The 'double-edged sword' of a sessional academic career

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Abstract

There have been widespread changes to working arrangements and employment relationships, including significant decreases in continuing/full-time employment contracts. This trend is particularly notable in academia, with more universities relying on the expertise of sessional, teaching-focused academics. This qualitative study extends understanding of this important group of professionals, identifying sessional work as a 'double-edged sword' and suggesting a typology of sessional academic careers to be tested in future research. It reports on the diversity among sessional academics, some enjoying the autonomy and flexibility of this working arrangement others seeking more job security and greater alignment with continuing employment. It also identifies synergies and contradictions between sessional academic careers and key themes in the contemporary careers literature.

Academic Work; Careers; Faculty Career; Leadership; Qualitative Research

Introduction

There have been widespread changes to working arrangements and employment relationships, with forecasts of further changes to come, including decreases in continuing and full-time contracts, expansion of the 'gig' economy and zero-hours contracts (McKinley 2016, Bankwest Curtin Economic Centre, 2018). A recent McKinsey Report (2016), reports an increase in 'independent work' characterised by: "A high degree of autonomy; payment by task, assignment, or sales; and a short-term relationship between worker and client" (p, 8).

Careers in academia were once characterised by stability, long-term employment (particularly in institutions with tenure systems) and high levels of job security (Baruch 2013). Yet, an increasing number are now premised on 'casual' or 'sessional' employment relationships (William & Beovich 2017, Hitch, Mahoney & Macfarlane, 2018) involving short-term contracts without entitlements associated with continuing employment. Whereas full-time academics' careers have been the subject of considerable interest (e.g. Baruch & Hall 2004, Feldman & Turnley 2004, Richardson 2009, Baruch 2013) the 'casualisation' of academic careers has only recently been examined. Moreover, the extant literature on casual or sessional academic careers has tended to adopt quantitative methodologies, creating a need for more qualitative studies exploring sessional academics' 'emic' career experiences including their motivations to engage in this type of work and impact on their career development opportunities and experiences. Therefore, drawing on a study of sessional academics in Australia, this paper expands understanding about this important group of professionals in the Higher Education sector.

Casualisation of academic careers

Casualisation of academic careers in many OECD countries has resulted in tenured or continuing academics representing a much smaller proportion of university staff (Crimmins,

2016; Crimmins et al. 2016, Hitch et al., 2018). In their place are sessional staff employed on a temporary basis, from one teaching period to the next, tasked with teaching rather than research activities (Crimmins, 2016). For example, a recent Australian study reported up to 60% of undergraduate teaching is delivered by sessional staff with one university reporting a figure of 80% (Klopper & Power, 2014). The challenges of identifying specific and accurate figures notwithstanding (Hitch et al., 2018), it appears that careers in higher education are diverging into two streams: an increasingly smaller stream of academics with continuing positions focussed on teaching, research and/or administrative leadership; and a larger group of temporary teaching-only sessional academics (Hitch, et al., 2018). This trend is partly a reflection of neo-liberal ideology of the 1980's when market-driven responses were considered 'good business' amid the corporatisation of higher education more generally (Williams & Beovich, 2017). Reduction of costs related to continuing academics has also been seen as a positive move with growing international competition, budgetary austerity measures and government cutbacks. These moves have also occurred alongside more doctoral students entering the labour market creating over-supply in some disciplines, thus giving more power to institutional employers during contract negotiations (Bastalich 2015, Hwang, Smith et al. 2015).

There are widespread concerns about the implications of using sessional academics for university policy regarding expectations for student learning experiences and outcomes (Hitch et al, 2018). Sessional academic have also raised concerns about decreasing levels of job security, and institutional support with respect to teaching or professional development opportunities (Williams & Beovich, 2017, Crimmins, 2016; Hitch et al., 2018). Other concerns include the lack of redundancy payouts, sick/holiday/parental and leave pay (Collin, 2013). However, an earlier study by Feldman and Turnley (2004) reported some academics do not want full-time, continuing positions, preferring casual work because it bestows greater

independence and opportunities to pursue more lucrative consulting work and achieve more work-life balance. These positive dimensions of sessional academic work echo the findings of a UK report (Taylor 2017) and an Australian study (Bank West Curtin Economic Centre, 2018) indicating that some individuals welcome more flexible, non-continuing work arrangement opportunities.

