

Stakeholder Summary

More research needed on the “other” university teachers: Non-full-time instructors

Over the last decade, increases in Ontario university enrollment have outstripped growth in full-time, tenure-stream faculty. Non-full-time faculty, which include sessional and graduate student instructors, play a significant role in addressing increased teaching demands although there is a dearth of public information about hiring trends and considerable variation in conditions of employment.

According to a new study from the Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario (HEQCO), further research is needed into the roles and experiences of sessional instructors, institutional employment trends and the implications for quality and student success.

Project description

The “Other” University Teachers: Non-Full-Time Instructors at Ontario Universities is a preliminary exploration of the employment of sessional and graduate student instructors. The study is based on a detailed review of collective agreements and related documentation, and the analysis of institutional data on employment.

Findings

Although most Ontario universities do not report the number of non-full-time instructors, the study found relevant data on the websites of five institutions, where in all but one case, the number of sessional instructors had increased in recent years. Based on the limited public data available, the study found that the ratio of sessional instructors to full-time faculty appears to be increasing at some universities while decreasing or remaining stable at others, suggesting that different universities are making very different decisions related to academic staffing.

Acknowledging that each Ontario university is “an autonomous corporation with the ability to make independent decisions related to employment,” the study found that conditions of employment for non-full-time instructors vary by institution. At 10 of the universities, sessional instructors are represented by the same association as full-time, tenure-stream faculty, while at the other 10 there are separate unions or associations. And while sessional instructors have various benefits guaranteed under collective agreements, often including some form of job security related to seniority or promotion, the authors note that sessional instructors “do not have anything close to the level of security associated with tenure.” The conditions of employment for graduate student instructors roughly parallel those of sessional instructors, according to the study.

Further research

There may be major differences by university in terms of the balance between full-time, tenure-stream faculty and non-full-time instructors, as well as important implications for Ontario higher education, say the authors, who call for additional research, including:

- A province-wide survey of sessional instructors to learn more about their background (academic and professional), employment situation and teaching load, as well as their perceptions and experiences.
- A more detailed study of institutional staffing patterns through the collection and analysis of data on employment trends at all Ontario universities; and
- A detailed analysis of staffing patterns within selected academic units at different Ontario universities and the implications of these patterns for educational quality and student success.

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