

Precarious U

Contract Faculty In Nova
Scotia Universities

Acknowledgements

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Not all survey data is presented in this initial report. Further publications may be released in future, and readers may request additional data tables and figures, or a copy of the survey instrument itself, by emailing the author at karen.foster@dal.ca.

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Background

The Challenge of Measuring a “Hidden” Phenomenon

Across Canada, it is estimated that over 50% of university courses are taught by instructors whose jobs are not permanent (Basen, 2014). These instructors, variously termed “contract”, “part-time” or “adjunct” faculty, “limited-term appointments” or “sessionals” (among other titles), are paid either on a per-course basis or a prorated annual salary. In most cases, they are paid only for teaching, and must apply individually for every course they wish to teach.

In this country and in universities and colleges around the world, it is strongly suspected that reliance on contract faculty in these kinds of positions has been increasing over time, intensifying the “casualization” of the academic (*and* non-academic) labour force in post-secondary institutions (CAUT, 2015). But researchers have consistently found it difficult to identify and enumerate contract faculty, and to track their prevalence over time.

One problem causing this difficulty is that the exact titles and terms of employment for contract faculty vary from institution to institution: one university’s “part time instructors” are another’s “individual course assignments”. Across institutions and even *within* a single institution, contract faculty “are variously defined by a number of factors, including the number of courses they teach, the length of their contract, how they are appointed and by reference to a union bargaining unit” (Brownlee, 2015:794). Another problem is that few institutions maintain (or are willing to share) accurate, accessible records of the number of contract faculty they employ; even if they did, the exact *number* of people employed in contract faculty positions varies from one academic term to the next, as do the people themselves, and many of *them* teach in multiple departments and even multiple institutions in a given term or year. Thus, contract faculty are a moving and obfuscat-

ed target. Attempts to study them, no matter what research method is used, are stymied at every turn. For these reasons, contract faculty are often referred to in the research literature as “hidden” academics in the university and college labour force (Brownlee, 2015; Rajagopal, 2002).

And yet, even though data on the prevalence of non-permanent teaching positions is scant, usually localized, and rarely (if ever) tracked over time (Pankin & Weiss, 2011), the data that *does* exist leaves little doubt that contract faculty are teaching a growing proportion of university courses (Brownlee, 2015).

This report, funded by the Association for Nova Scotia University Teachers (ANSUT), analyzes the results of an online survey of contract faculty at seven universities across Nova Scotia. Launched in October 2015 and closed at the end of December the same year, the survey was designed to generate data on “hidden” academics in the province’s universities. It faced the same kinds of challenges that other researchers, attempting to do the same thing in other places, have identified. But it also reached a significant proportion of the estimated 923 people teaching on a part-time basis in the Fall 2015 academic term, with 227 people completing the entire survey, many of them sharing detailed, critical and reflexive responses in addition to answering the multiple choice questions that made up the bulk of the survey. Though the survey is a snapshot of a discrete moment in time, it sheds considerable light on aspects of post-secondary labour and education that are otherwise generally unseen. In what follows, its findings are interpreted through the lens of “precarious work”: a concept associated with a growing body of research on the rise, causes and consequences of job-related insecurity.

Understanding Contract Teaching as Precarious Work

Despite the wide variation in terminology and terms of employment, contract instructors share one thing in common: unlike tenure-track (and the newer “lecture-stream”) faculty, their jobs are not permanent. This difference is what makes contract teaching a form of *precarious work* (Standing, 2009; Vosko, 2009).

Precarious work is not a homogeneous category of employment. It is generally understood, however, as paid work that is likely to be poorly remunerated and, more importantly, *insecure*. The lack of security is identified in the literature as the characteristic that makes precarious work so bad. Guy Standing, one of precarious work’s foremost critics, argues that precarious jobs and the people employed in them are afflicted with seven “dimensions of insecurity” (Standing, 2011:11).

The first, *labour market insecurity*, refers to a shortage of “adequate income-earning opportunities” in the wider labour market. This is different from, but related to *employment insecurity*—a lack of “protection against arbitrary dismissal, for example through regulations on hiring and firing”, entitlement to severance pay and adequate notice of dismissal.

Job insecurity is slightly different again, referring to a person’s ability and opportunity to “retain a niche” in employment, to move up a career ladder, and to have their skills renewed.

Work insecurity, the fourth of Standing’s seven dimensions of insecurity, refers to a lack of protection against physical and psychological harm on the job.

Skill reproduction insecurity is the lack of “opportunity to gain skills, through apprenticeships, employment training and so on, as well as opportunity to make use of competencies” (Standing, 2011:10).

Income insecurity, although it is one of the first manifestations of insecurity that most people think

of when they think of precarious work, is the sixth of the seven dimensions. It occurs wherever an “adequate, stable income” is not assured, whether by the job itself (through wage indexation, minimum wage rates, etc.) or by whatever social safety net exists to compensate for low employment income (e.g. access to Employment Insurance).

The final dimension of insecurity afflicting precarious workers is *representation insecurity*: the lack of “a collective voice in the labour market, through, for example, independent trade unions, with a right to strike” (Standing, 2011:11).

By virtue of their non-permanent employment relationship with the universities that employ them, contract faculty, in theory, would face all seven of these dimensions of insecurity to varying degrees. The results of the Nova Scotia survey, reported below, confirm that this is the case, and suggest that a typical contract instructor *experiences* the effects, and *recognizes* the impact, of these dimensions of insecurity in daily life.

And, as several recent empirical studies have begun to illuminate, the multidimensional insecurities that contract faculty face, understood as manifestations of employment precarity, have devastating effects (Field *et. al.*, 2014). Precarious work poses a number of well-documented strains on workers, organizations, and the people they serve (Standing, 2011; Vosko, 2006). Previous research has found that workers in precarious jobs suffer from higher levels of depression, stress and anxiety, as well as poverty (Lewchuk *et. al.*, 2013). Income insecurity in particular—characterized and triggered by unpredictable earnings and hours from week-to-week, and short-term contracts—has even been linked to weaker social ties; specifically, people whose incomes are unpredictable are more likely to say that they do not have a close friend to talk to, or to rely on for help, than people whose incomes are stable from week to week (Lewchuk *et. al.*, 2013: 10).

The Survey of Contract Academic Staff in Nova Scotia

The survey analyzed here covers seven of nine universities in Nova Scotia, Canada. It excludes one francophone university and one school of theology, and does not include colleges or other types of post-secondary institutions. Its temporal reference is the Fall 2015 academic term, although it posed a limited suite of questions to respondents who were not actively teaching in the Fall 2015 term but were slated to begin teaching contracts in January.

Across the seven surveyed universities, there were an estimated 923 contract faculty positions in the Fall 2015 academic term. Anticipating the same difficulty other researchers have had in trying to obtain numbers from university administrations, this report's estimate was produced on the basis of numbers supplied by each institution's faculty association and the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE), Local 3912, which represents some contract faculty at three of the seven institutions. Given that some contract faculty teach at multiple institutions and in multiple departments, there is likely some "double-counting" in this 923 figure. However, the results of the survey itself suggest that the proportion of contract faculty who teach in multiple departments and/or universities is small enough to be of only marginal concern (cf. Brownlee, 2015).

In addition to providing the figures to furnish an estimate of the total population of contract instructors to be surveyed, the faculty associations and CUPE 3912 also distributed the survey invitation to their contract faculty members via email.¹ Each sent one initial invitation and up to two reminders over the course of the survey. These invitations attracted 353 respondents to the survey, and 227 completed it.² Most of the 353 people who accessed but did not complete the survey dropped out of the sample by

the second question, because their answer indicated they did not fit the two selection criteria: 1) that their teaching contracts had to be non-permanent; and 2) they had to be actively teaching in the Fall 2015 term or slated to teach in the Winter. Twelve of the 227 respondents were teaching in the Winter term only. *If* the estimate of the total Fall 2015 population (923) is accurate, the 215 respondents who were actively teaching in Fall 2015 indicate a decent (albeit approximate) response rate of 23%.³

In the analysis below, the contract faculty who responded to the survey can be divided into two main categories. The first, and largest (n=125), is comprised of those who are only employed on a per-course basis and generally do not know if they will be offered the same course (or any course, for that matter) in subsequent terms or years—referred to herein as **sessionals**. The second, smaller category of contract instructors (n=62) includes those hired to teach multiple courses on the same contract—for example, a predetermined course load, or a predetermined suite of courses—usually for more than a single term.⁴ Instructors in this category, who are referred to in this report as **Limited Term Appointments (LTAs)**, may be given the opportunity to apply for renewal at the end of one, two, three, or four years (or, in some cases, less than one year but more than one academic term). Renewal is not guaranteed, however, and depends more on university and department budgets than on the instructor's performance. Sessionals and LTAs might be referred to by different titles, depending on the institution at which they are employed, but the report uses only these two titles for clarity's sake. Moreover, the tables and figures below, unless otherwise noted, group sessionals and LTAs together.

1 Accordingly, this project underwent a Research Ethics Board review at every university where contract faculty were surveyed.