Halcomb and colleagues' (2010) study categorises sessional staff into one of four categories: 'Aspiring academics' are doctoral students and early career researchers seeking a full-time academic career; 'Industry experts' have extensive corporate experience and seek to apply this in an educational setting on a temporary and part-time basis, either as a source of extra income or to contribute in the classroom, especially for those who enjoy teaching; 'Career enders' have pursued a full-time academic or corporate career and are working part time or on a casual basis as a prelude to retirement and; 'Freelancers' are a form of portfolio worker blending different work in different contexts as part of their overall work arrangements. While this typology offers a useful step towards understanding sessional academics, it doesn't explain their career experiences nor the affective impact of those experiences. It also appears static, where we might wonder whether they move between the categories depending on life stage or other influences. There is also some overlap between the four categories i.e. a 'freelancer' may also be an 'industry expert' suggesting the need for further investigation.

Connecting extant work on sessional academics with career scholarship, Baruch and Hall (2004) question whether future academic careers will involve acting 'as a self-employed knowledge worker, serving in a boundaryless fashion' (p, 260). This suggests a connection between sessional academics and the 'Independent Workers' described in a recent McKinsey Report (2016). Moreover, linking sessional academics with conceptions of boundarylessness (particularly moving across institutional boundaries as is the case for those employed in more than one university) poses questions about whether sessional academics' careers are indeed

characterised by the putative agency, independence and flexibility accorded to those pursuing boundaryless careers (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996). Or, do they experience the negative dimensions of precariousness, lack of institutional support or recognition (Pringle & Mallon 2003)? Responding to these questions this paper examines motivations to embark on, and continue to undertake sessional work, and the subsequent career experiences and opportunities, by answering the following research questions:

1) What are the positive dimensions of being a sessional academic?

2) What are the negative dimensions of being a sessional academic?

3) To what extent can sessional academics be characterised by the typology of 'Independent workers' as described in McKinsey (2016) matrix?

Introducing the McKinsey Model

The McKinsey Model (2016) is a two-by-two matrix based on survey data collected from 8,000 'independent workers' across six countries exploring motivation to engage in and experience of independent work, as well as themes relating to income, work-life balance and perceived levels of autonomy. The survey findings indicate that Independent Workers can be located in any of four categories of the matrix, i.e. 'Casual Earners', 'Free Agents', 'Financially Strapped' and 'Reluctants', as shown in Figure 1. The vertical axis indicates the level of individual preference or choice while the horizontal axis denotes whether 'independent work' is a primary or secondary source of income.

	Individual preference/choice	
	Casual Earner	Free Agent
	Financially Strapped	Reluctant

Primary income source

Figure 1. Independent worker matrix – McKinsey 2016.

'Casual Earners' (40% of respondents) use independent work for supplemental income by choice; 'Free Agents' (30% of respondents) actively choose and derive their primary income from it; 'Reluctants' (14% of respondents) make their primary living from 'independent work' but prefer continuing jobs and 'Financially Strapped' (16% of respondents) do supplemental 'independent work' out of necessity. A key finding is an increasing number of individuals are participating in 'independent work', their motivations depending on demographic circumstances and long term career aspirations.

Our interest in applying the matrix was driven by an underlying question as to whether sessional academics might also be understood as 'independent workers'. Specifically, we were interested to investigate whether the model would explain motivation to undertake sessional work as a primary or secondary source of income and its positive and negative dimensions. We were also interested in the affective implications of this work and whether sessional academics move between the four quadrants thus extending Halcomb and colleagues'

(2010) earlier typology.

Methodology

We define sessional academics as those engaged in temporary work contracts and paid according to completion of a specific teaching assignment. These contracts do not provide financial support for redundancy, health and pension benefits or leave entitlements.

Sampling

The sample comprises fifteen sessional academics at two business schools in Western Australia. We focused on business schools because of reported increases in the number of sessional academics in this area (Williams & Beovich, 2017). Both schools were located in public institutions with similar student bodies, work contracts and employment relationships for sessional academics. We used convenience sampling followed by snow-ball sampling. Participants reflected a range of demographic factors including age, career stage and gender. See Table 1 in Appendices.

