

‘I just feel very dispensable’: Exploring the connections between precarity and identity for academic literacy developers

Abstract: Precarious employment is a well-established feature in academia, with many lecturers, tutors and professional services staff on forms of fixed-term contract. It is especially a feature of academic development spaces, such as English for Academic Purposes (EAP) programmes, and academic staff and student development programmes. Precarity results in high staff turnover and undermines staff credibility and capacity; these issues may impact student success. For lecturers and tutors themselves, there are implications for professional identity and their sense of legitimacy within their role, department, university. Using data from qualitative surveys and interviews with academic literacy practitioners in South Africa, this article explores how being precariously employed affects agency and the development of a professional practitioner identity for those on fixed-term contracts. Using aspects of Archer’s social realist framework to theorise agency, we show how precarity impacts a sense of purpose and professional self within the university in relation to other academics and students.

Keywords: academic literacy development; agency; identity; Margaret Archer; massification; precarious employment; social realism

Introduction

Precarity in academia is a concept that has been widely researched in recent years (see Burton and Bowman, 2022; Mason and Megoran, 2021; Courtois and O’Keefe, 2015; Ivancheva, 2015). The rise of neoliberal managerialist cultures and practices in universities has meant that universities following the culture of New Public Management (NPM) behave more like corporations and less like publicly funded institutions. As a result, several universities have

increased the number of precarious or non-permanent employment contracts they offer. In essence, NPM enacts the neoliberal principle of competition and a free market, along with a smaller state and reduced public expenditure (Lorenz, 2012). This means that universities are in direct competition with one another – for students and staff, for grant money, and so on. To be competitive, you need to be relatively well-off, with the funds for new buildings, cutting-edge technology, smart accommodation, and more. For many universities facing reduced support from the government, this means trimming the wage bill and fixed-term contracts are less expensive than permanent ones; this is certainly a notable reason for the rise in precarious employment in recent decades.

Increased massification within higher education – a central feature of neoliberalism – has led to increased student numbers and thus also a greater need for lecturers and tutors. Many of these lecturers and tutors are employed on sessional or non-permanent contracts to reduce labour costs (Ivancheva, 2015; Wald and Harland, 2018), particularly in countries where governments have cut higher education funding (de Villiers and Steyn, 2009). Such cuts have led to universities being more reliant on student fees (Wald and Harland, 2018). Student numbers thus continue to increase as universities actively seek to recruit fee-paying students to increase their income. Yet, with the increase in numbers comes greater diversity of student needs and levels of preparedness for higher education study. This has salience for academic literacies development and those who teach in this field, which includes English for Academic Purposes (EAP), extended curriculum and foundation provision, and bridging courses for students entering the university for the first time.

The effects of precarity on lecturers and tutors have been documented by researchers exploring both the economic and psycho-social aspects of this phenomenon (Albayrak-Aydemir and Gleibs, 2023; Lopes and Dewan, 2015; Mason and Megoran, 2021). In this paper, we are particularly concerned with the psycho-social impacts of precarity, which relate to how

being on a non-permanent contract can impact people psychologically (i.e., how they develop a professional identity) and socially (i.e., how they develop a sense of belonging or mattering to the university). Researchers point to how precarious short-term contracts de-prioritise these staff members, leaving them feeling vulnerable and powerless to push back against overwork and exploitation (Lopes and Dewan, 2015). They are also often unable to enact the same kinds of academic agency their permanently employed and recognised counterparts may have, for example, in choosing what to teach, what projects to accept and turn down, and in projecting their career development goals into the future (Mason and Megoran, 2021). Early career academics, women, and people of colour are over-represented on precarious or short-term contracts (Arday, 2022; Elshafei, 2022; Begum and Saini, 2018), which further complicates the picture, as academia is still battling to transform deeply to be more anti-racist, anti-sexist, and more inclusive, equitable, and fair (CHE, 2022; Kangataran, 2023). The wider environment that academics are part of, and how open, accepting and nurturing that environment is, thus impacts how settled they feel, and how visible and invested in they feel as well. This is an important point to consider when discussing the effects of precarious employment on academics' sense of self-worth and their sense of being valued and valuable (Mason and Megoran, 2021; Elshafei, 2022).