2 Not every respondent answered every question. Unless otherwise noted, where responses are expressed as percentages (e.g. "24% of respondents"), "respondents" refers only to those respondents who answered the specific question in focus. Furthermore, some percentages in charts may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

3 227 respondents—12 teaching in Winter only = 215 as a "sample" of the Fall 2015 contract faculty population.

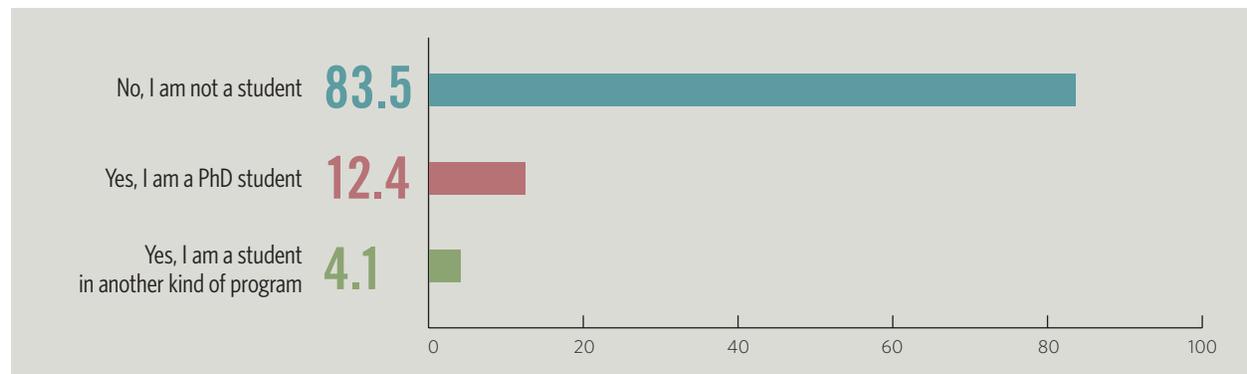
4 33 respondents did not answer this question, and 5 were not sure which category they fit into.

Findings

Several things are worth noting about the composition of the sample itself, because they cast doubt on some popular stereotypes of contract faculty—for example, that contract faculty are mostly PhD students; that they are divided between the young, recent graduates on the one hand, and the retirees teaching for fun on the other; and that contract faculty are only contract faculty for a short, preparatory period before beginning their “careers.”

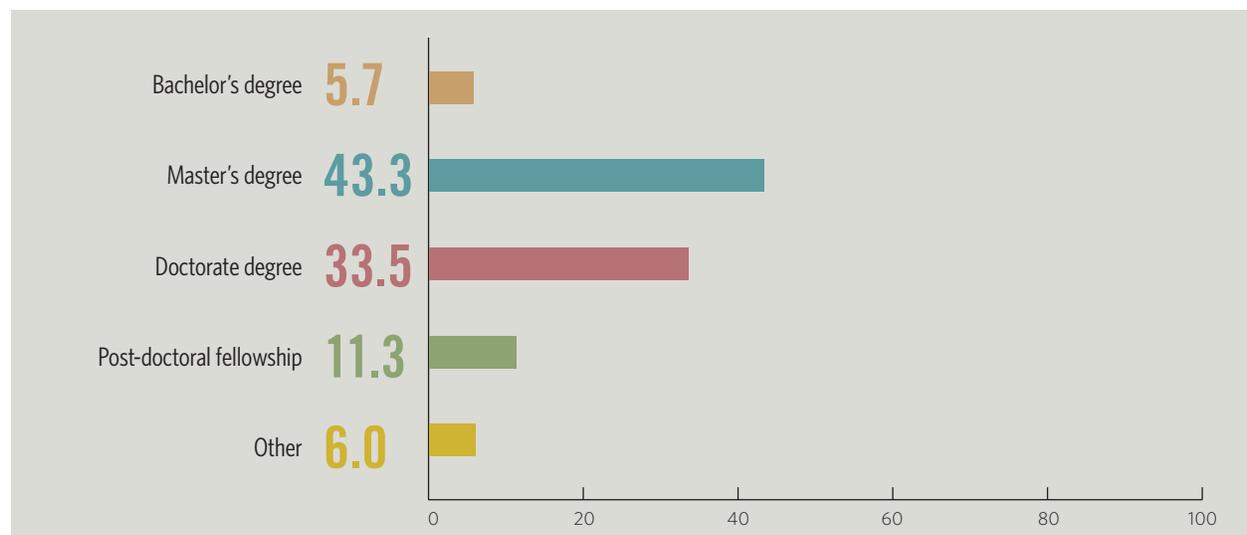
First, only **17% of respondents were current students**, a finding that shatters the myth that contract teaching exists primarily as a training opportunity for advanced graduate students preparing for the academic job market.

ARE YOU CURRENTLY A STUDENT?



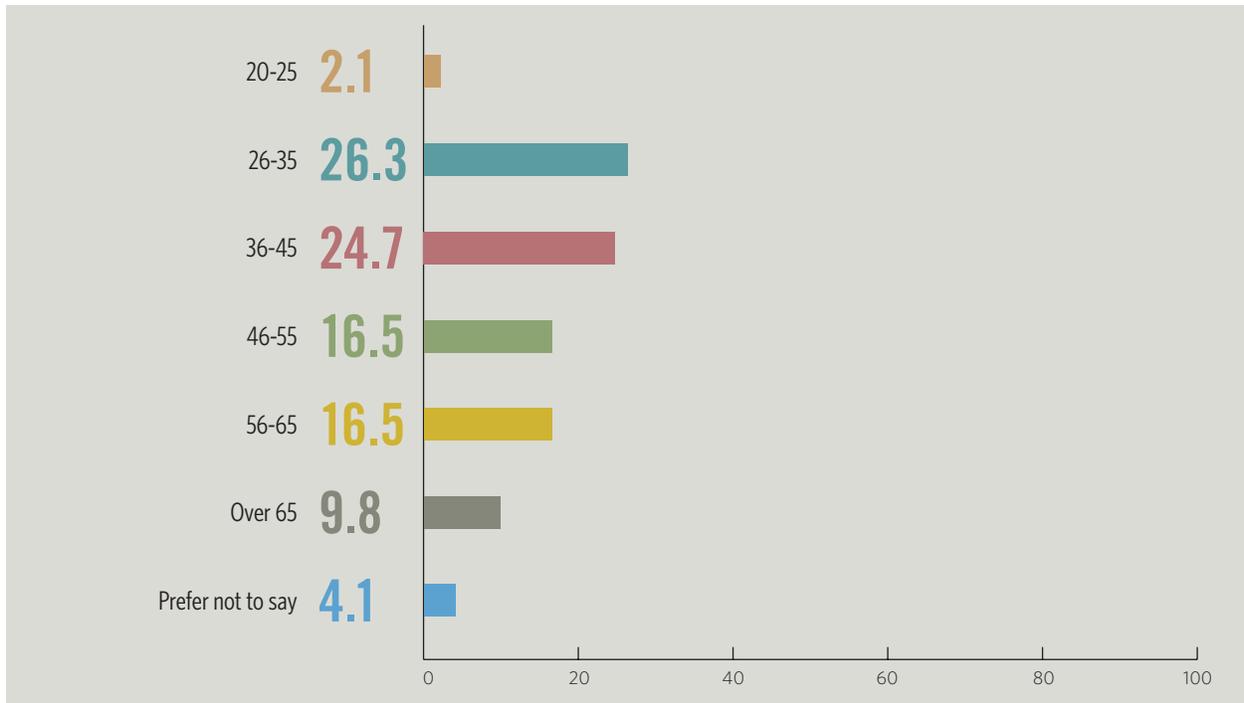
In fact, **55% did not have a PhD at all.**

WHAT IS THE HIGHEST DEGREE OR LEVEL OF SCHOOL YOU HAVE COMPLETED?



