

Rolling with the Punches: Perspectives of Human Resources and Line Management on Contract Academics

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Keywords	Abstract
Precarious employment; contract academics; higher education; human resources; qualitative research; head of departments (HODs)	The higher education sector endured significant transformations over the past few decades. One such aspect is university employment practice. Precarious employment has become extensive owing to cost-saving measures characteristic of modern-day university management. The literature captured contract academics' employment experience, described as exploitative and dehumanising; however, the perspectives of line management and human resources (HR) professionals have yet to be explored; therefore, this study offers the organisational perspective, and further insight into the attempt to improve the employment experience of those in precarious and vulnerable employment. The study employed an interpretive paradigm with a qualitative research approach. Interviews were conducted with three HR professionals and three department heads from two South African universities. The findings confirm the misalignment with role expectations, role disillusionment, and a breach in the psychological contract of academics, line

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management, and HR within the employment relationship; therefore, a perceptible need exists to reassess the policies governing the contract employment process, ensuring policies are comprehensive in regulating the needs of all employee categories while ensuring fair and equitable treatment within the employment experience.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

Employment within universities has been severely affected because of the way institutions are managed based on neoliberal business practices (Blackham & Blackham, 2020). The excessive use of non-standard employment contracts has become customary practice to curb employment costs within higher education institutions, leading to precarious employment (Leathwood & Read, 2020). Precarious employment is observed as non-stable, temporary, and short-term work. This is associated with a lack of employment benefits, employment security, and insufficient income to meet fundamental needs (Allan et al., 2021).

The literature documents the effect of precarious employment on the incumbent individuals. Recently, Solomon and Du Plessis (2023) emphasised academics' experiences in precarious roles within universities. The authors explain that these individuals live in constant insecure and uncertain employment. They intensely pursue permanent employment, experience stunted career growth, are often disillusioned and feel exploited when starting temporary contract employment, are marginalised and express a dehumanising experience at work (Solomon & Du Plessis, 2023). Bone (2021) emphasises further challenges experienced by precariously employed academics, including a lack of bargaining rights, employment instability, and financial insecurity.

1.2. Problem statement

Neoliberalism is globally emphasised as the leading cause of inequalities and injustices (Meade, 2024). Neoliberal business principles have become the norm in organisations worldwide; the higher education sector is no exception. Provided neoliberal management practice implementation, the

university employment practice refocused to predominantly using precarious employment contracts as a cost-saving measure. Contract academic employees constitute more than half of the academic staff in most higher education institutions in South Africa (Council of Higher Education, 2016). Universities encounter a substantial portion of academics with shorter-term service. These academics often depart the institution to pursue more secure employment in other industries (Balsmeier & Pellens, 2014). This constitutes a significant challenge for higher education institutions, provided South Africa's National Development Plan's objective includes having 70% of academics qualify with a doctoral degree by 2030 (NDP, 2030).

An emergent concern exists about the effect of precariously employed academics on university objectives in accelerating student learning and success (Hitch et al., 2018). Particularly, capacity building within higher education institutions is significantly affected owing to the lack of career development of contract and emerging academics and by extension the ability to retain qualified academics (Solomon & Du Plessis, 2023).

Managing higher education institutions has become problematic because it leads to inequalities and injustices for the most valuable assets of any organisation, which is its employees (Meade, 2024). The principles of neoliberalism make a significant business case, however, at the expense of the organisation's greatest asset, its people.

Precariously employed academics perform core university activities; however, access to basic employment benefits, career development, job security, unstable income, and continued stress and anxiety owing to job precariousness characterise their employment experience. The literature emphasises the employment experiences of individuals in these precarious employment roles in higher education institutions (O'Keefe & Courtois, 2019; Bone, 2021; Solomon & Du Plessis, 2023); however, the perspectives of those managing and directing contract academic employment have yet to be explored in this context. A multi-stakeholder perspective must direct the adverse effect of precarious employment that has become a customary practice in higher education institutions.

1.3. Research objectives

This study attempted to establish the organisational perspective on managing precariously employed academics in South African higher education institutions. It specifically aimed to explore the perspectives of HR professionals and HODs of academics in precarious employment in higher education institutions in South Africa. The aspiration is to answer the research question: What are the experiences of HR professionals and HODs in managing contract academics in higher education institutions in South Africa?

This study provides the background for the research problem. This is followed by presenting the research problem while defining the study objectives. It explores a literature review to provide a foundation. Finally, it explains the research methodology employed. The ethical considerations are delineated, followed by the results and findings. The managerial implications are followed by conclusions, limitations, and future research.