We are especially interested in the effect of precarity on academics employed to teach and develop modules related to student academic literacies and learning (for example, EAP; extended curriculum or foundation/access modules; and writing tutoring or skills courses). Academic literacy practitioners in various international contexts (for example, the UK, Canada and Australia) have been affected by precarity, as the work they do is often done at scale and is regularly positioned on the 'margins' of academia (see, for examples, Breshears, 2019; Kadmos and Taylor, 2024). These margins are those physical and metaphorical spaces outside of or adjunct to the 'mainstream' curriculum students must study to attain their degree or

diploma (e.g., Breshears, 2019; Ding and Bruce, 2017; Hadley, 2015; MacDonald, 2016). This marginality may, for example, present as working in a set of temporary or out-of-the-way offices that are hard to find (physical marginalisation), being given tutorial or teaching time outside of students' core curriculum, or teaching literacies in disembedded or disconnected 'skills-based' modules (metaphorical marginalisation) (see Elshafei, 2022; Hathaway, 2015).

Many academic literacy practitioners across higher education contexts work in and across these 'extra' spaces – writing or language centres, student support centres, sessional EAP programmes – and many of them work on some form of short-term contract without any guarantees of extension or renewal (Elshafei, 2022; Corcoran and Williams, 2021; Hyland, 2018). Yet, as massification has increased and student diversity along with it, academic literacy development (ALD) writ large has become increasingly less 'adjunct' to core university business. Bruce (2022, 10), for example, argues that EAP has become 'a globalized subfield of language education'; ALD more broadly is widespread within and across the curriculum in many higher education contexts (Wingate, 2018; Clarence & McKenna, 2017; Thies et al., 2014).

In the South African higher education context, the positioning of academic literacy work has had a mixed history, the conceptual baggage of which still seems to impact how it is perceived in institutions. It is generally agreed that the history of ALD work in South African higher education took place in three phases (although this phased history is not true for all South African institutions). The first phase in the development of the field, in the 1980s, was largely socio-political apartheid liberalisation, mostly focused on supporting black students who were allowed to start attending historically white universities. These students were seen to have a 'language problem', and the work of academic literacy practitioners was focused primarily on helping students acquire English as a second language rather than on acquiring the literacy practices necessary for reading, writing and thinking in a higher education

environment (Clegg, 2009; Scott, 2009; Boughey and Niven, 2012; Boughey, 2013). The second phase (the late-1990s and the mid-2000s) began as universities formally diversified following the end of Apartheid and the publication of the 1997 White Paper (DoE, 1997). This phase was characterised by formal research on language and literacy, leading to a firm focus on helping students acquire generalised and specialised knowledge of valued literacy practices across the curriculum (Boughey and Niven, 2012). The third (and more-or-less current) phase continues this critical work, yet has also been characterised by a persistent remedial view of ALD. This remedial view of the work is largely in response to the diversity of the student body, the prevalence of university rankings as measures of success (and resultant pressure on retention and throughput), and the need for universities to shore up their reputations to recruit new fee-paying students (Boughey and McKenna, 2021; Clarence, 2019).

At several institutions, the legacy of this phased history is still realised through the interplay between the structural positioning of ALD work (whether it is positioned in an academic department or as a support service, whether practitioners are on permanent or precarious contracts) and institutional perceptions of what the work is and what it should aim to achieve (Joubert, 2023). This interplay between structural positioning and institutional perceptions can present in various ways. For example, at several institutions, long-term professional development training/workshops/opportunities are generally reserved for permanent staff. In contrast, training for precarious staff is generally limited to one-off or shorter-term ‘interventions’ to ‘upskill’ or help them reach the standard the university expects. This interplay can also be seen in the way that, despite many years of research by those in the field arguing for the value of systemic literacy and EAP development for all students, this work is still perceived by many in universities as remedial or optional support. This perception often means that there is little urgency around finding permanent funding for contracts and non-marginal office and teaching spaces for staff on these contracts. This perception also makes it

hard for those who are persistently seen as doing ‘optional’ rather than ‘core’ work in the university to challenge this positioning, and to change the minds of university leaders and discipline-based colleagues about the value of what they do.

The history and durability of the perceptions surrounding the work have meant that, despite the value of the work they do, many ALD and EAP professionals remain precariously employed. This has significant implications for how visible they are, how valued they feel, and the extent to which they feel able to invest in their ongoing professional development and work (see Elshafei, 2022). In turn, we argue that precarity has important implications for the work such practitioners do for and with students, all of whom need some form of academic literacy learning as they enter and move through their degree or diploma programme (Wingate, 2018; Thies et al., 2014). Ultimately, our aim in exploring the issue of precarity in the field of academic literacy is tied to the integral nature of this work to higher education. It is important to investigate the subjective experiences of practitioners who are ‘made precarious’ so that we can interrogate the ways in which we invest in, support, and develop these practitioners. Supporting precariously employed staff also means supporting the students they work with and students’ access to knowledge, learning, and success at and after university.

