

How to improve conditions for the academic precariat - University World News

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CANADA

How to improve conditions for the academic precariat

Grace Karram Stephenson 26 February 2016 Issue No:402

One of the biggest challenges to face universities in an era of globalisation is the increased reliance on part-time instructors. Recent PhD graduates are less and less likely to find full-time, permanent work and are forced into casual teaching positions with low salaries and no benefits.

Although these instructors are highly qualified, they are on the periphery of institutions with little access to institutional resources or decision-making processes. Their situation is precarious and they are struggling for recognition.

Fortunately, in the Canadian context, this group is receiving interest from unions and researchers who now advocate on their behalf. On 11 and 12 February the Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations, or OCUFA, hosted a conference in Toronto showcasing research about precarious, part-time instructors from Canada, Australia and the United Kingdom.

Although there is a long way to go, collective organising and new governance structures are providing hope that more equitable hiring practices are possible at Canadas universities.

Precarious or flexible labour

Precarious, casual or flexible labour is certainly not an exclusive phenomenon of post-secondary education. Indeed, when championing the cause of exploited labour, migrant workers or low-wage service providers would definitely garner more support than university lecturers.

But several recent studies suggest that precarious instructors do not earn enough money for their basic needs and are increasingly forced to hold multiple jobs with little job security.

The negative impact is not just financial. Precarious instructors have many of the health problems associated with other insecure, low-wage jobs. Commuting to multiple job sites, carrying classroom resources in the absence of an office or walking across large campuses since parking or transit passes are not provided all of these result in physical and psychological exhaustion for part-time instructors.

In the Australian context the research of Robyn May from Griffith University has shown that women are particularly at risk. The cycles of a womans academic career occur alongside family responsibilities that leave women out of a highly competitive university market.

Other minority groups are also overrepresented among precarious instructors confirming that this new mode of academic employment pushes marginalised groups further down the social ladder.

Canada

In Canada there seems to be little awareness among the broader public that their universities are operating on the backs of underpaid instructors who may not be rehired next semester. The OCUFA conference showcased a recent public opinion survey by Mission Research that contacted 1,000 Canadians to examine their view on precarious instructors. Most were unaware of the new trend toward part-time instructors.

When asked, respondents agreed that part-time instructors should be paid an equivalent salary to full-time, tenured professors if they conduct the same work, but most did not want this to be financed by

their tax dollars. The Mission Research team suggests that economic struggles have left Canadians worried about their own employment rather than labour issues at post-secondary institutions.

Not surprisingly, economic concerns were a central part of why universities changed their hiring practices. As government funding for institutions decreased and administrators were forced to make up the shortfall, they turned to the flexible hiring practices of the corporate world. The comparatively large number of PhD graduates offered a willing supply of instructors who would teach on contract while waiting for their full-time jobs to materialise, although they rarely did.

At the same time the pressures of global ranking meant that universities needed to maintain a certain number of prestigious, tenure-track, research jobs. Few institutions can afford to make these the majority of positions offered. Currently, the situation at many universities is a startling divide in wages between low-paid casual instructors and highly paid prestigious researchers.

Governance change and political representation

The situation is not pretty. Too many competent, highly educated instructors are being forced to find work outside the university or dwindle into poverty. Fortunately, as this OCUFA conference highlighted, a brighter future is possible.

The conference was designed to move beyond critique and suggest new modes of academic labour with fair wages and job security. Speakers included Guy Standing from the University of London and author of *The Precariat*, Karen Foster, author of *Generation, Discourse and Social Change* from Dalhousie University, and Ontario-based advocates all of whom made important suggestions to reform hiring practices at Canadas post-secondary institutions.

Notably, the first step involves changing university governance to be more inclusive of part-time instructors and address their needs. Too often, these instructors remain invisible if they do not have representation at all levels of university decision-making.

Another necessary change is to increase the value placed on teaching at our universities. Certain institutions, like the University of Toronto, have experimented with teaching-stream, tenure positions. This new category validates teaching work and many long-time faculty adopted this status when it became available earlier this year.

Multi-year contracts are another step in the right direction and particularly important for small institutions that do not have resources to hire full-time faculty, but want to promote continuity of instructors.

Perhaps the most important message from the OCUFA conference is that precarious employees from all sectors need to organise collectively. It is too easy for part-time instructors to feel isolated and invisible as they move in and out of large campuses on a temporary basis. Developing new spaces for organising, both online and in-person, is essential to bring about equity for all precarious employees in universities, technical colleges and beyond.

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