

## **Adjuncting for Life: The Gendered Experience of Adjunct Instructors in Ontario**

Leslie Nichols  
Wilfrid Laurier University

ORCIDiDs <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2428-9385>

### **Abstract**

The market-based imperatives driving economic growth in Western societies have, in ways, both acknowledged and implicit, been used to reorient public institutions - academia dramatically so. This article deals with upending of post-secondary academic hiring priorities, and the impact on the adjunct or sessional lecturers implicated in the change. Over half of the courses offered by academic departments and programs in Ontario, Canada, are now taught by part-time faculty members (Pasma & Shakes, 2018). Their use in post-secondary education is underpinned by a notion of just-in-time course delivery in a free market of untenured PhD holders. This study assessed 26 adjuncts in Ontario, Canada, equally divided between male and female. It found working conditions, development of research dossiers, and health and work-life balance to be characterized by gendered differences and hardships. Although the difficulties of post-PhD adjunct work have been abundantly documented, this work brings to light components of the experience that have not been previously studied, most significantly, its health effects and gendered nature. It concludes with policy recommendations to support adjuncts in Ontario and beyond, including mentorship, longer term contracts, institutional research funding, extended health benefits, and affordable childcare.

*Keywords:* adjunct, sessional instructor, Canada, post secondary, gender

### **Introduction**

In the past four decades, across the developed world, the ubiquitous uptake of neoliberal norms has intersected with a growing need for skilled labour. Service and knowledge-based economies have generated an increasing demand for highly educated workers in a variety of sectors including finance, business, health, and technology (Kirby, 2007; Pupo et al., 2019; Rigas & Kuckaprki, 2016). This intersection has made an increasing difference to Canadian universities over the last two decades. Between 2000 and 2019, the number of undergraduate and graduate students in Canadian universities rose from 861,700 to 1,356,000 (Statistics Canada, 2003; Universities Canada, n.d.). This has, in turn, created a need for more faculty.

It is impossible to discuss faculty hiring without reference to the neoliberalization of higher education in North America, about which much has been said (Brown, 2015; Giroux, 2002; Hachem, 2018; Rigas & Kuckaprki, 2016). The Canadian constitution gives responsibility for education to its ten provinces and across the board these have responded with cuts to university funding (Canadian Federation of Students, 2013). Government grants for universities' operations fell from 82.7% of revenues in 1982 to 54.9% in 2012 (Smith-Carrier, 2020). Decreased revenues have increasingly shifted the burden of teach-

ing from full-time to adjunct faculty who are vastly cheaper to employ (Foster & Birdsell Bauer, 2018).

Most adjuncts aspire to full-time careers in teaching and research, but they far outnumber open positions and faced intense competition for each (The Council of Canadian Academies, 2021). The chance of being hired for a tenure-track position diminishes each year as new graduates compete with those still searching, and mature scholars seek other academic jobs. A large group of instructors with PhDs have now been underemployed for years, with no job security, low pay, limited to no benefits, little opportunity for advancement, and real difficulty building the research dossier required for full-time employment (Crossman, 2019; Field et al., 2014; Foster & Birdsell Bauer, 2018; Sadlier, 2021). Canadian information about this subset of university employees is limited but growing.

This study surveyed 26 adjunct Ph.D. instructors across Ontario, Canada's most populous province. Between 2017 and 2019, in-depth interviews were conducted with 13 male and 13 female instructors, and then subjected to a thematic analysis. Typically lasting over an hour, these interviews comprised 56 questions about their working conditions, the ways in which underemployment impacted their career trajectory and health, and whether new women scholars were continuing to balance teaching responsibilities and the demands of a constant job search with the majority of unpaid household labour and childcare. The study is predicated on the assumption that the lives of women adjuncts may differ from those of the men and that the degree to which the Canadian economy depends upon the labour of all adjuncts will motivate an interest in its sustainability. Further, exposure of the exploitative nature of that dependency and its health effects can help to lengthen the view of administrative policy across colleges, universities, and governments by illuminating the practical implications of contract-heavy hiring.

## Background

### *Neoliberalism and its Dramatic Changes to Canadian Universities*

In Canada, the principles we now think of as neoliberal began to be used to dismantle the post-war welfare state in the mid-1980s. Equated with the Chicago School's monetarism, the principles are based on a belief in "a spontaneous order specific to the market economy" (Brennetot, 2014, para. 26) with which all social institutions need to be brought in line, and which must be left to its own devices. Market interaction monetized everything in play, provided equivalent exchange (no lasting social obligations: see Godbout, 2022, on the difference), and ordered behaviours so as to maximize economic efficiency at every level. Its foundational belief is that the economic individual, alone, was truly free. "The entrepreneur, in Schumpeter's view a heroic figure, was the creative destroyer par excellence because the entrepreneur was prepared to push the consequences of technical and social innovation to vital extremes" (Harvey, 1990, p. 17).

In practice, there is no economic equivalent to the complexity of professional practices, social cohesion, and societal equity being lost (e.g., Hachem, 2018; Giroux 2002). Responsibility for citizen well-being has been shifted from government and corporate entities to citizens themselves; long-term security has been significantly eroded, even as an aspiration. Its effect when applied to academia is to treat its institutions as businesses, with their departments and schools ideally managed as profit-centres (Rigas & Kuckaprki, 2016). The efficiency maximizing mandate has created management cultures that replace the values of the professions in their charge (Hachem, 2018).

