

Sessional instructors on the fringes of UFV priorities, despite impact in classrooms

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Illustration: Anthony Biondi

If you go to university and get a degree, you're on a better track for a high-paying, secure job. Or so we're told. For many, the goal is to teach at a university in their specialty, earn a

decent wage, receive benefits, and most of all, find job security. Yet even after years of hard work and education, fewer instructors reach this goal than you might think.

Instead, many instructors are hired on a temporary contract basis. Even in a situation where they are teaching enough courses to be earning a living wage, these “sessional” instructors are not guaranteed basic job security.

“Every four to eight months you’re constantly scanning the job board, hoping to God that somebody has either died or retired and opened up a job,” says history instructor Clare Dale. “You’re always applying for work. You’re always trying to figure out how you can get things done on a budget. There is no stability whatsoever.”

Dale is also the non-regular contract faculty rep of the faculty and staff association (FSA). Though students may not realize it, roughly 30 per cent of courses are taught by sessional instructors, who do not have status as full-time employees of the university.

Diane Griffiths, associate VP of human resources, describes the difference between full-time and sessional faculty as the path each is on.

“To clarify ... they’re both faculty. One is tenure-track; the other is hired course-by-course,” she says.

Sessional faculty have limited say in the courses they teach each semester, since courses are divided among regular full-time faculty first.

“[Full-time faculty] get the courses they want, the days they want, the hours they want, line them up in a nice tight schedule, get the time off that they want, get sabbatical. Then the sessionals are those necessary to fill what’s left over,” explains English and communications instructor Ashton Howley.

This structure often makes it difficult for sessional instructors to plan anything beyond their immediate circumstances. In a 2013 draft of her dissertation on sessional professors in BC universities, Madeleine Hardin, an associate professor of communications at UFV, drew on her past experiences as an associate dean and department head, noting that “just-in-time” hiring, or the practice of hiring sessional instructors to teach courses shortly before the beginning of semester, was fairly common.

Hiring at the last minute also makes it difficult or impossible for sessional instructors to access benefits that full-time faculty — and, to a lesser extent, students — enjoy, even if they are technically available.

“There is language in the collective agreement that speaks to [sessionals] being able to get benefits. Practically speaking, no [they can’t],” Griffiths says.

In section 28 of the 2012-14 Collective Agreement between UFV and the FSA, sessional employees have access to benefits, but this is dependent on the following year’s courseload.

“A huge majority of sessionals know that clause doesn’t offer them a reality for health and welfare benefits,” Griffiths says.

Mathematics and statistics professor Karamjit Dhande agrees there is added stress from never knowing if there will be a job to count on in the upcoming semester.

“If I don’t get a contract, it’s in the back of [my] mind [and] worry is there. When you are worried, your output is affected,” he says. “You find other ways to deal with it, but the anxiety and ‘what if’ affects your performance ... maybe minutely in some cases, and maybe seriously in others.”

For sessional instructors to move beyond these problems, there are additional obstacles that stand in the way of securing full-time positions. Griffiths says that for most, the chances are slim. Sessionals are subject to more frequent performance reviews, as well as instructor evaluations from students. However, despite the perception that positive comments can only help in administrative decisions, their effect is negligible when it comes to an actual change in status.

“They certainly help, but it goes back to the reality [that] the stars really have to align for that to happen,” says associate dean of faculty Ken Brealey.

Communications instructor Linda Howell’s current position is one example of the rarity of opportunities instructors have to move up into more stable positions.

“I’m closer to retirement than I am to beginning a career,” Howell says. “I would just like to have 10 very good years ... but I don’t expect that now.”

This isn't the case everywhere, according to Howley, who says other BC institutions often hire their sessional instructors as faculty when jobs become available.

"Why not hire the people you've allowed to work in your institution for years?" Howley asks. "You've seen their progress, you see their evaluations. Kwantlen and Douglas have regularization — hiring sessionals as full-timers as positions [become] available — but not UFV."

Douglas College's collective agreement contains a section devoted to "internal selections for regular faculty from contract faculty," while Kwantlen's states, "In the event a regular position is advertised and the position has been filled by a non-regular type 2 faculty member for two or more years, the non-regular type 2 faculty member who has been filling the position will be given preference over other applicants providing the qualifications, abilities, and experience of the non-regular type 2 faculty member are equal to the other applicants." UFV's agreement contains no equivalent language.

