

# A mismatch: Why non-tenured teachers are ill-prepared to deal with the perceived job insecurity of students in the humanities

Arts and Humanities in Higher Education

2023, Vol. 22(2) 183–193

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DOI: 10.1177/14740222231156886

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## Abstract

Most of the instructional workforce within the humanities in countries like the United States, United Kingdom, Australia, and The Netherlands comprises non-tenure track appointments. This commentary is a starting point in thinking about what the meaning and consequences are of far-reaching casualization for humanities education. Based on my experience as a supervisor of non-tenured early-career teachers in the humanities and on an international exploration of the position of the so-called precariat, I describe the competing, and perhaps irreconcilable, discourses on the importance of the humanities for society and the labour market which these non-tenured teachers must navigate. These discourses put especially non-tenured academics, who are themselves in a very precarious, in an even more disempowered space that is not only detrimental to these non-tenured teachers but also to the students who must learn to deal with perceived job insecurity.

## Keywords

Early-career academics, precariat, humanities education, employability

## Introduction

More than half of the instructional workforce within the humanities in the United States (Hurlburt and McGarrah, 2017; Ott and Cisneros, 2015; Shulman et al., 2016), United

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Kingdom, (Chakraborty and Weale, 2016), Australia, (Gupta et al., 2016) and The Netherlands (Rathenau Instituut, 2021) consist of non-tenure track appointments and it is assumed that the dependence of many universities on adjunct labour will continue or even increase. (Rogers, 2020) For humanities students at these universities, the temporary, adjunct, or contingent faculty is responsible for most of their education and is often the first point of contact for their concerns about the uncertainty of their employment prospects. (Brown, 2007) Despite this essential role non-tenured teachers play in humanities education, they occupy a precarious and disempowered space in these humanities departments. In thinking about the role of the arts and humanities within the context of work and society, the question must be asked what the meaning is of the precarious position of non-tenured teachers whose task it is to prepare their students to hold their own in society and the labour market.

This commentary aims to be a starting point in thinking about and discussing the meaning of a largely precarious instructional workforce within many humanities departments for the position and potential futures for humanities in relation to society in general and the labour market in particular. It has its origins in my role as founder and supervisor of a trajectory within the faculty of Humanities of Utrecht University in which non-tenured early career academics are trained to obtain a mandatory formal teaching qualification to be eligible for tenure, comparable to a Post-graduate Certificate in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education. The participants in this trajectory, from over 10 nationalities, taught mostly in bachelor's programmes at Utrecht University that are all explicitly non-vocational and cover the broad field of humanities, including Languages and Communication, Philosophy, Religious Studies, History and Media and Performance. During this process, their insecure position, and how they as teachers must navigate between competing employability discourses, is a recurring theme in how they determine 'how to be', 'how to act' and 'how to understand' their work and their place in society. (Sachs, 2005: 15)

In my pursuit to better understand where the uncertainty comes from, I first asked if, and to what extent, the precarious position of non-tenured early-career academics in the humanities is an international phenomenon and if so, why so many will accept this. Next, I will discuss how they must navigate, from a precarious position, between competing discourses about the role and significance of the humanities for society and the labour market. Finally, I will suggest possible future action in which the strengthening of the position of early-career academics will contribute to better preparing students in the humanities for the world after completing the programme.

## **Precarity**

Many of the non-tenured lecturers like to think of themselves as early-career academics and pursue tenure-track employment: an indefinite academic appointment at a university. Although there will be meaningful differences between different national contexts and even institutions, it can be said that internationally, the prospects of ever getting a full-time tenure-track job are small. (Mintz, 2021) Because of widespread casualization in academia, non-tenured early-career academics form a growing "precariat", "cognitariat" or

“academic industrial reserve army” that provides most of the education in humanities programmes as “exchangeable deliverers of learning outcomes”. (Becher and Trowler, 2001) This development has brought us to the point that, as Berube argues, ‘the profession of college teaching has been hollowed out as full-time, tenure-track positions that have been converted to highly precarious positions that offer no possibility of tenure—which means, basically, all the job security of Wal-Mart or McDonald’s.’ (Bérubé and Ruth, 2016) The *New York Times* headlined ‘The humanities job market is in crisis’. (Carey, 2020) Fewer and fewer tenure-track positions are available, but even for adjunct teaching positions, there is a lot of competition.