2. Literature review

2.1. Precarious employment within higher education institutions

Precarious employment has become widespread in higher education institutions across the globe. These institutions are adapting to the continuously changing world of work and how the institutions are managed; therefore, non-standard employment options become customary practice as a cost-saving measure to ensure the institution's sustainability.

Contract academics comprise more than half of the academic workforce in higher education institutions (Council for Higher Education, 2020). These academics perform core university activities, yet their employment experience has been largely characterised as exploitative and dehumanising (Solomon & Du Plessis, 2023). Precariously employed academics expect to be treated equally and observed as valuable members of the academy privy to the general employment experience of onboarding, career advancement, development, and support (O'Keefe & Courtois, 2019; Bone, 2021). These academics experience disillusionment after accepting the employment contracts. They find that the role expectations vary vastly from what they anticipated, leading to an adverse employment experience (Solomon & Du Plessis, 2023).

Individuals in these precarious roles within universities often accept temporary contracts hoping to acquire a foothold and advance their careers in academia (O'Keefe & Courtois, 2019). The reality for most is that they are entangled in a vicious cycle of unstable employment and financial insecurity. They are living in limbo, with a robust desire for a permanent academic career (Bone, 2021; Solomon & Du Plessis, 2023). These academics have no choice but to operate in a system, perpetuating precarious employment conditions (Voulvouli, 2019). Precariously employed academics often contemplate how long they could survive in these precarious conditions with the hope of things changing in their career prospects (Stoica et al., 2019). According to the literature, contract academics experience a sense of despair and dehumanisation in their temporary academic employment (Allmer, 2018; Voulvouli, 2019). Temporary contract academics desire equal treatment compared to their permanently employed counterparts (Solomon & Du Plessis, 2023). They aspire to be observed as

valued staff members with access to basic employment benefits, rights, and HR support in their employment experience (Solomon & Du Plessis, 2023).

2.2. Precarious employment, higher education, and the psychological contract

Argyris presented the psychological contract in 1960, encompassing the expectations and unwritten rules between employees and employers (Sewpersad et al., 2019). With several iterations evolving over the years, the literature agrees that the psychological contract can be observed in three spheres:

- Transactional (involving an exchange of labour for monetary rewards)
- Relational (involving the relationship between the employee and the organisation based on non-monetary activities)
- Ideological (involving the employee's commitment to a cause beyond the organisation or the individuals) (Sewpersad et al., 2019)

The psychological contract has a subjective nature; therefore, it can fill the perceptual divergences established in the employment relationship and the daily employee behaviour that cannot be easily explained or understood from a written employment contract (O'Donnell & Shields, 2008). The psychological contract is formed based on the employees' perception of the organisational policies, practices, culture, and promises made by organisational members (Turnley & Feldman, 1999). The psychological contract is vital in the organisation because employees are central to sustaining a competitive advantage. By extension, the relationship between employees and employers is crucial for ensuring productivity and innovation (Wöcke & Sutherland, 2008).

Certainty, stability, and development characterised the traditional psychological contract (Tipples & Verry, 2006). This translated into employee loyalty because of the long-term employment offered by the organisation (Deem, 2001). Alignment existed with employee expectations for career mobility and progression for employee commitment to the organisation's goals (McInnis, 2012). According to Maguire (2003), the psychological contract is characterised by employees offering conformity, cooperation, and performance in exchange for employment and economic security. Conversely, in the contemporary workplace, economic and employment security is neither desired nor guaranteed (Sewpersad et al., 2019). McInnis (2012) defines the psychological contract in an academic context as direct and indirect promises between the two parties.

For example, when the employee is promised job security, the employer is promised hard work, commitment, and loyalty. The contract is called psychological as it contains the relationship perceptions and the promises involved for both parties (Maharaj, et al., 2008). Because of continuous

global work changes, the present psychological contract reflects limited job security, instability, and unpredictability (Sewpersad et al., 2019).

Breaches in the psychological contract occur when employees perceive that the organisation does not honour its obligations in the employment relationship (Shen, 2010). The perceived breach in the psychological contract could be owing to employers knowingly breaking a promise or because of unforeseen circumstances or diverse perceptions of employer/employee obligations (Turnley & Feldman, 1999). The resultant employee behaviour can lead to an upsurge in employee turnover and employees voicing their dissatisfaction. This may also induce a decline in employee loyalty, an increase in negligent behaviour, absenteeism, and a lack of diligence (Turnley & Feldman, 1999).

