



# Precarious employment practices in South African universities



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**Orientation:** The study explored the employment experiences of contract academic staff working in universities.

**Research purpose:** This study aimed to explore higher education employment practices experienced by contract academic staff. Recommendations for fair and inclusive human resource practices to address negative employee experiences was offered.

**Motivation for the study:** Research on employment practices and non-standard employment arrangements in the South African context are scant and outdated. Consequently, it is important to shed light on the experience of contract academic staff in universities given the widespread practice of employing contract academic staff in the sector.

**Research approach/design and method:** A qualitative research approach was employed. A total of 26 temporary employed contract academic staff members from 15 different departments across three institutions of higher education in South Africa participated in semi-structured interviews.

**Main findings:** The findings of this study highlight how contract academic staff experience being employed in universities. The themes identified were, a lack of job orientation and onboarding, last-minute contract offers, vague contract terms, lack of employment benefits, lack of rights and legal standing, limited career development and funding opportunities, unfair work demands, lack of performance feedback, and lack of human resources and organisational support.

**Practical/managerial implications:** Understanding the influence of university employment practices on contract academic staff will aid Human Resources Departments in re-evaluating policy and practice to combat the negative effects thereof. Particularly, how the employment contract process is managed, the lack of support available to staff, and the general disregard for the value that this category of staff adds to the academic offering.

**Contribution/value-add:** This study provides valuable insight for improving policies and practices that enhance the employment experience of contract academic staff in universities.

**Keywords:** employment practices; precarious employment; contract academic staff; South African universities; higher education; academics; academic staff; contingent faculty employment.

## Introduction

The higher education sector has experienced tremendous change in the last decade, and the South African sector is no exception (Council on Higher Education, 2016). These transformations are largely because of the implementation of neoliberal models, which entail the excessive use of fixed-term, temporary and short-term contracts as employment practice within the higher education sector (Bone, 2021), leading to precarious employment. Precarious work departs from the norm of stable, permanent and full-time employment, and is characterised by a lack of benefits or stable income that meets basic needs (Allan et al., 2021). In higher education institutions (HEIs), this means the precarious employment of contingent, non-tenured track, temporary and short-term academic staff (Leathwood & Read, 2020). Due to decreased public funding, employing temporary staff is perceived as a more cost-effective option. Consequently, the practice of using non-standard employment arrangements has become the norm in universities across the globe. However, the toll on the individuals employed in these precarious employment roles is rarely explored (O'Keefe & Courtois, 2019; Blackham, 2020). Recently, Solomon and Du Plessis (2023)

provided an account of the experiences of precariously employed workers in higher education. These workers face various challenges such as living in a state of uncertainty with a strong desire for secure employment, stunted career growth, job disillusionment, feelings of exploitation, marginalisation and a dehumanising work experience (Solomon & Du Plessis, 2023).

Further challenges experienced include a lack of bargaining rights, employment insecurity, instability and insufficient income to cover their basic needs (Benach et al., 2014).

## Employment in higher education institutions

Human resource (HR) policies within universities predominantly use two kinds of contracts to govern the employment of academics, namely, permanent contracts and fixed-term contracts (Lissoni et al., 2011).

Permanent employment contracts refer to individuals who are employed permanently and form part of the permanent staff complement of the university. These employees are afforded full benefits and employment security as their employment contract have no expiration date. Academics in permanent employment are exposed to career development initiatives, career planning, opportunities for conferencing and research funding, inclusion in departmental meetings and events, committee representation, and eligibility for promotion and career advancement. Fixed-term contract employment refers to individuals who are employed in a temporary capacity with an employment contract that has a start and an end date. Academics in temporary employment arrangements however are typically only remunerated for hours worked with little to no exposure to any other benefits (Allmer, 2018). This often has unintended consequences such as job precariousness and not having the ability to capitalise on the university knowledge base (Harney et al., 2014).

University policy is predominantly reliant on the utilisation of fixed-term contracts. Reasons for the use of temporary, short-term and fixed-term contracts include the fact that such contracts align with the university calendar, which consists of semesters and terms. These contracts therefore serve as the time-bases on which fixed-term contracts are based, thereby catering to the university's employment needs without having to incur additional employment costs. This is consistent with the neoliberal business model principles of university management practice (Blackham & Blackham, 2020). Although the employment of temporary, contingent and short-term academics is common practice, the employment experience, remuneration and benefits to the individual are significantly different for employees in permanent positions (Allmer, 2018; Bone, 2021; Leathwood & Read, 2020; McKenzie, 2021; Miller & Struve, 2020; O'Keefe & Courtois, 2019).

