and contract academic staff; 4) efforts made to include contract academic staff in communications; and, 5) the benefits and issues hiring contract staff raises for the academic unit. Interview transcripts were analysed for initial findings using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006; 2022). This approach to analysis includes a six-step procedure to deeply engage with data and to guide iterative rounds of code generation leading to the creation and refinement of themes. Members of the research team discussed, reviewed and revised the themes. Two primary themes were generated: *Casualisation destabilises and creates divisions* and *Contractual status influences access to information and departmental engagement.*

Findings and discussion

In attempting to understand the situation, a holistic perspective was adopted. The term holistic emphasises '*the importance of appreciating, contending with, and responding to, systems, groups, and issues in their entirety*' (Polkinghorne and Given, 2021, p. 2). A holistic perspective includes expanding ideas of what counts as information and people's information experiences, as well as examining structural issues.

Casualisation destabilises and creates divisions

The first theme generated in the analysis was about the broad effects of casualisation that influence the context in which chairs and contract academic staff work. Chairs had differing views about casualisation and its effects. For those working in professional disciplines (like law or education), they viewed casualisation as allowing them to hire practising professionals to share their expertise in the classroom. As Don, a chair in the social sciences, stated, '*I think it's actually a little bit good for the discipline because it takes away a purely academic framework, and it brings experience from the practitioner which is what originally [casual or contract] positions were meant to do, right?*' However, those who are employed full-time as practitioners and teach a course at a university are not the primary focus of concerns about casualisation. Many chairs are concerned about how casual labour is used as a long-term solution to hiring limitations and resulting shortages of permanent academics. Delaney, a chair in the sciences, stated,

> So, *for us in general, haven't seen it, the casualisation to be too impactful. But the issue has come, and I've pressured the dean and the associate dean about the growing enrolment in our programme. The faculty of science has to meet enrolment targets. ... So, I've argued we need more full-time faculty to teach the courses. Our courses are getting larger and larger and student experience is diminishing. So, the response from the associate dean was just hire more, you know, [casual] instructors, which is to me maybe a short-term, very narrow-minded solution.*

Hiring academics on casual or short-term contracts is a significant amount of work every semester for chairs and others involved in the hiring process. It decreases stability within departments due to high staff turnover, and it can have far-reaching effects on the academic development of the discipline itself. Alex, a chair in nursing, described running a complex, accredited programme,

where casualisation led to less continuity, complicating external programme evaluations. In addition, Alex described a larger issue for their discipline,

> *Contractual positions are unfortunately, a big part of academic structures. But by increasing them, it just overburdens the full-time [staff]. So, if we're talking about the discipline itself, so the body of knowledge of nursing, how does that affect our capacities? We end up being managers; it's managing as opposed to building that knowledge base and working on things that would help us with patient care. What we are, what we're dealing with, is structures of our programmes.*

Alex describes how casualisation can change the nature of academic work, leading academics to become managers. While the impact on departments and programmes is concerning, casualisation effects can also be seen day-to-day in departments, including interpersonal dynamics between colleagues. Avery, a chair in the social sciences, discussed the power dynamics with those they hired on casual contracts,

> *It's an unequal relationship, and it's pretty much at my whim whether I assign these courses and then hire [casual or contract staff] or not. I don't like these kind of power relations. I recognise that they are friendly. They have been friendly with me before but now as head that kind of friendliness has a little bit more of a false touch to it. And I am not really sure how conflicts between [casuals] and department heads work out. I believe that the power differential is so that the [casual staff member] has just gone forever. That's something I find disturbing.*

Casey, a chair in the arts and humanities, described being stuck. Their institution does not have any provisions for long-term teaching positions, but the collective agreement allows turning a limited-term position into a *'tenure line position'* that includes teaching and research. However, those working on casual teaching contracts are so overworked that they cannot build their dossiers to be considered for ongoing, full-time positions, which changes how they are viewed in the department. They describe the result this way,

> So *that means that there is a kind of systemic infantilisation of teaching faculty on limited-term contracts. Full-time teaching faculty are just considered to not be capable of research or participating in collegiate governance. So, there's a strong bias against those folks [on course-to-course contracts] in the institution ... Those [staff are] patching [roles] together, so there's a cap on the number of courses I can give them in a year. So that means they're not just teaching for me, they're teaching for one or two other institutions.*

Of particular concern are contract academic staff who must work at multiple institutions to *'patch'* together enough teaching to allow them to pay their bills. These working conditions lead to divisions between those working on different contracts and limits the possible advancement of those working in casualised positions.

Much of what chairs describe is the neoliberal approach to management in higher education – the increased pressure to use casualised labour (Gill, 2014; Loveday, 2018), higher workloads (Gill, 2014), the shift to manage others' labour (Hil, 2012) and *'labor servility'* (Chomsky, 2015, para. 1). This leaves academic units with destabilised labour – a consequence of neoliberalism. Bourdieu (1998) described neoliberalism as a system of working in which all is against all, with workers clinging to their jobs, and which is sustained by the *'existence of a* reserve army of employees rendered docile by these social processes that make their situations precarious, *as well as by the permanent threat of unemployment'* (para. 9, emphasis in original). Precarity is *'one of the defining experiences of contemporary academic life'* (Gill, 2009, p. 234). While many chairs are concerned about increased workloads, the shift to managing others' labour, and the power relations inherent between tenured/tenure-track and contract faculty, mean there is little that individual chairs can do to

address these systemic issues. It is this backdrop that contextualises and clarifies contract academic staff members' access to information.