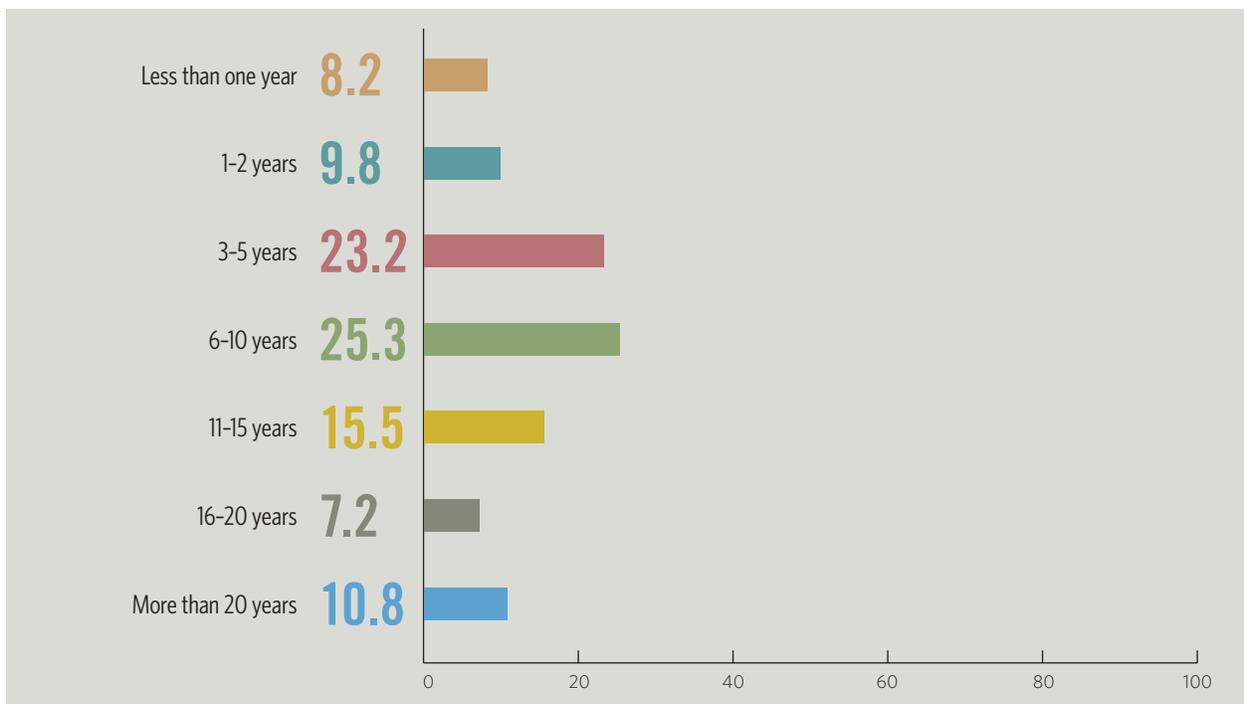
Second, respondents were young. They were most likely (26%) to be in the 26-35 age range—but a sizable 43% were older than 45.

AGE OF RESPONDENTS



The majority had been teaching at the university level for over five years; they were most likely (25%) to report having done so for 6-10 years.

HOW LONG HAVE YOU BEEN TEACHING AT THE UNIVERSITY LEVEL?



The majority of respondents (57%) self-identified as female; 40% self-identified as male and a further 3% declined to answer. It is worth noting that respondents who identified as female (57%) tended to be younger than those who identified as male (40%). The female respondents were also more likely to have children, and more likely to have young children (under age 12), living with them at home.

Labour Market Insecurity

It is evident from the survey data that contract faculty in Nova Scotia face **labour market insecurity**—that is, most cannot put together enough courses to constitute an “adequate income-earning opportunity” and tend to rely on other sources of income.

Nearly half of respondents (47%) were teaching only one course, at one university, during the Fall 2015 academic term. A further 25% said they were teaching two courses during the term. One-quarter each were slated to teach one or two courses in the Winter term, but 28% were not teaching any in that term.

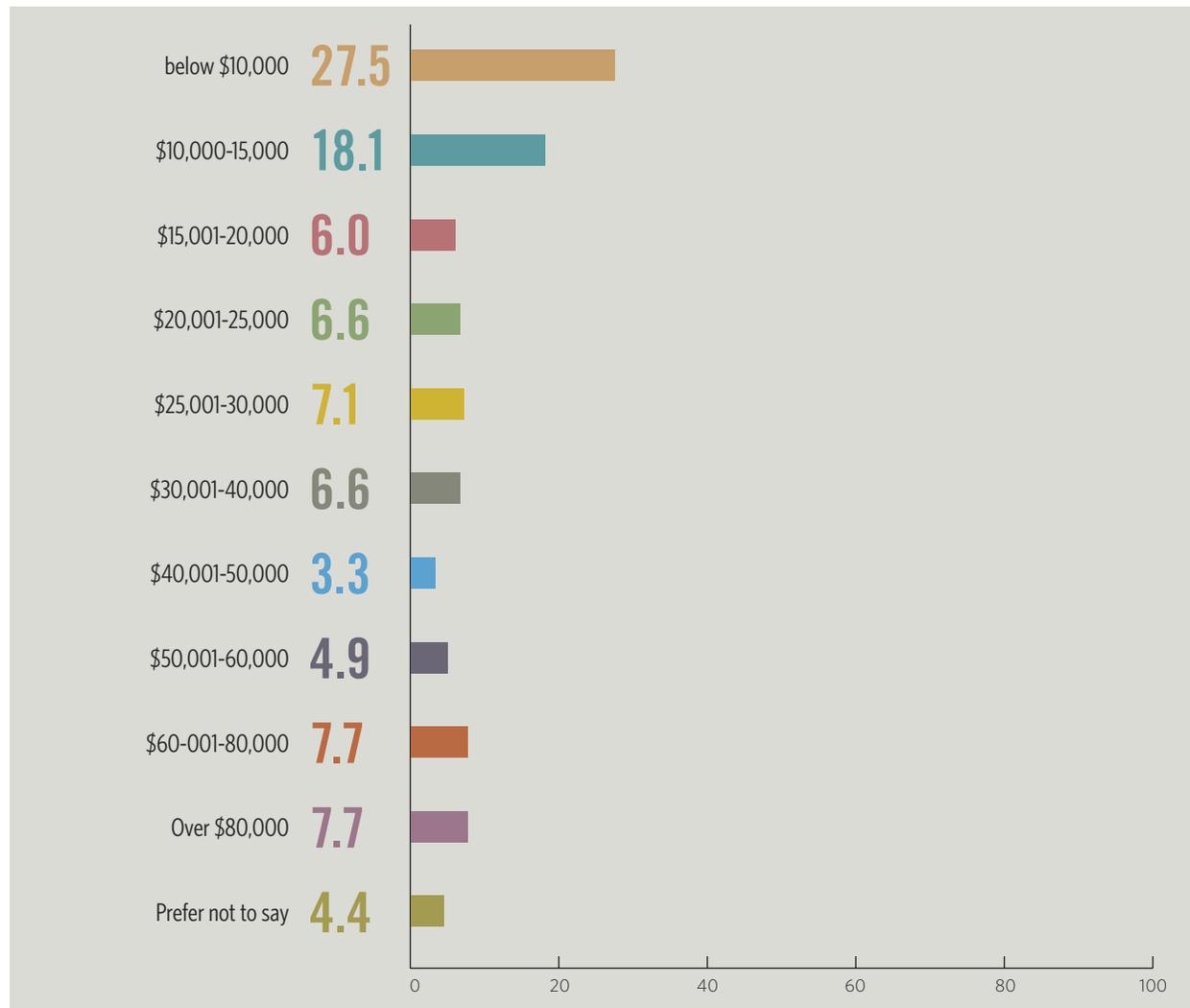
NUMBER OF HALF CREDIT COURSES RESPONDENT HIRED TO TEACH IN 2015-16

	Fall 2015	Winter 2016
1	46.5	26.5
2	25.0	26.5
3	16.0	16.0
4	2.5	3.5
5 or more	1.0	0.0
None	9.0	27.5

Given that most are teaching a maximum of two half-credit courses per term, it is not surprising that **respondents were most likely (28%) to report that they would gross less than \$10,000 in wages from their contract faculty jobs this year**. Add this to the 18% who said they will make \$10-15,000 in annual before-tax income from their work as a contract instructor, and the result is that near-

ly half of respondents (46%) expect to make \$15,000 or less from their teaching work this year. Among the rest, the data suggest that there is great variation in contract faculty teaching income.

PERSONAL YEARLY BEFORE-TAX INCOME, FROM CONTRACT TEACHING ONLY, IN 2015



The relatively low and unpredictable wages for contract faculty lead **41% of respondents to work other jobs in addition to teaching**. Of those working an additional job, 28% reported doing ad hoc consulting, and 23% had a salaried, full-time position in addition to their contract faculty job(s). All of these characteristics—the low pay, the multiple-job-holding—point to a lack of adequate income earning opportunities in the contract faculty labour market. In the comments, many respondents said they would prefer to teach more than the courses they were currently assigned, indicating that there are fewer opportunities than job-seekers in this field.

Employment, Job and Income Insecurity

McMaster Labour Studies professor Wayne Lewchuk's Poverty and Employment Precarity in Southern Ontario (PEPSO) study documents the effects that **employment and income insecurity** have on people's lives. They are striking; his data show that at low, middle and even high income *levels*, people whose incomes and employment are in some way uncertain are more stressed than people who are assured of a stable income from paycheque to paycheque. Among other things, they have more difficulty making ends meet—to pay for everything from groceries to children's school supplies or childcare—experience more anxiety about finance and employment, are less connected to their communities, have far fewer opportunities for advancement and training, and, sadly, are even less likely to have a friend to talk to or lean on for help (Lewchuk *et. al.*, 2013).

Contract teaching is certainly insecure, both in terms of the employment itself and the income it promises. Nearly half (46%) of respondents had 3-6 weeks notice, or less, of *which course or courses* they would be teaching in the fall term. Some who had more made sure to point out in the comments that they often had less—sometimes days or hours' notice.

In the responses to an open-ended question about the greatest challenge of being a contract instructor, and in the comments following a question that asked respondents to rate the stress level of their teaching job, the most common challenge and source of stress was insecurity related to the uncertainty of if, when, and for which courses, they would be employed in the future. In the words of one respondent:

“ It isn't necessarily the work itself. It's dealing with past, present, and future all at the same time that makes things stressful. In some regards, I am still dealing with my previous course at a different university, my current job, and also trying to secure employment for the winter term.”

