Isolated, individualised, and immobilised: information behaviour in the context of academic casualisation

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Abstract

Introduction. Universities rely increasingly on contract academic staff for teaching and research activities; yet, working in precarious conditions, these staff face significant challenges in finding relevant workplace information, in engaging with colleagues, and in building their careers. This study examines contract academic staff perceptions of precarity and workplace marginalisation, focusing on the implications of situational and environmental influences on their information practices.

Method. In-depth, semi-structured interviews with 34 contract academic staff, working in various disciplines across Canadian universities, were conducted to examine their information practices.

Analysis. Interview data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis, drawing on everyday life information seeking and information marginalisation theories.

Results. Results of the study show that 1) contract academic staff conduct their work within isolated information environments; 2) this isolation leads these staff to develop highly individualised information practices; and 3) the information activities of contract academic staff are often immobilised, due to the precarious contexts that shape their work and personal lives.

Conclusion. Precarious employment and information marginalisation are deeply entwined for contract academic staff. This results in frustration, disappointment, and uncertainty with their work and personal circumstances. Institutional challenges can seem intractable, particularly where task-related information provision (when available) cannot address systemic concerns.

Introduction

Contract academic staff (also known as adjunct faculty, contingent faculty, casual academics, sessionals, etc.) make essential contributions to teaching and research in higher education, despite onerous working conditions and increasingly precarious roles. Academic work is information intensive, requiring specialised knowledge, skills, and resources. For academics on short-term contracts, there are additional challenges, including being marginalised within universities (Lopes and Dewan, 2014; Willson, 2016) and lacking the workplace information required for day-to-day activities and career advancement (Dolan, 2011; Kezar, 2013a; Willson, 2016). In addition, contract academic staff may feel insecure, undervalued, and undercompensated (Foster and Birdsell Bauer, 2018, Jolley et al., 2013). Universities rely increasingly on contract academic staff to teach (e.g., al-Gharbi, 2020), yet heads of academic units – chairs, directors, deans, etc. – recognise some of the difficulties contract academic staff experience (e.g., Ryan et al., 2013). However, working conditions after the COVID-19 pandemic worsened (CAUT, 2020; Spina et al, 2022; Roy et al., 2021), with the number of contract academic staff, globally, continuing to increase (Colby, 2023; Frølich et al., 2018). While it is not easy to get a clear picture of the numbers of this group, being precariously employed, approximately one-third of academic staff in Canada (CAUT, 2019), the UK (HESA, 2024), and Australia (Burch et al., 2023) is employed on a casual, part-time, or fixed-term contract. This situation suggests that the issues surrounding the precarity of contract academic staff are prevalent, complex, and systemic. As such an important topic, this research examines the ways casualisation influences information practices within higher education workplaces to understand the impact to universities.

Literature review

Higher education context

Many have described the current challenges in higher education, attributable, in large part, to neoliberal policies (Giroux, 2007; Taylor, 2014; Taylor and Lahad, 2018). These include decreased government funding (Giroux, 2014), intensified demands for accountability and quantifiable outputs (Deem et al., 2007; Read and Leathwood, 2018), higher workloads (Gill, 2014), increased hiring of administrators (Ginsberg, 2011), and shifts toward a casualised workforce (Gill, 2014; Loveday, 2018). Casualisation is viewed as a strategy to '*reduce labor costs and to increase labor servility*' (Chomsky, 2015, para. 1), imposing job precarity – both insecurity and unpredictability – on higher education; this shift is central to Chomsky's warning of the *death* of American universities.

