



The precarity of university contract teachers

The phenomenon of labour market flexibilization has been growing since the late 1970s, evidence of a shift in the balance of power away from the worker. Nowhere is this more clearly illustrated than in the case of contract teachers, whose situation is a direct product of the ongoing quest to adjust for the rise in demand for education by cutting costs on the supply end.

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Course lecturers are atypical workers in that their employment status does not conform to the standard or “typical” model of the professor. The difference between the two can be seen as inequitable when both categories of teachers do not benefit from the same conditions to perform the same job—that of transmitting knowledge. Course lecturers tend to accumulate several atypical job statuses. They are considered part-time if they teach three courses or less per semester, and because their contracts are usually for a determined period of one to two semesters,¹ they also automatically fall into the category of temporary employment. Moreover, these teachers are likely to hold several jobs at once and, in some cases, to do freelance work on top of that.

While atypical employment does not automatically mean precarity, it does increase the likelihood of greater job insecurity, lower pay and benefits, less advantageous working conditions, deskilling, reduced access to advancement and proficiency training, poorer integration and

collegiality, a higher degree of stress and psychosocial illness, lower personal productivity, and so on. There are some factors, however, that do foster precarity, and these include job access, salary, legal protection and social benefits.

As contract employees, course lecturers have no control over the assignment of work, which is the key factor contributing to their job insecurity and income variability. The average number of courses a lecturer teaches per year is 2.1, across the university system.² Moreover, Richard Bousquet notes that women are particularly affected by this precarity because female lecturers are more likely to rely on their course load for livelihood and generally teach in departments and faculties that tend to offer lower individual course loads.³

Historically constructed inequality

The casualization of labour goes hand-in-hand with the neoliberal employment policies that have dominated the political landscape



since the 1980s. Let’s look at how this has evolved over the decades.

In the 1970s, the role of the course lecturer expanded within the context of the “university of the masses” brought on by the creation of UQAM and the Université du Québec network, coupled with democratic and demographic pressures. Although professors were being hired, the demands on the system were growing and course lecturers helped fill the gap. The same phenomenon was occurring in the United States and Europe at the time. By 1987-1988, the number of course lecturers in Quebec’s universities had exceeded that of professors—8,942 to

1 Note that efforts are being made to stabilize the job status of course lecturers at Université Laval by offering contracts of a duration of one to five years.
2 FQPPU, *Le financement des fonds de fonctionnement universitaire au Québec. Ensemble des universités québécoises*. Second report of the Committee on University Funding concerning operating budgets, February 2013.
3 Bousquet, Richard, *Portrait de la précarité chez les personnes chargées de cours*, SCCUQ@ctualités, n° 20, 2013: 6-9.



6,651—with lecturers teaching about 40% of the courses.⁴ By 2010, more than 11,300 contract teachers were delivering between 40% and 67% of all undergraduate university courses in the province.⁵

At the end of the 1970s, these casual, part-time contract teachers initiated a unionization process that would take a full decade to achieve, marking the first of many “firsts” they would come to accomplish over the years.

During the 1980s, in the throes of an economic recession that was weighing particularly heavily on young people, the unions representing course lecturers used their collective bargaining power to demand job stability for their members. Although some salary gains were also made—and there was still such a long way to go—wage stagnation would prove to be the rule for the next 20 years.

In 1989, the Quebec Council of Universities released a report on the status of part-time teachers in higher education. The Council noted that, based on their numbers, these teachers could hardly be seen as making a “casual” contribution to education. In identifying the various categories of lecturers, it found a problem with the “fixtures” of the system: neither ad hoc experts nor doctoral students in training, these supernumeraries represented a new phenomenon that was emerging. This category of

teachers, which until then had been used mainly in the newly-instituted universities of the UQ network, was now becoming increasingly popular in other universities as well in response to chronic underfunding in higher education. The Council was clearly concerned by this trend—as well as by unionization—but it was also worried that these casual workers were not enjoying good working conditions. It therefore recommended both the stabilization of employment for casual workers as well as the reduction of their numbers.

