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EXPLORING HOW CASUALIZATION COMPLICATES CANADIAN ACADEMICS' INFORMATION PRACTICES (Paper)

Abstract or Résumé:

An increasing number of academics working in higher education in Canada work on short-term contracts. The casualization of university work and the insecure nature of these contracts increases the difficulty that contract academic staff (CAS) experience, including often not receiving the information they need to carry out their work. While research around CAS has identified areas of challenge, there is a lack of research examining the information practices and environments of Canadian CAS. This paper reports on the findings from in-depth, semi-structured interviews carried out with CAS, focusing on their information experiences and how precarious employment and ongoing uncertainty influences their information seeking, sharing, creating, and use.

1. Introduction

A significant number of those working in higher education in Canada – roughly one third (CAUT, 2019) – work on limited contracts. While they make vital contributions to teaching and research, many contract academic staff (CAS) (also referred to as adjunct faculty, contingent faculty, sessionals, etc.) deal with challenging and increasingly precarious working conditions. Because of their insecure status, they are frequently marginalized within universities (e.g., Lopes & Dewan, 2014), often not included in meetings, not on email lists, and hired last minute. This exclusion can lead to a deficit in workplace information required to carry out day-to-day activities and advance in their careers (Dolan, 2011; Kezar, 2013; Willson, 2016). Academic work is information-intensive, requiring specialised content and procedural knowledge. When academic work takes place in a precarious context, this can leave CAS feeling insecure, undervalued, undercompensated, and unable to work to their full capacity (e.g., Birdsell Bauer,

2018; Brady & Briody, 2016; Foster & Birdsell Bauer, 2018, Jolley et al., 2013). However, there remains relatively little empirical research into the lived experiences of contract academic staff.

2. Background

As part of a larger study looking at casualization in academia, a scoping review was carried out for empirical research into the experiences of contract academic staff from 2000-present. From that review, sixty-six studies from six countries were selected and analysed (Willson et al., 2022). However, only eight of these were focused on CAS experiences at Canadian universities. This section will review some of the findings from the literature in the scoping review, highlighting findings from the Canadian studies.

Experiences presented in the literature suggest an ongoing clash between the ideals, expectations, and hopes associated with academic work and the lived realities of CAS (e.g., Spina et al., 2022). In the Canadian context, experiences of CAS are seen as discouraging many academic workers from continuing to work toward dreams of full-time employment and stability (Foster & Birdsell Bauer, 2018). Yet, many CAS spend years in their positions (Acker & Hague, 2017), furthering the myth that such work serves merely as a stepping-stone to secure, full-time work (Foster, 2016) – an ideal which may most greatly benefit university administrators. Long-held desires to be good teachers and scholars, along with passion for their areas of expertise, may also conflict with the weight placed by administrators on publication numbers and grant dollars (both of which are challenging to achieve for CAS) and may further entrench CAS in positions of precarity (Langan & Morton, 2009). Expectations for professional development and academic growth (as skilled professionals) have also been suggested as conflicting with the devalued, gendered perceptions of their precarious work as educators (Birdsell Bauer, 2018).

Precarity is discussed in the literature as something that is differentially and intersectionally (Crenshaw, 1989) experienced, involving class, gender, race, and ability. In Canada, there is a higher percentage of women working on precarious contracts in academia (Vander Kloet et al., 2017). As part of these varied experiences, Vander Kloet and colleagues (2017) discuss the degrees of contingency CAS may face, noting that some may be better positioned to face one or all “three conditions of contingency - institutional knowledge, role and status; isolation and invisibility; and precarity” (p. 11-12). Personal and professional contexts matter to the lived experiences of CAS, with implications for their information practices.

As ‘outsiders’ within their institutional spaces, the challenges and needs of CAS are concealed and often unaddressed (Harris et al., 2022). In the Canadian context it has been noted that interactions, communication, and flows of information between institutions, more securely employed academics, and other CAS are disrupted by their isolation and invisibility (Vander Kloet et al., 2017), leading to further othering and marginalization. With little preparation for career transitions in doctoral programs for academics, successfully navigating the start of an academic career has been suggested as requiring “hidden information” (Acker & Hague, 2017, p. 107), not available through formal channels and necessitating strong mentorship and supervision. However, many studies reference the negative effects of precarious academic employment on

informal communication channels, intradepartmental collaborations, and access to professional development opportunities (e.g., Vander Kloet et al., 2017).