Data collection

One researcher conducted a pilot study prior to the main study resulting in refinement of the interview agenda. For the main study, interviews were scheduled to allow preliminary data analysis between the initial, middle stage and later interviews. These 'analytical breaks' provided for an emergent understanding of the findings and in-depth discussion of differences and similarities between participants. However, this did not result in any changes to the interview agenda. Participants were asked about their motivations to engage in sessional work and the advantages and challenges of this type of work. They were shown the Independent Worker Model (McKinsey, 2016) and invited to identify where they might be located i.e. in one or more, if any, of the quadrants. The semi-structured format allowed for consistency between the interviews but ensured that participants could introduce further themes if they so wished (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009). All interviews were conducted face-to-face, recorded and detailed notes taken for subsequent analysis.

Data analysis

Data analysis was informed by an interpretivist ontology (Sandberg, 2005) to engage with the socially constructed and relational nature of participants' perceptions and experiences of sessional work. It was conducted in three stages in order to answer the research questions, introduced above. While the researchers make no claims to having applied grounded theory in its purist form (Suddaby, 2006), they took care to ensure that each element of the collected data was examined and incorporated into subsequent theorizing, where appropriate. First, to answer research question three, a note was made of where each participant had located themselves in the model. A broad thematic analysis (King, 2004) then identified the dominant and subsidiary themes in each of the participants' respective accounts. The aim at this stage was to compare identified themes with each of the four quadrants of the model. While most of the participants' working arrangements fitted within the *a priori* model some participants' overall career trajectories suggested they had moved between the quadrants, which the original model does not allow for. The broad thematic analysis also ensured identification of dominant and subsidiary themes beyond those relating to the model such as the negative and positive dimensions of sessional work and corresponding implications for work-life balance and professional development. It also provided a more holistic understanding of participants' experiences of sessional work by incorporating all aspects of their accounts, thus allowing the researchers to identify sessional work as something of a 'double-edged sword'.

Results

Positive dimensions of being a sessional academic

Data analysis suggested the majority of participants were engaging in work activity they found interesting and saw as a way to develop and maintain their expertise. A further key theme was the bridge between the practical aims of teaching and (for some) their research interests. This was seen as particularly important for those actively engaged in research, particularly the six doctoral graduates. Therefore, while they are primarily employed to teach,

they were also gaining benefits for their research and professional capacities, as suggested by Blue:

> The thing is with this kind of teaching you have to keep up with the reading so I can keep up with the research and what's going on, what reports and other researchers are saying and doing. You have to update your readings so it forces you to read. You really need to know your stuff, that's a given.

Several spoke about 'giving back', notably to students and in some cases as mentors. This was especially important for those who had industry experience (compared to recently graduated doctoral students who did not mention this theme). For example, one participant (Nancy) with an extensive corporate background ran her class as a business department, taking the role of the 'boss' and establishing employer-employee performance contracts. This enabled her to 'give back' by drawing on her success in the corporate sector. Terry described how teaching allowed him to be a *"pebble in the pond"*: sharing his ideas using a 'ripple effect' to impact student learning.

For the six recently graduated doctoral students and for Rachel, who was pursuing Halcomb and colleagues' (2010) concept of the 'aspiring academic', as Stefan explains:

> Well, this is kind of like training for me, it's a foot in the door hoping that they will recognise that I've got the talent and take me on, plus it means I get to know about the jobs coming up and they already know me ...

Flexibility was seen as a major positive dimension of sessional work by virtually all interviewees allowing them to combine it other work responsibilities (including sessional work in different institutions). For Jed, it enabled him to reconfigure his work commitments, providing greater work-family balance and allowed family income to be structured differently to share the tax burden between him and his partner. The majority felt that it provided a level of convenience not always available in continuing work arrangements – particularly full-time

work contracts. The theme of flexibility was especially connected with participants' work-life balance in terms of fulfilling caring responsibilities to children. For example, Theo explained how it helped him to take a more active role in raising his three children:

> It allows me and my wife to organise ourselves in advance so I only commit to units that I know won't interfere with the kids and me taking my turn with them. When I knew about the new baby coming, I declined some work till we had got us sorted out, I couldn't have done that with a full-time continuing job.