The new university is one of standardization ... It is also one of strategic planning, continuous system-wide data collection and analysis, and standards-based accountability. The ultimate goal of today's university, like any other aspiring free market corporation, is to increase profit, and this can be done by either reducing costs or increasing revenues. To reduce costs, the new university refers to measures of fiscal austerity, including the outsourcing of services to cheaper providers and the hiring of cheapest "labor" possible. (p. 56)

True to form, in an analysis of the 2012 Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities report, Rigas and Kuckaprki (2016) found that:

students are viewed as purchasers of education. As courses come to be regarded as instruc-

tional commodities, the student–teacher relationship becomes one of production and consumption. The discourse in government documents is normalizing a governance structure for higher education that is more like business, with faculty members viewed as traditional workers, and students as customers. (p. 67)

Ontario’s cuts to post-secondary funding have been deep: between 1990 and 2015, funding was decreased by \$3,250 per student to \$8,500 (Canadian Federation of Students-Ontario, 2015). By 2019, the province’s share of its university operating revenues had fallen to 24% (Smith-Carrier, 2020). Cuts continued even as enrolment increased. For example, in 1999, there were 227,131 full- and part-time students enrolled in Ontario’s undergraduate programs; this number had increased to 366,851 in 2015 (HEQCO, 2022).

To address shortfalls, universities across Canada have increased tuition fees and expanded fundraising (Kirby, 2007). Canadian post-secondary institutions have also followed their American counterparts and reduced the number of tenure-track professors, whose salaries were high and benefits, substantial (Weingarten et al., 2018). A distinct trend emerged in replacement of full-time professors with cheaper temporary adjuncts (Foster & Birdsell Bauer, 2018). The Canadian Association of University Teachers reported in 2018 that from 2005 to 2015, as post-secondary enrolment grew by 28%, full-time positions grew by 14% and part-time adjunct positions, by 79%. The extent to which hiring of full-time faculty has failed to keep pace with student enrolment seems to indicate the transition of a short- to a long-term strategy. Across Canada since 2000/2001, a 25% increase has been recorded in the ratio of full-time students to full-time instructors (Snowdon & Associates, 2018).

## *The Job Market for Recent PhD Graduates*

### **Tenured Professorship**

In 2016, Canadian universities granted 7,767 PhDs (Statistics Canada, 2021), 65% of whom aspired to full-time university teaching positions (Maldonado et al., 2013). Less than 20% of those graduates could get a full-time position. However, the majority found positions in industry, government, and non-profit organizations (Edge & Munro, 2015). Jonker (2016, p. 3) tracked 2009 Ontario PhD graduates, which revealed that by 2016, 30% had found tenure-track appointments (10% above the national average), 21% were employed as “researchers, lecturers, college instructors, and administrators,” and 35% worked outside academia; the status of the remaining 15% was unknown.

Given the limited tenured opportunities, many new PhDs become adjuncts, hired simply to teach, leaving other tasks critical to their career trajectory, such as research, writing and publishing, grant application development, and service to the institution and wider community to be done on their own time (Weingarten et al., 2018). Underemployed with respect to their skill set, they frequently took jobs at several institutions at once (Foster & Birdsell Bauer, 2018), earning them the moniker “freeway fliers” for their time-consuming commutes across large urban areas (Field et al., 2014, p.11).

### **Women PhDs**

A large literature documents the continuing relevance of separating out statistics by gender (Nichols, 2019b). Women remained overrepresented in traditionally ‘female’ jobs and underrepresented in the more highly skilled professions; when they transcended gender norms, they continued to meet forms of resistance including the famed “glass ceiling” limiting both promotion and wages (Macdonald, 2021; Nichols, 2019a). Women were also hamstrung by the absence of adequate work-family policies that would allow them to gain ground in a career at the same time as they support an active family life. These issues, as will be seen, complicated life for female adjuncts.

In the early 1990s, women accounted for just 30% of Canadian PhDs; by the end of that decade, the number had increased to 40% (Statistics Canada, 2011). Since the mid-2000s it has risen to 45%, both across Canada and in Ontario (Statistics Canada, 2011; Statistics Canada, 2021; see Table 1).

**Table 1***Doctoral Graduates by Gender in Canada and the Province of Ontario, 2007 – 2017<sup>1</sup>*

Year of Graduation	Canada		Ontario	
	Male (%)	Female (%)	Male (%)	Female (%)
2007	55.4	44.6	55.9	44.1
2012	54.2	45.8	54.0	46.0
2017	54.4	45.6	54.4	45.6
2019	53.4	46.5	53.2	46.6

*Note.* Statistics Canada. (2021). Table 37-10-0135-01, Post-secondary graduates, by field of study, International Standard Classification of Education, age group and gender.

Several studies have tracked the trajectory of Canadian PhD graduates (Porter et al., 2017; Reithmeier et al., 2019). Of the University of Toronto (U of T) graduates followed by Reithmeier et al. (2019) from 2000 to 2015, 49% were women. Among all graduates working in tenure-track positions, 46.2% were women and 53.8% were men. Women held 51.2% of teaching-stream positions (i.e., those with higher teaching loads and little or no research). That trend was stronger among those hired by the U of T from its own PhD programs: 57% of teaching-stream hires were women and 43% were men. An interesting, but smaller sample, University of British Columbia (UBC) study with a 56% response rate found that 22.4% of recent female, and 25.7% of recent male PhD graduates, were employed in tenure-track positions (Porter et al., 2017). The proportion of female to male recent PhD graduates employed in a teaching stream was roughly similar, at 9.7% and 8.2% respectively; men predominated in the research stream. The authors reported that 3.5 % of UBC's women graduates were employed as adjuncts, compared to 2.5 % of its men - numbers that might reflect the study's low response rate. They might also indicate, the authors note, participants' temporary unemployment or their situation between adjunct teaching appointments when the survey was administered.

Although women slightly outnumber men, both in Canada and worldwide, they are, thus, underrepresented among PhD recipients, and in tenured and research-stream positions, although the gap between the genders is not as large as it was prior to the 2000s.