Theoretical Framework

This paper explores how precariously employed academic literacy practitioners exercise agency in constructing and negotiating their roles and sense of professional ‘self’ and identity. We have drawn on Margaret Archer’s (1996) social realist framework to undertake an analysis of agency in our data, through looking at the underlying structures and cultures around ALD work that shape or influence agency enactment and identity-making. Archer (1996) explains that ‘structure’ is a useful term to refer to patterns in social behaviour, physical material interests and resources. She provides examples of structures that include race, gender,

educational systems, organisational structures, and social class (Archer, 1996). Structures are also a set of ‘internally related objects’ and as such, can together form larger structures (Danermark et al., 2002, p. 178); for example, gender and race are often related within structures such as a research supervision environment, where based on your gender and race, you may receive different treatment than others and have access to different resources and means for success (see Dinsmore and Roksa, 2023). In this paper, the structures we are interested in are the precarious contract itself, and structures that shape how funding decisions are made, how academic units, centres or departments operate, and how professional development opportunities are made available to academics. Structures all operate in line with, or against, prevailing culture, which is usually less visible than structures can be, and more enduring or resistant to change (Boughey and McKenna, 2017).

Culture is constituted by ideas, ideologies, beliefs, theories, and values, which become accepted norms of behaviour (Archer, 1996). Cultural systems can evolve over time due to the expansion of knowledge, research, and changing beliefs (Archer, 1996). However, change within the cultural domain often proves difficult and takes place gradually compared to the speed with which structures can change. In this study, cultures largely play out as the ways in which ALD work is perceived by those within an institution, stemming from the phased history discussed earlier. These perceptions run on a continuum from ALD work as an optional extra form of language support for some students to a set of critical practices all students need to learn. Culture in this study also links to the ways in which power plays out in an institution, and who is given preference or priority over others. For example, even if a head of department creates a new programme for staff development, staff on a temporary contract may not be able to register if there is a pre-existing culture of prioritising the development of staff in permanent roles.

Alternatively, an academic leader can cultivate an enabling culture around, say, professional development even where the formal structures (a policy) may not necessarily make this possible by setting up informal opportunities to grow and learn, such as journal clubs, networks and so on. We have applied this concept in relation to structure and agency, to understand how and why the participants in our study who seem to have enabling structures still struggle to feel valued, recognised and able to invest in the development of professional practitioner identity. We postulate that this is because the cultural positioning and understandings of academic literacy development and related work, discussed in the opening sections of the paper, persist despite structural change. And this persistence makes the full exercise of practitioner agency challenging at times.

In discussing her conceptualisation of agency, Archer acknowledges that individuals possess the ‘properties and capacities to self-monitor their lives, mediate the structural and cultural aspects of society, and thereby contribute to societal perpetuation and transformation’ (2002, p. 19). This means that, both individually and collectively, people have the capacity to act, to make changes, even though there may be limitations imposed on them by the structures and cultures they are part of that can be hard to mitigate or overcome. People have the capacity to contribute to change as well as to keep things as they are with the choices they make and the ways in which they respond to existing cultural and structural conditions. People also have the capacity to set goals and work towards achieving them. However, we do need to acknowledge, again, the relationality of Archer’s framework here: structure, culture and agency do not act independently of one another, they are always acting in relation to one another, at times enabling and at others constraining choice, change and action.

Our focus in this paper is on exploring the experiences of the sampled precariously employed academic literacy practitioners and the effects of precarity on their sense of belonging, or ‘mattering’ (Schlossberg, 1989), and agency. We thus primarily focus on an in-

depth exploration of the cultures that surround the precariously employed academic literacy practitioners in this study and their sense of what enables or constrains their agency in constructing and enacting a professional practitioner identity and sense of self.

Methodology

The data analysed for this study have been drawn from a larger PhD study which sought to examine the ways in which academic literacies practitioners construct and reconstruct their professional identity considering structural and cultural forces that affect them (Joubert, 2023). Convenience sampling was used to identify South African higher education institutions willing to participate. Every effort was made to ensure that the sample included an even spread of different kinds of institution – traditional, comprehensive and universities of technologyⁱ. The final sample included two universities of technology, one comprehensive university and six traditional universities. It is important to note that the data is skewed towards precariously employed academic literacy practitioners working at traditional institutions. This is an important point since higher education institutions in South Africa are stratified with different recruitment and employment policies and are constituted by different student cohorts with varying levels of support needs (Chetty, 2014).