Others echoed these points:

““ The work, and workload, aren’t particularly stressful—I’d be doing equivalent work as a tenure-stream, just of a different (and more personally beneficial kind). The insecurity, not knowing if I’ll be able to provide for my family in a few months, having to move every few years, etc., is extremely stressful.”

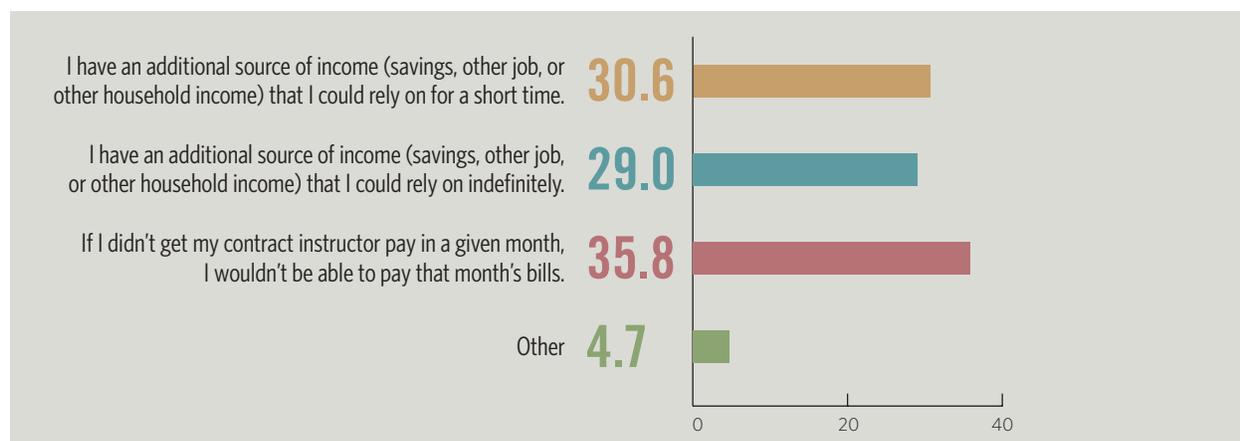
““ It’s stressful not knowing if you will have a job next year. You can’t plan for the future and lay down roots in a community. You know you are delaying retirement, since you are not contributing to a pension plan.”

The second most commonly identified stress or challenge was time; respondents said they struggled for enough time to manage multiple jobs, and to fit all of the work demanded of them into the hours for which they were actually paid. Moreover, many said they had difficulty balancing their teaching time with time for family, publishing and writing, and other activities that should help land a permanent job. They pointed as well to all of the tedious and redundant work they have to do—and the time it takes—to basically start a new job from scratch every term: the paperwork; the forms; the course prep; the login codes; the textbook orders; the online tools; the scheduling. All of this fits with Guy Standing’s contention, in *The Precariat*, that there is a great deal of necessary and mandated work that, because it is not valued as *labour*, goes unpaid and unrecognized as being legitimate and useful, but it still steals time away from other things (Standing, 2011).

The third greatest challenge for contract instructors, according to their answers to this open-ended question, was money—not just the instability of it, but the fact that, for many, there was never enough money to make ends meet.

Indeed, in another question, respondents were most likely to say that they were one missed paycheque away from not being able to pay their bills. In other words, 36% of all respondents were living paycheque to paycheque. Another 31% had another source of income they could rely on temporarily, and 29% had another source of income they could rely on indefinitely.

RELIANCE ON CONTRACT INSTRUCTOR PAY



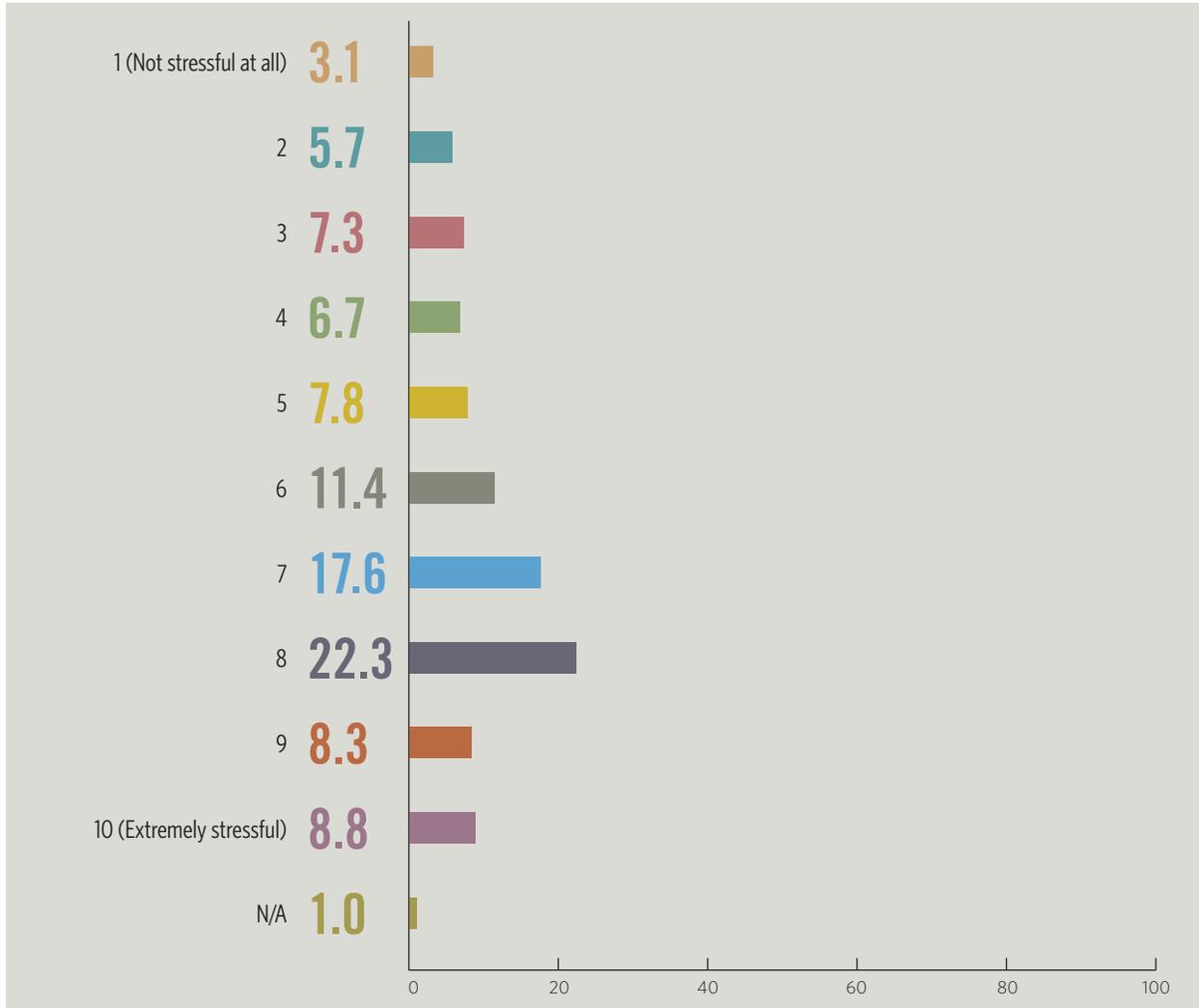
There were interesting gender differences in responses to this question. Men (38%) were more likely than women (23%) to say they had another source of income they could rely on indefinitely, whereas women were more likely than men to say they only had an alternative they could rely on temporarily (36% vs. 26%). In other words, it appears that women have less income security than men in the sample.

		How would you describe your reliance on your contract instructor pay?			
		I have an additional source of income (savings, other job, or other household income) that I could rely on for a short time.	I have an additional source of income (savings, other job, or other household income) that I could rely on indefinitely.	If I didn't get my contract instructor pay in a given month, I wouldn't be able to pay that month's bills.	Other
Do you identify as...	Male	26.0%	37.7%	35.1%	1.3%
	Female	35.5%	22.7%	36.4%	5.5%

Relatedly, only a minority had access to health or dental benefits, with 36% reporting access to health insurance, 33% to a dental plan, and 24% to a 'Health Spending Account' to cover procedures and medications not covered by their other plans.

These aspects of insecurity—income insecurity and employment insecurity, on top of the poverty of time—make work very stressful for most contract faculty.

HOW STRESSFUL IS YOUR WORK AS A CONTRACT INSTRUCTOR?



Asked to rate their general stress level, respondents tended toward the higher end, giving ratings of 6 (11%), 7 (18%) and 8 (22%). It is worth noting that women in the sample tended to report higher stress levels than men. The comments following this question, as noted, make it clear that “the teaching itself is not stressful at all”; the most stressful part, in their words, “is the simple lack of security.”