### ***Adjunct PhD Instructors***

Critical reporting on contract faculty in American academia is plentiful and wide ranging. The American Association of University Professors 2020-21 Annual Report cites 2019 figures indicating that 63% of faculty members across the country's universities hold contingent (untentured/non-tenure-track) positions. At the community college level, that figure can be as high as 80% (Schlaerth, 2022). These positions remain both essential, thus valued, and contained within dehumanizing constraints, thus devalued (Sadlier, 2021). They are also dominated by women, indicating either systemic discrimination against veteran male adjuncts (Clingan, 2021) or that more women can, or feel they must, tolerate their working conditions and level of pay. Little has changed system-wide, despite decades of illumination, rational argument, and pressure. Henry Giroux's widely cited argument against the market-driven reforms of American higher education was published in 2002; the international 'Coalition of Contingent Academic Labor' and 'New Faculty Majority' were created in 1998 and 2009 respectively, to advocate for equity in adjunct working conditions (COCAL n.d.; NFM n.d.), and the first handbook for adjunct action came out in 2005 (Berry, 2005). As the resistance of institutions of higher learning to change entrenches, reformers have been issuing calls to action (Anthony et al., 2020; Schlaerth, 2022). In Canada, the literature is sparse; studies investigating adjuncts have been carried out in Alberta (Crossman, 2019), Ontario (Field et al., 2014), and Canada-wide (Foster & Birdsell Bauer, 2018).

### ***Working conditions***

It should be noted that both graduate students and PhD holders are employed as adjuncts, and that the literature reporting adjuncts' working conditions might not separate the two. The only Canada-wide study

of contract academic staff at the time of this writing was conducted for the Canadian Association of University Teachers in 2018 by Foster and Birdsell Bauer. Their 2,606 participants helped paint a picture that dispelled two myths about adjunct work (Foster & Birdsell Bauer, 2018):

The narrative around these gig or short-term contracts in post-secondary education (PSE) is that they serve both the institutions and the workers well. Like assumptions about Uber drivers, the story goes that contract academic staff (CAS) are just picking up extra income on the side while studying or working elsewhere. (p. 4)

The reality was quite different. Adjuncts experienced income insecurity, were unable to plan for their future, could not build relationships with students, for example, while supervising research projects, and could not put enough work into their own research projects (Foster & Birdsell Bauer, 2018). Crossman (2019) identified additional difficulties: limited advanced notice of course appointments; the unpredictable workload from one term to the next; having to work at multiple institutions or take on a non-academic job to survive financially; and exclusion from department committees, meetings, and events. In her review of the difficulties dealing with graduate plagiarism as an adjunct at an Albertan university, she also laid out the problems adjuncts had with such processes – opaque, weighty, time consuming, and stressful – in the absence of university support and guidance (Crossman, 2019).

### ***Mental Health***

The stress of adjunct life is, thus, compound and wide-ranging and begins with an intense quest for a full-time position. In the meantime, it accompanies the adjunct's temporary part-time positions, often at multiple institutions; the research they must actively be engaged in to be competitive; the grants for which they need to apply to support that research; and the writing and publishing of papers.

In the Ontario study, Field et al. (2014) reported adjunct professors to work 29.3 hours a week, compared to 35.6 for their full-time counterparts, but to earn less than half the salary and experience lower job satisfaction. With the extra service and research tasks they normally took on, the data revealed their work to be equivalent to a full-time job in other industries. Yet, data on their mental health is lost in larger studies of the practical hardships they face (e.g., Foster & Birdsell Bauer, 2018), and is left to non-academic reports to describe (e.g., Schein, 2019).

Mental health is almost certainly connected to the concept, explored by Kouritzin et al. (2020), of academic dignity: “feeling valued and supported and being democratized”; applicable to all academic staff including faculty, adjuncts, and research focused positions (p. 44). The application of marketized approaches to higher education administration makes this a particularly important indicator now.

### ***Physical Health***

Limited attention has also been paid to adjuncts' physical health. Much of that which has been published concerns their access to extended health coverage. In Ontario, for example, all citizens are covered by the Ontario Health Insurance Plan (OHIP); but OHIP fails to cover preventative health interventions such as dental, drug, and nonclinical procedures like physiotherapy. Foster and Birdsell Bauer (2018) found that most adjunct professors have no access to coverage over that provided by OHIP: 37% of adjunct contracts gave direct access to health benefits and 19% provided access to a health spending account; 63% had no health benefits and 69% had no dental coverage. If these benefits are needed to keep other faculty healthy, and on the job, then their absence can be argued to place adjuncts at risk of conditions that not only undermined their continued presence in the classroom but could result in their removal from the labour market altogether. Counterintuitively, especially given the interconnection of mental and physical health, the limited attention paid to adjuncts' mental health is the good news; an even greater gap exists for analysis of their physical health.

### ***Study Relevance***

While more Canadian women are completing doctoral degrees, female PhDs are still experiencing more challenges than men. And despite the attention paid by academic studies, non-academic studies, media, and social media to the impacts of underemployment on post-PhDs, to the challenges of adjunct work

and the search for tenure-track employment, analysis of the toll on health, and the gendered experience, remains concerningly incomplete. This is particularly true for Canadian adjuncts. The findings presented here go some way toward filling that gap.

## Methods

This study was conducted between 2017 and 2019. In their most general form the research questions were: (1) What are your working conditions? (2) How is underemployment impacting your career trajectory? And (3) How is underemployment affecting your physical and mental health?

To be included, participants were required to have a PhD, and to be a current adjunct instructor. Participants were recruited through listserv emails from university unions for adjunct contract faculty. I approached part-time academic unions across Ontario, requesting that they share the recruitment flyer with their members and these emails were frequently forwarded to recipients' contacts. I, thus, initially conducted convenience sampling and later used snowball sampling to increase participant numbers. Data were collected through in-depth interviews. Given the wide geographic distribution of participants across Ontario, interviews were in person where possible, and otherwise via video conferencing. Data saturation, the point at which no new themes emerged in the coding (Urquhart & Fernandez, 2013) and no new data were found to describe the coding categories (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), was reached at 26 participants.