Permanently employed academics are confronted with juggling increasingly heavy teaching loads, the pressure for continuous professional development, balancing personal

and work life, the pressure to publish and navigating the changing higher education landscape (Bone, 2021; O'Keefe & Courtois, 2019). Academics on temporary contracts are confronted with similar challenges in addition to experiencing job precariousness continuously, financial insecurity, a lack of career advancement, and a lack of recognition and legal standing. Temporary employment contracts lead to job insecurity in the form of temporary employment offers, high turnover rate and significantly high levels of stress among academics with limited opportunities for promotion (Metcalf et al., 2005). The widespread university practices of using precariously employed academics have led to a rapid increase in the amount of academics with shorter term length of service, and these academics frequently choose to exit the university for more stable employment in industry (Balsmeier & Pellens, 2014). Furthermore, various studies have found that the levels of productivity of academics and researchers are impacted by employment conditions, work arrangements and the ability to manage their career development (Harney et al., 2014; Lissoni et al., 2011).

Employment practices that are predominantly dependent on temporary, fixed-term and short-term contracts could be detrimental to longer-term career development by prohibiting academics from accessing job opportunities and conditions of work that are critical to such development (Harney et al., 2014). Furthermore, there is growing concern about the impact of using temporarily employed academics on university policy around expectations for student learning and success (Hitch et al., 2018). In addition to this, capacity building within universities is severely affected because of the lack of longer-term career development and by implication the retention of qualified academics.

From a Human Resource Management perspective, it is imperative to identify employment practices, which may have a dire impact on the employee experience. Failing to identify and address these issues may lead to individual outcomes such as a lack of well-being (Benach et al., 2014) and a vacuum of employees wanting to procure permanent employment in academia (Allmer, 2018). Much of the information on experiences of precarious work conditions in higher education is outdated and applied in non-South African contexts. Therefore, the need exists to pinpoint precarious employment practices and the resultant effect of such practices on precariously employed academics in South African Higher Education settings. This study aims to explore and highlight the employment practices experienced by academics in precarious employment.

## Theoretical frame

This research study is underpinned by the talent management framework adapted from Musakuro (2022), which has been developed in the higher education sector. Talent management can be defined as a systematic process of acquiring, developing, retaining and placing individuals who can bring a unique value-add to organisations (Bussin, 2014). Furthermore, organisations need to develop a talent management policy to

ensure improved alignment of talent management strategy and processes (Meyer, 2016).

The framework of talent management adapted from Musakuro (2022) to the higher education highlights the employment processes and practices within universities.

### **Workforce planning**

*Workforce planning* entails the action plans to ensure human capacity needs are met (Grobler et al., 2006). Musakuro (2022) reported that current practices regarding workforce planning, both for permanent and non-permanent staff, are ineffective; therefore, the need for a talent management policy and aligned practices is evident.

### **Compensation and rewards**

*Compensation and rewards* entail the incentives an organisation provides for services rendered (Meyer & Kirsten, 2005). A negative perception of an institution's compensation and rewards policy could lead to a high turnover and loss of qualified and skilled academic staff (Musakuro, 2022).

### **Recruitment and selection**

*Recruitment and selection* entail the process of advertising a new vacancy and then screening, selecting and hiring new employees with the right capabilities for the required position (Wild et al., 2009). To ensure recruitment and selection activities are effective, they should be underpinned by written policies and procedures (Kleynhans et al., 2006). The norm within South African universities appears to be offering temporary employment contracts as a cost-effective measure to save on extended employment costs (Allmer, 2018).

### **Performance management**

*Performance management* entails a process whereby performance expectations are discussed with individual employees aligned to the objectives of the organisation (Mondy, 2008). Essential to the process of performance management is the development of a performance management policy. This serves as a guide to managing the performance of employees.

### **Success planning**

*Succession planning* entails planning for the replacements of senior staff when they eventually vacate their positions (Schreuder & Coetzee, 2011). Success planning in South African HEIs is not faring well. Institutions are particularly struggling with the promotion of junior to senior positions where senior employees are then leaving the institution (Musakuro, 2022). It is therefore a key imperative for HEIs to develop potential staff members with the aim of promoting continuity, minimising transitions when senior staff leave and fostering a positive organisational culture (Warnich et al., 2015).

### **Training and development**

*Training and development* entails interventions aimed at staff to develop their capabilities to enhance organisational performance (Warnich et al., 2015). Given the ever-changing

business environment, prioritising training and development is vital in ensuring the advancement of academic staff capabilities, allowing staff to advance their skills to stay relevant for current and future demands in higher education (Buthelezi, 2010).