One reason is that PhD graduates in the humanities often choose a job in higher education, much more often than PhDs from science or engineering, resulting in even more competition between them. (American Academy of Arts and Science, 2021c; Vitea, 2019) The situation for early-career academics in the humanities is further aggravated by the large increase in the number of PhDs. Worldwide, there has been a huge rise in the number of PhDs awarded, but in the humanities, their number has quadrupled in many countries over the past 30 years. All these humanities PhDs compete for the sparse career opportunities out there. The conclusion must be that universities train far more humanities PhDs than there are jobs for, at least in academia. This leads to a glut of academics with doctorates competing for entry-level academic jobs. (Carey, 2020; Yachnin and Leigh, 2014)

The choice for recent PhD graduates to start their academic career as temporary teacher seems partly motivated by the lack of an alternative. Outside academia, it is difficult for humanities PhDs to get a job. They are the least likely to have definite employment at graduation. (American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2021d; Kier and Jonge, 2018) Even in the longer term, they score the highest in the unemployment rankings. (Auriol et al., 2013) The large supply of recipients of doctoral degrees in the humanities could also explain why they receive the lowest salary of all the fields of study. (American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2021b; Hancock, 2020) Quick improvement seems unlikely. A widely shared opinion is that science and technology (STEM) fields will continue to grow in importance. As a result, there will be more and more jobs in STEM and, by implication, fewer and fewer jobs in the humanities. (Winterhalter, 2014)

Humanities’ poor reputation when it comes to employability (Luce, 2019), has also an undeniable effect on the choice that prospective students make. Although the unemployment rates among humanities majors are not as bad as many stories suggest (Newton, 2018; American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2021e; Office for National Statistics, 2017), students increasingly opting for a major that seems to offer graduates a warmer welcome on the labour market. In the US almost every humanities field has seen a rapid drop in majors (Schmidt, 2018) and in Europe the situation is similar in many places. In a study of 35 countries, a sharp decrease in humanities degrees is visible from 2015 to 2018. This decline appears to be a worldwide phenomenon, and the end is not yet in sight (American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2021c) and contributes to the lack of job opportunities for early-career academics in academia and with it the precarious position of non-tenured early-career academics.

## Academic community

Given the precarious position in which non-tenured teachers in the humanities find themselves, the question arises why so many PhD graduates are willing to teach under these poor conditions. The alleged lack of alternative cannot be the only explanation for why so many “choose” to be part of adjunct faculty. An important reason is the unmistakable deep commitment that most of them have to their research area, to education, and to the idea of teaching the next generation of students. In short: they desire to be part of the humanities community, in which like-minded people in education and research come together. It is what Rogers described as ‘The Problem of Love’. This love runs so deep that it can create a blind spot where labour conditions are concerned. Still, these graduates act not only out of love but also because for many of them, tenure-track employment is seen as the sole expected professional outcome and the only appropriate commitment to the academic identity they have formed over many years of study. (Rogers, 2020)

A temporary appointment as a lecturer is the next best thing after a tenured position and still offers the opportunity to remain part of the humanities community after finishing a PhD. This commitment, the required adaptability and thus the acceptance of the poor conditions are in line with findings from studies into how aspiring academics (seek to) gain a position in the academic community and form an academic identity that the community requires. Through a socialization process, early-career academics learn how to be effective members of their academic community. (Weidman et al., 2001) This involves not only a sufficient level of knowledge and/or technical proficiency in their intellectual trade, but also loyalty to one’s academic community and adherence to its norms. (Becher and Trowler, 2001) Consequently, every academic who wants to enter a new academic community, with the ambition of becoming a full-fledged, competent member, must learn to comply with the specific norms and cultural rules of that community, including the ability to use the type of discourse required. (Gerholm, 1990) The norms, cultural rules and required discourse of the academic community to which early-career academics want to belong is, it is argued, formed by the characteristics of the discipline. (Becher, 1981, 1987, 1994; Henkel, 2000, 2002, 2005).

## In defence of the humanities

To understand the characteristics of academic disciplines, the Biglan model (Biglan, 1973a, 1973b) is often used. (Jones, 2011: 16) Although I recognize the limits of any attempt to identify a generally valid characterization of the diversity of subdisciplines within the humanities, let alone one-on-one links between the characteristics of a discipline and the cultural rules of the disciplinary community (Trowler, 2014), the Biglan model offers two dimensions in which the humanities occupy a recognizable position. The model is based on two dimensions: The first dimension is the degree of paradigmatic development of a discipline, i.e., whether there is a high degree of consensus about theories, methodologies, techniques, and problems, expressed on a scale from hard to soft. This second dimension is the applicability of the discipline. This dimension is expressed

on an axis from pure to applied. Applied should be read in Biglan's classification as the more utilitarian disciplines that aim to find an answer to 'knowing how' and less to 'knowing what'. These two dimensions make it possible to distinguish four main intellectual clusters, which Biglan labels hard-pure, soft-pure, hard-applied, and soft-applied.

