

Contingent Academic Work in the Canadian Context

Vicky Smallman, Organizing and Collective Bargaining officer
Canadian Association of University Teachers

Over the last two decades, Canadian universities have become increasingly reliant on contingent appointments. As university budgets remain stagnant while enrollment increases and tenured faculty retire, administrators are anxious to find ways to do more with less, and fixed-term appointments (whether per-course, part-time or full-time) fit the bill nicely.

Of course, contract teaching is nothing new - but itinerant academics no longer fill short-term needs, filling the gaps left by faculty on leaves or providing specialised expertise. Now a significant proportion of undergraduate teaching is performed by academic staff on short-term contracts. Although many of these individuals consider themselves career academics, they have little institutional support for research and professional development, no job security and limited teaching resources. The universities rely on their work, but contract academic workers often feel invisible on campus - and their employers like to keep it that way.

Contingent Academe in Canada

Unfortunately, there are no reliable statistics on the extent of casualization in Canadian universities. Anecdotal data indicates that Canada is in slightly better shape than the US, but not much better.

We do have some data from faculty associations, who have negotiated good information clauses which require the employer to report the number of courses taught by each category of academic staff. At Western, for example, only 51.4% of undergraduate courses in 2000-2001 were taught by tenured and tenure-track faculty. 25% were taught by part-time members of the University of Western Ontario Faculty Association, 12.9% by other members (i.e. limited-term appointments) and 10% by people teaching less than 1 full course equivalent.

Carleton also makes data about teaching available. Over the last four years the amount of teaching by academic staff in the professorial ranks has decreased (especially in level 1 courses, where they only teach 39.6% of the sections), while the “other” ranks (non-tenurable and frequently contingent) have increased. Sessional (or per-course) teaching rose from 20.5% in 1998/99 to 24.5% in 2000/1 and then dipped down to 21.5% in 2001/02. This may reflect a shift in employment patterns - the growth now is not necessarily in per-course appointments, but in full-time teaching-only or limited term contracts.

Who are contract academic staff?

Discourse on casualization in academe is often limited to discussing the plight of people who are hired on a per-course basis (often called “adjuncts”, “sessionals” or “part-timers”). But there are many different kinds of contingent appointments in Canadian universities: contracts for one or more courses, “rolling” contracts to teach a certain number of courses each year for a certain number of years, part-time contracts, full-time limited-term contracts, teaching-only contracts,

research or librarian contracts, appointments contingent on “soft money”, hourly work teaching ESL, music, or studio courses, clinical instructors in nursing or similar programs, and so on...

Within each category are an equally diverse range of individuals, with different circumstances, levels of education and experience, career aspirations, family status, additional employment, and so on. It's impossible to generalize about contingent academic staff, and quite difficult for bargaining agents to develop good language to protect everyone's interests and improve their situations. For every sessional instructor who wants a shot at a tenure-track appointment, there's at least one who's happy teaching on contract, or who is afraid that a move to convert sessional positions to tenure-track means they would lose their job.

Addressing Professional Marginalization

Contract Academic Staff experience marginalization in many ways - some overt, some more subtle.

Low Wages, Lack of Benefits

Even in unionized workplaces, wages are low when compared with per-course wages for full-time faculty. Salaries range from around six thousand to just over eleven thousand for a full-year (two semester) course - depending on whether the employees are unionized or not, how long they've been unionized, and where they are geographically. The excuse for this lack of equity is that full-time faculty are expected to do research and provide service to the university community through committee work. However, even if you removed the portion of non-teaching work from faculty salaries and broke the remaining amount down by course, most per-course contract academic staff stipends still fall short.

In 1999 the Institut de la statistique du Québec published a study on the remuneration of part-time lecturers at the Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières, following a joint request by the administration and the part-time union. The study revealed a significant salary gap between full and part-time faculty at the university - affirming what the contingent academic labour movement in Quebec had always claimed. In a comparison of salaries at different points on the full-time salary scale with part-time stipends, discrepancies ranged from 29.2% to 102.4%, depending on the step. According to the ISQ, “the salary gaps ... with regard to teaching do not seem to result from a difference in duties or from distinct qualification requirements”.