In a separate question, respondents were asked if their mental health had been affected by their work as contract instructors. Responses were mixed. Roughly half of respondents reported some negative impact on their mental health. Many pointed specifically to “stress” and “anxiety” related to the uncertainty of the work—the insecurity of the employment itself, as well as the uncertainty surrounding their role in and value to the university.

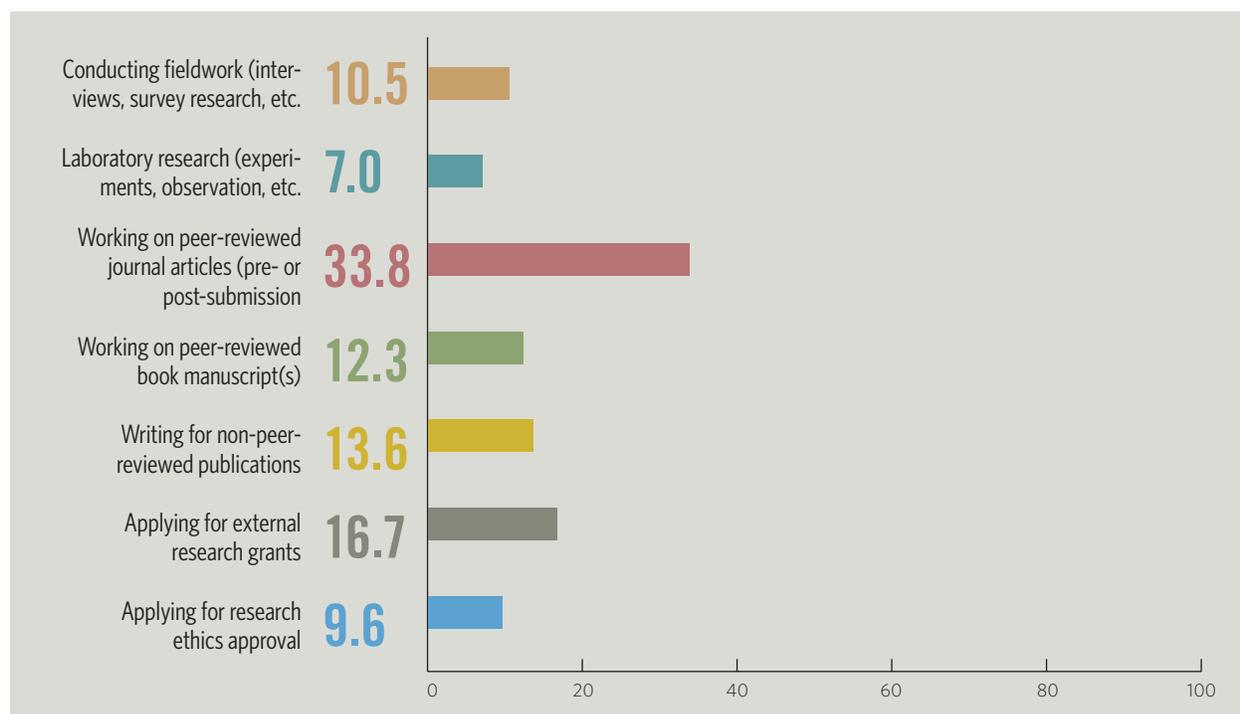
The emphasis on security in all its forms should not suggest, however, that the amount of money contract faculty receive for their work is satisfactory. A majority—61% of respondents—said they believe they are not paid fairly, pointing out in the comments that their hourly rate is far below minimum wage when they divide their salary per course by the number of hours they actually work in a given term. Several pointed out, more specifically, that contract faculty wages in Nova Scotia are much lower than in other provinces. In describing the remuneration for contract faculty jobs, many used the word “exploitation.”

Job and Skill-Reproduction Insecurity

A common characteristic of precarious jobs in general, and one that is reflected in our data, is that workers put in more hours than they are paid for, and most of them know it.

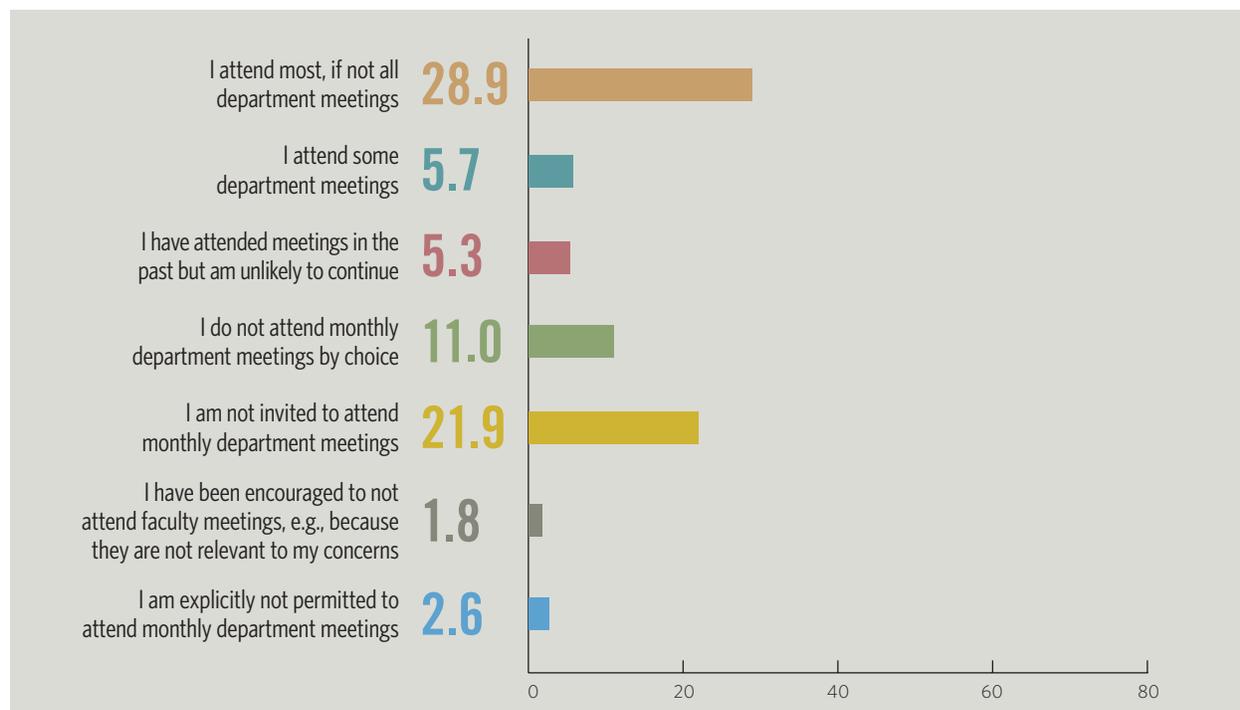
One third of respondents said they were actively writing articles for academic journals, 17% were applying for research grants, while about 1 in 10 were writing manuscripts, writing for non-peer-reviewed publications, conducting research fieldwork, and applying for research ethics approval.

% OF RESPONDENTS ACTIVELY CONDUCTING RESEARCH AND SCHOLARLY ACTIVITIES



Nearly one-third said they attend all or most department meetings, while at the other end of the spectrum 22% said they were *not* invited or told not to attend. Those who don't attend had some interesting things to say—like “I don't feel a real part of the department, to be honest”; and “I stopped attending faculty meetings because I did not have the right to vote on any matter; this made me question whether my comments were of any importance”.

ATTENDANCE AT REGULAR MONTHLY DEPARTMENT MEETINGS



Yet, in the sample, 13% serve on departmental committees, 9% on faculty-wide committees, and a shocking **34 people in total hold some kind of coordinating, advising or leadership position in their department (undergrad advisor, study-abroad coordinator)**. There were even two department chairs among the contract faculty who responded to the survey. And only 10 of these contract instructors with other positions were actually paid for doing the extra work.

This extra work—work that is not mandatory but is at the same time *expected* and *encouraged*—is a manifestation of what Standing calls *job insecurity* and *skill reproduction insecurity* (Standing, 2011:10).

Looking first at the skill reproduction insecurity, many contract instructors obviously strive to build and show evidence of skills that are ultimately not valued in their contract jobs, and which may or may not help them secure a full-time, tenure-track position in such an insecure labour market. The lived experience of skill reproduction insecurity is a constant, Sisyphean struggle to appear valuable, worthy of a permanent job, all the while suspecting that one's status as contract faculty might render the struggle valueless on the tenure-track labour market, and knowing that it might not make a difference in any future contract faculty job.

In other words, the efforts of contract faculty to build up and show off their skills in service work and research will not allow them to hang on to contract teaching as a “niche”—thereby retaining *job security*—because contract faculty positions are defined precisely by their temporariness, their discontinuity.

Engaging in any activities beyond the basic requirements of teaching a given course is made even more difficult by the fact that contract faculty are under-resourced, not only in *time* but also in access to supports and funding that full-time faculty can use to facilitate their scholarly activities. Most reported insufficient to no access to conference or research travel funding and allowances for necessary teaching supplies (e.g. computers). A majority reported sufficient access only to library loans, online periodical access, printers, and an email address. In a separate question (not in the table below), most (81%) reported that they are given an office as part of their contract, but for 44% this means office space that is shared with other contract faculty or graduate students.