There is broad concern both for the future of higher education and for the effects on those working in academia of such neoliberal policies (Loveday, 2018; Willson, 2018). Indeed, as increasingly higher numbers of students are taught by contract academic staff (Miller and Struve, 2020), calls to address the various experiences and repercussions of academic precarity have grown (Birdsell Bauer, 2018; Allmer, 2018). While they desire longer, more stable contracts (Harper, 2018), contract academic staff face high levels of stress and anxiety and are often undercompensated for the hours they work (Carver, 2017). Many contract academic staff feel undervalued and disengaged from their universities (Jolley et al., 2013), are forced to decrease their sense of commitment to their work (Reevy and Deason, 2014), and are unable to work to their full capacities as educators and researchers (Brady and Briody, 2016). Amid heavy workloads, they engage in constant searching and applying for future work. This leaves little time or energy for contract academic staff to develop their teaching, research, or personal lives, which can also inhibit their ability to move into secure positions (Spina et al., 2022). This situation also contributes to higher rates of academics leaving their chosen profession (Brady and Briody, 2016; McKenzie, 2021), which negatively shapes the quality and diversity of education offered and potentially leads to significant economic impacts for universities due to high costs of hiring new staff (Blatter et al., 2012).

However, despite the pervasiveness of these issues, a scoping review conducted as a preliminary phase of this research found

relatively little empirical research exploring the perceptions and practices of contract academic staff (Willson, et al., 2022). In addition, despite the complexity of their information environments, researchers have not previously examined the information practices and workplace environments of this group. This paper addresses this significant gap.

Complex information environments

Academic information environments are complex, with academic positions often involving multiple roles and informational contexts, including interactions with students, learning technologies, various academic units, university administration, union representation, and broader government policies (Willson, 2016). For contract academic staff, the range and complexity of information environments is often intensified. For example, opportunities and resources for contract academic staff may vary greatly between institutions or even from one faculty/department to another within a single university (Heffernan, 2018). Contract academic staff may also be required to understand and balance the sometimes conflicting goals of multiple labour unions (Foster, 2016), to work harder to build and maintain social networks (Langan and Morton, 2009), and to deal with complex and difficult financial situations (Witt and Gearin, 2021).

Frequently faced with limited agency, for both work-related decision making and social integration (Mason and Megoran, 2021), these precarious employment situations may also intensify the challenges faced by contract academic staff from racially oppressed, marginalised, and/or minoritised groups. For example, contract academic staff who are Black may have limited opportunity to challenge, confront, and prevent oppressive and abusive situations (Schofield, 2022), while workplace ignorance of the effects of family, cultural commitments or social class within academia can be intensified by minority status (Acker and Haque, 2017).

While direct discussions of information behaviour in the literature about contract academic staff are sparse, inconsistent and inequitable access to information has been suggested as both a result and a cause of precarious employment. Excluding contract academic staff from formal departmental resources, including faculty meetings and professional development opportunities, can inhibit access to important information that may benefit their teaching and research (Lopes and Dewan, 2014). Moreover, information acquired through social and informal professional networks and through everyday workplace routines, such as from interactions with other faculty, department chairs, and/or academic supervisors, is crucial for making sense of university life and activities, for carrying out daily activities, for building a sense of belonging for employees (Ryan, 2017), and for integration within academic departments (Haviland et al., 2017). However, such access is frequently disrupted (Langan and Morton, 2009), or inconsistent at best (Haviland et al., 2017), for contract academic staff, and requests for information from casual academics are often not treated with the same respect or importance as those from full-time faculty (Ryan, 2017). Limiting access to information (e.g., not including contract academic staff on departmental emails) may signal their value and status in a department, effectively segregating them from colleagues.

Selective information sharing may not only result from employment precarity itself but also result from continued instability and isolation in the work role. Limited or inconsistent access to even the most basic workplace information (e.g., how to submit grades) may contribute to ambiguities around roles and responsibilities (Frias, 2010), reinforce feelings of being second-class workers (Kezar, 2013b), influence the quality of instruction, and limit opportunities for advancement into secure roles.

Information Practices of Academics

In addition to working in complex information environments, academics' information practices are, themselves, complex. Information practices are sets of '*socially and culturally established ways to identify, seek, use, and share the information available in various sources … [that] are often habitual*' (Savolainen, 2008, pp. 2–3); they can be viewed as part of

individuals' tacit knowledge about how to interact in a particular setting (Jarrahi and Thomson, 2017). Rather than a specific activity or behaviour, information practices are complex and socially established patterns of interacting with information in particular contexts.

