



Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations
Union des Associations des Professeurs des Universités de l'Ontario

OCUFA Response to the latest Faculty at Work Report *February 2018*

The Council of Ontario Universities (COU) recently released the latest report from its Faculty at Work project. [The Composition and Activities of Ontario Universities' Academic Workforce](#) updates and extends the [Preliminary Report](#) released in 2014 to include attention to the composition of the academic workforce. It constitutes the first serious effort to use administrative data to produce a picture of the numbers of contract faculty and the scope of their teaching at Ontario universities. This response will focus on the section of the report addressing contract faculty.

Precarious work as the new normal?

For many years, OCUFA has been advocating for fairness for contract faculty who face job insecurity, unequal pay and lack access to benefits. Our estimates suggest that the number of courses taught by contract faculty at Ontario universities has nearly doubled since 2000. A lack of data, however, has made it difficult to quantify the scale of the problem.

The data assembled in the latest Faculty at Work Report is a welcome addition to the available information about academic work. The results of surveys completed by seventeen universities in Ontario in the 2014-15 academic year (excluding Algoma University, Laurentian University, and the University of Toronto) suggest that over half (58 per cent) of the academic workforce are now contract faculty, with full-time tenure-stream faculty representing only 42 per cent of academic staff. These are significant figures, which do not receive enough attention in the report itself. Ontarians expect universities to be model employers, and this data suggests we have a lot of work to do to make all academic jobs good jobs.

By glossing over the scope of precarious academic work, the report risks normalizing the status quo, but the reality of precarious work should not be accepted as the new normal on our campuses. Moreover, the report's findings are just a snapshot of a point in time. They offer no insight into the trends of increasing faculty workload and growing reliance on contract faculty that brought us to this point.

Making sense of precarious work

The academic workforce is divided according to numerous job classifications, which can be confusing. Contract faculty is an umbrella term used to capture workers in several employment situations with little to no job security, including sessional faculty and faculty with limited-term appointments. Sessional faculty are generally hired only to teach and are remunerated on a per-course basis, receiving separate contracts for each course taught. Faculty with limited-term appointments, hired on contracts of limited duration (usually one to three years), are often hired

primarily to teach, but are more likely than sessionals to be hired to perform the full range of duties – teaching, research, and service. Both sessional faculty and limited-term faculty are precariously employed, with no guarantee of employment after their contract has expired.

The Faculty at Work Report treats contract faculty in two categories: “Full-time other” and “Part-time instructors”. The first includes full-time faculty with limited-term appointments who represent six per cent of the academic workforce, and the second includes “part-time, contract academic staff” who are “commonly hired on a per-course basis” and make up 52 per cent of the academic workforce (page 5). The use of “part-time” to describe a category primarily made up of sessionals who teach on a per-course basis is a misnomer. For those working on a per-course basis, employment status has no inherent relationship to the quantity of work performed. Individuals in these positions could be teaching any number of courses year to year. In fact, the report suggests that many working in this category taught more than six courses in the year the data was collected.

Individuals working on a per-course basis have diverse backgrounds and experiences and take on this work for different reasons. The report highlights three groups of people who work as sessionals: professionals who bring experience from their practice to the classroom; graduate students, recent graduates, and post-doctoral fellows; as well as other university staff and retired faculty. Another group that is not delineated are contract faculty do not hold a full-time position at a university or in another sector. These faculty have been referred to in some literature as “precarious sessionals” as opposed to “classic sessionals”.¹ Leaving this group out of the initial demarcations of contract faculty reflects a tendency throughout the report to diminish concerns about the scope of precarious academic work.

A closer look at the figures

The Faculty at Work Report’s discussion about contract faculty centres around the assertion that a large proportion “are not eligible for or not at this time seeking full-time academic positions” (page 1). The report argues that only 9 to 23 per cent of non-tenure stream faculty could be considered eligible for and seeking full-time academic positions. These figures are based on several assumptions, since the data available does not include information about the aspirations or career goals of contract faculty. The 9 to 23 per cent figure is calculated based on the exclusion of tenure-stream faculty (1.3%), graduate students and postdocs (13.9%), current and past university staff (6.7%), those without a PhD (51.4%), and those over 65 years old (3.7%). At the high end, the 23 per cent figure accounts for those remaining after these exclusions, while at the low end, the nine per cent figure further excludes those who teach less than two courses (14.3%).