Of these, 13 were male and 13, female. Gender equality was achieved by convenience sampling of those who responded to the recruitment notifications. Participants ranged in age from 32 to 70 and had received their PhDs between the ages of 29 and 58. They represented a range of ethnicities and races: 20 identified as Caucasian, two as mixed-race, one as Middle Eastern, one as South Asian, one as Indo-Caribbean, and one as Chinese. With respect to country of origin, 13 had immigrated to Canada and 13 were Canadian born.

Table 2 shows the remarkable range of their annual teaching income. The low end, \$0-8,999, would normally correlate to one course a year; those teaching at this level were recent graduates, recently in Canada, a recent mother, or disillusioned with the adjunct life. The mid-level incomes correlate to two to eight courses a year and so to more established adjuncts, each making their own complicated way forward, most with hopes of tenure. The highest level (over \$100,000) was an anomaly with circumstances and institutional relationships few could attain. The majority, 19 of 26 participants, were teaching one to four courses a year with a maximum income of just under \$35,000.

**Table 2**

*Participant Income from Adjunct Contracts by Gender*

Income (CDN\$)	Number of Participants	Male	Female
0 – 8,999	7	5	2
9,000 – 18,999	5	2	3
19,000 – 34,999	5	3	2
35,000 – 44,999	3	1	2
45,000 – 59,999	2	1	1
60,000 – 79,999	3	1	2
99,000 and over	1		1

Given the difficulty of supporting a household experienced by all participants in the first four income categories, ten participants indicated that they also worked at a side job (in retail, as restaurant waitstaff, as an elementary or high school substitute teacher, post-secondary administrator, editor, translator, or gig work musician). These jobs increased their take-home income by about \$5,000 to \$30,000.

Sixteen participants were married or in common-law relationships, nine were single, and one was divorced. Nine had children and one was a single parent. Participants obtained their PhDs in 19 disciplines from biology, management, and political science to drama.

Interviews lasted over an hour due to the depth of information that the participants chose to provide.

To develop these discussions, the 56 questions I asked were both closed- and open-ended. They pertained to: (1) working conditions and activities; (2) obligations and time use outside work; (3) the impact of underemployment on the participants' career trajectory, and mental and physical health; and (4) their suggestions for improving working conditions and providing career support for emerging scholars. All interviews were recorded and later transcribed.

I, then, conducted a thematic analysis of the collected data, identifying those that were common and recurring, and analyzed the results using a feminist political economy approach, sensitive to the roles of gender, class, power, and hierarchy, and emphasized by several feminist scholars (e.g., Pritlove et al., 2019 and Nelson, 2010). This approach allowed an analysis of the ways in which institutions, including the family, state, and market, "interact and balance power so that the work involved in the daily and generational production and maintenance of people is complete" (Bezanson & Luxton, 2006, p.3). It also, importantly, facilitated an assessment of the ways in which participants' experiences were influenced by the global pressures of late capitalism and their translation into conditions in universities across Ontario.

## Findings and Discussion

Analysis of interview data revealed five themes, all articulated to some degree in previous research, and present to various extents: (1) poor working conditions; (2) negative impacts of long-term underemployment on career trajectories; (3) negative health impacts; (4) exploitation under neoliberal policy; and (5) gender, childcare, and work-life balance issues. These are explored below.

### *Poor Working Conditions*

All study participants referenced challenges posed by their working conditions. These included a need for, and a lack of, guidance and mentorship from senior instructors or professors; lack of a physical office to meet with students; inability to access the resources needed to prepare classroom materials such as printers, paper, and markers; and lack of job security. Since job security is implicated in a number of issues, I'll address it in relation to the other challenges below.

A lack of support from senior colleagues was the most common problematic situation. Thirty-eight percent of participants (10 of 26: six men and four women) noted that they lacked support as they started to teach or attempted to grow their careers. One recent male graduate expressed his frustration with the lack of mentorship, and the fact that it could lead to mistakes on the job - "You need some guidance from senior ones or from supervisors. But typically, we don't have such support ... later, you ... try to figure [it] out all by yourself." The particular need at the beginning of one's teaching career was highlighted by another recent male graduate: "When it's your first time teaching a contract ... there's often a lack of communication about requirements." It is important to note that support can vary across institutions, within programs and departments, and according to administrator. Even before exploring the physical work resources, however, participants felt they lacked emotional backing.

A third of participants (nine of the 26: three men and six women) cited a lack of physical resources to prepare for their classes. Basic access to an office was paramount. None of the nine were allocated a separate office to prepare for classes or meet with students; four of these, all female, shared an office, one, with seven other adjuncts; five (three men and two women) said they had no office at all, or a cubicle "in the middle of everything" on campus. No office at all was a real issue. In the words of a long-term female adjunct, "We don't even have an office, we are treated like cattle, you know, to put it crudely. We just go in and come out, it's just sad." Another long-term female adjunct stated,

When you're a Sessional, you're an interloper . . . You don't ever really have the luxury of having your own office and, getting settled in and, having all of your things there and making a groovy environment. You're couch surfing all of the time.

Connections to, and support for, students often must take place beyond the classroom, yet interestingly here, more women mentioned the lack of access to an office for this role, not only to adequately teach but to feel a part of the department.

Other physical resources difficult to access ranged from printers and in-class materials, such as markers and large sheet paper, to computers. How courses can be taught without these was a puzzle

raised by several. One recent male graduate, for example said: “professional lecturers have access to an office, a computer ... material they can actually use to teach. I’ve had this ongoing issue at [at two institutions] with photocopying ... I can’t photocopy.”

While lack of mentorship and material support was a common talking point among both men and women, it tended to be the women who reflected on the symbolic implications of their working lives and the conditions associated with their physical space. Having access to physical resources enfold one into the community of departmental scholars, able to teach at their best, and offers membership and support, despite one’s status as a part-time employee.