ACCESS TO UNIVERSITY RESOURCES FOR CONTRACT TEACHING WORK

	Library: Full-term loans	Library: Online journal/periodical access	Professional Development seminars / workshops	Conference travel funding	Professional Development Allowance / funding	Printer (for course materials)	Research travel funding	University email address
Have sufficient access	80.8	85.6	47.8	14.5	17.4	77.9	4.5	96.2
Have limited, insufficient access	3.3	3.9	18.5	24.6	18.5	11.0	15.9	1.6
No access	1.6	1.1	15.2	41.3	41.0	7.2	52.3	0.0
Don't know	13.2	8.8	18.0	17.3	20.2	2.8	21.6	2.2
N/A	1.1	0.6	0.6	2.2	2.8	1.1	5.7	0.0

Not surprisingly, respondents were ambivalent about extra, unpaid work. On one hand, many contract faculty see these additional activities as exploitative and unsupported and unsustainable, and they reject them. So in the comments, they wrote things like, “until contract faculty are paid better, I do not think we should be encouraged to sit on board”, and “I do think contract staff could be helpful on committees but they need to get paid for doing it—it should not be ‘volunteer work.’”

On the other hand, many *acknowledged* the difficulty of doing research or service work, but tried to do it anyway, because for them it was a way to *possibly* get ahead and get out of the contract instructor “trap.” Many in the comments proudly noted their efforts at publishing and attracting research money, while others ex-

pressed a strong desire to do it, if only they had the time. Indeed, a majority of respondents clearly indicated that they would like more support for research activities, with 34% strongly agreeing with the statement “I wish I had support from my university to do research.” Most respondents (57% and 69%, respectively) also agreed that contract faculty should “have a seat on university-wide bodies, e.g. Senate, Board of Governors”, and that “full-time faculty should make efforts to include contract instructors on academic panels, departmental decisions, research projects, etc.”

Their ambivalent comments, however, serve as a reminder that contract faculty face a dilemma: they want to be more involved in university and departmental governance, in research and service work, and in collegial events and activities, but unlike full-time faculty there is no acknowledgment of these things as professional responsibilities. They are not remunerated, and there is no time carved out for them alongside teaching responsibilities. Respondents to this survey seemed to see engaging in non-teaching activities as a gamble; they could not tell if it would be worth their time and effort.

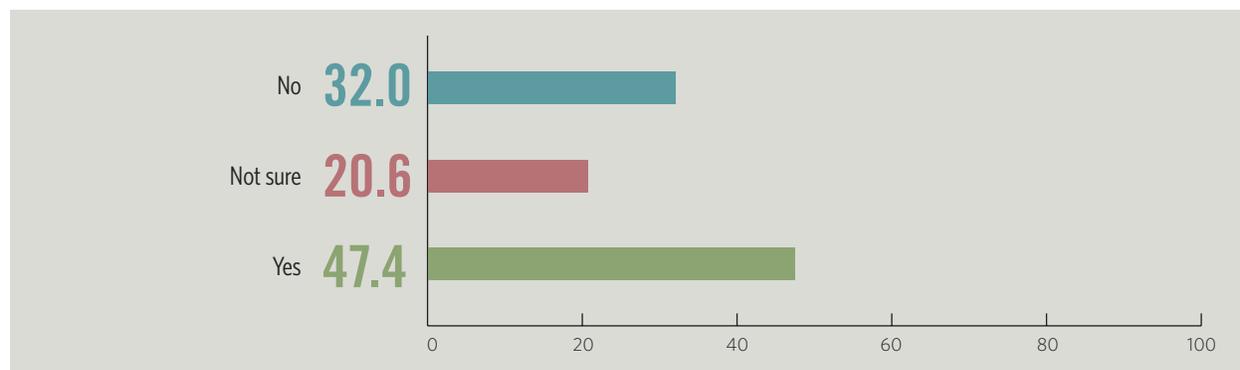
The respondents who *do* believe that engaging in research and service work, even if it is unpaid, might open up opportunities in the future, call to mind a paradox that Kathi Weeks identifies in her very compelling book, *The Problem with Work* (2011). Making reference to Max Weber’s seminal concept of the protestant work ethic, Weeks surmised contemporary workers are enjoined to approach their jobs—even their precarious, unstable and ephemeral jobs—*as if* they are careers. People in precarious, short-term jobs know they are not careers, and their contracts make that clear, but these people are expected to act as if their jobs are careers on the tenuous promise that if they do them well enough or long enough they might *become* careers. Workers in precarious jobs are invited to imagine that their work ethic could act as a self-fulfilling prophecy (Weeks, 2011:72).

But not all contract faculty do this, and not all want a tenure track job.

Precarity and Hope

Certainly, respondents were applying for tenure track jobs, or they had in the past, and they also applied for limited-term appointments. Specifically, **the average respondent had applied for 13 tenure track jobs and 5 limited-term appointments.** But only just under half (47%) of respondents said they *want* a tenure track job.

DO YOU WANT A TENURE TRACK JOB?

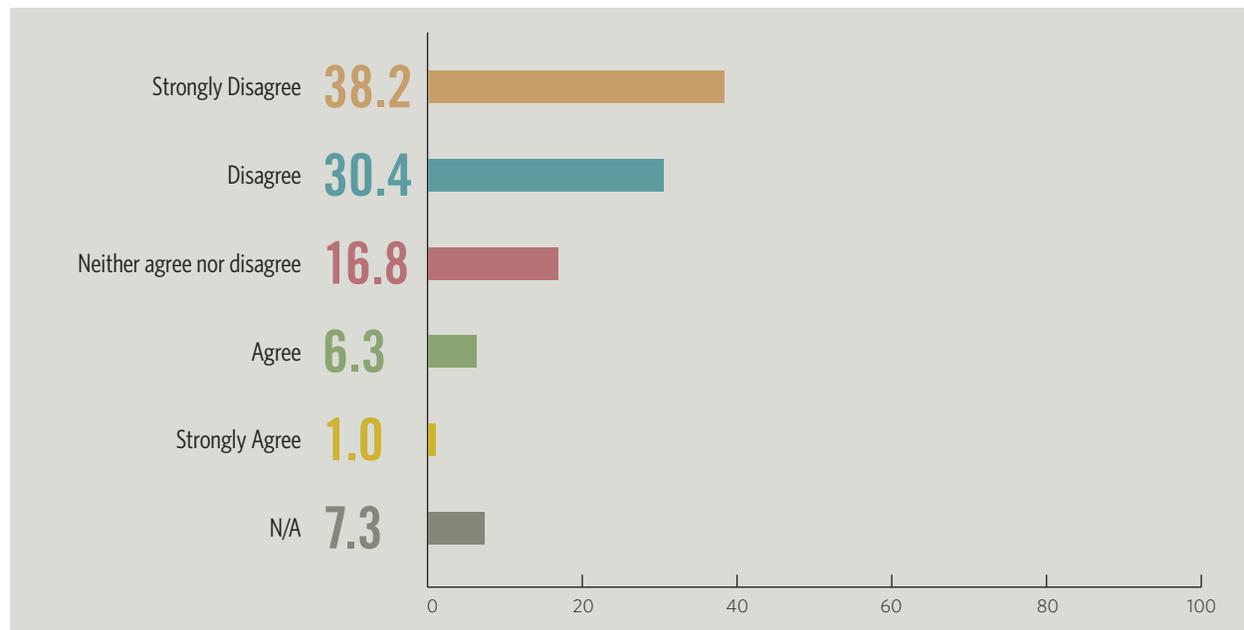


Of those 47%, 65% of *them* said they probably would not find a job within the next two years. And a common reason for that was that they'd spent too much time teaching on contract—that is, spent too many years not focused on research—to be competitive in a labour market that rewarded youth and recent graduates.

Fully 32% of respondents said they do *not* want a tenure track job, and 21% said they were not sure. However, the 32% who said they do not want one generally pointed to circumstances beyond their control, things other than pure desire, preference or aspiration—like “I’m too old”, “I’ll never get one anyway” or “I prefer to be realistic”—as the main reason why they did not want one. The rest were mostly either retired or they self-identified as unqualified (e.g., no PhD).

In a separate question, only 7% of respondents agreed with the statement “If I put my time in as a contract instructor, I will eventually get a tenure-track job.”

IF I PUT MY TIME IN AS A CONTRACT INSTRUCTOR, I WILL EVENTUALLY GET A TENURE-TRACK JOB



It makes sense that only **one in ten** said they believe that the **academic job market in their particular field is “healthy.”** No matter what, the people in the sample tended toward irreverence about life in academia. A selection of their imaginary advice to recent PhD graduates who aspire to tenure track jobs reflects this:

- “Buy a lottery ticket.”
- “Throw out all hopes of work-life balance (especially if they identify as a woman—don’t have kids!).”
- “Magic? Prayer?”
- “Be male and never disagree with anybody who is tenured.”
- “Marry a TT [tenure track] professor.”

In light of this cynicism, one might ask what keeps contract instructors going. The answer: it’s the students.