Data for the larger study were generated in three phases: questionnaires, interviews, and document analysis. As we are looking at participants' accounts of agency and identity-making, we are looking only at the open-ended responses in the questionnaires and the interview data in this paper. An online questionnaire was circulated to participating institutions and any academic literacy practitioners were invited to respond, regardless of contract type or term. The sampling method used was a mix of maximum variation and snowball sampling. Although the primary researcher (Joubert) selected a wide range of participants who related to the aim of the study to achieve as heterogenous a sample as possible (Onwuegbuzie and Leech, 2007; Etikan,

Musa and Alkassim, 2016), participants who responded were asked to share the questionnaire link and participant information form with other colleagues who may have been interested in participating. The questionnaire primarily explored what structures and cultures exist within the field of academic literacies development and how these might impact practitioner agency and professional identity construction in constraining and/or enabling ways. There were 96 responses in total across the nine participating universities.

In the second phase of data generation, semi-structured interviews were held with those participants who had volunteered themselves as potential interview candidates in the questionnaire. In total, 15 first interviews were conducted, and follow-up interviews were conducted with ten of the 15 participants, most of these employed within traditional universities (similar to Russell Group universities in the UK). The kinds of teaching they were doing at the time and the different structures and cultures they were part of would have informed their responses, although across the dataset we did not note major differences in experiences related to university type. The aim of the interviews was to explore in more depth how academic literacy practitioners construct and reconstruct their professional identities considering certain structural and cultural forces that surround them and how these impact the work they do.

Although the larger project did not originally aim to investigate precarity in depth, there were several precariously employed academic literacy practitioners represented in the questionnaire data and in the interview data, and thus precarity was highlighted as an issue for further exploration. Thus, for this paper, all data were inductively coded and analysed using Atlas.ti in response to the research problem posed in the opening section of the paper. The ‘themes’ constructed from the data were then mapped against some of Archer’s core concepts (i.e., structure, culture, agency). The discussion in this paper centres around four precariously employed academic literacy practitioners from the interviews, Grace, Evelyn, Willow and Mila (all pseudonyms), along with insights from the anonymised questionnaire respondents. These

two data sources have enabled us to explore the individual and collective experiences of precarious employment in the field of academic literacies development in South Africa, noting the limitations mentioned above as regards the type of university and related funding and employment implications.

Before continuing, it is important to mention two acronyms we use moving forward for ease of reference and writing. From this point onwards, we refer to permanently employed Academic Literacy Practitioners as ‘ALPs’. For practitioners in precarious forms of employment, we will use the acronym ‘PALPs’ (Precarious Academic Literacy Practitioners). We have both, at various points in our careers, been both ALPs and PALPs, and our experiences have shaped, to some extent, our reading of the literature as well as our reading of the data (see Courtois and O’Keefe 2015). To mitigate an over-identification with participants, we drew on critical social theory as a lens to interpret the data and engaged in numerous conversations during the larger study that enabled us to reflect on our own experiences and separate these as far as possible from those of the participants, to allow their experiences to take the fore.

Findings and Discussion

In embarking on this research, it was first necessary to establish the extent to which precarious forms of employment are present for ALD practitioners at the sampled South African higher education institutions. Although the extent of precarious employment structures in ALD varied at the participating institutions, the data nevertheless showed that these precarious forms of employment follow a similar trend to the increase in precarious employment practices in higher education globally. In this study, 41 respondents (43%) (n = 96) reported that they were on some form of precarious contract, be it ad hoc (i.e., zero hours) or fixed term. Again, it is important to note that most of the questionnaire data was generated by staff in traditional institutions, and so this representation of precarious employment may differ from other kinds

of institution in South Africa. From this data, however, we can deduce that academic literacy development work and language teaching at the nine sampled institutions have been impacted by the effects of massification and New Public Management, specifically in relation to the number of students who need academic literacy support and the cost-cutting measures that are part and parcel of the neoliberal university (Arday, 2022).

This context enables a better understanding of some of the driving forces behind precarity in this fieldⁱⁱ. The larger study from which this paper draws shows how, at many South African higher education institutions, the work of ALPs (and ALPs themselves by implication) is done, literally or metaphorically on the periphery of their institutions, as discussed earlier in this paper.