## *Impacts of Long-Term Underemployment on Career Trajectory*

### ***Developing a Research Portfolio***

Long-term underemployment takes a significant toll on career trajectories in all industries. To find tenure-track appointments or even contract teaching, academics need to keep adding research projects to their portfolios. This can be a challenge without full-time affiliation. Four of the 26 participants (two men and two women) indicated that they were not actively involved in writing and research. Eighty-five percent were pushed to fulfill the academic credo, “publish or perish.” During the interviews, this was even reflected in their word choice. One female participant said, “It is crucial because if I want to be hired [for] a stable job I need to have an excellent dossier and we are assessed on the basis.” Another woman on moving ahead:

I feel that everything on my plate is probably my biggest priority and that’s just because of how academia has shaped itself to kind of tell us what’s the most important thing to do in our career moving forward into a full-time position.

The need to reach beyond their teaching contract and keep writing was clear: it had to be done, not only to maintain their current employment but to progress at all. However, institutional support for research and publishing was extremely difficult to get. Eighty-eight percent (all participants except three men) said they had no support at all in the form of grants, review of grant applications, advice on developing a research network, access to a lab, etc. One recent male graduate mourned his ability to remain current:

I have done some publications since I finished the PhD, but ... research is almost impossible because you don’t have institutional backing ... there’s no support, or no time given to do it then it’s impossible and what would I write? If I can’t do research I can’t write ... I lost my currency, I’ve lost doing what I love to do. I love research ... What they want to do is hire their 30% of tenure track and those are the people who will be the elites and do the research.

Another long-term male adjunct described the problem as bleakly: “My impression is that the sessionals come in to relieve the full-time faculty when they get the funding, and therefore you kind of take over their course loads while they do their research.”

The difficulty of grant access hinders many academics’ ability to carry out research programs, but it’s clear that adjuncts are in a particular bind. Institutional and government policies treating them as temporary employees can cite an inability to administer funds due to the chance that they will not be rehired. At the same time, institutions expect the courses they contract adjuncts to teach to be based upon the material they publish. In the words of a male participant, “if I don’t keep up with my research I will not even teach as a sessional.” The demands of teaching and difficulty getting financial support restrict an adjunct’s ability to publish, yet an inherent expectation exists that all academics will do just this.

This bind could be alleviated if the work contract of an adjunct included hours dedicated to research, writing, and grant development but it did not. The work itself is time-consuming and stressful, and particularly without compensation, can conflict with teaching demands. Two men and a woman cited these challenges; the woman, a recent graduate, said: “I think especially because I just finished my doctorate ... I feel like now I need to compete to have as many publications and conferences.”



The depth of the problem of building a research portfolio puts the career trajectory of contract faculty into a particularly fragile state. That this was acknowledged by more women than men might point to a gendered divide in research studies, publications, and grant allocation (e.g., van der Lee & Ellemers, 2015).

### ***Inability to Plan for the Future***

All participants were employed in some form of a temporary contract, from four months to a year. A four-month work schedule leaves one unable to plan for one's long- or even short-term future: vacation time, work goals, start of a family. This was brought up by all participants. One long-term male adjunct spoke about the stress tied to his inability to make even short-term plans:

It's just the lack of being able to make plans even two months in the future, and that also is a source of stress. I also think that's just in terms of ... family things ... I really don't know where I'm going to be.

A female adjunct with an international PhD voiced the same concern: "There's always like, uncertainty and not being able to make plans for the future with calm and with confidence ... I don't know if there will be new offers coming in." A man, a recent adjunct, brought up a similar point in connection with the need to keep up with new courses the department was offering:

I cannot count on that so it's that I need to study more materials to present a new course they offer. There is not a regular plan that I can count on that so all the time I should look for you know ... I cannot plan for [the] future so that's the main issue.

Another bind thus exists for contract faculty. Not only does the insecurity of contract continuation block the ability to plan a future but the need to keep up with departmental course offerings can result in a diversion of time use, from development, writing, and drafting of research projects to keep prospects open, to the development of new courses. Both genders were equally concerned about this but its combination with factors such as starting a family or raising children points to a harsher reality for many women.

### ***Health***

The majority of participants described periods of depression and loss of hope. Five (three men and two women), experienced this often; 13 (six men and seven women), sometimes, and six (four men and two women), rarely. Only two (a man and a woman) said that they never felt this way.

All five who often experienced loss of hope or depression linked this directly to their search for contract teaching positions, a tenure track job, or a position outside academia. Three (one man and two women) of the 13 who sometimes dealt with these states of mind also connected them directly to their job search. Competition is fierce: Acetol Reports tell us that some academic job postings receive 100 to 200+ applications. Many potentially strong academics never get to an interview. One woman noted: "I have so many conference presentations and publications in progress but getting published and getting an interview is impossible ... I am about ready to give up." Another, an adjunct at the university level with a partial teaching load at a college, said:

...I've had 5 years now where I'm on and off suicidal ... there are some days I'm so depressed I sit in a chair and I can do nothing ... I have lost whole days of sitting and doing nothing and it's worst at the end of August when I know I'm going back. And here's the awful thing, I love teaching. I love being in the classroom with students, and for whatever reason that I can't figure out, they love being with me. But I hate, hate the work situation. It's constant disrespect. Everything about it shows how much you're disrespected.

A long-term male adjunct, back from a full-time position in India, connected his mental health to a lack of departmental affiliation: "I do think it affects mental health, because of the frustrations on

non-engagement which they impose on us.”

Eleven sought help for their mental health struggles. Five men and five women reached out to a therapist or counsellor, and another woman, to her family doctor. A twelfth did not know where to turn to for support that was free. One of the five men, seeing a therapist, was now on antidepressants, but the cost of both was unsustainable, “I am on antidepressants . . . for a year I was able to have free counselling, but now I can’t . . . pay.” The woman who sought support from her family doctor said that these had been prescribed but she didn’t like the way they made her feel, so she stopped.

