

Ontario's Contract Faculty Problem

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Ontario's universities suffer from a problem. In recent years, many of our public universities—all of which are research institutions—have started to rely heavily on contract faculty. These faculty members are employed on a limited basis with worse pay, fewer benefits, and less job security than their tenure-track and tenured colleagues. This increasing reliance on sessional instructors is *the contract faculty problem*.

According to one recent estimate, more than half of all undergraduate students in Ontario are taught by contract faculty. This is not a surprising result. After all, undergraduate enrolment has grown by 68 percent since 2000, but our province has the lowest per-student funding in the country. When universities have more students to accommodate than ever before and little money with which to do it, turning to cheap labour to minimize costs is natural.

So, what's the problem? When universities depend significantly on contract workers, they are acting in tension with a self-proclaimed institutional aim: teaching excellence. For example, our universities aspire to “creativity, innovation, and excellence” in teaching, and also “fostering an academic community in which the learning...of every member may flourish.” The problem is that these aims are less attainable when a great deal of teaching is carried out by faculty who don't have the resources or institutional support to excel as instructors. Contract faculty often end up having to take on more courses than their peers, and their contact hours for students are limited due to the nature of their contracts. Is this really what innovation in teaching looks like?

The ethical dimension of the contract faculty problem is equally worrying. These instructors have employment conditions that are characterized by low salaries, few benefits, and massive job insecurity. A contract instructor who teaches four courses during the academic year—which is not an unusual teaching load—is estimated to make about \$30,000. Compare this salary to their tenure-track and tenured colleagues who are bound to make upward of \$80,000. However, even this side-by-side annual comparison is too generous. After all, whereas many faculty members have job security, contract faculty don't know where they will be from one year to the next. These conditions aren't exactly conducive to a stable livelihood.

Luckily, there are potential solutions to the contract faculty problem. For instance, some universities have introduced so-called “teaching-stream faculty”—faculty whose primary academic duty is teaching. Instead of following the traditional model according to which research, teaching, and service is to be done in a 40:40:20 proportion, respectively, these teaching-focused academics have nowhere near the same research obligations. U of T has already introduced such faculty. If our institutions begin to consistently use teaching-stream faculty in lieu of contract staff, and the employment conditions for such positions are respectable, we're moving in the right direction.

A bolder proposal is legislation. Since each province has power over education, the Ministry of Advanced Education and Skills Development could adopt legislation that imposes restrictions on the use of contract faculty. For instance, the government could put limits on the percentage of contract faculty that may be on teaching rosters. They could also limit the percentage of courses that may be taught by contract faculty. This proposal has strengths, but it could also create problems if poorly executed. If schools face serious constraints on how to fill out their teaching rosters, then institutions

striving to be competitive in the international labour market may suffer. Policy-makers must keep this sort of consideration in mind.

We have a bad news-good news situation. The bad news is that the contract faculty problem is genuine. The good news is that there are potential solutions on the table, and the problem continues to receive more attention. In recent years, the Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations (OCUFA) has served as an advocate for contract faculty. Just this past winter, they hosted a conference “Confronting Precarious Academic Work” which dealt with various issues pertaining to sessional instructors. Sure, change doesn’t take place over night, but this is nothing new. Like most social issues, change can occur only if the problem is on the public agenda. Now that it is, we need to discuss adequate solutions. It is time for universities to take teaching seriously again.