



How can we, as higher education professionals, address these new technological, cultural and relational challenges in a way that allows us to meet the growing demand for new and diverse education formulas without relinquishing our academic heritage? All of these are questions we need to reflect on and try to answer. ■



Precarity

An international overview



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The Quebec higher education system is made up of different ranks of teaching personnel: professors, course lecturers, tutors, language teachers, part-time teachers, instructors, teaching assistants, post-doctoral students, etc. The rights of these employees are laid out in collective agreements that set the parameters of their job assignments and afford them a certain protection from contract violations by their employers. The most precarious of these university teaching positions are the course lecturers, tutors and other contract teachers, who find themselves condemned to the uncertainty of variable contract work. So how does this compare to what's going on in other countries?



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In France, the system is equally complex, with professors, lecturers, teacher-researchers and contract teachers composing the university teaching body. The most vulnerable to employment precarity are the contract teachers hired directly by the universities for short-term contract cycles that can go on for years. According to the unions, these employees number in the thousands, whereas the French Ministry of Higher Education puts their number at closer to a few hundred.¹

In the United States, figures compiled by the National Center for Education Statistics in 2011 indicate that a third of all teachers in the country's university colleges and universities are contract workers, a proportion some observers say is probably about the same in Canada.»²

1 LE MONDE 05.10.2009 http://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2009/10/05/les-soutiers-de-l-universite_1249443_3224.html.

2 Moira MacDonald, January 9, 2013. Sessionals, up close. University Affairs <http://www.universityaffairs.ca/sessionals-up-close.aspx>.



Information from the American Federation of Teachers paints a very different picture: it pegs the number of contract teachers in the U.S. higher education system at 1,212,257, representing a full 73% of the country's postsecondary instructional workforce.³

According to the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) 2012-2013 annual report, the number of part-time teachers in the United States more than tripled between 1975 and 2011. And in Australia, in 2008, only 28% of doctoral graduates were able to secure a permanent teaching position.⁴

India requires that candidates for university lectureship pass a national eligibility test before they can qualify for a position. In 2012, this process came under fire when it was revealed that the qualification requirements had been modified after their publication.⁵ The modifications were subsequently struck down by the Supreme Court of Kerala later that year.⁶

Although the work assignments of these invisible and unrecognized employees of the higher education system vary according to job status, all of these individuals engage in teaching. Despite all of their skills and professionalism, the difficult working conditions they face can have an impact on the quality of teaching. Not only is it difficult to plan and manage classes at the last minute, but constant effort is required, as well, to keep up with the rapid advances in fields like science. These contract teachers are also confronted with the growing demand for student support and guidance: the rise in the number of students with learning difficulties in universities has given rise to an increase in the need for support, which means part-time teachers are often forced to be available at all times to deal with email exchanges, and so on. In short, their working conditions become governed by the learning conditions of students.

The extremely precarious working conditions of lecturers in South Korea were the cause of at least one suicide in 2010⁷ and a total of eight since 1989. Yet the Coalition of Contingent Academic Labor (COCAL) reports that South Korea's Sung Kyun Kwan University still intends to replace all of its tenured teaching staff with contingent faculty by the year 2020.⁸

The internationalization of teaching and the advent of distance learning on a multitude of platforms are contributing to even greater precarity among higher education contract teachers. The splitting of the teaching role and the increase in the number of players (course authors, project heads, academic designers, technology specialists, and so on)⁹ are causing numerous impacts and adding to the plethora of contingent job statuses.

At the EDUCA Fair held in Helsinki from January 23-25, 2014, the Opetusalan Ammattijärjestö (OAJ)—a national affiliate of Education International—reaffirmed that “Strong education unions are crucial to ensure a good status for teachers and to provide quality education for all.”¹⁰

While a good many States are paying lip service to the importance of quality education, few seem inclined to recognize the ones who, at the very base of it all, are making that quality possible. So when will course lecturers get the international recognition they deserve? ■

3 <http://www.aft.org/yourwork/highered/academicstaffing/index.cfm>.

4 <http://lamaracuya.tumblr.com/post/71073631249/the-trend-toward-employing-part-time-contingent>.

5 <http://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Thiruvananthapuram/ugc-net-results-leave-students-an-angry-lot/article3917202.ece>.

6 <http://www.newindianexpress.com/states/kerala/article1383563.ece#UvkHAM-x7IV>.

7 http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/nation/2010/05/117_66639.html.

8 http://cocalinternational.org/report_shanks.html.

9 Note the absence of the term “teacher”...

10 Finland: Commitment to education and teachers vital (January 31, 2014)
http://www.ei-ie.org/en/news/news_details/2852.