Despite the adjuncts’ need, and level of education, the precariousness of their work and inconsistencies in health benefits made access to mental health professionals for contract faculty surprisingly difficult. From a male participant “I actually wouldn’t know where to look for one. I know on-campus, there’s a lot of mental health there for students . . . I don’t think there is any – neither for sessional lecturers or faculty or other staff.” Although this was a problem for both genders, the overlapping impact of other issues made it a greater concern for many women.

### ***Feeling Less Than Full-Time Faculty***

The secluded nature of the academic “old [white] boys club” remains a particular problem for contract faculty who are frequently excluded from department meetings and the key decisions made within them, including those about course offerings. Sessionals often find out about these from students or postings online. When they are invited to join, they are often made aware of their peripheral status. Six (three men and three women) reflected on meetings and the committee work that could develop from them. One female adjunct, leaving the profession at the end of the term, said:

[What] makes us feel alienated, is that we don’t have these ways of connecting so if there would be some way to support . . . paying sessionals for some of these kinds of things, for meetings, for time on campus, to feel like they’re part of the fabric of the institution. . . . I became more jaded, that there was always a little note at the bottom of the meeting invitation, sessionals . . . it’s not a mandatory meeting.

Two of the six were unaware of the department meetings. One long-term male adjunct said, “We don’t get to attend any faculty meetings. We don’t even know when they occur or where they occur.” Inclusion in departmental functions is a key element of academic life and can foster an important sense of connection; that it wasn’t mentioned by 20 of 26 participants could mean that department meetings are a common part of the fabric of most adjuncts’ working life or that new adjuncts, and those teaching one or two courses, feel so distanced from the permanent faculty that they don’t see inclusion as possible.

Other forms of alienation from full departmental life can include research grant applications, conference funding, and ethics reviews. One woman, a long-term adjunct, in light of the fact that full- and part-time faculty can be indistinguishable with respect to education and career trajectory, commented that:

there is . . . that hierarchy in the university that treats obviously full-time professors in a more deferential way, and certainly they get all kinds of other benefits. They have a salary, they have funding for conferences and for other things that we don’t.

All participants acknowledged lack of research funding. If reference was made to funding, it was to small pools of money accessed under ‘professional development’. Just three male adjuncts indicated an awareness of that fund. One man spoke of his experience with the funds at two comparable and geographically close schools:

[At school A] you have a professional development fund which gives you about \$200 per course . . . you’re able to use that for conference travel costs or books. [School B] was much better . . . typically you got up to a \$2,000 travel grant per year and a Professional Development [Fund] which was twice as generous.

This support, normally intended for teaching advancement, gave no help to the original research that

adjuncts needed to be engaged in to drive their careers forward.

All study participants referred, directly or indirectly, to a feeling of disposability, a characteristic normally associated with just-in-time blue-collar contract work (Lewchuk et al., 2008). The solution suggested by one male participant was equity, precisely the aim of the New Faculty Majority (n.d.): “[Institutions] should increase the wages of the sessional instructors a great deal . . . They should lessen the gap between sessional payments and what a tenure track professor would get teaching the course.”

The discourse that contract faculty are less valuable than those hired full-time undermines attempts to move out of that position. It impacts both genders, but again, feeds into conditions that this data shows overall to be harder for women adjuncts to manage.

### **Stress**

The stress of contract, and other precarious, work has been well-documented (e.g., Lewchuck et al., 2008). It significantly impacts mental and physical health, which can be difficult to tease apart. All 26 participants spoke about the stress of their contract job, particularly its uncertainty. A female adjunct with an international PhD referred to its difference from that of other jobs:

I see friends who . . . are successful entrepreneurs and they also are in precarious labour, but they don't have the same amount of stress. They sell the labour but that is the profit from what they are creating.

A male adjunct with a recent PhD had a similar feeling about the stress of contract work: “It absolutely does. I think the job security part increases stress and anxiety about the future. I mean, I have to worry about money and worry about applying for jobs every two to four months.”

The knowledge that one's money runs out with the contract makes the job inherently stressful. Contract faculty also often teach more classes than do those working full-time, creating situations where multiple deadlines arise simultaneously. Eleven participants (seven women and five men) taught two to four courses a term, with multiple deadlines which could be different and overlapping. A long-term female adjunct noted that:

keeping on top of all the material for three different courses is tough going. The deadlines are very short. Got to keep a lot of things in my head at the same time. And then answering student e-mails . . . handling student expectations. . . I've had a few mental health issues with. . . to deal with students and they were very tough.

A less seasoned woman was very worried about departmental dynamics:

This is part of the challenge that I have been facing because, there was a time where I had an incredible number of sessions per year. Then, year-by-year, the availability to keep that number of sessions up there was very, very difficult. One of the ways in which departments can modify your access to employment is that they can decide to not offer your course again . . . any of your seniority or whatever you've been working on, now gets a disruption point. I had two years where I was teaching eight courses.

Dealing with the deadlines of new and familiar courses, and at the same time, with the uncertainty of their continuation, is a challenge for many contract faculty; in this study, more women expressed concern about its long-term financial repercussions and stress.

## ***Exploitation Under Neoliberal Policies***

### ***Financial Insecurity***

All participants were on some form of temporary teaching contract – for all but one, it was four-month. For the one, although it contained some uncertainty, could be a year – the majority contract teaching income was low. Seventeen or 65% of participants (ten men and seven women) had earned \$34,999 or less

the previous year; those earning more taught at the more established institutions and/or were able to teach more courses. The ten participants who raised their incomes with other work penalized themselves by reducing the time available for their research dossier. Eighty percent of participants commented, directly or indirectly, on the low level of their wages (21 in total: 13 women and eight men) and the impacts it had. One man compared his income and level of financial security to that of his wife, a tenure-track faculty member at one of the institutions where he was teaching part-time:

Low income... The amount of teaching that I do, it's throughout the year. It's pretty much equal to what my wife teaches but she receives almost three times more. For employers, it's a business decision: having a tenure-track faculty member teaching the same courses or hiring a bunch of part-time . . . to teach the same thing with one-third of the price.