The discussion of the findings will be divided into three sections. The first section explores the ways in which the PALPs experienced their precarity by focusing on the institutional cultures that surrounded them and their sense of agency. Specifically, we focus on how they perceived their precarity and how they believed their institutions perceived them, in turn. The second section focuses on how precarity has impacted the PALPs. We pay specific attention to the ways in which their sense of professional identity and self has been impacted, how their precarity has affected the work they do (and feel able to do), and how their experiences of professional development and support have been affected by their status as precariously employed. In the final section, we consider possible responses to these experiences from an institutional perspective.

The experience of precarity

The most dominant thread that emerged from the PALP data was that of uncertainty and insecurity. This was an expected finding since insecurity is a key dimension of precarious employment (Elshafei, 2022; Courtois and O’Keefe, 2015). In our study, this insecurity and

uncertainty were largely linked to anxiety and demotivation, which participants felt in response to the continuous uncertainty regarding their future work situations. One questionnaire participant, for example, mentioned that their greatest challenges with working in the field of ALD were '[t]he uncertainty of contract positions' and '[j]ob security'. Another questionnaire participant stated that '[w]orking as a yearly contract worker creates a space of great anxiety (will I get a position again next year?) and uncertainty'. This anxiety is another typical feature of precarity; the uncertainty about one's career pathway and the inability to project into the future and plan a career and a life around that (for example, securing a mortgage) (Lopes and Dewan, 2015).

Living in a state of anxiety is, in turn, linked to the sense of (un)belonging (Burton and Bowman 2022; Burton 2021) – often experienced as powerlessness – that some participants reported experiencing as a direct result of being precariously employed. This (un)belonging – of not 'mattering' to the university (Schlossberg, 1989) – is not only to their department or unit but also to the broader higher education space, which is keeping with research into the experiences of precarity in higher education: insecurity, anxiety, (un)belonging are linked to a broader sense of powerlessness and social subordination (Lopes and Dewan 2015; Mason and Megoran 2021). When asked how she saw herself fitting into higher education, Mila commented:

I don't. [laughs]. It's tough... I just feel very dispensable. But I think that that's probably par for the course in academia, generally, in terms of the models that academia seems to follow all over the world, and that it takes an awful lot to prove yourself. And even then, that might not be good enough to be taken seriously enough to be granted a permanent position.

325 Mila particularly noted that her dispensability seemed to be ‘par for the course in academia’
326 and that even if she continued to prove her worth, it might never be good enough to be given
327 permanent employment. Her sense of individual marginalisation was compounded by working
328 in a field that is deprioritised relative to core academic work by being positioned as a
329 professional or academic ‘service’ in several South African higher education institutions
330 (Joubert, 2023). Mila expanded upon the above point to include the ways in which her sense of
331 not mattering was compounded by the perceptions of others at her institution of her as a
332 precariously employed staff member. These perceptions were tied specifically to respect.

333

334 ...as contract lecturers, [the rest of the institution] don't really equate us with academics,
335 as such, or practitioners. We're just sort of filling a role and fulfilling a service that
336 needs to be done. ... I think there's definitely more respect for permanent staff....I think
337 possibly...it's because of the perception that we're not doing it full-time. But I mean,
338 obviously, a lot of us aren't doing it full-time, not because we don't want to but because
339 no one's going to hire us permanently. So, I don't think it's seen as us dedicating our
340 lives or our careers to it. And possibly, that's why we get undermined ...

341

342 In this extract, Mila specifically talked about the perception her institution has of her as a
343 service provider rather than an integral, valued member of staff; she described herself as ‘just
344 sort of filling a role and fulfilling a service’. This is important because employees experience
345 work as truly meaningful when their conception of their professional identity matches that of
346 their work context (Albayrak-Aydemir and Gleibs 2023). So, even though Mila may have seen
347 herself as an academic practitioner, she was acutely aware that there were people at her
348 institution who did not. This ultimately led to her feeling disrespected and disregarded by her
349 peers.

350 Grace made a similar point about her institution's perceptions of precarious staff.
351 Specifically, she talked about contract positions being understood as 'filler positions':

352

353 ...in general, my understanding is that the [part-time lecturing position] is considered
354 like [sic] a developmental position, or like a... a filler position where sometimes if they
355 can't find a lecturer at the right level, they'll then get [a part-time lecturer] because that
356 course needs to be taught, but they just can't find the person to teach it so they'll take
357 [a part-time lecturer]...One of the stipulations is that...there's no guarantee of
358 employment or anything like that....So yeah...[a] precarious professional context.