Several spoke about sessional work as a source of additional income to support family education choices, holidays and what Ricki described as 'non-essentials'. Those for whom it was a sole source of income commented on the apparently high hourly rate, whereby sessional academics receive a payment loading in lieu of leave entitlements. This was seen as a primary motivator to engage in this type of work when compared to other temporary work opportunities in other sectors.

Not having to be involved in 'organisational politics' was also seen as a major positive dimension. Participants connected this with reducing stress levels and not having to *play the game of academia* (Stefan). Jed described it as, *I go in, I do my work and I get out* whereas Anna spoke about the advantage of forming relationships but not needing to *get bogged down in the politics*. The majority said that not having to attend departmental meetings and other 'service requirements' was a further important positive dimension. This was seen as especially advantageous, allowing them to be 'more productive' when compared to other academic colleagues on continuing contracts. As Stefan explains:

> God yes, the meetings I don't have to attend to any of that stuff – I hear the full timers complaining all the time what they have to do at this and that meeting but I can just come in and do my stuff. If they want to tell me something they will but I don't have to sit in a three-hour meeting to find it out.

Negative dimensions of being a sessional academic

A more salient negative dimension was the lack of consistency and general ad hoc nature of teaching allocations. This, participants said, required considerable discretionary unpaid effort preparing new materials, being responsive to student demands to help ensure they would be considered for future work. This discretionary effort was further exacerbated by students who required greater academic support. Terry, for example, described it as, *your charitable contribution, it's your goodwill so that it seems seamless for students*. Theo talked extensively about the *outside* unpaid work he had to do, indicating that *prep* time was not included in payment although he acknowledged that he could get a *slight bonus or a bit extra* if the unit was completely new to him:

> You wouldn't believe how much extra work we have to do to keep up to date, and
> this isn't paid but I think it's because they think they can't quantify it and if they can't
> quantify it they won't give you a cent which is unfair. I daren't turn down new units
> as they might not ask me again so I kind of get on with it, but I don't like it one bit.

Blue also reported *long days* and working *outside normal and paid hours up to midnight* to ensure that she could teach new units. Whereas teaching the same units reduced preparation time it also reduced payment because both institutions offered a slightly higher rate for teaching new units. However, the majority said teaching the same unit became repetitive leading to boredom and lack of motivation. There were also concerns that they might be *typecast* into only being able to teach in a narrow field.

It is notable that continuing staffs were understood to receive more generous time allocations for overseeing unit management responsibilities, a point of consternation among participants in this study. Relatedly, many of the negative dimensions of being a sessional academic –particularly the discretionary work – were described as 'perks' enjoyed by continuing staff. In this regard continuing staff were regularly used as comparators to

negatively evaluate participants' own experiences. Yet, as noted above, participants also compared themselves favourably with continuing staff who they saw as having to fulfil service requirements and engaging in organisational politics.

Nevertheless, several participants said that the "downside" of not engaging in organisational politics meant they lacked the camaraderie and support of a continuing academic team, leaving them to *fend for themselves* (Theo). Terry, for example, missed being *part of a tribe* and Blue talked about being *an outsider of the team*. Likewise, Stefan complained about not being able to learn from senior academics. For the recently graduated doctoral students and those pursuing higher degrees, lack of mentoring opportunities and performance feedback beyond standard student evaluations meant there was little opportunity to progress their careers.

All lamented the precariousness of their working arrangements with and being managed by different continuing academics with very different interactional styles. Anna, for example, described being *at the mercy of unit coordinators.* Blue also commented, *if they don't like you for some reason they'll just ask someone else and you won't get a look in – you are like 'throw away' in their minds*. A key concern here was a perceived lack of protocol for managing sessional academic. Others spoke of not getting contracts until part way into the teaching period or being given very short notice that their services were no longer required. Indeed, in one university, a codicil was written into all sessional contracts that they could be given two hours' notice to start or stop teaching. Rachel described this problem as, *you are off and on and off again in a minute, one morning you wake up and you've got a steady income, by night you are earning half of what you thought you would be.*

To manage this precariousness and the perceived lack of professional respect, some participants sought work at more than one institution, which meant in some cases ending up overloaded with teaching assignments or, if they prioritised one institution over another,

putting future work at risk. A key concern in this respect was prioritising the need to work 'somewhere' rather than at a preferred institution or field of teaching.