Employees and organisations must contend with the ever-changing and dynamic business environment, leading to changes and transformation in the psychological contract (Osterloh & Frey, 2000). Mutually beneficial work is a priority with the new psychological contract. The individual determines their worth in contrast to the traditional psychological contract, where the organisation would define the employee's worth (Eisenberger et al., 2001). An important characteristic of the new psychological contract is the employment duration of organisational contracts. With significantly elevated levels of short-term employment, employees must sustain their networks and establish multiple working relationships to prepare for events, such as job loss and retrenchment (Theron, 2011).

The importance of the content of psychological contracts significantly varies between academics and other professionals (Shen, 2010). The literature contends that university academic employees are typically more concerned with relational aspects. They display a higher level of job satisfaction with the intrinsic rewards of their work as recognition of work and a pleasant working environment as opposed to transactional aspects, such as promotion and pay (Gillespie et al., 2001; Winefield et al., 2003). Shen (2010) established that academic psychological contracts are more transactional than relational. Employees in diverse roles could likely have diverse psychological contracts. Senior employees may be less mobile and more inclined to a relational contract compared to junior employees (Shen, 2010). Stress levels vary among diverse academic ranks, with lecturers established as the most stressed group (Shen, 2010).

Similarly, employment status also affects the psychological contract as part-time employees reported higher levels of job satisfaction yet decreased commitment and organisational citizenship behaviour (Conway & Briner, 2002). Part-time and temporary employees have more transactional psychological contracts compared to permanent employees (Shen, 2010). Permanently employed academics are more inclined towards a relational academic psychological contract (Shen, 2010).

Shen (2010) established that contract workers were more sensitive to changes in expectations and obligations than permanent employees. Contract employees had a more transactional and limited psychological contract compared to their permanent counterparts (Shen, 2010). Guest and Conway (1997) established that the psychological contract plays a significant role in mediating the relationship between objective and subjective job security. Sverke et al. (2000) established that temporary workers were less committed to the organisation with an adverse perception of their psychological contract. Similarly, flexible employment contract employees engage significantly less in organisational citizenship behaviours (Shen, 2010).

Tipples and Jones (1998) contend that society has increasingly become contractual, legal, and psychological. HR professionals encounter the challenge of aligning employers' and employees' expectations in employment contracts to improve the employment relationship (Sewpersad et al., 2019).

3. Research methodology

This research attempt was based on the ontological perspective, where reality is socially constructed by individuals under investigation. The researchers are interested in understanding the reality of those managing contract academic employees within universities. The interpretivism paradigm supports this study, where the researchers can acquire an in-depth understanding of experiences and perceptions of a phenomenon. Interpretivism aims to offer richness in the experiences collected despite variables and other factors (Myers, 2008; Saunders et al., 2012). The study employed a phenomenological approach as a part of the exploratory research design. This approach is suitable, as it offers the shared meanings of various individuals and their lived experiences (Creswell, 2013).

According to the qualitative research design, semi-structured interviews are implemented to collect rich data in understanding these phenomena. By adopting this approach, participants could probe into their responses, providing insights beyond what quantitative methods could reveal. This approach further enables researchers to access the lived experiences of individuals and how they interpret those experiences (Sewpersad et al., 2019).

A purposive sampling technique was used to recruit research participants. This method was appropriate to elicit the experiences of individuals to answer the research question and objectives. For this study, the sample comprised three HR professionals and three HODs from two universities. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the six participants (n=6) to obtain their lived experiences of managing the precariously employed academics in higher education institutions. Creswell (1998) suggests that five to 25 interviews are ideal, while Morse (1994) indicates that at least six interviews

should be conducted. The interviews were conducted in English using the Zoom online platform. An interview guide was used for data collection consistency to offer trustworthiness and credibility (Tracy, 2010) with member verification to ensure data accuracy (Nieuwenhuis, 2016).

Data analysis constituted thematic analyses based on the principles of Braun and Clarke (2006). The process of inductive coding was followed. The process involved becoming familiar with the data, generating initial codes, identifying themes within the data, and subsequently reviewing and defining those themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The study followed a code-recode process, with peer-reviewed confirmation among the authors. This approach ensured consistency in the results and confirmed their dependability (Nieuwenhuis, 2016).