For many years, studies of academics focused on their information-seeking patterns during research (Bronstein, 2007; Chu, 1999; Ellis, 1993; Ge, 2010; Meho and Tibbo, 2003) and their use of formally published sources, rather than on everyday aspects of their work. However, more recently, research has shifted to incorporate more everyday and social aspects of academics' information work, including information sharing (Almehmadi et al., 2016; Pilerot, 2013), networking (Miller, 2015), and cooperative information work (Given & Willson, 2015; Haman & Hertzum, 2019). This includes specific complex information practices, such as archaeologists' drawing as an embodied practice (Olsson, 2016), and academics *bouncing ideas* around to advance a concept (Willson, 2022). These types of in-depth explorations look at patterns of information work in specific contexts to better understand the many ways academics interact with information. However, the precarity and ongoing uncertainty experienced by contract academic staff significantly changes their information environment. Currently, little is understood about the influence that casualisation has on the information practices of these academics.

Research aim and questions

This paper discusses initial findings from a large, nationally-funded project focused on academic casualisation among academics on short-term contracts at Canadian universities. The aim of the research discussed in this paper was to examine how casualisation shapes and is shaped by the ways workplace information is found, shared, created, and used.

To address this aim, the following research questions were explored:

1. What are contract academic staff's information practices?

2. How do contract academic staff negotiate their information environment(s) to situate themselves in their workplaces and career trajectories?

3. What are contract academic staff perceptions of precarity and workplace marginalisation and how do these influence their information practices?

Methods
Theoretical approach
This study approaches academic casualisation from an information practices perspective, which involves complex cultural, historical, embodied, and situated practices. Specifically, this research examines the daily information practices of contract academic staff – the socially and culturally established ways of identifying, finding, using, and sharing available information (Savolainen, 2008). While workplace information practice research has highlighted the variety, complexity, and contextually dependent character of workers' information practices (Lloyd, 2007; Olsson, 2013), casualisation presents an interesting context for information behaviour/practices research, as contract academic staff are often embedded in unstable, marginalised, and liminal spaces, experiencing multiple, shifting contexts simultaneously or serially.

This study's theoretical framework builds from Everyday Life Information Seeking (ELIS) (Savolainen, 1995; 2008; Savolainen and Thomson, 2022). Based on a social phenomenological approach, ELIS examines everyday information practices, including how individuals seek, use, and share day-to-day information, within their unique contexts and information environments, including attention to social rules and values, goals, and interests. While the ELIS model was devised to examine non-work contexts, there is growing recognition of the everyday nature of employment, particularly for academic work, leading researchers to use ELIS to study various workplaces (Given, 2002; Känsäkoski and Huotari, 2016; Maurel and Bergeron, 2007). The ELIS model includes information practices and actions, information seeking, use, and sharing.

Actions and projects 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 ELIS provides a theoretical framework for this study, the concept of information marginalisation – '*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 and Martin, 2019, p. 476) – frames the exploration of situations whereby contract academic staff interact with workplace information. Building on Chatman's (1996) work on information poverty, information marginalisation draws attention toward systemic/institutional forces creating gaps in information access, rather than focusing on behaviours of individuals experiencing those gaps. Information marginalisation attends to factors leading to social marginalisation and resulting information practices, such as persistent questioning and building strategic professional relationships (Gibson and Martin, 2019, p. 480). In addition, as contract academic staff often experience unstable and insecure situations affecting their social, economic, and personal well-being, this study incorporates the concept of information precarity (Stewart-Robertson, 2022) to further examine how academic workers' experiences further complicate information practices.

Participants

In total, 34 contract academic staff working in Canadian universities participated in the study. While contracts varied, all were working on teaching-focused contracts, with the majority employed semester by semester, working on contracts of less than a year's duration. Participants had varied disciplinary backgrounds (across the natural sciences, humanities, social sciences, and fine arts) and a large range in years of teaching experience (from less than one year to over 25 years). Contract academic staff in eight of 10 Canadian provinces and from small, medium, and large

universities were recruited for this study through emails to faculty associations and unions. All participants were given pseudonyms.