An individual trying to make a living teaching on contract would have to teach much more than the average course load for a full-time faculty member to make an equivalent yearly income. Because many collective agreements have negotiated limits on the number of courses a member can teach each year, she or he may also have to teach at several different campuses - become the stereotypical “freeway flier” or “road scholar”.

There are profound differences between tenurable and contract appointments in other forms of compensation. Like many contingent employees, contract academic staff are rarely eligible for pension plans - a serious concern for a whole generation of workers who have been surviving on contingent appointments.

Few contract academic staff have access to maternity/parental benefits. Many find it difficult to qualify for Employment Insurance during their leave, and even if they do, employer top-ups are rarely negotiated. Most agreements simply refer to the basic minimum leave workers are entitled to according to that province's employment standards act. There is also a more subtle dynamic discouraging women from taking time away from teaching to have a baby - a fear that if they turn down an opportunity for a contract, they may never get asked again.

Canada's public health care system makes health insurance less of an issue for Canadian workers, so benefits negotiations tend to focus on extended health care, drug coverage, vision care and dental benefits. These are difficult to negotiate, and often contract faculty have to settle for payment in lieu of benefits - usually around 3%, although recently the University of Prince Edward Island Faculty Association won 6% in lieu of benefits.

Support and Resources

Most students would find it difficult to distinguish between contract academic staff and tenure-stream faculty...yet they have vastly different working conditions. Many things regular faculty take for granted - access to office space, a telephone, mailbox, library privileges, email, photocopying, computers - are not necessarily available to contract academic staff.

Most contract academic staff have library privileges, but only for the duration of their contract. While it may seem logical that a person expected to start classes with a plan in hand should be able to access the resources they need to prepare, universities can be remarkably unwilling to allow contract academic staff to retain their library privileges between contracts. In fact, universities are reluctant to grant anything that would imply that these teachers are actually part of the university community or that they might expect to be rehired if their course is offered again: extended library privileges, email accounts, mailboxes, names included in department listings. Faculty Associations have made a lot of progress in this area, but not without a fight.

While they provide a substantial proportion of the undergraduate teaching, contingent faculty are often excluded from departmental committees, including committees that set curriculum priorities. Access to governance (and compensation for that work) is often a high priority for contract academic staff in bargaining. Faculty unions have had some success in getting access to governance - voting rights in departments, representation on governing bodies, participation in most committees (hiring committees seem to be the most elusive). Quebec unions have led the way in negotiating compensation for university service work. Some have negotiated large pools of money that are distributed to contract faculty who serve on committees and other governance bodies. The amount is proportionate to the amount of work expected. So the president of the union might receive the equivalent of a course stipend (or more), while someone sitting on a task force or a departmental committee might only receive a small portion of funds.

Although their contracts are most often limited to teaching only, many per-course contract academic staff conduct research, despite the lack of institutional support for their work. There has been some progress in negotiating support, especially for conference travel and small professional development allowances. Some associations have negotiated sabbaticals for long-term contract academic staff, and leave to complete degrees is now a fairly common collective agreement clause. So far employers seem to be willing to grudgingly acknowledge that contract

academic staff do some research (on a voluntary basis, they claim) and to provide token amounts of support, but are resistant to recognizing it in the collective agreement as part of the duties of a per-course appointment.

State of contingent faculty organizing in Canada

Canadian Association of University Teachers

The Canadian Association of University Teachers (CAUT) represents over 35,000 academic staff at Canadian post-secondary institutions. Most of the faculty associations and unions affiliated with CAUT are certified bargaining agents (there are a handful of notable exceptions, but even those engage in collective bargaining with their employers), and many represent not only full-time and contingent faculty, but also librarians and other academic staff, such as counsellors, athletics coaches, laboratory instructors, and so on. One faculty association, at Bishop's University, recently certified a new unit of non-academic staff, and now represent all workers on campus - from maintenance to administrative staff to academics.