To ensure the integrity of the study, trustworthiness criteria were considered, indicating credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. These criteria are particularly relevant provided the qualitative nature of the study (Nieuwenhuis, 2016). To enhance the study's credibility, the first author engaged in scholarly consultation with the second author. This collaborative process allowed for peer debriefing and ensured the robustness of the research findings. Peer debriefing provided an opportunity for richer insights and more significant learning (Guba & Lincoln, 1982). Transferability was ensured by the researchers, offering an in-depth account of the context and methodology. Dependability was ensured by offering the raw interview notes for scrutiny. Additional researchers scrutinised the available data to ensure confirmability.

3.1. Ethics

Ethical approval was secured from the Human and Social Sciences Ethics Committee (HSSREC) at the University of the Western Cape (HSSREC Reference number: HS21/5/32). Ethical clearance was obtained from two additional universities (Reference number: REC 2021/09/001). Participants willingly participated in the study, assured of anonymity and confidentiality.

4. Results and findings

This study comprised six participants: three from the HR department across two universities and three HODs from three departments from two universities. The participants were permanently employed within their respective universities. The participants' age range spanned from 34 (the youngest) to 49 (the eldest). Two participants were married, two were single, and one participant was divorced. The HODs hold doctoral degrees; two HR professionals hold undergraduate degrees; the third holds an honours degree. Two HODs had 19 years of experience in academia and the third HOD had over 20 years' experience in higher education institutions. One HR professional had over 20 years of

experience in academia, and one had 12 and 18 years of experience, respectively. The participants are employed less than eight years in their role (Table 1).

Table 1: Participants’ profile

Participants	Gender	Position	Employment type	Age	Marital status	Highest qualification	No. of years in academia	No. of years in role
HR 1	Female	Senior HR practitioner	Permanent	34	Single	Honours degree	8 years	5 years
HOD 1	Male	HOD	Permanent	44	Single	PhD	19 years	6 years
HR 2	Female	Senior HR practitioner	Permanent	42	Married	Degree	12 Years	4 years
HR 3	Female	HR consultant	Permanent	44	Divorced	Degree	Over 20 years	7 years
HOD 2	Male	HOD	Permanent	43	Married	PhD	19 years	6 years
HOD 3	Male	HOD	Permanent	49	Married	PhD	Over 20 years	2 years

In this study, three categories of themes were established. First, the theme of establishing whose responsibility contract academics are (role expectation and role disillusionment). Second, to clarify the roles of HR and line management in managing contract academic employment and the breaching of the psychological contract.

4.1. Contract academics—where do they belong?

4.1.1. Role expectation

Contract academics are primarily employed to alleviate the heavy workload of the permanent academic staff from a line manager's perspective. This allows the permanent staff to free up their time to focus on research publications and other academic matters.

“Contract lecturers are not as committed due to temporary contracts. Contract lecturers often have other jobs that are not as committed to the institution. Contract lecturing is often limited to teaching only and the real need is for supervision assistance. Contract staff don't contribute to the growth of the department”. (HOD3, male, married, PhD)

The line management expects that individuals who accept these temporary employment contracts operate as independent contractors requiring no onboarding, management support, guidance, coaching, or mentoring. The experience, however, is that:

“Contract lecturers cause more work for HoDs. Managing contract lecturers takes more time and effort”. (HOD2, male, married, PhD)

“Regular checks with candidates during contract periods which causes more work”. (HOD1, male, single, PhD)

The line managers are disillusioned in their expectations of the contract lecturers:

“New staff require more reassurance and feedback especially younger individuals. Managing contract lecturers takes more time and effort. No time for orientation for contract staff. Investing in contract staff who then leave for other institutions”. (HOD2, male, married, PhD)

“Some contract staff work very hard for possible contract renewal. Others don't stick to timelines and deadlines and have to run around after them to meet deadlines. Experience a lack of commitment from contract staff”. (HOD1, male, single, PhD)

From an HR perspective, they are responsible for employment contract processing and ensuring compliance with statutory requirements regarding employment matters. From the study findings, the HR function primarily applies to permanent staff within higher education institutions. Provided the large contract academics employed by the university, HR observed that line management is responsible for orientating contract staff to their departments, ensuring contract academics have the necessities to perform their duties and responsibilities.

“Management [referring to line managers such as HODs] is responsible for managing the contract process and people processes. Because line management knows the specific needs of contract academics, they are best suited to manage induction, orientation, etc”. (HR1, female, Senior HR practitioner, single, Honours degree)

Line management should also ensure effective monitoring of the academic contract employees in their departments, justifying processes running effectively and efficiently. To direct potential concerns related to delayed payments resulting from missed contract processing deadlines, it is essential to

manage employee expectations regarding the feasibility of contract renewals and further employment opportunities.