Data collection

Following ethics approval, 34 in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with contract academic staff. Interviews took place via videoconferencing software, with each lasting approximately 60 minutes. The interviews explored participants' perceptions of their precarious working conditions, including institutional provision of information, information practices used in the workplace, facilitators and barriers to information, and how marginalisation and social inclusion influenced workplace information practices.

Data analysis

Interview transcripts were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006; 2019), an approach involving a six-phase procedure for deep engagement with qualitative research data and for systematic and iterative generation and development of codes and themes. Following transcription of the contract academic staff interviews, two members of the research team repeatedly analysed and discussed the data, generating initial codes. Using NVivo, these initial codes were expanded through line-by-line coding and collated into initial themes. Generated themes were subsequently reviewed, defined, and renamed through numerous in-depth discussions between two of the authors and through consultations involving all four members of the research team.

Findings and discussion

From data analysis, three major findings were generated. First, the information environments of contract academic staff are frequently isolated because they are regularly excluded from the social, working, and/or physical settings of their universities. Second, stemming from that isolation, contract academic staff face individualisation of information practices; they often must act alone to determine and meet their information needs. Third, the information activities of contract academic staff are often immobilised; even if needed information is

provided, the precarity they experience across their working and personal lives often inhibits their abilities or desires to seek and to make use of that information.

Isolated information environments

I don't actually have all that much contact with my [institutional] colleagues in the sense of, you know, hallway chats and all that stuff because the part-time offices are in a completely different part of the building, you know, like we're on a different level. – Rubi, humanities academic at a midsized university

For many participants, isolation was experienced on multiple levels, disrupting their established information practices, limiting their abilities to develop new practices and literacies, and adversely affecting their academic careers and personal lives. The above quote, by Rubi, illustrates the physical isolation many contract academic staff expressed and points to the systemic processes that push and hold contract academic staff in their workplace precarity, furthering their isolation from both formal and informal information environments. This physical siloing, where institutions physically separate contract academic staff from their full-time colleagues, disrupts workplace information exchanges with peers; such exchanges often confirm or provide important critical insights into information acquired from other sources (Lloyd, 2009). In many instances, contract academic staff also reported a lack of dedicated office space for their use; this situation initiated a range of other activities to gather needed information, including reaching out to administrative staff, seeking and navigating alternative meeting spaces, and limiting the extent of information exchanged with their students.

I feel like I'm a bit in a silo. I think sessionals are siloed from each other as well. I don't know another single sessional teacher at [my institution], but I'm sure there are tons of us teaching the same freaking class, and I don't know who they are … It's sad. I feel sad about being disconnected from others. And it's as if my training and my career trajectory doesn't matter to the institution. They just want me

to show up in the classroom and teach that class because they need to fill the position. Beyond that, I feel like they don't care much about me as a professional or a person. – Zaiden, humanities academic at both small and large research universities

For Zaiden, isolation is both individual (e.g., colleagues) and institutional levels. However, even these feelings of interpersonal isolation (such as from contract academic staff colleagues) were seen as resulting from institutional failures. While Zaiden expressed a need for exchanging information with other contract academic staff teaching the same course, to discuss teaching approaches and improve student learning, being siloed made such interactions unobtainable. Some relatively straightforward forms of information provision, such as encouraging meetings to discuss teaching with other instructors or simply presenting instructors with a list of other instructors, were seen as offering the potential to ameliorate their situation in small ways. Yet, like many contract academic staff interviewed, Zaiden's feelings of sadness, discouragement, and being undervalued made such simple adjustments seem unlikely, further shifting their information practices. Without supportive institutional information practices, the realities of their precarious work – i.e., caught in a cycle of just trying to make do on the job – made individual solutions and career development seem impossible.

In another instance of institutional isolation, Zaiden described a situation where attempts made by the university to provide some information more tailored to contract academic staff failed to acknowledge this group's working realities: '*They had, at the beginning of January, a sessional information session. But they put it right when I was teaching, so I couldn't go.*' As with many other interviewees, Zaiden noted specific information needs (e.g., who to contact for technological issues, teaching, and curriculum development ideas), and specific potential sources for meeting those needs were identified. Yet, for Zaiden, the scheduling and information provision of these general sessions conflicted with the more specific information needs (Frias, 2010) and the realities of contract

academic staff work; information sessions were offered only after a semester had already begun and at inconvenient times, when many contract academic staff were scheduled to teach. When personal circumstances were combined with institutional structures and decisions (e.g., lack of accessible resources for contract academic staff, expected attendance at unpaid department meetings), the possibilities for supportive information activities to occur were interrupted, again deepening feelings of isolation.