While research around CAS in the Canadian context has acknowledged impacts of these precarious employment situations on the transfer of information and knowledge to university students (e.g., Foster, 2016), no research has fully examined the information practices and environments of CAS themselves. In addition, little research has addressed CAS information needs, access, seeking, or use directly, particularly in the Canadian higher education context. There remains much that we do not know about the information practices of contract academic staff.

3. Research Aims and Questions

The research centres on contract academic staff in Canada, particularly focusing on their information experiences (their engagement with complex information and the meaning they derive from everyday life), the nature of workplace information they need, and how casualization – and the marginalization that many experience – influences how workplace information is found, shared, created, and used.

To do this, the study addresses these research questions:

1. How do CAS negotiate their information environment(s) in order to situate themselves in their a) workplaces? b) career trajectories? and c) personal life context(s)?
2. How does perceived career instability and marginalization influence the information practices of CAS?
3. What practical strategies could better support CAS' workplace information practices?

4. Theoretical Framework

The research uses the Expanded Everyday Information Practices (E-EIP) model (Savolainen, 1995, 2008; Savolainen & Thomson, 2022) to study information practices. Built on a social phenomenological approach, E-EIP examines everyday information practices, including how individuals seek, use, share, and create day-to-day information, within their unique contexts and information environments, including attention to social rules and values, goals, and interests. The actions and projects people undertake are influenced by contextual factors and understood in the context of an individual's "life-world" (Chatman, 1996), their perceived reality, and "transindividual (social, cultural and economic) factors shaping context for intersubjective action" (Savolainen, 2008, p. 65). While E-EIP provides a theoretical framework to look at information practices, information marginalization will help to frame the exploration of the context in which CAS interact with workplace information. Information marginalization is "the systematic, interactive socio-technical processes that can push and hold certain groups of people at social 'margins,' where their needs are persistently ignored or overlooked" (Gibson & Martin, 2019, p. 476). Building on Chatman's (1996) work on information poverty, information marginalization focuses on the structures that create a lack of access to information, rather than the behaviours of the individual experiencing that lack, including the factors leading to

marginalization and the resulting information practices, such as persistent questioning and building strategic professional relationships (Gibson & Martin, 2019, p. 480).

5. Methods

In-depth, semi-structured online interviews of approximately one hour in length were conducted with 34 contract academic staff (CAS). Participants came from a number of universities across eight provinces and had varied disciplinary backgrounds from the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences. Participants ranged in years of experience (from one participant's first semester teaching to over 25 years) and length of contract, though the majority had contracts of less than a year.

The interviews explored how employment precarity influences: 1) institutional provisions of information, support, and communication; 2) information practices used in the workplace; 3) facilitators and barriers to workplace information (including issues related to COVID-19); 4) the implications barriers have for professional – and personal – lives; and 5) ways to overcome barriers. Particular attention was paid to issues of marginalization and social inclusion, as well as their influence on obtaining workplace information. Participants, recruited via listservs and snowball techniques, were also asked about the workplace information and supports they require and the information practices they employ.

The interview transcripts were analysed using qualitative content analysis (QCA), which categorises data into patterns, conceptual categories, and themes to derive meaning from and relationships between data (Julien, 2008). This method is useful for identifying conscious and unconscious messages (Julien, 2008), which is beneficial when asking participants about information – a topic little thought of outside of information science. Constant comparison – which iteratively compares data, codes, categories, etc. – was also used to ensure that the analysis was grounded in the data and that the analytical process was trustworthy and credible.

6. Findings

This paper outlines preliminary findings from the interviews addressing the lived experiences of contract academic staff in Canada, including giving voice to their experiences in the workplace and the ways these experiences also affect them personally. The paper focuses on the information experiences of CAS and how employment precarity influences their information seeking, sharing, creating, and use, and how CAS deal with ongoing uncertainty. Attention is paid to the role information environments play in information experiences and practices (particularly marginalization experienced), providing insight into how information work is accomplished within higher education. This research contributes to understandings of precarity and uncertainty as they relate to information practices and helps fill a gap concerning experiences of CAS in Canada, particularly pertinent as universities continue to adjust to implications of the pandemic. Practical strategies that universities may be able to adopt to better support the information work of CAS will also be discussed.

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