### **Talent retention**

*Talent retention* entails various initiatives aimed at retaining valued members of staff (Bussin, 2014). Research shows institutions of higher learning in South Africa appear to be doing fairly well in terms of managing employee retention with a lower turnover rate (Musakuro, 2022). Furthermore, despite a number of academic staff members being dissatisfied at work, they are not inclined to leave the institution. Perhaps institutions could then strategise around the area of talent management and develop a comprehensive strategy to ensure that not only are the right people employed in the right role and at the right time but also those qualified and skilled academic talent are retained to ensure continuity and succession.

## **Research design**

### **Research approach**

The study is grounded in the qualitative approach to yield a descriptive view of the area of investigation using the language of the participants with limited inferences (Kim et al., 2016). This study was approached from an interpretivist-constructivist view where reality is based on individuals' engagement with their social environment as the focus is to understand the lived experiences (Burns et al., 2022).

### **Research method**

#### **Research setting**

The study was carried out in various public HEIs in South Africa. Three universities consented and provided ethical clearance to participate in the research study. Therefore, these three institutions were included in the study. The study participants were all on temporary, short-term employment contracts with a start date and end date.

#### **Entrée and establishing researcher roles**

Once permission for the research had been granted, the researchers prepared action plans to gather the data. The first author played the role of interviewer, while the second author was consulted throughout the data collection, analyses and interpretation of the data to ensure reliability and congruency in the analysis process. This consultation process also ensured that bias and prejudice were eliminated in the interpretation of findings (Creswell, 2013).

#### **Research participants and sampling methods**

The population of the study encompassed academics employed in non-standard employment contracts from various departments across three different HEIs. A total of 26 temporarily employed academic staff members from 15 different departments across three HEIs in South Africa

**TABLE 1:** Profile of research participants.

Participant	Type of employment/position	Current contract duration (months)	Gender	Age	Married	No. years in academia	No. of years in current role
1	Contract lecturer	6	Male	35	Single	2	2
2	Contract lecturer	6	Female	47	Married	17	4
3	Contract lecturer	6	Female	32	Single	6	2
4	Contract lecturer	6	Male	39	Single	2	2
5	Contract lecturer	6	Male	37	Married	10	3
6	Contract lecturer	6	Male	41	Married	5	3
7	Contract lecturer	6	Male	33	Single	5	2
8	Contract lecturer	12	Female	44	Divorced	10	3
9	Part-time lecturer	12	Female	57	Married	5	5
10	Part-time lecturer	12	Female	30	Single	3	3
11	Part-time lecturer	11	Female	43	Married	10	3
12	Part-time lecturer	6	Female	39	Single	5	5
13	Fixed-term lecturer	24	Female	40	Single	10	5
14	Part-time contract	12	Female	58	Married	25	2
15	Contract lecturer	10	Male	22	Single	2	2
16	Contract lecturer	12	Female	51	Married	6	1
17	Fixed-term contract lecturer	12	Female	34	Single	3	3
18	Lecturer	12	Female	32	Co-habiting	7	5
19	Contract lecturer	12	Male	56	Married	4	4
20	Researcher	3	Female	35	Married	6	6
21	Part-time lecturer	6	Female	38	Married	6	4
22	Part-time lecturer	12	Female	42	Married	8	8
23	Part-time lecturer	10	Female	56	Married	11	11
24	Contract lecturer	10	Female	42	Married	8	8
25	Contract lecturer	10	Female	40	Married	5	5
26	Contract lecturer	5	Male	25	Single	2	2

formed part of this study. These academic staff members were employed under the category of contract lecturers (10), fixed-term lecturers (2), part-time lecturers (6), lecturers (4) and researchers (4) (Table 1). Participants self-identified their appointment grade according to their contract stipulation. To recruit participants for this study, a purposive sampling method was utilised. Purposive sampling ensures the selection of individuals who meet the selection criteria and who hold broad and important views about the phenomena in question and, as such, should be included in the sample (Mason, 2002; Robinson, 2014). A general invitation was sent out to academic staff via the university communication channel to recruit potential participants with a link to follow for further participation in the study. Participants answered a call for research participants with non-standard and temporary precarious employment status. Once potential participants provided their contact information, interviews were scheduled with each participant.

#### Data collection method

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. This allowed participants the opportunity to further elaborate on their responses and insights through probing by the researcher. Questions such as 'What are the biggest problems or issues concerning temporary contract work from your point of view?' was asked. The data were collected between April 2022 and July 2022. The interviews were conducted online through the Zoom platform, which were audio recorded. Most of the interviews lasted between 40 min and 50 min. Informed consent was obtained before commencing audio and video recording.