At UBC, sessional faculty have access to extended health, dental, vision, and other benefits.

However, despite the varying details of sessional contracts, the overall story regarding how these instructors are used by universities remains consistent.

Dale, before coming to UFV, originally studied at the University of Toronto. "I remember when I started my PhD, the chair of the department said there was going to be a wave of retirement and a wave of hiring, so, 'Don't worry, there'll be jobs for everybody.' There were some retirements; a lot of people now don't retire at the age."

But the natural end of professorial careers did not lead to a corresponding entrance into the vocation for Dale's and subsequent generations.

"What you couldn't foresee," she says, looking back, "is that many universities weren't going to replace bodies with bodies. What has happened is people with full-term jobs have gone and they haven't been replaced."

These inequalities are at the forefront of Dale's mind as the FSA is about to begin negotiations for their next collective agreement; the current edition is up this year.

"[Negotiations] will probably start somewhere near the end of term," she says. "Probably by the middle of February we should know one way or the other if there'll be a need to strike. [At] this place, the history is that they settle. That's why sessionals get a little angry ... everybody who isn't permanent, whether they're admin staff or sessional, are [typically] sold down the river. The concessions are given to the full-time faculty."

Dale adds that the position of sessionals isn't even at the bottom of the ladder at UFV.

"It's not just the sessionals that are in a dire straits; it's also the auxiliary, the admin workers, the contract admin workers — in fact, if anything, they're treated worse than the sessionals are."

Sessional instructors want their employment regularized because the conditions of working as a sessional are often a broad sign of inequality at the university.

"Sessional instructors don't earn as much as they ought ... we're not just paid less, we're paid WAY LESS, capital letters," Dale says. "The bottom line is one-third of your professors are getting screwed financially."

While a full-time faculty professor can make anywhere between \$53,899.96 and \$86,610.51 (usually closer to the latter) for teaching an average of seven courses per academic year, a sessional instructor will only earn \$42,573 to \$53,903 for doing the exact same amount of work. For comparison, a public school teacher in Abbotsford, before salary increases based on the most recent contract signed by teachers takes effect, starts at \$42,802.

It is not very easy for sessionals to teach that many classes, Howley explains. "For me to make [as] much [as faculty], I would have to teach 13 or 14 courses — but sessionals here are capped." Facing lower wages and course-capping, sessionals often need to teach at multiple universities at once in order to make something close to a living wage.

Factoring in travel time and the commitments of managing completely different groups of students, institutional environments, and faculty relationships, sessional instructors can be stretched thin. Classes sometimes run for shorter than their allotted times as instructors commute between campuses, and instructors' availability to be consulted outside of class time can also be limited as a result of balancing multiple non-faculty positions.

Howell looks at the current landscape and sees the use of sessional instructors only growing, unimproved.

“More and more people will be hired on contract basis, and fewer and fewer people will become regularized or become full time,” she says. “I think it’s exactly what’s happening [now] ... and universities should resist it as much as they can.”

Communications instructor Peter Clayton writes in *Words and Vision*, the UFV FSA newsletter, that “respect for sessionals means fair remuneration and access to benefits for those who need them. A secondary pay scale serves only to undermine our professional status and the work we do.”

The question, then, is why sessional instructors stay within a working environment that is not weighted in their favour. For academically trained scholars searching for any position in a crowded workforce, UFV has been a relatively comfortable institution for many instructors.

“I love the friendliness of people of UFV and [its] collegiality,” Howell says. “I find that is one of the strongest things that makes me want to keep working here despite the fact that it’s very clear that I am a member of what has been called ‘the precariat.’”

Sessional instructors may care and contribute just as much to UFV as any other employee, but according to Dale they are not respected as much for it.

“I keep hearing from [sessional instructors] that they have [just] as much loyalty to this institution. They want as much for it to succeed as the full-time faculty,” she says. “They’re as invested in this place as anybody else, and one of the main things that they’re concerned about is that they don’t seem to be getting the respect they think they deserve — and I think they’re right.”

With files from Michael Scoular and Katie Stobbart.

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