Contractual status influences access to information and departmental engagement

The second generated theme was about contractual status influencing contact academic staff's access to information. Despite being hired for similar jobs, those working in permanent positions can have significantly different experiences by virtue of their contractual status. This includes a large disparity in access to work-related information. Access to orientation for new hires varied depending on their contracts. For some CAS, *'There's no onboarding, no orientation,'* as noted by Delaney. However, Casey mentioned *'an optional group meeting'* was all that could be provided to contract staff. They explained *'I can't require it unless I build it into the contract and reduce the number of working hours. So, it's an invitation.'* Noemi, a chair from the arts and humanities, described orientation for casual and contract staff this way,

> All right so the [instructional limited-term appointments], they fall under [the union], so they're considered faculty. They will meet with [the union]. They often meet with the dean. I'm not sure what happens with HR, and of course they are always encouraged to do the [teaching] workshops, and the chair is again the contact person for them.

Different contracts dictate the provision of orientation, where information is shared and workplace socialisation begins.

Departmental meetings are also sites of important workplace information exchange. Jessie, a chair in science, described contract academic staff's limited involvement in departmental meetings as, *'Well, we have regular departmental meetings. And [contract staff] are invited, they're non-voting, but they are invited to the meetings.'* This means they can attend but are not part of any decision-making process. Casey describes why contract academic staff are not part of meetings,

> [Casual and contract] instructors are not included in our department meetings, so that's full-time faculty and staff. ... participation in departmental governance is not included in the contract, and the faculty collective agreements are different union[s]. [The] faculty union defines who can be a member of a departmental committee, and part-time employees are not on that list.

While some meeting membership is determined by collective agreements, in other instances chairs also have some discretion. Avery's department has monthly staff meetings and circulates the agenda and attachments, which are sent to the contract academic staff, as they are included in the meetings. In addition, Avery made the determination of who can vote in departmental meetings,

> Yeah, [contract academic staff] are part of the staff meeting. Just now we had the voting policy back, last three months or so. So, I suggested anyone who attends a staff meeting has a vote because they're there and they are part of it. And we, so we have the [contract staff], the reps, the student rep, undergrad rep, and grad rep, the admin assistant, and the profs in the staff meetings. And they are all in the same way invited, get the same attachments and so on and so forth.

While in some departments there is parity in terms of what workplace information is shared, not all contract academic staff are invited into the spaces where that information is shared.

Receiving information from the university was another area that varied widely. Some chairs described communication as working well; others described significant problems. Don described the situation as, *'The contract academic instructor, they're not kept informed of a whole lot of things*

that are, you know, happening in the university.' Providing information – whether through emails or through orientation – to contract academic staff was not always seen as a priority.

However, some of the communication issues were also due to the complexity of who was communicating with contract academic staff and how. All chairs described separate email lists for permanent faculty and contract academic staff. Kam, a chair in business, stated, *'There's lists for faculty only, faculty plus contract instructors, or faculty or staff only, faculty and staff, faculty staff and contract instructors, right?'* Frequently it was not always clear what information contract academic staff received. And sometimes issues were due to contract status. Blair, a chair in STEM, described the problem this way,

> *IT used to cut off their email the last day of the contract. And you can't do that, right? Because the contract is only maybe a day after grades are due, where are the students going to complain, right? So, we have a couple, in the department, we've kind of organised ways of helping do that. I was like, we'll create an email address for the whole class rather than just the instructor.*

Blair was not alone in having difficulties in communicating with contract academic staff, whose access to IT was tied to start and end dates. This demonstrates the structural invisibility of those working short-term contracts; that their experiences and needs are not being understood by institutions or provided for in processes.

Throughout their discussions of their academic units, chairs described the information marginalisation of contract academic staff – *'the systematic, interactive socio-technical processes that can push and hold certain groups of people at social 'margins,' where their needs are persistently ignored or overlooked'* (Gibson and Martin, 2019, p. 476). Sometimes access to information is unknown or haphazard – ensuring contract academic staff have the workplace information they need for their jobs is rarely made a priority. Sometimes access to information is deliberately restricted, as collective agreements may dictate who can be in meetings where information is shared, and departmental decisions are made. However, it is technology – both the creation of different email lists and the removal of IT access when contracts end – that most clearly demonstrates that access to information is tied to academic status. Those that do not have the right academic status experience information marginalisation. Information marginalisation may result from chairs' decisions or contract academic staff's actions. Information marginalisation shifts focus from individual responsibility and deficit-based understanding of individuals' actions to systemic elements and the tactical responses of marginalised groups (Kitzie et al., 2022).

Conclusion

These findings demonstrate the impact that academic casualisation can have on departments, disciplines and the working conditions of academics. When viewing the management of higher education through a neoliberal lens, a more complete picture of the context of universities and how they engage with contractual staff emerges. While many department chairs might welcome these staff at department meetings, for example, the institutional constraints imposed by enterprise staffing agreements and contract law dictate the extent to which middle-management is able to engage contracted staff in the day-to-day workings of the unit.

The general lack of an information ecosystem in support of contractual staff activities is exacerbated by these structural challenges. As individuals are hired by and supported at the local unit level, there are no easy ways to provide university-level information and support. As units design and offer courses independently (while working within institutional curricular and financial constraints), there is no one-size-fits-all approach to support contracted staff. In the sciences, for example, staff may need training on lab equipment or may be teaching a class combining lectures and tutorials; in the humanities, staff may need support with counselling students on writing

practices and plagiarism in long-form essays. Academia is not a monoculture, despite attempts to construct singular approaches to many administrative functions. This leads to unit-level interpretations of university policies, which must then filter down to staff. Without additional support at unit level to provide relevant, localised information and resources, contractual staff must often rely on other academics in the department or find their own pathways through trial and error. While challenges are numerous in supporting the information practices of these workers, the lenses of neoliberalism and information marginalisation provide interpretive frameworks to support a robust perspective on these complex information environments. Future research into academics and other workplace and everyday contexts may benefit from similar approaches.

Acknowledgements

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