#### Data analysis

The interview data were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The data set was analysed using the thematic analysis of Braun and Clarke (2006). The objective was to identify, analyse and formulate themes in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Preliminary coding of the data was carried out with the aim of identifying patterns in the data. The researchers then systematically verified and reformulated codes and themes in the iterative process to meaningfully cluster and categorise themes emerging from the data. An initial coding template was formulated with various versions of the coding template until a final consensus was reached between the researchers. The template was applied to a subset of the data set to further verify the data and modify it as necessary.

#### Strategies employed to ensure data quality and integrity

The trustworthiness criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability were considered to safeguard the integrity of the study given the qualitative nature of the research (Nieuwenhuis, 2016). Credibility was established through the first author consulting with the second author where scholarly guidance was provided by the experienced researcher in the form of peer debriefing. Peer debriefing provided an opportunity for richer insights and greater learning (Guba & Lincoln, 1982). Transferability was established by the researchers who provided a comprehensive account of the research context and methodology. Dependability was established by means of availing the raw data in the form of interview notes for



scrutiny. Confirmability could also be established by scrutinising the available data for further corroboration by other researchers.

## Findings and discussion

The findings emanated from the data gathered for this study. The aim was to explore and highlight the employment experience of contract academics within South African universities. The data were contextualised through the Talent Management Framework (Musakuro, 2022), which consists of workforce planning, compensation and rewards, recruitment and selection, performance management, succession planning, and training and development. Through the thematic analysis conducted, nine themes stood out, namely:

1. *A lack of job orientation and onboarding;*
2. *Last-minute contract offers;*
3. *Vague employment contract terms;*
4. *A lack of employment benefits;*
5. *A lack of rights and legal standing;*
6. *A lack of career development and funding opportunities;*
7. *Unfair work demands;*
8. *A lack of performance feedback;*
9. *A lack of HR and organisational support.*

### Theme 1: A lack of job orientation and onboarding

Most participants did not receive job onboarding and orientation. This is especially challenging as the working environment and institutional systems are then unfamiliar to these workers. These systems form an integral part of carrying out employee tasks and duties. As illustrated in the comments, employees are expected to perform their duties without the necessary introduction and training on how to use these systems:

*'I was in at the deep end when I started out. I didn't know the systems, I didn't know anything and coming from another institution.'* (Participant 2, female, contract lecturer)

*'No onboarding or orientation to get individuals started. Contract was not contractually explained. First appointment was as an assistant lecturer. I learned from example from other lecturers.'* (Participant 4, male, contract lecturer)

*'There was absolutely no onboard, for instance, when I arrived for the first time, which was the most difficult year, for that first year. Also, zero, and this is even more important, zero handovers from the previous contract lecturer. You are in the deep end.'* (Participant 7, male, contract lecturer)

Scholars have reported similar findings in terms of contract academic staff experiencing a lack of socialisation into their role as well as socialisation with their permanent departmental counterparts (Bolitzer, 2019; Drake et al., 2019). The successful integration of new employees into the organisation is a vital process for every new employee as well as the organisation (Perrot et al., 2014). This is an important occurrence in any new employee's life, which entails navigating and adjusting to a new role, reaching performance expectations and forming internal networks. Contract employees are new members to

the organisation, they are required to assimilate into different procedures and other aspects of the organisation, which can be a stressful experience (De Cuyper et al., 2008). Previous research has extensively explored the significant impact of organisational socialisation on the behaviour and attitudes of employees (Alalwan et al., 2022).

### Theme 2: Last-minute contract offers

The majority of the participants indicated that they received contract offers at the last minute. This placed employees under undue stress and anxiety. Employees were uncertain of whether they had employment for the next month, term, semester or year. Most receive notifications on short notice, with some participants indicating notification a mere week before the commencement of classes. This leaves inadequate time for course design and planning for the term, semester or year. Furthermore, the stress of having to navigate unfamiliar systems, last-minute contract offers, and inadequate time to prepare for teaching and facilitation all impact on the performance of these academics:

*'I was contracted the first time two weeks before the module starts and it takes quite a bit of time for preparations for presenting the modules. If you have not taught something before you really need to prep well in order to be able to teach. So, for me being so short of time really doesn't help with being adequately prepared to teach.'* (Participant 2, female, contract lecturer)