Another participant, a woman said, "I am looking for additional income all the time. On top of that I am an over-the-phone interpreter, and that is very stressful. . . I wouldn't have any of those jobs if I could [choose]." And to find work, she feels she has to hide her educational credentials: "I've been doing other jobs but I got them because . . . [retail outlets], Statistics Canada, don't care who we are. They don't Google people. . . and that's why I got the jobs." I will address below the reasons why more women than men are acknowledging this struggle. Why highly skilled workers are struggling to this degree to find employment is an issue for those furthering the neoliberal project.

Seven participants (two men and five women) mentioned dependency on someone else, a husband or extended family. All were supported by their spouse's income but one woman, whose support came from her parents (her husband had just graduated and was waiting to start supply teaching in the fall). All acknowledged that someone in the household had to earn enough to support that household, which highlights the real difficulty of providing that support on contract. One woman, recently a limited term, said: "My husband has a good . . . job . . . I was not pressured to just go do any job to just pay the bills and I absolutely recognize this as privilege." While it has been acknowledged as a kind of joke that a successful male academic needs a wife, it seems that in this case, a husband and his income is needed to sustain an adjunct. Financial insecurity is a touchstone in respondents' comments, particularly with respect to women, reinforcing common knowledge that it is women PhDs who are more likely to get stuck in adjunct work.

## *Gender, Childcare and Work-Life Balance*

### ***Combining Contract Employment with Childcare***

Many studies point to the work-life balance issues faced by women (e.g., Leclerc, 2020; Nichols, 2019c) and it was only the women who spoke to me about the challenge of balancing childcare with contract work. These intersectional identities characterized just over half of the female adjuncts (two with adult children, five with young ones). Three of the five described the impacts of traditional role expectations on their work. Two mentioned the guilt felt by many working mothers. One, a recent graduate, laid out the dilemma:

It is disheartening because I try to volunteer... When I was on a field trip last week, I saw this other mom... She's like, "Oh, did you take the day off?" I'm like, "Yeah, today I took the day off." And she's like, "I'm a stay-at-home-mom." . . . there's so many parents and I feel like they can give their kids more than I can ... Between Monday and Friday, I'm so busy. And I'm just thinking, "Gosh, what a luxury."

Clearly, adding to the challenge of the adjunct experience are the strengths of traditional gender roles and the expense of having a family.

The cost of childcare is a significant issue here. Many campuses across the country offer daycare, but the monthly cost varies with the child's age and care requirements and ranges from \$300 to \$1500 (Canada's Higher Education & Career Guide, 2021). The high end is insupportable for many staff and most adjuncts. Outside Quebec, which has a program in place, Canada's universal childcare partnerships

aren't scheduled to offer positions until 2026 (Government of Canada, 2022) and as in Quebec, ability to cover the need will be an issue. In the meantime, childcare in the largest cities eats up most of a single course salary: Toronto at \$1,457 a month for a toddler in 2019; Vancouver at \$1,112; and Calgary at \$1,110 (Macdonald & Friendly, 2020). That a single course salary averages \$8,000 or \$1500 per month after taxes, puts full-time childcare out of reach for contract PhDs.

Three of the five women with young children spoke directly about financial insecurity. One recent graduate said, "People think, professor, you're on the sunshine list ... no and I have a lot of student debt ... Am I ever going to afford a house? I literally have to depend on my husband and I hate that...". Another with a newborn indicated: "I'm in a position where my family can help me out financially ... because we couldn't obviously have all these kids ... on \$30,000 a year." The expense of childcare combined with the instability of contract teaching puts many parents, mothers in particular, into situations of financial dependency.

### *The Gendered Experience of Research Portfolio Development*

The unpaid work needed to get noticed, hired, and rehired, for example, for institutional yearly reviews to maintain teaching contracts, is hardest on those earning the least, and harder still on those with children. "Publish or perish" was embraced by 11 of the 13 female participants, who were working actively on their research dossiers, including six of the seven mothers. A recent graduate explained the financial implications: "I need to compete to have as many publications and conferences under my belt just to be competitive ... I'm not being paid for all of this research."

Other unpaid tasks are necessary for applications for full-time positions: cover letter development; maintenance of an up-to-date CV; development of statements or dossiers regarding diversity, teaching, and research; preparation for interviews such as the job talk (or research presentation), teaching demos, and sometimes meetings with senior administration. All of these take a significant amount of time; some argue it is a full-time job. For parents, this must all occur while teaching courses, grading assignments, and caring for children. Of the five women with young children, a new mother with three other children attempted to resolve the dilemma this way:

I mean it was ...difficult..., but I made the decision to teach only one course so I can keep my research and writing going and also be available to my baby.

While her household finances took a hit, reduction of the paid workload didn't fully remove her academic stressors:

The day before I had my baby I received notification that I had an interview for a full-time position. . . and then I had a baby and then it was incredibly stressful. . . the first month of her being around I was trying to prepare for this interview. I was a mess physically, emotionally . . . just the thought of having to be away. It was extremely difficult and I'm breastfeeding and so I had to pump every hour and a half ... it was honestly the most stressful thing I've ever gone through. I did the interview and I managed to pull it off, but not to the best of my ability. Obviously I didn't get the job, and so that's been really, really difficult because the timing was just so terrible...

Most concerning was that the competitive market of job-searching academics didn't seem to allow her the option of delay. Enormous conflicts clearly characterize the period where academic, untenured, women start and raise families.

### *Final Considerations*

These findings reinforce those of other Canadian and American scholars of higher education that adjuncts in the academic world face a significant struggle. Brought on, often at the last minute, to fill teaching gaps or used to cut the costs of running departments in jeopardy of further trimming, they resolve the student-professor ratio as student numbers increase above that of tenure-track funding. Adjuncts are pushed to teach their courses well but must accept that these courses exist at the pleasure of the depart-

ment, that what they need to teach may not be provided by that department, and that the positions they fill will never become full-time.