“HR plays a big role in managing contracts, they have to proactively manage contract deadlines. Yet it is line management's responsibility to take the lead on managing the contract academics in their departments”. (HR3, female, HR consultant, divorced, Degree)

“HR has to do a lot of policing. HR has to monitor to avoid issues falling through the cracks”. (HR2, female, senior HR practitioner, married, Degree)

The expectations of each party in this contract employment process are not met. HR must enforce deadlines and ensure timely submission of contracts and workforce planning by line managers.

“Management doesn't adhere to deadlines and implications thereof. Last-minute contract requests from departments. HR has to police line management to manage their contract processes. To mitigate risks HR has to continuously monitor contract dates because management doesn't do it”. (HR3, female, HR consultant, divorced, Degree)

“Contract policy guidelines are in place but not always followed in practice”. (HR1, female, Senior HR practitioner, single, Honours degree)

Role expectations of line management, dealing with contract academic staff who do not fulfil their duties as expected, can be challenging.

“Contract lecturers often cause more work for me, sometimes I think that is it worth the effort to have the contract lecturers because my work isn't minimised”. (HOD3, male, married, PhD)

Contract academics may experience emotions of inferiority due to forfeiting the same development, support, coaching, and mentoring opportunities as their permanent counterparts (Solomon & Du Plessis, 2023).

4.1.2. Role disillusionment

Contract academics experience role disillusionment when receiving their employment contract. This often occurs after commencing with the work. Contract academics often feel exploited because of vague employment contracts exceeding their anticipated workload, leaving little time to explore supplementary income sources necessary for meeting their basic survival needs (Bone, 2021; Solomon & Du Plessis, 2023).

“Contract staff work without knowing contract terms and remuneration. Ensuring contract staff view their contracts before commencing work to avoid disillusionment”. (HR2, female, Senior HR practitioner, married, degree)

Line managers often feel disillusioned because they contemplate that HR should manage and oversee people processes related to recruitment, staffing, and onboarding; however, HR contends that line management is better suited for inducting and orienting contract staff.

“In terms of contract academics line management is responsible for orientating staff, etc. Because of the high volume of contract staff - the management thereof is left to line management. Because line management knows the specific needs of contract academics, they are best suited to manage induction, orientation, etc”. (HR1, female, senior HR practitioner, single, Honours degree)

HR professionals experience role disillusionment in their frustration with line managers regarding their responsibility in managing contract academic employees employed in their departments.

“Management doesn't adhere to deadlines and implications thereof. Policing of line management to manage contract process. To mitigate risks HR has to continuously monitor contract dates which is the responsibility of line management”. (HR3, female, HR consultant, divorced, degree)

4.2. Clarifying human resources and head of department roles—who is responsible for contract academics?

The perceived role of the HR function within higher education institutions is to fulfil their responsibilities for all categories of employees, regardless of employment status. The head of the department clarified this perspective:

“In practice, HR is only responsible for putting the contracts in place and processing them”. (HOD3, male, married, PhD)

Human resources contend that owing to the substantial number of contract staff, line management is better positioned to direct the needs of these contractors. Consequently, line management bears the responsibility of ensuring proper induction, orientation, and effective management of the contract process.

“Management is responsible for managing the contract process and people processes. Because line management knows the specific needs of contract academics, they are best suited to manage induction, orientation, etc”. (HR3, female, HR consultant, divorced, degree)

Ulrich (1997) promoted four core roles that HR should play in the organisation. First, as a *strategic partner* to assist in realising the business strategy. Second, as an *administrative expert*, ensuring continuous improvement in work processes and organisational efficiency. Third, to be the *employee champion*, ensuring employee commitment and competence are maximised. Last, to be a change agent, facilitating organisational transformation and a culture change. From Ulrich's four core roles,

the two most evident from the findings in this higher education context are that of administrative expert and employee champion.

The findings suggest that the work processes regarding contract management should be drastically improved as the administrative expert is included in HR's responsibilities; however, HR should collaborate with management to ensure management also accepts accountability for their role in managing the contract employment process. As the employee champion, HR must also facilitate processes, cultivating employee commitment while advancing employee competence. HR must continuously explore methods to advocate for all employee categories to ensure that management also takes accountability for contract employees and their permanent staff complement (Ulrich, 1997).