*'For the first few months of this year, like I was really worried because I knew that next year, I wouldn't have employment again. Like I won't be employed again in the department because I think the maximum years of employment, this type of employment, is like three years. And I was told by someone that this is the last year that you will be lecturing part-time in the department.'* (Participant 10, female, part-time lecturer)

Along with last-minute contract offers, temporary contract academics also noticed the anxiety they experience with regard to whether their employment contract will be renewed for another term, semester or year. These contract renewals are always left until the last possible moment with a very short notice period provided for acceptance of the terms. Again, this makes time management and financial planning extremely difficult, which leads to stress and anxiety:

*'Contract lecturers always have to save, make provisions for periods of unemployment, savings become essential to survival, which further leads to anxiety.'* (Participant 1, male, contract lecturer)

*'The one time, the second time that my one contract was not paid, it had an effect on some of my debit orders. My reputation gets tarnished and I end up with a bad credit score, which impacts my ability to invest in anything.'* (Participant 7, male, contract lecturer)

Richardson et al. (2019) in their study of 'sessional academics' found that participants were either offered contracts partway into their teaching period or were given short notice in terms of renewed contract offers or services no longer needed. These sessional or contract academics were thus in a state of uncertainty; one participant described her employment as off

and on and off again in the span of a minute (Richardson et al., 2019). From an institutional perspective, this practice negatively impacts the workforce planning within institutions. This practice impacts the ability to forecast and implement plans to ensure competent staff are in the right positions (Warnich et al., 2015). With a large portion of qualified academic staff close to retirement age, the higher education sector is faced with the challenge of having to attract and retain qualified younger academics to ensure an adequate pipeline of competent staff (Musakuro, 2022).

### Theme 3: Vague employment contract terms

Various participants reported that they received vague employment contracts, which often led to misinterpretation and exploitation. Furthermore, vague contract terms often also led to role ambiguity and confusion. Employees were often unclear about how to address student queries, how much autonomy they have in their role or position, and what the extent of their duties and responsibilities were. Many expressed that they often carry out tasks for which they do not receive payment. Because contracts of employment are not specific, employees are often exploited by senior staff. For example, in the form of having to carry out menial tasks and administrative work for which they do not receive reward or recognition. As evident in the following comments:

‘Yes, and what I found was that the contract of employment is very vague ... so there’s room for interpretation and misinterpretation and exploitation. That’s where I think the loopholes come in and yes, I think people are being taken advantage of.’ (Participant 10, female, part-time lecturer)

‘The contract just states lecturing and the number of hours. List of tasks and duties are not included in the contract of employment.’ (Participant 2, female, contract lecturer)

‘The contract is very vague, I had to figure things out for myself which was quite stressful and chaotic.’ (Participant 7, male, contract lecturer)

A detailed and unambiguous employment contract is essential to employees carrying out their duties and responsibilities as it provides a guide to the expectations of the job incumbent. This will ensure employees meet the job requirements as well as reaching the institutional goals. A clear contract of employment will also assist in adequately managing the performance of employees (Wandera, 2013). This will also aid in reducing staff turnover and ensuring constructive performance management to retain qualified staff and ensure an adequate pipeline within institutions.

### Theme 4: A lack of employment benefits

Most of the participants highlighted the lack of employment benefits in their employment contracts. Employees expressed a desire for access to basic employment-related benefits in the form of medical aid, leave, protection, recognition and rewards, and human resource support. Access to these benefits would greatly reduce the stress and anxiety that comes with precarious employment contracts:

‘As contract lecturers, we are not privy to applying for leave and receive no bonus or other incentives related to employment.’ (Participant 1, male, contract lecturer)

‘Contract staff aren’t offered leave, especially paid leave. Last year a colleague was in hospital with COVID, he could not get work because he was in hospital and, thus, did not get an income and one isn’t able to take off leave because you don’t get paid for those off days. These aspects hinder your ability to take care of all your duties and responsibilities, especially where your family is concerned.’ (Participant 1, male, contract lecturer)

‘Really just getting paid for your time and that’s it. Not aware of any benefits related to employment like pension or medical aid.’ (Participant 2, female, contract lecturer)

The lack of benefits experienced by contract academics was also indicated in a study by O’Keefe and Courtois (2019). Academics on contract who were paid hourly were found to be the most exploited as these academics did not receive leave or other benefits (O’Keefe & Courtois, 2019). Employee benefits and other forms of compensation serve as an important motivator for employees (Warnich et al., 2015). Organisations that offer a decent value proposition to their employees often find higher levels of employee satisfaction and positive organisation citizen behaviour (Warnich et al., 2015). The fact that contract academics are not entitled to benefits as part of their employment leads to an exacerbation of the struggle to meet their basic needs. Intrinsic rewards are most often what keep these contract academics in these precarious employment contracts. The lack of extrinsic rewards is what makes staying in these precarious employment roles the most challenging (Warnich et al., 2015).