What is new here is the translation of these difficulties into adjuncts' stress and mental health. The continual flux in their employment relationship and the sheer amount of work it takes, frequently with multiple employers, to maintain a household produces significant mental and physical stress. This stress is multiplied by everything involved in the search for full-time work and mount the next, ever-important research project; and for most, it is set against a backdrop of financial worry and an inability to plan. Few have access to the health care resources they need.

Most importantly, these findings place women adjuncts at the crossroads of professional and family/household demands, where gendered norms put them at a unique disadvantage. Spending more time than their male peers tending to the myriad needs of their children and on household maintenance, they struggle to find time to fulfill all their professional functions while maintaining some semblance of work-life balance, many in a state of financial precarity. If the situation of male adjuncts is, overall, unsustainable, that of women is more so.

### **Policy Recommendations**

Within the system of financial administration currently in place, which places cheap adjuncts at the heart of Canada's post-secondary economic metric, the supports these employees need to increase the system's viability are fivefold: (1) guidance in the form of mentorship; (2) institutional research funding; (3) longer contract duration; (4) extended health care benefits/resources; and (5) universal affordable childcare. The fifth, in Canada, is under development; the remainder are discussed below.

#### *Mentorship*

PhD programs are designed to create independent scholars, students who conduct original research leading to a written thesis; the process of mentorship and support, however, should not stop there. Much of the academic career that follows will be new, perhaps even the composition of journal articles. Given the pressures on adjuncts, a mentorship program is needed to support the furthering of all aspects of an academic career: teaching, research, and service. While teaching supports and workshop series are normally available for permanent teaching staff, more of these kinds of services need to be available to adjuncts.

#### *Institutional Support for Research*

In most cases, Canadian Federal Tri-Council funding, other funding bodies, and the ethics reviews that must be carried out for every study involving human participants, all require applicants to be full-time faculty members, post-doctoral, limited term, tenure-track or tenured. Even these funding options can be out of reach for many research grants, due to their processing and peer review timelines. Required here is a mechanism to open up the grant application and ethics board review processes to adjuncts whose need can be argued to be as great as that of tenure-stream/tenured faculty. This can be achieved by creation of a new federal entity or a federal mandate that institutions better support development of their adjuncts' research portfolios. This support needs to cover how-tos for grant application, composition for specific publications, and the kind of in-house peer review process normally in place for full-time members.

#### *Longer Contract Duration*

Surviving contract to contract when their duration is four months is clearly no way to live, plan a future, a marriage, a family, or purchase of a house – let alone a vacation to unwind. Institutions begin to choose the courses they'll offer each winter or early spring. At that point, they'll have an understanding of the number and type they need to fill; offering a bundle of courses to adjuncts for the academic year would lengthen contract duration. While the need will always be there to fill courses at the last minute, the mandated bundling of most will substantially improve adjuncts' stability.

#### *Health Benefits and Resources*

Health incidents and concerns don't always coincide with a four-month contract; there is, currently, no remedy for reoccurring issues or support required during non-contract periods like the summer months

when more adjuncts are unemployed. Affordable health care benefits need to be detached from contracts and made available to all adjuncts through institutions themselves or via province-wide plans covering cases where multiple institutions are involved. Other resources such as mental health care, on campus or online, need to be permanently available to adjuncts.

Integrating childrearing, global medical coverage, reasonable contract duration and supportive oversight into what has become an increasingly quantified and competitive academic management regime would make a great deal of difference to the lives of adjuncts and their families. It doesn't, however, touch the systemic problem evident two and a half decades ago (Nelson, 1997, as cited in Giroux, 2002):

The real issue here is that such conditions are exploitative and that the solutions to fixing the problem lie not simply in hiring more full-time faculty, but, as Cary Nelson points out, in reforming 'the entire complex of economic, social and political forces operating on higher education.' (p. 443)

A good start would be attention to the effects of academia's cost-cutting mandate on those who make it possible, the underpaid and undervalued staff and the contract employees.

### Research Needed

This study has demonstrated the lack of academic attention in the literature, and administrative attention on the ground, to a growing demographic of academic workers. Both are needed to better support these workers, particularly in light of the ubiquity of neoliberal policy used in the administration of post-secondary education and its consequent marketization. Research is needed in areas including: (1) support that recent PhD holders receive post-graduation, including that which is formal, from their institution, and informal, from their supervisor or mentor; (2) reasons and details for the exodus of up-and-coming experts from academic contract work to industry, and administrative positions at universities and colleges; (3) quantitative studies on the nature of stress and depression among "freeway fliers"; and (4) the job search experience of current tenure-track hires as well as their previous experience in postdoctoral or adjunct positions. These are just a few of the areas that need significant and ongoing analysis.

### Conclusions

This study details the experience of 26 adjuncts, ranging in age from 32 to 70, teaching in 19 disciplines at approximately 10 Ontario institutions. The courses for all, but one, were limited to four-month contracts; in the previous year, seven had a single course, five had two, and 21 had three to eight. Each had a unique and complex life within which working as an adjunct played a position, but a number of difficulties united them. No one was happy with the conditions under which their universities expected them to work; 80% mentioned the low level of their wage. All but four were actively involved in research, for which 88% had no institutional support, and everyone mentioned the difficulty of research funding.

All but two (92%) experienced depression and loss of hope: five often, 13 sometimes, and 6 rarely. Just under a third, including all five who often felt depressed, connected these states directly to their job. Everyone felt the stress of job uncertainty, and everyone felt, to some degree, disposable. Because in most households they still do the lion's share of housekeeping and childcare, these conditions fell hardest on women.

No one would put up with this who did not savor their contact with students and hope for something better. Most were working energetically toward it. But, to achieve "academic dignity" (Kouritzin et al., 2020), they not only need more light cast on their situation, they need administrative policy that takes their sustainability seriously.

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