Whereas flexibility was one of the positive dimensions of being a sessional academic, for some it was also a 'double-edged sword' as indicated by Blue:

> I have flexibility so if I wake up one day and decide I don't want to teach I can do, I
>
> just won't take on another unit. But on the other hand I don't get any support, in terms
>
> of everything else because I'm not one of the gang.

A high level of personal discipline and setting clearly defined boundaries and expectations for both institutional employers and for themselves was required. There was widespread consensus that sessional academics aren't always 'respected' by institutions, which connected with the need to 'protect' themselves and their individual well-being.

There was also widespread awareness of the need to exert self-discipline i.e. not to feel that they had to *compensate* for sessional status by being *overly willing to pander to student and continuing staff's needs* (Blue). Three participants (Anna, Richard and Theo) connected the negative theme of precariousness with lack of understanding from financial institutions (i.e. banks) unwilling to provide loans because of their 'non-continuing employee' status. Anna and Theo spoke about problems getting housing loans because of their work status. Not having an income during teaching breaks, which could be up to three months, was also a major negative dimension of being a sessional academic. Participants noted that the 'above-average' hourly wage for sessional academics did not compensate for the lack of income during this period.

Nearly all were frustrated at the lack of access to professional development and expectations that what was available should be undertaken in their own time. This was widely connected with their sense of being seen as 'second-class citizens' compared to their full-time

counterparts. A key concern was they were expected to 'keep up' with trends in their respective fields and to maintain the requisite standards for various accreditations but the host institution did not provide appropriate support/learning opportunities. Feelings of isolation from continuing members of staff exacerbated perceptions that their professional development was negatively impacted by their sessional status. They were not, for example, part of institutional processes for performance management and their lack of contact with peers meant that it was more difficult to determine their own professional development needs. As a caveat, participants did not expect access to the full range of training and development opportunities offered by the respective institutions to continuing employees, rather they felt frustrated at the lack of support for basic training to support their work as sessional staff.

Independent Worker Matrix (IWM)

All participants were shown the Independent Worker Matrix (Figure 1), invited to locate themselves in one of the four quadrants and to discuss the potential value of the matrix more broadly. One placed herself in the 'Financially Strapped' quadrant; five in the 'Reluctant' quadrant; five in the 'Casual Earner' quadrant and four in the 'Free Agent' quadrant. Notably, those who located themselves in the 'Casual Earner' and 'Free Agent' quadrants tended to be older (40+) and with significant industry experience outside academe. Those in the 'Reluctant' quadrant were all early career researchers with doctoral qualifications and four of the five were younger than the 'Casual Earners' and 'Free Agents'. The participant (Jan) in the Financially Strapped quadrant was under 30 years old and was a full time student working towards her doctorate.

Whereas the matrix encouraged participants to reflect on their experiences it was clear they had difficulty locating themselves in a single quadrant suggesting their experiences of working as a sessional academic changed over time. Most said they had moved between quadrants –from 'Free Agent' to 'Reluctant' for Blue, Stefan and Theo. For some the request

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to place themselves in a quadrants was confronting - particularly for those who had initially seen themselves as 'Free Agents' or started out as such but on reflection felt they now more closely aligned with 'Reluctants'. Stefan explains:

> It's quite depressing now, to realise that this is where I've ended up, not doing what I want to do but what I have to do. I never thought it would end up like this.