### Theme 5: A lack of rights and legal standing

The majority of the participants stated that their rights in the organisation were neither highlighted nor discussed with them. Furthermore, their contract of employment did not refer to their rights and legal standing. These participants felt that given their temporary employment status, they have no rights or legal standing in the organisation:

‘Most of the employment laws are not applicable to you because you are in contract employment. Which is really unfair on the rest of us.’ (Participant 6, male, contract lecturer)

‘The weird thing for me is that it seems extremely illegal (against the employment laws in South Africa). Because I’m not being employed for a specific project. This is lecturing that is continuous. Every year it’s going to be the same lecturing that will continue. It is not as if it is a specific project and I’m being employed under a contract that says it’s a specific project, which it is not. It’s a full year employment, meaning the students are there, I’m lecturing them weekly and it’s not only one group, it’s two groups of students. So, it’s second years and fourth years and its research projects and it is journal clubs. I don’t understand how they can actually – Get away with it.’ (Participant 11, female, part-time lecturer)

This study demonstrated that contract academics experience a lack of legitimacy tied to their status in the institution. This was confirmed by a study where precariously employed academics were not featured on the web pages of academic

departments and were not eligible for funding and research support (O'Keefe & Courtois, 2019).

Moreover, contract academics are typically denied ownership of or recognition for their work (O'Keefe & Courtois, 2019). O'Keefe and Courtois (2019) also found that precariously employed academics do the same work as their colleagues without the same recognition or compensation. Similarly, Richardson et al. (2019) found a 'lack of professional respect' and rights accorded to contract staff and the value they add to the institution. Furthermore, when it comes to hourly paid or non-remunerated work conducted by contract academics, they have no legal protection against unfair dismissals and other types of unfair labour practices. (O'Keefe & Courtois, 2019). From an HR perspective, this practice makes institutions liable for unfair labour practices, should employees pursue legal action. It would be best practice to readdress policies and practices pertaining to the rights and legal standing of contract employees to ensure fair and equitable practices for all categories of employees.

### Theme 6: A lack of career development and funding opportunities

The majority of participants indicated that they were not aware of any career development opportunities within the institution. In their experience, temporary contract staff are ineligible to apply for career development and training opportunities. Also, access to funding for research and conferences is restricted to permanent staff members only. Furthermore, contract academics are also not exposed to career pathing and HR support to pursue a career in academia. Academics on contract are excluded from applying for promotion because of the temporary nature of their employment. Most of the participants expressed a desire for coaching and mentorship. Temporary academic staff are ineligible for these types of support:

'There is no access to funding and opportunities for development. In 2019, I did apply for funding for an international conference and was denied.' (Participant 6, male, contract lecturer)

'I do know that the website offers career section, but nothing from the department's side. It's never been communicated when a role is made available. I think career pathing is important. But they would probably most of the times be reasons with economic merit, or in this case, the reasons aren't always like that, so maybe that's why they keep it from people.' (Participant 7, male, contract lecturer)

'I've been hoping to apply for promotion to a senior lecturer, even if my hours stay the same. The HOD said that part-time employees are not allowed. So, I specifically asked her if I could apply and she said no, part-time employees are not allowed to apply. I've been told they are not applicable or accessible for part-time employees.' (Participant 11, female, part-time lecturer)

The ineligibility of contract academics for career development, promotion and conference funding opportunities was observed in similar research conducted by O'Keefe and Courtois (2019). This further emphasises that precarious employment not only influences material conditions but also the less than favourable treatment of temporarily employed academic staff. In the same

way, precariously employed academics are excluded from career development endeavours and get stuck in a cycle of temporary employment with little chance of obtaining secure employment (Courtois & O'Keefe, 2015). Lack of professional development opportunities was also noted by various other researchers (Bolitzer, 2019; Drake et al., 2019; Haviland et al., 2017; Kezar & Sam, 2013; Ott & Cisneros, 2015). Another study found that temporary academic staff are impacted in terms of economic security, autonomy, exclusion from departments, working relationships with colleagues and lack of career development opportunities (Bryson & Barnes, 2000). The training and development of staff is essential to address the current and future staffing needs of institutions. As universities are knowledge producers, it is paramount that staff are qualified and engage in continuous professional development with the necessary upskilling to remain relevant and leading in the instruction of higher learning. These opportunities should be available to staff of all categories.