Canadian universities and colleges are funded by provincial governments, so certified faculty associations are protected by provincial labour legislation. There are two exceptions: the Canadian Military College, a federal institution, where faculty negotiate with the Treasury Board just like other public servants, and are covered by the Canada Labour Code; and universities in Alberta, where academic labour relations are governed by the Universities Act (they bargain collectively with the university, but in a different legal context). CAUT also has members in the college system in British Columbia, who are represented by the College Institute Educators' Association of BC.

Canadian faculty began to unionize in the mid-1970s. Most faculty bargaining units include full-time contract academic staff and non-tenure-track appointments. A few faculty associations brought in per-course contract academic staff when they first unionized, or added them later by amending their certificates or adding separate bargaining units. Lately, faculty associations have been on an aggressive campaign to organize the unorganized, resulting in over a dozen successful card-signing drives in the last 4 years. New bargaining units (and in a couple of cases, new faculty unions) are at UBC, Bishop's, Wilfrid Laurier, Nipissing, UPEI, Acadia, Queen's, Augustana, Algoma and Sudbury. Moncton and Mount Allison are still before the New Brunswick Labour Board. Overall, CAUT affiliates represent per-course contract academic staff at 24 institutions, plus the community college system in BC.

The Quebec Context

Full-time faculty (whether tenure-stream or contract) working in francophone universities in Quebec have independent unions which are affiliated with the Fédération québécoise des professeures et professeurs d'université (FQPPU). Per-course contract faculty, excluded from faculty bargaining units, began organizing their own unions in the 1970s. Most unions of chargées et chargés de cours are affiliated with the Fédération nationale des enseignantes et des enseignants du Québec (FNEEQ-CSN), part of a large public sector union, the Confédération des syndicats nationaux, although there are a couple of locals at Quebec francophone universities affiliated with other unions.

Although each of Quebec's contingent faculty unions has their own collective agreement, they try to coordinate their bargaining wherever possible. FNEEQ's university division meets regularly to develop joint strategies. They also have an inter-union coalition in Quebec, which allows for some coordination between FNEEQ-CSN, the Canadian Union of Public Employees local at Trois-Rivières and the independent Concordia University Part-time Faculty Union.

Canadian Union of Public Employees

The Canadian Union of Educational Workers (CUEW), a national union of graduate student teaching assistants and part-time faculty, organized quite a few campuses in the 80s and early 90s before merging with the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE) in 1993. CUPE is Canada's largest union, representing more than half a million workers in health care, education, municipalities, libraries, universities, social services, public utilities, transportation, emergency services and airlines. Before the merger with CUEW, CUPE represented per-course faculty at Carleton, Saskatchewan and Trois Rivières. Now they have contingent faculty members at 15 campuses. CUPE also represent many non-academic university workers - although the locals representing administrative, technical, maintenance or food service workers are separate from the contract faculty locals, many work together at the local level. CUPE's Ontario division has a University Workers Coordinating Committee to help promote coordination locally and provincially.

Independent Unions

There are three independently-organized unions for contingent faculty: Simon Fraser's Teaching Support Staff Unit (which also represents teaching assistants, tutor markers and language instructors), the Concordia University Part-time Faculty Association (CUPFA) and the Association of Part-time Professors at the University of Ottawa (APTPUO).

Conclusion

The good news is that as contract academic staff organize, they are taking on these issues aggressively, making access to a career path their biggest priority. And tenure-stream faculty have finally recognized the dangers of casualisation on their own workload, their strength at the negotiating table and the future of the tenure system. Faculty associations are making career path language a priority in bargaining, and are making progress in tying per-course rates to percentages of full-time salaries. We are still a long way from a full pro-rata approach, but we are making progress..

Unfortunately, as contract academic staff issues are pursued with greater vigour, employers are responding with considerable vehemence. Claiming a need for "flexibility", some employers' starting proposals include the elimination of all previously-negotiated posting, hiring and job security language. This kind of division makes it extremely difficult to make any meaningful progress in negotiations. Western made some progress, winning right of first refusal and multi-year contracts. But it was a struggle. Employers also do their best to capitalize on divisions between full and part-time faculty, refusing to negotiate improvements for part-timers while offering improvements to full-time terms and conditions, for example. It is important for faculty associations to resist these kinds of tactics.