359

360 The excerpts above evidence Mila's and Grace's sense of the perceptions of them as service
361 providers who were not seriously pursuing a recognised academic career; as such, they were at
362 a remove from the centre, which is inhabited by those who are seen to be 'dedicating [their]
363 lives' to the field by virtue of their permanent employment.

364 Evelyn echoed this mismatch between how PALPs are positioned with relation to
365 existing structures and hierarchies of mattering and their own desires and intentions when she
366 spoke about the ways in which she felt unable to fully commit to her academic literacy role,
367 despite it being a leadership role, because she was temporary and largely functioned on the
368 periphery of her institution. This underscores the ways in which precarity is not just about
369 having a temporary contract, but also about 'lacking power by positional differences'
370 (Albayrak-Aydemir and Gleibs, 2023; Lopes and Dewan, 2015). This powerlessness
371 interweaves with the anxiety mentioned earlier.

372

373 I think it's difficult to really see your role as being part and parcel of the institution, of
374 a faculty, because...my position was temporary. And I think that's...the main reason

375 why I left... my status as being a contract employee...was a problem for me, because I
376 felt that I couldn't really contribute, you know, I've always been unsure about, "could I
377 say this, could I do this?" You know, "are they expecting me to do this?" There's always
378 that uncertainty.

379
380 The cited extracts shed light on key challenges experienced by PALPs, especially the ways in
381 which precarious employment can work to constrain the sense of agency that PALPs feel
382 ('could I say/do this?'). Precarity, in this sense, however, seems to go beyond the structural –
383 contract type – and affects the ways in which PALPs can 'be' in the higher education space.
384 This is in keeping with Burton and Bowman (2022, 500) who refer to precarity as a 'social and
385 cultural "condition of being"' that can shape one's selfhood, one's relations with others, and
386 the paradigms that one values'.

387 388 ***The Effects of Precarity***

389 The sense of (un)belonging of the sampled PALPs also impacted their career progression and
390 professional development in two ways: 1) through a lack of institutional investment in PALPs'
391 professional development; and 2) through a lack of PALPs' investment in their own
392 professional development. Professional development here does not refer to standard training
393 that typically takes place during an academic year related to, for example, curriculum design,
394 teaching, assessment, and administrative processes. Rather, professional development refers to
395 the additional or continued enhancement which typically takes place throughout a person's
396 career, for example, training on writing grant proposals and leading research projects, funding
397 and support for conference attendance, networking opportunities, and so on.

398 Regarding point 1 above, if institutions are reticent to invest in the professional
399 development of precariously employed staff, they limit not only the agency of those staff but

also the potential impact those staff members can have in the institution and in the higher education space more broadly. A questionnaire participant, for example, made this comment: ‘I really wish there was more opportunity for development for staff. It sometimes feels as if opportunities [sic] for professional growth could be communicated more readily, especially to “lower ranking” employees’. The participant’s reference to ‘lower ranking’ employees echoes Thorkelson’s (2016) discussion of the distance between ‘elite’ academics (i.e., permanently employed academics or tenured researchers) and the so-called ‘precarious underclass’ who lack cultural capital (see also Burton and Bowman, 2022; Mason and Megoran, 2021). Willow, a PALP who had recently become a permanent staff member at her institution, also mentioned the lack of investment in PALPs’ professional development that often takes place in the field of ALD.

...the problem also with contracts is there's not a lot of progression for those people on those contracts. And that is quite sad because these people are quite passionate about what they do. And because of the nature of this, the financial nature of this, you can't grow and cultivate people who are on one-year contracts, or not as well as you would have would like to because they might leave in a year's time or two years' time.

In her comment above, Willow pointed out an important tension that pervades the structures of the neoliberal institution: financial expenditure and risk. There is a certain amount of risk that institutions weigh up when considering the amount of time and money they invest in the professional development of PALPs or other precariously employed staff, since these staff may choose to seek permanent work elsewhere. However, institutions are more likely to retain staff, even those on precarious contracts, if they invest in them. In a study focused on the professional development of precarious academics, Daddow et al. (2023) found that when institutions invest

in the professional development of precariously employed teachers, it not only leads to increased teacher capacity but also to a sense of purpose, increased scholarship, career progression, and greater organisational commitment more generally. In our study, Willow mentioned that her institution had to limit investment in PALPs' professional development having weighed up the time and cost of such cultivation against the likelihood of retaining the PALPs year-on-year.