Others oscillated between 'Free Agent' or 'Casual Earner'. For example, Bruce decided that whilst he was a 'Casual Earner' at time of interview his preference was to become a 'Free Agent' or return to more traditional, full-time employment. Richard, however, self-identified as a 'Reluctant' but lamented he had always aspired to be a continuing academic, much like Stefan. Further discussion resulted in participants' locating themselves in a quadrant at the time of the study, as described below:

Free agents (Jed, Rachel, Kath, Anna)

Jed deliberately constructed his career to consist of multiple roles providing flexibility, work-life balance and (as he saw it) an escape from office politics. For Anna sessional work was her primary and only source of income, which she saw as providing greater flexibility than more traditional roles. Both Rachel and Kath were satisfied with their status as 'Free Agents' and expected to continue on this career trajectory:

> Well, I can't see myself changing from being a Free Agent as it's described here, even if or when I get my doctorate, I'll carry on. It fits with my holiday schedule, I'm in control. (Rachel)

> Heck, yes that's me, I haven't heard that name before for a sessional but I like it, it suits me down to the ground. It's what I want, I don't think I could go back to being a full-time employee and work for one place, I would be bored to death. (Kath)

Casual earners (Ricki, Jerry Bruce, Terry, Nancy)

These participants explicitly chose to work for additional income. They had extensive previous work experience outside of academe in middle and or senior management roles, enjoyed working with students and saw sessional work as an opportunity to *give something back.* Whereas money provided the means to meet a range of personal and family commitments it wasn't a key driver. This group was notably characterised by a strong sense of loyalty to students but not necessarily to the respective institution. They said they could easily give up sessional work and would do so if the institutional demands became too great. As Ricki describes:

> I feel like I want to give back, I've got all this corporate experience so now's the time
> to prepare the future generation. I work with them so closely, it's like a buzz I get of
> just being in the class with them, they love it and I love it – even if the marking kind
> of stinks.

It is important to note here, however, that even while these participants had actively chosen to be sessional academics they also identified several negative dimensions of this work such as feeling "disrespected" at times or treated like "second-class citizens".

Reluctants: (Stefan, Blue, Richard, Theo, Ruby)

'Reluctants' were all early career researchers who aspired to have ongoing academic roles. They were committed to becoming continuing academics as soon as possible with four of the five writing and publishing academic papers in their own time despite this not being a requirement of their role. They were concerned that if they didn't maintain research outputs they would become increasingly deskilled limiting opportunities for a permanent academic position. Importantly, however, with the exception of Stefan, they did not see their teaching providing a pathway to a continuing relationship with the university. For example, Ruby and Blue used teaching breaks to build their research profiles in order to be competitive for future

full-time academic employment. Yet, both also felt some discomfort with this situation, as described by Blue:

> I publish and **** institution gets credit for that but I don't get any from them, even if I want to go to a conference I don't get any funding or support, they say no support for sessionals. So it's one way, they benefit from me but I won't receive any benefit from them and I'm publishing like crazy.

Financially strapped (Jan)

Jan the only participant who identified as being in this category described oscillating between this quadrant and 'Casual Earner'. She was completing her doctoral studies and saw sessional work as providing the opportunity to develop her academic profile and as a source of financial support as a full time student.

It is notable that both 'Reluctants' and the 'Financially Strapped' were hoping to find continuing employment as academics. Indeed shortly after their interviews both Blue and Stefan secured full time continuing academic positions in different institutions to where they were employed as sessional academics. The Casual Earners and Free Agents were all satisfied with their current arrangements.

Discussion

This study has identified both positive and negative dimensions of being a sessional academic, suggesting that this career form is something of a 'double-edged sword'. In response to research question three, we have indicated how the McKinsey Matrix was a useful initial framework within which to explore sessional academics' career experiences and motivations. All participants used continuing full-time academics as a point of comparison echoing Feldman and Turnley's (2004) assertion that because sessional academics are in direct contact with their continuing counterparts, they are more likely to engage in comparative behaviour. They

especially compared themselves unfavourably regarding the amount of 'professional respect' accorded to continuing academics including how much notice they were given to teach or when a contract was being cancelled. This finding reflects justice theories (Fortin, 2008) and connects to the four dimensions of justice, namely informational justice (continuing academics were understood to have more accurate and timely information); interpersonal justice (continuing academics were understood to be accorded more respect); procedural justice (the procedures for hiring and supporting sessional academics were understood to be adhoc) and distributive justice (the payment and provision of training and development was biased towards continuing academics). In other instances, however, they see themselves as better off than their continuing counterparts, suggesting a more nuanced understanding of what it means to be a sessional academic – that even while there are drawbacks there are also benefits.