Such circumstances highlight the value of understanding contract academic staff's information practices through the lens of information marginalisation (Gibson and Martin, 2019). The interviewees emphasised the inseparability of individual information poverties and related responses and affordances from the implicated institutional and systemic actors. For many contract academic staff, institutional actions and choices not only created those gaps but also created situations where those gaps and their needs were potentially unacknowledged or rendered invisible, furthering staff marginalisation and exacerbating the complexity of their situations.

Perhaps rooted in myths around casual academic work as temporary or as a stepping stone toward tenure-track appointments (Foster, 2016), and furthered by structural isolation from their colleagues, several contract academic staff reported feelings of being ignored, unseen, or abandoned by their full-time counterparts. One contract academic staff, Gage, employed in the social sciences at a midsized university, noted,

> I've got lots of colleagues talking about issues of power and identity and social justice, but I never hear them talk about contract faculty in that discussion, and I have to admit I'm feeling a little sad and disappointed that they don't recognise that this is a really big piece of inequality happening.

Separated and misunderstood, many contract academic staff discussed feeling of a lower status. For example, Angela, a fine art academic at a small university, described feeling 'kind of talked down to a fair amount, or sort of disregarded as 'just' part timers, despite being people who teach a lot of the classes.' Such situations shaped various information activities. For instance, when asked about attending department or faculty meetings, Reilly, also working in the fine arts, reported feeling that even when opportunities for information sharing were present, isolation and a lack of respect undermined that sharing or the degree to which that information might be received or understood: 'I feel like I'm invited when it pleases them. They're asking for my opinion, but if they're not happy about it, they're going to ignore it.' The communication and informational contexts for contract academic staff thus often involve being presented with information that was not relevant or was even insulting; given their situations, this furthered their senses of not being valued, of being outsiders, and of being isolated. In the literature, this lack of respect and inclusion is partially attributed to gaps between the primarily managerial foci of many universities (e.g., generating research income, student satisfaction metrics) and the increasing numbers and vastly different working conditions of contract academic staff (Read and Leathwood, 2020; Smithers et al., 2021).

Individualised information practices

> There's kind of not a centralised place to which we can go for information. I often feel … you know, finding out information from our students, like kind of being the last to know, despite checking our emails and being on top of things. It's finding out information a long way down the chain, and that doesn't really make us feel respected or valued or informed. -Angela, a fine arts academic at a small university

The data show various factors, including isolation, job precarity, and inequitable institutional information delivery, force contract academic staff to piece together their own, informal information networks, shifting the burden of workplace information provision from institutions to workers. Angela, in response to the lack of dedicated resources, described the multistep, sometimes haphazard, processes often required to gather needed

information: approaching faculty in her department, reaching out to a technician or chair, needing to do more digging, yet often still not getting the necessary information. Thus, in seeking to obtain the information needed to effectively engage in their teaching and advance their academic careers, the situations of contract academic staff are further complicated. This increased information work compounds with other forms of under- or uncompensated work associated with their contract positions (e.g., unpaid hours for lesson preparation, expected but uncompensated service work) (Roy et al., 2021).

Feeling devalued or disrespected may extend this individualisation of information work, leading contract academic staff to seek other ways of acquiring information so as not to be '*the last to know.*' For instance, Julian, a humanities academic at a midsized university, also described frustration about only receiving information in very informal ways, '*through the grapevine,*' from '*a trickle-down effect.*' Luka, an academic in a humanities department at a small university, described changes over time in how he gathered information:

> There was definitely a sense of just kind of floundering in the wilderness for a little bit. I don't have that sense anymore. And now definitely if I have a question about a class or a student issue or whatever, I feel very confident knocking on colleagues' doors and asking for help, and people will do that with me, and I think that's great. But that initial probably first semester it did feel a bit lonely. I'm just kind of like 'what the hell am I doing? Could I have reached out to other people, to other like more established colleagues being like what the hell am I doing?' I could have, but that's more on me that I didn't want to, like I'm an academic, I am faculty, I should be able to figure this out by myself.