A lack of institutional investment in professional development opportunities may constrain a PALP's sense of agency and professional identity. This constraining effect is often compounded by PALPs' limiting their own professional development for pragmatic and financial reasons (e.g., paying for their own professional memberships or conference attendance), which is another way in which a sense of (un)belonging can negatively impact the career progression of PALPs (point 2 mentioned above). One questionnaire participant, for example, spoke to this point: 'The uncertainty...leads to you stunting your own development in the field (should I invest in doing an extra degree/certificate if I am unsure of my place in the field?)'. Other comments from PALP participants highlighted the difficulty with investing personal time, finances, and energy in professional ALD development opportunities when, pragmatically, they need to spend time looking for more permanent employment opportunities or work for multiple institutions or departments at the same time to make ends meet. One respondent said that '[i]f you are [a] contract worker you have no job security and that impacts on your output as some of your time is spent looking for a job elsewhere', while another commented that '[a]s largely contract-based staff we cannot always provide the intensity of support that students need, due to the necessity of taking on outside work to supplement income'.

A complex cycle thus emerges: limiting the financial and time investment in PALPs can constrain their professional development and, as such, the impact they can have on

students' development of academic literacies. PALPs often look for permanent employment elsewhere and thus may limit their own development in the field of ALD, which can result in a smaller pool of highly qualified and experienced candidates when permanent employment opportunities arise. Part of this, surely, is a limited sense of professional practitioner identity, as they may feel like they are doing a series of jobs rather than building a career which coheres around future-facing plans and action.

Breaking the cycle

This complex cycle illustrates the intricate interplay of institutional and sector-wide structures and cultures, which in turn act to either constrain or enable PALPs' agency within their institutions. Breaking this complex cycle is thus important to enabling PALPs' greater sense of agency and their investment in the field of ALD, which will enable the nurturing of a stronger, coherent professional identity. Interestingly, even many of the permanently employed ALPs still seemed to experience a sense of precarity, in its literal sense, by virtue of functioning within the margins. Although ALPs are not the focus of this paper, it is still important to note that the experience of precarity in the broader field of academic literacy seems to extend beyond the structural (i.e., contract-type) to the cultural (linked to the ways in which the work is often perceived by some institutions as being augmented support [Joubert, 2024]). In other words, ALPs more broadly may have a longer-term relationship with precarity, which impacts the ways in which they construct and reconstruct their professional identities (see Albayrak-Aydemir and Gleibs, 2023; Joubert, 2023).

Breaking this cycle, however, will require intentional action from multiple stakeholders in higher education institutions. From an institutional standpoint, part of breaking this cycle is for management teams (both top- and middle-management) to be more intentional about the investment made in PALPs. Staff training that is accessible to all staff, is one such example.

475 Investing in the professional development of precariously employed staff is another. Mila made
476 this clear when she spoke about how enabled she felt when one of her line managers invested
477 in her professional development by working collaboratively with her on research projects.

478

479 ...we've got Dr. X, he's the one who likes us to work collectively on things. And he's
480 very good about providing us as lecturers and academics with like, sort of agency. He's
481 co-written articles with a few of us, I've co-written two with him. And a few of my other
482 colleagues have as well, which I think is very nice. ...gives us a foot in the door and
483 makes us feel like actual academics.

484

485 This gave her multiple chances to enact her agency, develop research skills, and produce
486 published research, which is a highly valued form of knowledge production in higher
487 education, giving her greater legitimacy at her institution and personally (feeling like an 'actual
488 academic'). This kind of management-level support for PALPs is key not only to their own
489 professional development but also to the further development of ALD as a field, which is vital
490 for widening student access and success. Having said this, however, it is also important to note
491 that PALPs are often not paid for this kind of developmental work or for undertaking research.

492 Mila highlighted this:

493

494 I think that's finding my own time, because I'm only contracted for...on paper, for six
495 hours a week...I think it's four hours a week this semester. So, ... that's for the lectures
496 and for marking. So, it's basically if I have any time, over and above that, I'll spend it
497 researching.

498

499 Mila's reference to 'if [she has] any time' highlights another part of the challenge of precarity:
500 having research experience and being published is usually a requirement for staff hoping to
501 secure a permanent academic post. Using and creating research is, of course, beneficial to the
502 field itself and to the provision of ALD support. However, this kind of work most often takes
503 place in a PALP's private capacity and in their private time, since most are only paid for
504 measurable hours (i.e., their hours spent teaching and marking).