For nine of the participants their current arrangements as 'Free Agents' or 'Casual Earners' reflected their preferred choice. Yet, 'Free Agents' were the only group to show mindful awareness of exercising control over their working arrangements by only doing work that they enjoyed. They also set firm boundaries regarding what they would and wouldn't do, managing their own and their employers' expectations to ensure mutual benefit. Their way of working aligns closely with conceptions of the 'boundaryless career' (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996) and more recent discussion of the 'Intelligent Career' (Arthur, Khapova & Richardson, 2017) where primacy is accorded to individual career management. It also echoes Baruch and Hall's (2004) conjecture that (some) academics will operate 'as a self-employed knowledge worker, serving in a boundaryless fashion' (p, 260). 'Casual Earners' were similar to the 'Free Agents', although they had a more short-term focus with no plans to continue this form of employment in the long run.

It is notable that the 'Free Agents' and the 'Casual Earners', were more likely to identify the positive dimensions of being sessional work – citing flexibility, autonomy, not having to

attend meetings or engage in 'organisational politics'. Furthermore, they were least likely, particularly the 'Free Agents', to focus on negative dimensions of this work arrangement compared to the 'Reluctants' and 'Financially Strapped'. This finding supports scholars who have highlighted the positive dimensions of the boundaryless career and the closely related concept of the 'protean career' (Briscoe & Hall, 2006), suggesting that flexibility, autonomy and independence are motivating factors to engage in sessional work. This challenges extant scholarship focusing on the negative dimensions of sessional work (Ryan et al., 2013; Beaton, 2016; Williams & Bevovich, 2017, Field et al., 2014; Bryson, 2013) because they do not appear to be concerned by the putative job insecurity, seeing it as a source of freedom with no requirement for long-term commitment. Moreover, there is a strong sense of affective commitment (Allen & Meyer, 1990) to their work as sessionals based on a felt personal connection with where they work, how they work and with whom they work (especially to their students).

The 'Financially Strapped' and the 'Reluctants' were more dissatisfied with their work arrangements and relationships feeling the precariousness of the work more acutely. Reluctants especially felt that they had limited agency, aspiring to continuing academic positions. This finding echoes criticisms of earlier conceptions of the 'Boundaryless' and 'Protean' careers as being overly positive, under-estimating job insecurity, isolation and lack of opportunities for professional development (Pringle & Mallon, 2003; King, 2004; Richardson, 2009). Thus, whereas we have responded to Feldman and Turnley's (2004) call to examine the positive dimensions of sessional work, we add a cautionary note that it also has significant problematic dimensions. For example, the 'Reluctants' and the 'Financially Strapped' were much more likely to have continuance commitment (Allen & Meyer, 1990), only doing sessional work because they could not secure a continuing academic position.