Without dedicated orientation and support (Talbert-Hatch and Hundley, 2011), several contract academic staff described the development of informal information networks over extended periods of time, through trial and error, casual or chance encounters, as well as various levels of increasing comfort and confidence in navigating their university environments. In Luka's experience, a gradual growth in assurance and competence in navigating new working environments and establishing information sources was described. However, responsibility for this growth was seen as individual, built on personal expectations, and grounded in assumptions (e.g., meritocracy) drawn from full-time and secure academic work (Loveday, 2018).

While for Luka, increased self-confidence brought greater access to informal information sources, contract academic staff may not always have or be given the time and opportunity to develop the needed networks to meet their information needs. For example, Reilly, described a near constant process of searching and applying for future work, always creating and managing multiple backup plans, making choices necessitated by time constraints to share less information with students, and feelings of '*never having really one foot down anywhere.*' In addition to the added work created by building information networks and seeking necessary workplace information, interviewees' experiences suggest that the insecurity and demands of their temporary positions further individualised blame and responsibility for difficult decisions about where to devote time and energy. For Reilly, such decisions reflected the need to make a personal choice between self-preservation and attending to students' needs.

Individualised responsibility for gathering necessary information and support to interact with various work-related technologies were described by several participants. Already stretched thin and undercompensated, some participants mentioned taking on additional information work, filling gaps created by a lack of information provision at institutional levels. For example, Jaden, teaching classes at both small and large research universities, described the challenges of mastering different learning management systems at two institutions while also navigating long gaps in system access between teaching contracts. Ally, teaching healthcare classes at a small university, described taking on responsibility for instructing and supporting several other contract academic staff who had not received

the learning management system training or access needed to prepare for their teaching. Moreover, Azul, a science academic at a small university, described the unconventional and inefficient strategies she developed for accessing university emails and other IT services, not having been made aware of the IT supports available to full-time colleagues.

Despite the challenging information settings described, the responses of contract academic staff also demonstrate the agency of many in this group. While their situations often individualise responsibilities for creating and maintaining information worlds, the creative and persistent responses and workarounds expressed by contract academic staff do support the need to move understandings of the information practices of contract academic staff away from deficit-based perspectives and toward those that centre the situated knowledge authorities of groups (Costello and Floegel, 2021) and the systemic, institutional structures that create many of their challenges (Gibson and Martin, 2019; Kitzie, et al., 2022). The concept of information marginalisation (Gibson and Martin, 2019), broadly, advances theories of information poverty (e.g., Chatman, 1996) by turning attention away from individual responsibility and deficit-based frameworks toward systemic factors and the tactical responses of marginalised groups (Kitzie et al., 2022). While this turn toward highlighting the systemic processes leading to and perpetuating degrees of marginality provides a useful frame for shifting responsibility from the individual activities of contract academic staff toward their structuring institutions, the circumstances and lived experiences of precarious workers and associated information practices may complicate such perspectives. Indeed, the enforced individualisation of activities and social, institutional, and emotional isolation described by the contract academic staff interviewed can destabilise potential refutations to structural barriers, further individualise responsibility, and lead to an immobilisation of information practices.

Immobilised information practices

While contract academic staff are well educated, deeply versed in their academic environments, and represent various levels of both marginalisation and privilege, the interviewees' demonstrated proficiencies for (re)creating information networks. They navigated various information sources as part of their precarious working situations, all while being cognisant of gaps and expressing some confidence in being able to accomplish the added work of finding needed information. Moreover, many participants noted being aware of, and often being provided with, large quantities of information related to their present and future work. However, for several participants, isolation, uneven delivery of information, and the extensive work required to find sources and access needed information also immobilised many information activities. While information might be available, and possibilities for sharing information present, insecure and undependable information access (brought about by their precarious contracts) shaped these academics' practices and their abilities to develop new information literacies.