### Theme 7: Unfair work demands

A large portion of participants viewed their work expectations as unrealistic and often unfair. Employees on temporary contracts have to carry a full-time workload yet are only remunerated according to part-time hours. Given the vagueness of their employment contracts, participants feel that institutions are permitted to have unrealistic work demand expectations. Only once employees have signed their contracts and commenced with their duties, do they fully grasp the extent of the work to be carried out. In most cases, the work demands do not do justice to the remuneration received. Participants feel demotivated because of constant work demands with no hope for permanent employment:

'We were never expected to create content. We were only expected to lecture already existing content. In addition to the fact that there was no onboarding, of how lecturing is done now, we had to create this new module. We were thrown in the deep end really with no assistance.' (Participant 7, male, contract lecturer)

'There's nothing that says, no but someone who is contract is actually not supposed to be a coordinator because it takes way too much hours to be a coordinator for that to be a part-time person's job.' (Participant 10, female, contract lecturer)

'The fact that it's so much work and we get, some of us get put into positions that we really, I don't think we are supposed to, and I mean this can also really impact your studies because I mean a lot of the people who have contracts, they are still doing their PhD, and because so much work gets put onto them, then the PhD ends up being put at the back burner, while in fact you're supposed to be finishing your PhD. So that to me is the thing that's most negative.' (Participant 10, female, part-time lecturer)

'Yes, so I mean it was clearly said to me from day one that you get paid for your hours that you lecture, you do not get paid for the hours that you mark any tests or the exams or tutorials.' (Participant 11, female, part-time lecturer)

It was found, in a similar study, that academics on contract reported inadequate payment and economic insecurity (Allmer, 2018). This is similar to the findings of this study. In



that study, Allmer (2018) found that young academics on temporary contracts were required to fulfil duties such as marking and lecturing without pay. Furthermore, the preparation time for teaching and marking is not sufficiently remunerated. Contract academics often have to work on weekends and after formal hours without remuneration to meet all the demands of the institution, sacrificing time spent with family and family responsibilities (Allmer, 2018). This was also found in another study, specifically, that contract academics had to carry out extensive unpaid work (such as preparation time for teaching) after normal working hours (Richardson et al., 2019). The practice of overloading contract academics with the grunt work and a lack of recognition for their work disadvantages the individuals aspiring to become fully fledged academics and also hinders an institution's reputation with the effect of losing qualified and experienced staff.

### Theme 8: A lack of performance feedback

The majority of the participants indicated that they did not receive feedback on their performance. They found this to be concerning as there is no way of measuring their performance to identify their developmental areas. Furthermore, these participants felt that the absence of any feedback on performance further reinforces the insecurity experienced by contract academics in terms of not knowing if they performed satisfactorily and, consequently, the uncertainty regarding contract renewal is exacerbated:

'No performance discussion, no way to know how effective you are doing your job or that your manager is satisfied with your work. No way to improve upon your craft.' (Participant 7, male, contract lecturer)

As confirmed by Kang et al. (2007), practices in HEIs should include the creation of both flexible work structures and incentive systems that include performance appraisal, pay and job security. Similarly, contract academics experienced a lack of mentoring opportunities and performance feedback, which resulted in limited opportunity for career progression (Richardson et al., 2019). The practice of the lack of performance feedback can hinder the institution's ability to reach its strategic goals as individual performances are not monitored for improvement and therefore not aligned with the institution's goals. This misalignment could cost institutions valuable resources as underperformance and misconduct could greatly impact the financial sustainability of institutions.

### Theme 9: A lack of Human resource and organisational support

Many participants did not receive any support from their HR department in terms of their contract of employment and employment-related matters. Participants struggled when they had an issue with payments, contract renewal, access to training and development opportunities or access to funding for research projects or conferences. Furthermore, contractors are unsure of the extent of their rights and responsibilities when it comes to student demands on academics' personal

time and concessions on deadlines for tests and assignments. Human resource's role in the employment of contract employees is seemingly neglected:

'Is there any recourse, and I mean, if I ask someone in HR, who would that be to ask? Because I've been trying to contact HR at the university and nobody answers the telephone. I don't even know who to ask.' (Participant 11, female, part-time lecturer)

'It would be to the benefit of the facility to actually assist all their staff in terms of HR support because I have felt zero support. And even things like I've done research, I've now published papers, and none of the funding that the university received is reaching me at the end. Not me personally, but my research. I don't have a research fund so I can't actually continue assisting other students and creating more research, which is what I'm doing. So I don't understand why part-time people should not be allocated their research funding device.' (Participant 11, female, contract lecturer)

Supporting the findings of this study, O'Keefe and Courtois (2019) found that precariously employed academics experienced a lack of workplace support, which contributed to these academics feeling a sense of exploitation from their respective institutions. Harney et al. (2014) found that the human resource framework often underrates contract workers' value based on the view that their capabilities and potential are not seen as important to the institution. These sentiments are consistent with the findings of this study. As explained by Kang et al. (2007), the main role of contract workers is to offer support to permanent employees, which disadvantages those in temporary, short-term contracts. Academics, irrespective of their contract status, constitute a valuable resource for universities; therefore, developing appropriate HR management strategies is of paramount importance (Feng et al., 2012).