According to Biglan, the humanities, in all its varieties, qualifies more as a discipline with a lower consensus than, for example, the STEM fields and on the axis of applicability rather concerned with questions about 'knowing what' and less 'knowing how'. Based on this categorization, Becher and Trowler concluded that the soft-pure humanities community can be characterized as: 'reiterative; holistic (organic/river-like); concerned with particulars, qualities, complication; personal, value-loading; dispute over criteria for knowledge verification and obsolescence, lack of consensus on significant questions to address; results in understanding/interpretation.' (Becher, 1994: 154) Because the disciplinary community is the central context in which academics construct their identities and values, it is the knowledge base of their work, their modes of working and their self-esteem. (Henkel, 2000: 22) It provides the members of a disciplinary community with: 'their own social and cultural characteristics: norms, values, modes of interaction, life-style, pedagogical and ethical codes etc.' (Ylijoki, 2000: 339) shared by the stories shared about the humanities: 'The stories faculty tell each other about disciplines and subdisciplines are very significant and help create a kind of reality themselves.' (Trowler et al., 2012: 185)

Recurring are the stories that deal with on the one hand the existential importance of the humanities and on the other hand how those values are threatened. The humanities are there to help us understand others, foster social justice and equality, show how people made moral, spiritual, and intellectual sense of the world, teach empathy, think critically and creatively, and develop students into informed and critical citizens. Without the humanities, democracy and therefore free society could not function properly. The rapidly accumulating literature in defence of the humanities (Brooks and Jewett, 2014; Bérubé and Ruth, 2016; Drees, 2021; Harpham, 2011; Miller, 2012; Nussbaum, 2016; Small, 2013; Sommer, 2013) without exception repeats these virtues of the humanities for the world and refers invariably to neo-liberal politics as the biggest threat to the discipline. Because it is argued that a dominant neoliberal discourse in higher education has led to New Managerialism, in which market language of costs, efficiencies, profits and competition has been chosen over moral and ethical values and the emphasis in education has shifted to practical applicability, success and optimization. (Archer, 2008; Fitzgerald et al., 2012; Hussey and Smith, 2012; Molesworth et al., 2010) Through this shift, higher education's traditional "Humboldtian" role of producing critical citizens is being replaced by a market-oriented model that functions, directly and indirectly, to serve global business interests. It produces a way of thinking in which everything in society ought to be perceived as a commodity, to be privatised, bought, and sold, and considered solely within a framework of maximizing 'economic growth' (Davidson-Harden, 2013), and thus diametrically opposed to the values of the humanities.

## Employability skills

As Becher and Trowler describe it, the humanities community (Becher and Trowler, 2001) is not equipped to solve tangible problems. Humanities scholars are trained to question the ideas and beliefs behind this need for progress, not to contribute to these ambitions. Humanities education revolves around a continuous reinterpretation and revision of a body of knowledge, while it is also continuously disputed what that body of knowledge should be. (Martin, 2003: 302) Not about how knowledge can be used to achieve a certain goal, certainly not ‘economic growth’, as summarized by Nussbaum in the title of her book ‘Not for profit’. (Nussbaum, 2016)

Yet the humanities have not been spared from neo-liberal politics and teachers cannot suffice with the significance of the humanities for democracy and free society in response to legitimate questions from students about their chances in the labour market. Especially for non-tenured teachers, who are themselves in an extremely precarious position. Their role, as the first point of contact for students, is further complicated by an emerging and neo-liberal employability discourse in which the so-called employability skills of humanities majors are praised. It is pointed out that humanities graduates will be able to secure a better job, as defined by salary and wealth if they can translate their humanities competencies to market demand. (Marr, 2020; Ruggeri, 2019) In fact, the business community is eagerly looking for graduates with the skills and competencies that are central to humanities programmes. As the British Academy put it in 2020: ‘They have skills employers value – communication, collaboration, research and analysis, independence, creativity and adaptability – and can build flexible careers which may move across a number of areas of employment while remaining resilient to economic downturns.’ (British Academy, 2020) Their skills, therefore, lie, among other things, in the ability to adapt quickly in uncertain times. Humanities graduates, as the British Academy wrote 3 years earlier, are recognizable by their ‘positive, open outlook, and willingness to try different approaches, being comfortable with uncertainty and unfamiliarity, anticipating and accommodating change.’ (British Academy, 2017) The same idea can be found in a collaborative project of the humanities faculties of the universities in Leiden, Helsinki, and Leuven, with Randstad, a global leader in the HR services industry. They state: ‘To keep up with the global economy, Europe needs highly skilled employees whose profile is aligned to the evolving labour market. Humanities graduates remain an underutilized resource in the current economy.’ (Asset-H, 2021)