> I mean, there are definitely times when I've chosen, for example, not to speak up on issues that I feel passionate about or that I think we need to be spending time coming up with a solution on. Not necessarily for fear of not getting a full-time contract in the future, but I guess maybe that's what it is … it makes me hesitate to get too involved with things … it just gives a kind of underlying anxiety or makes you question maybe some of the ways that you're interacting with the people around you in a way that you might feel during like a trial period at the beginning of a contract, but to be sort of in that space for years at a time I think is challenging. -Azul, a science academic at a small university

Information activities were described as immobilised in multiple ways. Azul describes choosing not to act due to the anxiety caused by job precarity. However, immobilisation could also take the form of not being able to act due to the limitations of the situation. As Kaitlyn, a healthcare academic at a midsized university notes,

> I guess I'm sort of stuck in this path right now, and I've just got to keep trudging forward in order to be successful. I wish it

was certainly easier. I wish there was more opportunity for permanence in this position. I think, in reality, it will be probably five years of this precarity in my work for sure. . . unless something really wonderful happens. Are you hiring?

Resulting from information precarity (Stewart-Robertson, 2022), contract academic staff may choose not to share information when opportunities are present, may not act on information obtained, may give up on information seeking before beginning, or may feel unable to make use of the information and resources available. For Luka, for example, this resulted in a self-protective withdrawal from workplace information activities: '*Maybe other people would get more concerned and try to rabbit out all the information. After the hell fire that was my first year, I just don't care.*'

With the skills to acquire and navigate their complex information environments, interviewees were often forced by their situations to choose inaction or express indifference to further engagement and information acquisition. For some, through having to navigate communication and customs across various communities and institutions, feelings of being stuck in an almost helpless cycle were expressed. For example, Reilly, when discussing community building and engagement, felt as if she were '*investing a little bit everywhere and nowhere at the same time;*' she felt restricted by the temporary character of her position, which complicated her growth, career advancement, and personal-life decision making. As the earlier quote from Azul also exemplifies, the longer-term precarity experienced by many contract academic staff may further destabilise information environments, inhibiting the establishment of connections and the ability to trust those sources.

Conclusion

In discussing their work-related information practices, the contract academic staff in this study described deeply entrenched, wide-ranging experiences of information marginalisation. These academics are on the margins of universities 'where their needs are persistently ignored or overlooked' (Gibson and Martin, 2019, p. 476) and frequently lack the workplace and career information they need because of their contract status, situation, and information environment. The analysis demonstrates that contract academic staff work in information environments that are isolated from their secure, full-time colleagues, as well as others working in precarious roles, and the isolation they experience is both physical and social, significantly affecting their interactions with information. The isolation contract academic staff experience is associated with individualised information practices, leaving these staff to identify how to deal with much of their work-related information on their own. This context results in haphazard strategies, including digging, floundering, trial and error, chance encounters, and managing significant amounts of information from different jobs, all while looking for new, future employment. What is unique to the contract academic staff role is that despite their high levels of education and seemingly privileged positions working in universities, they are frequently immobilised; more information will do little to help their circumstances.

In practical terms, contract academic staff are typically excluded from meetings and left out of decision-making and feedback mechanisms. They frequently have difficulties knowing who to go to for practical information about their workplaces and frequently do not receive university or departmental communications. They typically do not receive orientation information or training on university policies or how to use information systems. Their temporary status may also create issues in having consistent access to university systems and infrastructure. In many universities they are not eligible for professional development or other resources, such as internal research funds.

While uncertainty is often viewed in universities as something that can be solved with more information, the precarious nature of these academics' employment demonstrates that additional information provided for specific work tasks will not resolve systemic

issues. While this research sheds light on the information practices of contract academic staff and the role precarity plays in information work within universities, more research is needed. Within universities, additional investigations need to explore the drivers behind institutional decision-making in support of contract academic staff and how best to address systemic challenges, grounded in expectations of full-time, secure modes of working. Similarly, studying the information practices beyond academe, in other areas where precarious employment is increasing, is warranted.

Acknowledgements

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