¹ C. C. Field and G. A. Jones, A, “Survey of Sessional Faculty in Ontario Publicly-Funded Universities,” *Centre for the Study of Canadian and International Higher Education at OISE-University of Toronto*, April 2016, page 3-4. Field and Jones’ study distinguishes between classic sessionals most of whom do not have a PhD and have another major source of income, and precarious sessionals who are “typically reliant upon income from instructional work”. In their survey of contract faculty at Ontario universities, roughly one quarter of the respondents were classified as classic sessionals.

There are a number of limitations and issues resulting from this narrow categorization:

1. The data on contract faculty who teach less than two courses is limited because it does not account for contract faculty who work at multiple institutions. Generally, the report states that roughly two-thirds of “part-time instructors” teach only one or two courses a year with more than 40 per cent teaching only one course per year. This figure is reduced to 14.3 per cent when faculty who are tenured, do not hold a PhD, are graduate students or postdocs, or are over 65 years of age are excluded from the calculation.

The report does acknowledge at the outset that the data collected cannot account for contract faculty who teach at more than one university. This means that the course load figures for contract faculty could be heavily misleading since individuals with heavier multi-institution workloads would be included in the category of instructors teaching one to two courses per year, and also counted multiple times (once for each institution at which they teach), thus further decreasing the average number of courses taught by contract faculty. Course load figures also vary from year to year and the data presented in the report only captures workload figures at a certain moment in time.

2. The report assumes that contract faculty without a PhD are not “seeking to make a full-time career” (page 10). It is arbitrary to assume that contract faculty without PhDs are not attempting to support themselves with their teaching income or that that they are not seeking full-time, secure employment. Moreover, the precarious nature of contract academic positions and the heavy, demanding workloads that individuals take on to make a living, can act as barriers to pursuing or finishing doctoral degrees.
3. Those above 65 years of age are excluded. Some of these contract faculty may be former professionals or full-time faculty with retirement security. However, they could also include those who have worked as contract faculty for a number of years and are unable to retire due to inadequate pension or retirement savings, benefits most contract positions do not include.
4. While a comprehensive review of the academic workforce must include the teaching done by graduate students, there is no reason to include them in the total if the purpose is to better understand the proportion of faculty seeking full-time faculty positions or relying on their income from teaching to support themselves.
5. The figures on “highest degree completed” and on the composition of the contract faculty workforce is only based on detailed data from six Ontario universities because the response rates were lower from other institutions. The longer technical report that accompanies the Faculty at Work Report acknowledges that “it is unclear whether the data for these six is representative of all universities and whether the results can therefore be generalized to the whole university sector” (page 7).

Despite these limitations to the data and analysis, the report still concludes that one in five contract faculty are likely aspiring to full-time tenure-stream positions; that is not insubstantial. Certainly, even on this scale the matter should not be dismissed. In the last decade, student enrolment figures

have grown seven times faster than those of full-time faculty hiring. It is clear that our institutions have not taken the necessary steps to close this full-time faculty hiring gap, leaving an increasing number of contract faculty without full-time secure positions for which to apply.

Disentangling faculty work

Throughout the report, references are made to the differences in the work of full-time and contract faculty. While full-time faculty are responsible for teaching, research, and service, contract faculty are usually only hired to teach. The report does not take into account the degree of overlap between teaching and scholarly activity for contract faculty whose research, to stay current in their field and to secure the next contract or semblance of job security, is expected but not remunerated. Moreover, when contract faculty do take on unpaid research they often do not have access to the same resources as their full-time tenure-stream colleagues (e.g. access to libraries and research funding). Service work can also be difficult to disentangle. While the multifaceted work contract faculty often do regularly goes unrecognized and is difficult to capture quantitatively, it bears repeating that the expectations of teaching done by contract faculty and full-time tenure-stream faculty are the same. It is widely acknowledged that sessional faculty are too often paid less than their full-time colleagues for performing work of equal value.

Conclusion

The Faculty at Work Report confirms what many in the sector expected based on our experiences working and studying on campuses: that over half of academic positions at Ontario universities are now precarious. Regardless of the report's attempts to shift the focus away from the need to address precarious work by making assumptions about the qualifications and aspirations of contract faculty, the data collected about the number of faculty working without job security remains the most significant finding.

Addressing precarious work at Ontario universities requires a serious commitment from our academic institutions and leadership from government to invest in and support faculty renewal. Faculty renewal must include full-time tenure-stream faculty hiring and pathways for contract faculty to full-time, secure positions. Placing the focus on individual qualifications and aspirations, rather than the structural issues underlying precarious work in the sector, distracts from the importance of setting universities on a path towards becoming model employers who support good jobs in our communities. Fairness for contract faculty and faculty renewal are as timely as ever.