4.3. Psychological contract breach

The findings confirm a clear breach in the psychological contract between line management and contract academic staff within higher education institutions. The psychological contract encompasses the expectations and unwritten rules perceived between both parties. As evident from the literature, precariously employed academic staff experience this psychological contract breach in acute ways. Their employment experience is characteristic of unmet expectations, emotions of exploitation, and dehumanisation in their employment relationship (Solomon & Du Plessis, 2023).

Line management perceives a breach in the psychological contract; they expect the employed contract academics to be independent workers who can self-manage, requiring no supervision, guidance, coaching, or mentoring. Line management must pursue contract academics to ensure they meet deadlines and perform their duties and responsibilities. This creates more management responsibilities when supposed to alleviate the workload for the departments.

“Have to run around after the contract lecturers to meet deadlines. Investing in contract staff who then leave for other institutions. Contract lecturers cause more work for HoDs”. (HOD2, male, married, PhD)

“Managing contract lecturers takes more time and effort. New staff require more reassurance and feedback especially younger individuals”. (HOD1, male, single, PhD)

Shen (2010) established that contract lecturers have limited opportunities for promotion or job security; they had lower expectations and, therefore, an unfulfilled psychological contract. Contract academic staff are inclined to observe the university as failing to acknowledge their capabilities, contributions, and efforts, whereas permanently employed academics value the support they receive for career development, a benefit they can access (Shen, 2010).

5. Managerial implications

The study findings confirm a clear misalignment with the role expectations of contract academics, line management, and HR within higher education institutions. This leads to unmet expectations, frustration, emotions of exploitation, and dehumanising employment experience (Leathwood & Read, 2020; Solomon & Du Plessis, 2023). Evident from the study findings, role disillusionment is a major theme in managing contract academics in higher education institutions. This further leads to frustration and disappointment for precariously employed academics under the impression they would receive the needed guidance, support, coaching and mentoring in their employment to advance their academic careers (Bone, 2021). Line managers are often disillusioned because they anticipate that contract academics will be self-managed and help alleviate their workload; however, contract academics sometimes end up creating additional work for them.

An apparent need exists for clarifying the role of each stakeholder in employing contract academics within higher education institutions. The policies guiding managing contract employment to inform best practices must be clarified. Institutions should have HR procedures customised to the effective management of contract employees with more oversight from an HR perspective to mitigate the risk to individual employees. Improved contract monitoring would ensure that employers and employees are not short-changed in this employment relationship (Leatherwood & Read, 2020, Bone, 2021).

Provided that contract academics constitute a significant portion of the academic workforce in higher education institutions, university management and HR departments should consider research findings regarding adverse employment experiences. Reassessing policies governing contract employment management is crucial not only for maintaining employment relationships but also for ensuring a positive and beneficial employment experience for all employer and employee categories.

Studies display an overall lower level of academic psychological contract fulfilment, confirming significant contract violations in higher education institutions. Shen (2010) established that this significantly harms organisational performance. HR policies and practices have a substantial effect on employees' psychological contracts. Observing the higher education context, the primary areas for improvement are consultation, fair promotion, recognition of contribution, research funding, and equity in pay (Shen, 2010); however, not all factors of the academic psychological contract are equal in importance. Most academics are more inclined to the transactional contract over relational aspects; the transactional contract remains unfulfilled.

Certain aspects, such as workplace safety, sufficient resources, equitable and competitive compensation, fair promotion practices, consultation, and acknowledgement of work, hold more

significant importance and should ideally be prioritised. The research indicates that considering extrinsic factors is crucial; however, directing intrinsic factors is equally vital. University leaders should develop targeted strategies and practices to direct the unique needs and expectations of diverse academic staff. Providing additional support for emerging academics—often research-oriented, mobile, and marketable—can contribute to the institution’s sustainability.

6. Conclusions, limitations, and future research

This study explored the experiences of line managers and HR professionals in managing contract academics in higher education institutions. The research findings confirm the pressing need to define the roles of each stakeholder in managing contract academics. Disillusionment, unmet expectations, and breaches in psychological contracts affect contract academics, HR professionals, and line managers. These challenges significantly influence the university’s ability to attract and retain qualified academics, hindering progress towards institutional goals related to sustainability, research publication, and student success.

This study includes a sample size of six participants to explore their experiences of managing contract academics in higher education institutions. Future research could broaden the sample size to acquire more profound insights into precarious employment among university contract academics. The present study employed a qualitative research design, whereas future research might adopt a mixed methods approach to validate the findings and explore enhanced management practices for employing contract academics in higher education institutions. Considering the student perspective—since they are the ‘clients’—could provide further insights into the realm of contract academic employment.

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