## Mismatch

For non-tenured early career academics, these competing discourses create an insurmountable mismatch between how they were schooled and the need to deal with the perceived job insecurity of students. On the one hand, non-tenured teachers with a PhD have been trained and shaped for many years according to the core values of the humanities community. They are qualified because they can and must critically approach market thinking within the neo-liberal discourse. Deviating from this will lead eventually to alienation from the community, especially with the sparse career opportunities that

made it even more important for early-career academics to be loyal and comply with the norms and cultural rules of their academic community. On the other hand, as the largest group within the instructional workforce within the humanities, they are the ones who most often encounter students who ask legitimate questions about their chances in the job market. An optimistic employability discourse creates pressure on teachers to provide insight into how skills and competencies taught are marketable skills outside the academic community. They probably have no experience of having a career outside academia, are not trained for it and, more importantly, their academic identity as humanities scholars cannot be reconciled with this goal of education. And to make matters worse, they themselves have an extremely precarious position on the labour market and, for their students, are more of a spectre than an inspiring example of what career a humanities graduate may build after graduation.

For tenured faculty, it may be also difficult to find a balance between the moral and ethical ambitions of the discipline and the increasing pressure to showcase the usefulness of humanities research and education. After all, they too have had little work experience outside academia and are maybe also not the most equipped to teach about finding a career outside of the university. However, it is a big difference whether one must fulfil this uncomfortable role with or without a permanent job at a university. The same applies to the use of a rhetoric of vocation and even love for the possibility of teaching the next generation of students. This notion that one works ‘for love’ reflects a position of privilege, maintained primarily by tenured staff in the community, but disregards the struggle that non-tenured teachers face to support themselves and renders invisible the barriers that exacerbate the challenges for academics who are part of the precariat.

In thinking about what the role of the humanities is within the context of work and society and finding solutions which might enable to regain or reframe their centrality, it is necessary to bring into dialogue the precarity of non-tenured teachers and their relationship to students. It would be appropriate if tenured faculty within the humanities community would speak out more strongly against this inequality between colleagues. This would not only strengthen the position of non-tenured academics but is also important for students in the humanities who certainly not benefit from being confronted with non-tenured academics as the embodiment of all uncertainties about the future of a humanities graduate.

## Conclusion

As the largest group within the instructional workforce, non-tenured academics are responsible for a substantial part of the education in the humanities. The chances to obtain tenure-track employment are small, the competition between early-career academics is growing and, internationally, the influx of humanities students is decreasing. Despite this precarious and disempowered position, many PhD graduates are willing to accept this, because they hope they might get tenure, out of love for the discipline and out of an ambition to contribute to a better, more beautiful, and righteous world through teaching. However, the absence of a better career option outside academia may also play an important role. Developments that are increasingly pressuring the humanities affect

tenured and non-tenured members in the humanities community disproportionately, not only because of the far-reaching casualisation of non-tenured teachers, but also because of how they as teachers must navigate competing discourses. On the one hand, they must comply with the core values of the discipline that translate into certain norms and cultural rules of the community that they have acquired during a long socialization process, based on which their academic identity was formed. These values strongly oppose the idea that the value of a programme can be measured by graduate destinations and employment outcomes. On the other hand, there is increasing pressure from society and students that humanities programmes should prepare students for careers outside of academia since specific humanities skills are an underutilized resource in the current economy. In exploring the position and potential futures for the humanities, the precarity of non-tenured teachers who form more than half of the instructional workforce in many countries must be brought into dialogue. Especially by tenured faculty, who from a position of privilege, have a responsibility for those who have such an important task in preparing the students for working life outside of academia.

### Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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## Author biography

Vincent CA Crone is currently an Associate Professor at the Faculty of Humanities at Utrecht University and is also a Principal Fellow at the Center for Academic Teaching and Learning. He is dedicated to promoting and advancing innovation in education and teacher development, with a special emphasis on the humanities. As part of this effort, he oversees a program for new teachers in the Humanities who are guided through their first steps in the field of education. His research focuses on the relationship between discipline-specific characteristics of higher education and the role of the teacher.