505 To incentivise and encourage research done by contract staff, managers could consider
506 including a set number of research hours into the contracts of precariously employed staff.
507 Those staff could then be fully included in researcher development training and development
508 often reserved for those on teaching and research pathways or in permanent roles. Further,
509 those precariously employed staff should be able to collect any research rewards that come
510 from publishing research (often sponsored by national research bodies such as the National
511 Research Foundation in South Africa, or the Research Excellence Framework in the UK).
512 Although it is true that not all institutions expect PALPs to undertake research due to their
513 teaching-focused contracts, having published research remains a central criterion considered
514 by universities when making permanent academic appointments. For most of the participants
515 in this study, being seen as an 'actual academic' by their peers and the university meant using
516 and creating research in the roles, and this was important not only for external legitimacy but
517 for their own identity-making as well.

518 Key to breaking the cycle, however, is for ALPs and PALPs themselves to continuously
519 engage with their institutions – other academics, other precariously appointed staff,
520 management, and students – to shape more accurate understandings of what ALD work is, what
521 it aims to achieve, and how it plays an integral role in student success. Correcting incorrect
522 perceptions of the work will contribute to a better understanding of value, thus consolidating
523 its legitimacy, and, in turn, the value and legitimacy of the practitioners who do the work.

524

525 **Conclusion**

526 Precarious employment is common in fields such as academic literacy development
527 (encompassing EAP, writing centres, generic provision of ‘study skills’, and varying forms of
528 embedded literacies development). The situation in South Africa has been unevenly
529 documented and few studies have looked across the sector at multiple universities to understand
530 PALPs’ experiences of precarious employment and their agential capacity in relation to their
531 roles. This paper, and the wider study it draws on, contributes to our understanding of the
532 effects and impact of precarious employment within academic literacy development spaces,
533 which is important since the working conditions of staff impact the learning conditions of
534 students (Courtois and O’Keefe 2015). Our aim with this research was to consider the impact
535 of precarity on those staff whom institutions rely heavily on to ensure that students receive
536 equitable and quality literacies learning. Drawing on the questions raised by Courtois and
537 O’Keefe, (2015, 61), we wanted to think about the impact of precarity on staff and students in
538 a system where students needing the most support are often taught by precariously employed
539 staff whose working conditions make it difficult to adequately support students (see also
540 Elshafei, 2022).

541 The precarious status of PALPs in this research did have a constraining effect on their
542 professional identity, although there were also notable enabling conditions. The first constraint
543 was a constant sense of insecurity, which played out through a lack of motivation and of a sense
544 of (un)belonging, as a professional, to the field and broader institution. When we feel that we
545 do not belong, we feel less visible, and in feeling less visible we are less likely to continue to
546 ‘fight for space’ when the space does not seem to be there for us. Ongoing precarity in contract
547 type and forms of professional support offered to ALPs may act to reinforce the cultural
548 perception of ALD as a marginalised entity that can be taught by ‘filler’ lecturers rather than

specialist practitioners. There were, however, some enablers that seemed to give the PALPs in this study a greater sense of legitimacy and professional identity, such as support from line managers and being involved in formal research – a form of knowledge production valued in higher education contexts.

It seems that precarity pervades the spaces that PALPs inhabit, working to shape the role of PALPs in ALD work and the ways in which they develop firm, authentic and critical practitioner identities. This has important implications for bringing new, critical voices into the field (for example, in South Africa and the UK where decolonising the curriculum and knowledge are important current debates), and for growing and expanding the field to include practitioners who are representative of the students they work with in terms of race, gender, nationality, home and school background, sexual orientation, ablebodiedness, culture and ethnicity. In essence, if precarious contracts are here to stay, our argument is that universities that are serious about the environment they create for both staff and student flourishing need to make more intentional investments in the professional development and support of academic literacy practitioners and specialists. Doing so will expand their sense of agency, create space for new perspectives, and contribute to enhancing their role in enabling wider student success.

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688

689 Notes

ⁱ Traditional universities offer more theoretically orientated qualifications, whereas comprehensive universities and universities of technology must focus 60% of their research output on applied research and 30% of their qualifications on technology-based programmes) (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2022).

ⁱⁱ For a comprehensive account of the origins and growth of precarity in South African higher education see Callaghan (2018) and Lange, Reddy and Khumalo (2021).