It is important to emphasize that the transformation of universities and their longstanding underfunding had a direct impact on the living and working conditions of course lecturers.

The string of federal and provincial cuts to education funding⁶ in the 1990s hit these teachers hard: all recruitment stopped; some lecturers lost their place in the “pool,” and their seniority along with it; the target number of students per class was also raised, bringing about a comparable increase in workload. Bargaining talks on job stabilization and integration were largely to address these issues.

While the number of course lecturers did begin to climb again in the late 1990s, this period was particularly marked by significant improvements in their salary conditions. Still, the question remains as to whether casual

teachers in the higher education system are receiving their fair share of university budgets given the proportion of courses they teach. In 2004-2005, for example, only 8.7% of the university payroll was for course lecturers, versus 40% for professors.⁷

Today, most university contract teachers are unionized and, where they qualify, enjoy access to social benefits, integration programs and skills development opportunities; they provide academic guidance and support at the undergraduate and graduate levels, serve on various committees and perform administrative work. More and more, they have doctoral degrees, are considered experts in their field, publish, innovate and give conferences. Yet despite all of this, these teachers remain precarious employees who are under-recognized, under-integrated, undervalued and underpaid. ■

4 Council of Universities, *Les chargés de cours dans les universités québécoises, Avis au ministre de l'Enseignement supérieur et de la Science*, N° 89.7, Québec, Government of Québec, September 1989, p.31.
5 Rioux, Laval, *Les chargées et chargés de cours dans les universités québécoises*, Montréal, FNEEQ, 2007.
6 See comments on the provincial Acts 102 and 198 of 1993, and on Act 104 of 1997 implementing the zero-deficit policy, in the December 2003 SCCUQ@ctualités, pages 32 and 33.
7 Boucher, Marie-Pierre, *Emploi atypique, précarité et avantages*, SCCUQ@ctualités, N° 20, 2013: 10-17.



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A Few data

Evolution of the student enrollment				
Students	1984-1985	1992-1993	1997-1998	2009-2010
	143,977.4	171,893.8	158,076.3	204,549.5
	Rise in enrollment begins ⁸	Rise in enrollment ends	New growth period begins	
Undergraduate	124,389.3	145,907.4	131,796.9	164,858.7

Evolution of the number of professors					
Professors	1987-1988	1992-1993	1997-1998	2009-2010	2011-2012
	6,651 ⁹	8,860	8,152	9,546	9,961
		Increase begins in 1991-92 and continues until 1994-95	Decrease begins in 1994-95 and continues until 1999-2000	Steady growth since 1999	

Evolution of the number of course lecturers and average number of courses taught				
Course lecturers	1987-1988	1992-1993	1997-1998	2008-2009
	9,043	8,815	8,419	11,305
		Decrease begins in 1987-88, continues until 1992-93 and levels off until 1996-97	Steady growth since this period	
Average number of courses taught	46% of cl teach 1 course / year, 22.6%, 2c/yr and 13.8%, 3c/yr ¹⁰	2000-2001 2.3	2003-2004 2.1	2008-2009 2.1

Source: FQPPU, *Le financement des fonds de fonctionnement universitaire au Québec. Ensemble des universités québécoises. Deuxième rapport du Comité sur le financement des universités à propos des fonds de fonctionnement*, February, 2013

8 Periods of economic recession are favourable to university enrollment.

9 This is the figure reported by the Council of Universities, 1989, p.16. For the same year, it recorded a total of 8,942 course lecturers, the highest number of them at *Université de Montréal* (1,421), followed by UQAM (1,365), Concordia University (1,277), *Université Laval* (1,044) and *Université de Sherbrooke* (1,100), seemingly contradicting the Council's assertion that this status is more prevalent in newer universities. However, it is true with regard to the proportion of the university courses taught by contract teachers, which stands at 50% in the newer institutions.

10 Council of Universities, Op. cit., p. 70 and 71.