The McKinsey Model (2016) while a useful initial framework within which to understand career experiences of sessional academics, does not allow for movement between the quadrants. This study, on the other hand, shows that movement does occur as a result of an individual's own volition and/or other external influences. The 'Casual Earners', for example, oscillated between the 'Casual Earner' and the 'Free Agent' quadrant, whereas the 'Free Agents' were very clear that it was a conscious choice to work and remain in that space. Likewise, some had started out as 'Free Agents' but moved to the 'Reluctant' quadrant due to an inability to find continuing academic employment. For some, this was interpreted as a form of failure. Adjusting the model to reflect these findings, as shown in Figure 2, the dotted line allows for porosity between the quadrants. The findings also suggest the need for a fifth box which we have located in the middle of the matrix to reflect the desire by some sessional academics to find continuing employment in academe (as did two of our participants several months after this study). Importantly, other studies have also reported that some academics in continuing employment may move to sessional work, as a precursor to retirement or in some instances through institutional restructuring (Danson & Gilmore, 2012). The central location of this additional box also captures the finding that participants compared their own experiences of sessional work with those in continuing employment. Finally, while we didn't have any such participants in this study, the refined model has a dotted surrounding line to indicate that some sessional academics may end up outside the entire matrix in other forms of work beyond academe or even unemployed.
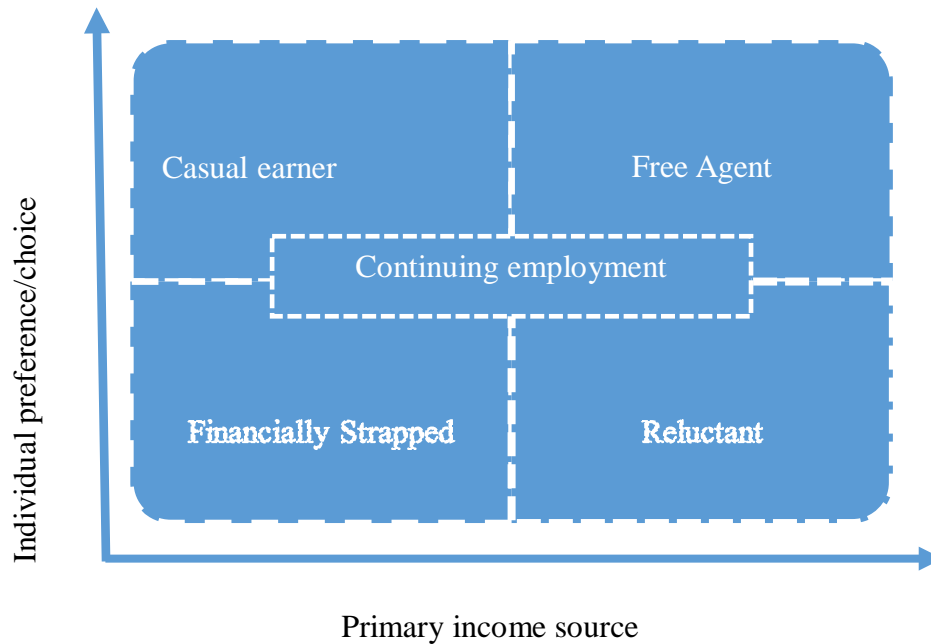
Figure 2. Sessional academic career matrix[2]

Conclusion

This paper has identified positive and negative dimensions of sessional academics' career experiences and opportunities, suggesting this career form is something of a 'double-edged sword'. Whereas some sessional academics may enjoy the putative freedom and flexibility, others appear to desire the stability and security of continuing academic work – notably for opportunities to engage in research scholarship. A further key finding is that sessional academic careers are not static, rather they change over time depending on individual circumstances, career stages and institutional requirements. The implication for employers is the need to incorporate this inherent diversity into their employment practices. The implications for individuals are the need to be aware of both the negative and positive dimensions of this career form and to factor it into their career planning.

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[2] This model is an adaption of the original McKinsey (2016) Independent Workers Matrix

There are several avenues for future research. First, exploration of continuing academics' and institutional employers' perceptions of sessional academics to enable a comparison of the different stakeholders' perspectives. Second, given the relatively small sample size a larger sample would likely identify further themes for consideration. Relatedly, future researchers may wish to adopt a quantitative approach using survey methods to 'test' the themes identified here including the utility of the proposed Sessional Academic Career Matrix for understanding sessional academics' careers and their synergy with the concept of the 'Independent Worker'.

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Table 1. Demographic data

Name	Age	Earning Status	Years as a sessional	Years teaching	Highest Qualification
Anna	40-49	Primary	10+	10+	Masters
Blue	31-35	Secondary	2-5	6-10	PhD
Bruce	55+	Primary	2-5	10+	PhD
Jan	25-30	Primary	6-10	6-10	Honours
Jed	36-40	Primary	2-5	2-5	PhD
Jerry	55+	Secondary	6-10	6-10	PhD
John	55+	Primary	2-5	2-5	MBA
Kath	40-49	Secondary	2-5	2-5	Masters
Nancy	40-49	Secondary	2-5	10+	PhD
Rachel	50-54	Secondary	2-5	2-5	Masters
Richard	31-35	Primary	6-10	6-10	Masters
Ruby	55+	Primary	6-10	6-10	PhD
Stefan	31-35	Primary	6-10	6-10	PhD
Terry	40 – 49	Primary	10+	10+	PhD
Theo	40-49	Secondary	6-10	6-10	PhD