

# Academia imitates life: 'atypical'!

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Academic life is a veritable punch of precarity – a heady mix of two sibling components, research + teaching – and (dependent on your contractual positioning) one can sweeten the other, or dilute it. Coupled with the lack of time and funds, increased assessment metrics and job insecurity, the notion of research-informed teaching rather than necessity-informed teaching is akin to the 'academic unicorn' for any person on a fixed-term contract.

In an ideal academic world we hope to use research to drive not just teaching content but also to investigate and challenge our educational practices as a whole, in particular for this issue, our academic employment strategies. This special issue seeks to do exactly this; to cast direct and indirect light on to the architectural academe, and specifically its employment practices. Whether identifying as 'academics' or otherwise, a healthy proportion of architecture educators operate within an itinerant and unstable employment structure, epitomised by the 0 hours contract and populated by a cacophony of contractual variants (or as the U.K. Higher Education Statistics Agency, HESA, calls them 'atypical'). As a topic, the exploration of the role, position, impact and relationships of transient teachers specifically in architectural

disciplines is under-investigated and under-represented in academic research.

For me this issue is an opportunity to acknowledge the current status of educational employment practices in architectural disciplines; to consider their merits and pitfalls, how they are being managed at both institutional and individual levels, but also to look to the future, to qualify input from practitioners and students (future-practitioners and future-academics) – generating an issue which is an honest discussion rather than a one-sided rant. A place to share thoughts and contributions that are perhaps too sensitive to discuss internally but when framed more formally can be posited positively and constructively.

Thus far the HESA has conducted research into the percentages of university staff on different employment contracts. "*In 2015/16, for the first time, atypical staff on non-academic contracts were excluded from the coverage of the Staff record. Prior to this, HE providers could optionally return this information.*"<sup>1</sup> Meaning that the 2015/16 data is a rather skewed set of statistics that glosses over the key issue affecting or discipline but here are the basic stats for the 2015/16 HESA census for academic staff only:

- 55% male / 45% female
- 49% teaching + research / 26% teaching only / 25% other
- 24% female professors / 76% male professors
- Other senior academics – 35% female
- 34% fixed term contracts / 66% permanent
- 19% aged 56yrs+ / 81% aged under 56yrs

As is so common these studies focus on statistics rather than their impact. The personal impacts on teachers themselves is much more readily discussed and exposed in the mainstream media with headlines such as “Zero hours, infinite anxiety”<sup>2</sup> and “I don’t make enough for rent”<sup>3</sup> might seem an emotional exaggeration pedalled as click-bait for the online newspaper industry, but the stories they tell, from a very personal place are just as important and perhaps more useful in understanding the impact of than the data gathered by the HESA.

In the ten years between 2005-2015 I circumnavigated my way (not wholly intentionally) from teaching assistant to course leader. A little like Alice in Wonderland, along the way I have grown, I have also shrunk at times, I’ve seen unimaginable things and conversed with (in)animate objects. I have operated in almost every conceivable position, contract and university type, and I can only assume that this is the reason I was invited to edit this issue of *Charrette*. My CV looks like a messy menu of acronyms and assurances, further separating my academic self from the more holistic setting I feel most comfortable with; teaching assistant (TA), associate lecturer (AL), visiting lecturer (VL), hourly paid lecturer (HPL), course leader (CL), senior lecturer (SL), part-time employee (PTE), full time employee (FTE), Bachelor of Arts (BA), Bachelor of Architecture (BArch), Master of Architecture (March) in Architecture, Interior Design (ID), Interior Architecture (IA) and many more. In the last decade or more I have been pushed to the brink; I am/have been/have taught all these things, with regards identity and belonging this can be difficult to reconcile, especially in black and white on the page, but also in my more colourful outlook on life. As such I lean towards the more comfortable and colloquial of the descriptors; tutor, teacher, mentor, critic, scholar, pastoral carer, curator, author, designer, thinker, maker... valiant attempter.

*The real teacher, in fact, lets nothing else be learned than learning. His conduct, therefore, often produces the impression that we properly learn nothing from him, if by “learning” we now suddenly understand the procurement of useful information. The teacher is ahead of his apprentices in this alone, that he still has far more to learn than they—**he has to learn to let them learn.***<sup>4</sup>

As a young academic myself I believe it my duty to emphasise the need to nurture our future academics – so we have included 6 student voices in this volume of *Charrette*. In 2015 I presented a paper called ‘Architecture: Teaching the future / The future of Teaching’ at the LEARNxDESIGN conference in Chicago where I posited that “*if the discipline lies in the hands of the educators, then the future of the discipline lies in the hands of the future educators. To be truly forward thinking about the direction of practice we must first address our approach to academic recruitment, with a specific focus on early career academics.*”<sup>5</sup>

In recent years there has been a move away from the Heideggerian thinking quoted above. But this is a vein I hold on to tightly as curricula become more involved, learning outcomes expand and accreditation processes get checked, assessed, reviewed and double-checked – the administration of teaching is at risk of diluting the organic process of letting-learn. If we don’t look after our staff, who will look after the future of our discipline? Life is about let-learning. (Hopefully) academia imitates life.

## EDITOR'S NOTE

It is with great pleasure that the Association of Architectural Educators (AAE) presents this important special themed issue of *Charrette*. We are particularly grateful to Gemma Barton for developing the focus and themes of the issue.

We must acknowledge that this issue of *Charrette* fell behind schedule during production. We offer our apologies to all the contributing authors, peer reviewers and members of the AAE Editorial Committee who have helped produce it. Their patience has been greatly appreciated.

We would also like to offer a sincere word of thanks to our departing Editor, Professor Ruth Morrow, who steered *Charrette* through its first three volumes. Ruth was instrumental in the formative stages of not only this issue, but also the journal.

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3 Guardian, Nov 2016, Sally Weale, Part-time lecturers on precarious work: 'I don't make enough for rent' <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2016/nov/16/part-time-lecturers-on-precarious-work-i-dont-make-enough-for-rent>

4 Heidegger, M. (1968) What is called thinking? (F. D. Wieck & J. G. Gray, Trans., Vol. 21) New York, NY: Harper & Row, p. 15

5 Barton, G. 'Architecture: Teaching the future / The future of Teaching' LEARNxDESIGN conference, 2015, Chicago