Almost every respondent said that what they liked *most* about their contract teaching was their interactions with students—helping them learn, watching them grow, learning from them.

““ I love teaching, I adore my students. It feels incredibly satisfying when I know that I’ve explained a difficult concept in a relevant, lucid, and interesting way. I truly believe that my students enjoy my class, and that makes me proud.”

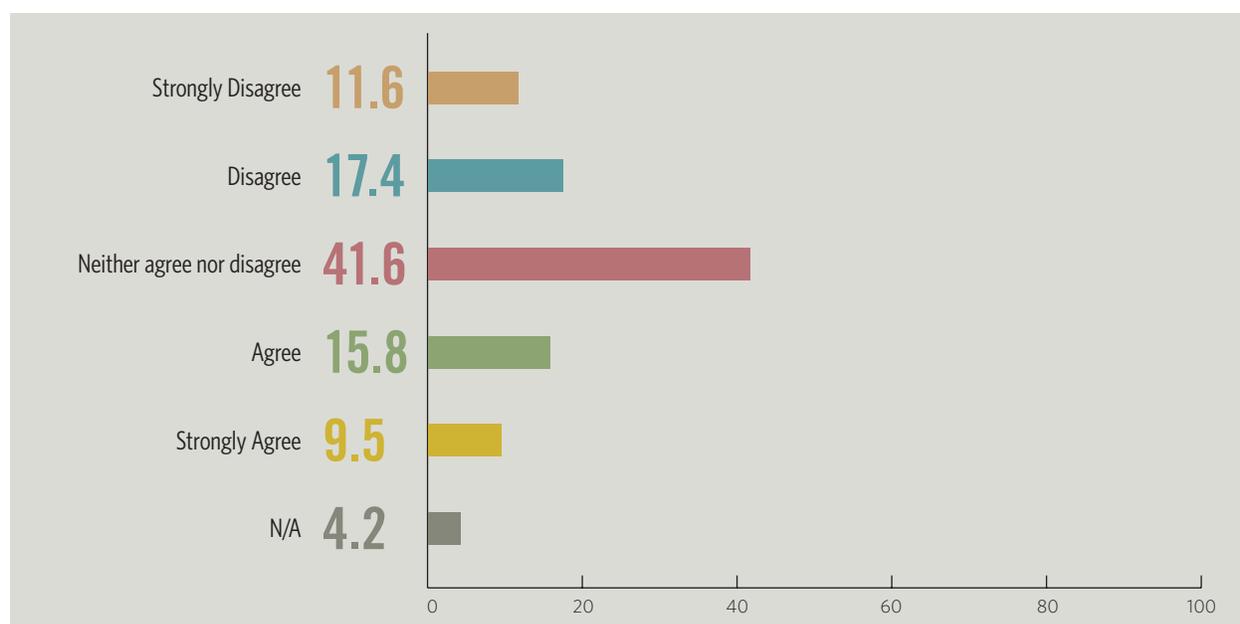
In a separate question, over three-quarters of respondents said they are “passionate about teaching.”

Teaching is a form of what the sociologist Arlie Hochschild (2003) termed “emotional labour”. Like any kind of emotional labour or care work, it is generally done under exploitative and alienating circumstances because the teacher gets a reward from helping others, from making a human connection, from seeing others succeed, and from lifting other people up. As Hochschild’s work makes clear, in teaching, and in other jobs characterized by emotional labour, society is let off the financial hook by the assumption that the emotional rewards will make up for the low pay, insecurity, and the other indecent and inhumane aspects of the structure of the work itself.

Precarity, Injury and Alienation

Despite the commitment to students, many contract instructors who responded to this survey said they feel that the university system is broken beyond repair. And they, themselves, are injured by it. Respondents were not sure (42%) if the tenure system would be around by 2050—a clear indication that they recognize that something about tenure is under threat or perhaps unsustainable.

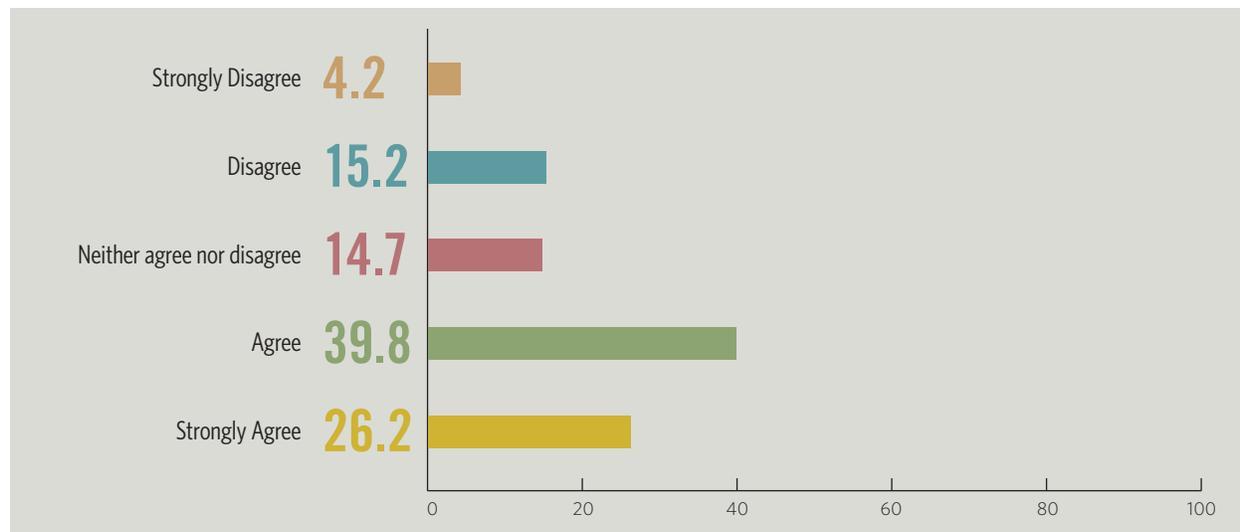
THE TENURE SYSTEM WILL STILL BE AROUND IN 2050



Accordingly, nearly half of respondents **strongly agreed** with the prediction that universities would “rely increasingly on contract instructors in the future.”

Asked about their relationships with colleagues in the departments or schools in which they teach, most said they felt respected by the full-time faculty there.

I FEEL LIKE THE FULL-TIME FACULTY IN MY DEPARTMENT(S) RESPECT ME AS A COLLEAGUE



However, in an open-ended question about the same topic, very few of those who described positive relationships with colleagues, and said that they felt “supported” and “respected”, could say this without equivocating. For example:

““ I have a good relationship with many of the faculty, and I think my work is valued. However, I think I am also seen as a person who isn’t willing to leave the department for another job or fight for a better position, so also not someone to give more rights or better job security. So, I think some people in the department feel a little guilty that I’m in a limited term position, but also aren’t likely to stick up for me in that regard.”

Another put it this way:

““ I feel very much like a colleague. However, having to reapply for my job causes stress and a feeling of being a second-class colleague—although my colleagues assume that I do not feel this way and express surprise if I give voice to my anxiety.”

Those who described negative relationships emphasized feeling “disrespected,” “exploited” and “replaceable” or “dispensable.” They said that even if the relationships with colleagues were “cordial” and “polite,” they were nevertheless “distant”, “removed” and “isolated.”

Still others, as mentioned, said they had no relationship at all. “I don’t have any real relationship,” said one respondent. “I show up, do my thing, and go home.”

Asked if they had ever voiced concerns about their working conditions, respondents either said they had never done it—some citing fear of repercussions—or said they had, but to no avail. As one respondent put it, “our shitty working conditions and wages have been discussed regularly in various departmental committees. It always comes down to austerity rhetoric: it’s this, or nothing.” Another said they had only ever voiced concerns “casually to other contact employees”, assuming that “established members of the university don’t care at all about the working conditions of contract instructors.” This same theme was repeated over and over in the responses—contract faculty feel like whether they complain or not, it will not change anything, because those who are listening do not understand or sympathize with—or simply cannot do anything about—their plight.

This sense of hopelessness, and the injury that precarious work has obviously inflicted on so many respondents, should be of concern to full-time faculty and anyone who cares about the ethical and collegial foundations of the university. This applies to full-time faculty unions especially.

Among respondents, there is a sense of an “inherent conflict of interest” between full-time faculty and contract faculty.

One-third of respondents agreed with the statement that “older professors who won’t retire are taking away jobs from new scholars.”

As one respondent explained, “perks (such as sabbatical and other leaves) for tenured faculty are maintained in large part through the flexible and cheaper work provided by contract academics. The [faculty union] has little interest in advocating for current contract employees. It would like to promote the maintenance of more traditional appointments.”

Nearly half strongly agreed that “full-time faculty members should publicly support contract instructors who are asking for better working conditions.”