### Practical implications

The findings of this study confirm that academics in precarious employment roles face numerous challenges that negatively impact their work experience, well-being and career progression. The nine themes identified through the thematic analysis – lack of job orientation and onboarding, last-minute contract offers, vague employment contract terms, lack of employment benefits, lack of rights and legal standing, lack of career development and funding opportunities, unfair work demands, lack of performance feedback, and lack of HR and organisational support – collectively paint a picture of a workforce that is undervalued, exploited and unsupported.

The experiences shared by the participants in this study are consistent with the findings of previous research on precariously employed academics (Allmer, 2018; Bolitzer, 2019; Courtois & O'Keefe, 2015; Drake et al., 2019; O'Keefe & Courtois, 2019; Richardson et al., 2019). The lack of job security, inadequate compensation, exclusion from career development opportunities and absence of workplace support create a challenging and often demoralising work environment for these academics.



The prevalence of these issues highlights the need for HEIs to re-evaluate their employment practices and policies related to contract academics. By addressing the themes identified in this study, institutions can create a more supportive and equitable work environment that recognises the value and contributions of all academic staff, regardless of their employment status.

Specific attention should be given to how the contract of employment process is managed and the lack of support available to academics on contract. University policies managing contract employees should be reassessed in comparison with what is afforded to permanently employed academics as it pertains to job orientation, employment benefits, employment contract, performance management, and career and professional development. The negative effects of contract employment on the health and well-being of incumbent employees should be mitigated.

In a broader sense, the higher education sector in South Africa plays a vital role in providing oversight and input in the governance of the higher education sector. Consequently, the sector is challenged to explore ways to offer guidance and assistance to institutions to ensure decent work for all as mandated by the Sustainable Development Goals (UNSDG, 2015). In this study, the problem areas were mostly centred around workforce planning in terms of how the contract processes are managed, the lack of rights contract employees have and the lack of organisational support. Research shows that employees' level of performance, innovation and carefulness often increase when they perceive a greater level of organisational support (Patterson et al., 2004). These are the areas that HR departments within HEIs have to address to ensure that employment experiences are fair and equitable for all categories of staff. It should be noticed that the theme of succession planning did not feature in the data. This could likely be because of the short-term nature of these employment contracts. It further shows that contract academics are not being considered for permanent employment academic roles and succession planning as part of the talent management practice within HEIs becomes irrelevant as it pertains to non-permanent staff.

### Limitations and recommendations

This study was limited to the perspectives of academics in precarious employment roles within three public universities in South Africa. Future research endeavours could include more institutions for an even broader range of perspectives. In addition, it could include perspectives of private HEIs. Furthermore, the aim of the study and the findings relate to employee's views in relation to their employment experience. Further studies could triangulate these findings with views from line managers and HR departments in universities.

### Conclusion

This study aimed to explore contract academic views on university employment practices. The findings show a negative employment experience for academics on contract in

terms of job orientation, employment contracting, absence of human resource support, a lack of access to basic employment benefits, employee rights, performance feedback, and career development and support. By addressing the challenges faced by precariously employed academics, HEIs can foster a more inclusive and supportive work environment that attracts and retains talented individuals, ultimately enhancing the quality of education and research produced. As the higher education sector continues to evolve, it is imperative that institutions adapt their employment practices to ensure the fair treatment and support of all academic staff, thereby securing a sustainable and successful future for the sector.

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### Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no financial or personal relationship(s) that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

### Authors' contributions

S.S. and M.D.P. contributed to the formulation of the study from conception, design, analysis as well as the interpretation of the results. Both authors approved the final version of the article for submission.

### Ethical considerations

This study received ethical clearance from the Human and Social Sciences Ethics Committees of various universities: the University of the Western Cape (reference no.: HS21/5/32) and the University of Cape Town (reference no.: REC 2021/09/001).

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### Data availability

The data pertaining to this research is available from the corresponding author, S.S. upon reasonable request.

### Disclaimer

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