The danger is that contract faculty’s justifiable anger and alienation can very easily be exploited by anyone who wants to undermine the forms of security *almost guaranteed* to those with tenure. Employers, administrators and Boards of Governors need to do very little to stoke the embers of the cynicism uncovered by this survey. The marginalization that contract instructors feel and experience is created in their contracts, but it is sustained by much of what full-time faculty do every day to keep their departments solvent, their students served, their committees staffed and their own research time protected. Full-time faculty, at the department level, are usually centrally involved in hiring contract instructors, in deciding which courses go ahead and which get cancelled, in choosing whether and how to include contract faculty in departmental governance, and in the full-time personnel decisions that ultimately shape the need for contract faculty positions.

This is the double-edged sword of the university’s collegial structure: although it is weaker than it might have been in the past, the autonomy full-time faculty get within their departments implicates them in whatever is done to contract instructors. Contract instructors appear to believe this, and they want to see action. Thus, the time for faculty unions to act—to help advocate for contract faculty and seek their input—is now. And it is not just for our own sake, but for the sake of the students we serve.

Contractualization and Education

There is not much evidence to conclude, one way or another, whether contract instructors make better or worse teachers than full-time faculty. Anecdotal evidence seems to suggest that contract faculty can be even more enthusiastic about the content of their courses, and more accessible to students, despite their tenuous employment relationship to the university and their comparative lack of resources. But perhaps the question of teaching *quality* is approaching the matter from the wrong angle. The more important question might be about the impact that contractualization itself,

as a structural transformation of the university, has on the students who pass through it seeking knowledge and the capacity for critical thought.

A former contract instructor who worked on this survey reflected, in its initial stages, on his despair for the liberal arts students he taught. He was trying to teach them about the political economy of the modern university—and here he was, “a living example of its effects”, embodying and perpetuating the very system he was trying to equip them to critique. This should give us pause.

We must ask ourselves, what is the impact of precarious academic labour on how knowledge gets passed on to students? What is the impact of a contract instructor’s precarious employment situation on the students he or she is either trying to “skill up” for an economy that may exploit them in the same ways, or trying to teach them how to protect themselves from it, to teach them how to critique it and change it?

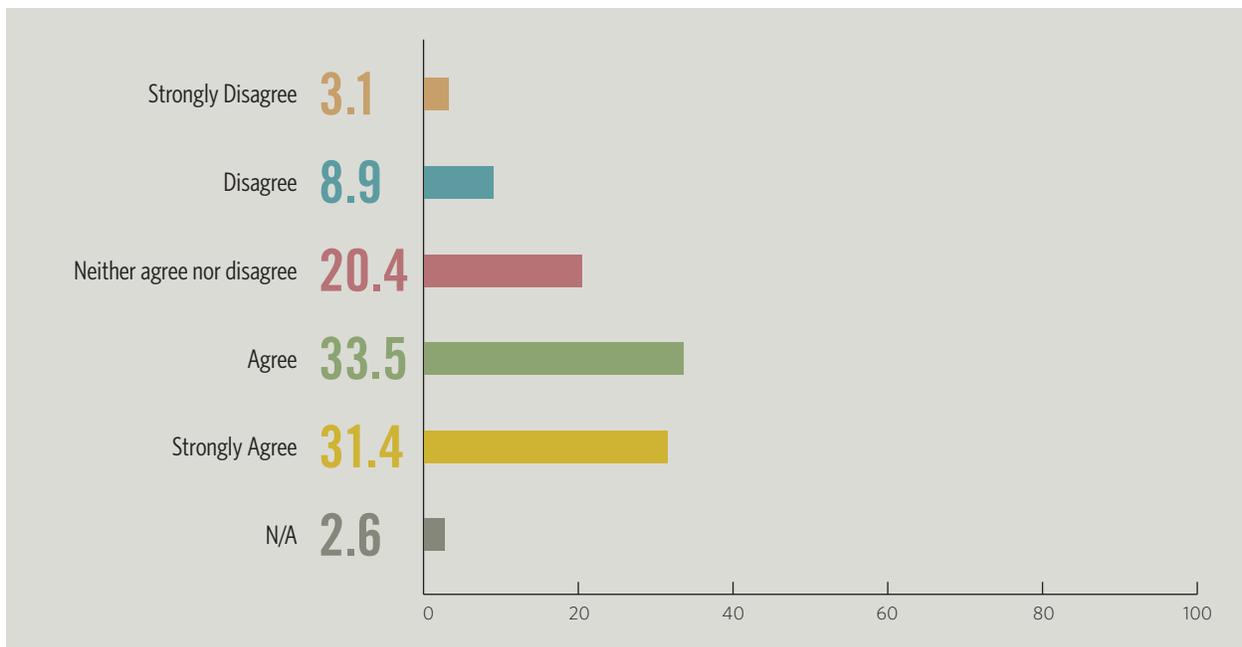
It is not just about having enough time to meet with students or give them detailed feedback. It is much deeper than that. Just as parents scarred by economic restructuring pass on to their children a certain set of lessons and knowledge about the world of work, so too do educators.

What now?

The data from this survey point toward some potentially fruitful first steps in addressing the challenges that contract instructors in Nova Scotia universities face. For full-time faculty, it should be clear that contract instructors want the *opportunity* to engage in non-teaching activities. They want to be invited to workshops and department meetings, and to sit on committees. Ultimately, they want to be compensated for their involvement in such activities too. What they do not want, generally, is to be excluded from these opportunities at the outset. They want the chance to decide whether or not to participate.

They also believe that full-time faculty should advocate for contract faculty interests, suggesting that full-time faculty unions should make it a priority to connect and consult with contract faculty at their institutions. If it is possible, inviting a contract faculty representative to sit on the faculty union—and ideally, to have them remunerated in some way for this service—could be a first step toward stronger ties between regular and contract faculty. At the same time, contract faculty acknowledge that if they want true representation security, they must organize and advocate for themselves collectively: over half agreed that this was necessary.

CONTRACT INSTRUCTORS NEED TO ORGANIZE AND ADVOCATE FOR THEMSELVES COLLECTIVELY



Thus, if full-time faculty unions can offer support to contract faculty looking to set up their own advocacy organizations, they should, for example by organizing workshops and seminars to bring disparate contract faculty together, providing the opportunity for them to connect and develop mailing lists and working groups.

While full-time faculty and their unions can take some steps to help contract faculty, it is ultimately up to university administrators to mitigate most of the structural challenges facing contract instructors. In the short term, given the overwhelming desire for *security* evident in the survey data summarized here, the most meaningful and impactful thing that university administrators could do to make life better for their contract employees is to reduce the insecurity they face as a result of their contingency. Some possible concrete solutions taken from the data include:

- offering longer, renewable contracts;
- making the process for renewal crystal clear;
- giving contract instructors more notice about their appointments;
- implementing a conversion process where a certain number of courses taught qualifies a contract instructor for an ongoing appointment;
- creating research and service work funds for contract instructors who wish to engage in such non-teaching activities.

Few contract instructors would disagree with the idea that some short-term positions are necessary to cover occasional gaps in teaching coverage—to ensure continuous course offerings when full-time faculty are on sabbatical, administrative, or other kinds of routine leave. However, the fact that so many contract instructors are teaching continuously for years, even decades, suggests that these positions have morphed from ad hoc solutions to permanent, but precarious, fixtures in most departments.

The last several decades of change in university hiring practices tell us that, like every other industry and occupation, academia is vulnerable to “flexibilization”. Like most other kinds of workers, university professors’ jobs can be “deskilled”—carved into more specialized, limited positions that demand less pay and prestige, even if the people filling them are just as educated, skilled and talented as the full-time professors working alongside them (Braverman, 1998).

Thus, in the long term, “solutions” to precarious work in academia will have to be more expansive than mere tweaks to contract faculty’s terms of employment. Scholars who study precarious work, and “the precariat” themselves, are looking at broader measures, from strengthened employment legislation at the provincial and federal levels, to more radical proposals that seek to redraw the connections between work and income, and between survival and the labour market, such as the macro-level policies of Basic Income and a “jobs guarantee” (Hamilton, 2015; Standing, 2011; Weeks, 2015).

The latter policies represent an acknowledgment that employers have the upper hand and will never restore the post-war consensus model of full-time, permanent jobs for all out of the goodness of their hearts. More disturbingly, they are increasingly impervious to union demands that the post-war model even be *preserved* for the shrinking workforce lucky enough to have it. University administrators and the expert consultants who direct them have learned from the last two decades of contractualization that it is feasible to have a smaller number of instructors teach a larger number of students. They have learned that it is possible to “[shift] the risks and costs of the employment relationship from the employer to the employee” (Luce, 2016:14). These lessons may be impossible to unlearn.

Advocates for radical, macro-level policies like Basic Income believe that, in this environment, only a strong state, acting as mediator between the market and the civil sphere, can be counted on to guarantee ordinary people’s well-being.

Thus, the fight for the future of the university, and for the well-being of everyone who labours in it, might need to be fought on two fronts: one front pressing for changes within the institution itself, while the other front binds onto larger movements to change the political economy in which our institutions of higher learning are situated.

A university built on a political economy that *ensures* intergenerational justice, which cultivates solidarity among the increasingly divided ranks of the professoriate, and which connects them with a larger society confronting the same forces of contractualization and precarity, may indeed be the only way forward to ensure that universities retain their role in the generation and dissemination of knowledge for the public good.

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