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# Precarious academic citizens: Early Career Teachers' experiences implications for the academy

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## ABSTRACT

The fragmentation of academic work and its uneven distribution among academic staff have produced particular challenges for new entrants to teaching in Higher Education, Early Career Teachers [ECTs]. In this paper, documentary analysis of the narratives of fourteen ECTs, who worked across six different continents, was undertaken. The findings highlight the diverse forms of precarity that ECTs face, which cut across migratory, identitarian, economic, and ideological dimensions. It discusses ECTs' reflections on their expectations of teaching and their adaptation to the demands of neoliberal Higher Education. Drawing from their narratives and Sevil Sümer's theories of differentiated academic citizenship, ECTs are recognised as 'precarious academic citizens'. This has important implications for revealing the unique circumstances of this group, thereby opening further questions as regards their mentoring and support to enable them to be situated more equally as citizens of the academy.

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## KEYWORDS

Early career; narratives; precarity; neoliberal academy; academic citizenship

## Introduction

The fragmentation and uneven distribution of academics' work has transformed professional careers and shaped experiences of precarity (Burton and Bowman 2022; Greaves 2021). Increased workload differentiation – in line with neoliberal practices that emphasise capital accumulation, consumer metrics, and profit-oriented managerialism – has intensified the division of labour within the academy (Maisuria and Helmes 2019). Casualisation (including zero hours contracts), a reduction in the availability of permanent posts in the sector, and decreased job security compound this situation across a range of national contexts (e.g. Kraimer et al. 2019; Schwaller 2019; Tian and Lu 2017; Courtois and O'Keefe 2015). Similarly, universities remain sites of exclusion that contribute to a relational, or affective, dimension of precarity (e.g. Ingleby 2021; del Cerro Santamaría 2019). Appointments, promotion processes and job security both reflect and reinforce wider social inequities along lines of gender, ethnicity,

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disability, and social class (e.g. Ivancheva et al. 2019; Arday and Mirza 2018; Burke and Byrne 2020; Warnock 2016). Yet, precarity is not simply the consequence of temporary and casual forms of contract. A fuller understanding of 'precarity' attuned to forms of intersectional inequality must incorporate feelings of marginalisation, 'exile', or a lack of belonging (Millar 2017). Thus, as precarity is not homogenous, understandings of the ways in which it structures academic life courses cannot be either. This nuance is particularly important as forms of precarity have been found to vary over academic career stages. Those early in their Higher Education (HE) career are most affected by institutional challenges and are also more susceptible to organisational responses, which are intended to address these challenges (Stratford et al. 2023; Loveday 2018). This paper reveals how precarity shapes the experiences and academic citizenship of new entrants to teaching in HE.

## Early career teachers

In recent years, there has been an increased focus on the careers and life course of those who are labelled as 'early career' within institutions. This is a diverse group of academics, as early career staff will not necessarily occupy the most junior posts in the faculty, nor will they always be the youngest, owing to some entering academia later in life as a 'second career' (Herman et al. 2021). Unlike the traditional, idealised 'professor life cycle', which postulates a rocky but largely uphill trajectory, academic careers are not linear – there are multiple entry and exit points, no 'smooth professional journey', and some may never reach the professoriate or gain permanency/tenure at all (Spina et al. 2022, 534). Consequently, 'early career' academics vary in age, length of service, number of years since PhD completion, and in the quantity of research publications they have produced. However, there is an additional layer of complexity. Much of the existing literature tends to focus on the experiences of 'Early Career Researchers' and 'Early Career Academics', but these terms further obscure the realities of fragmented academic work (e.g. Mantai and Marrone 2023; Spina et al. 2022). For instance, staff in HE may be employed on temporary teaching-only contracts without research responsibilities; or alternatively, they may take up successive postdoctoral research contracts (e.g. in the sciences) and attain mid-career researcher status whilst acquiring very little teaching experience. In both these cases, the staff member might be termed 'early career' in relation to their teaching practice, but not included in an 'Early Career Researcher' grouping.

An existing emphasis on traditional teaching and research models of employment therefore not only misrepresents the diversity and complexity of contemporary university workforces, but also helps to sustain a perception of academic citizenship that marginalises the significance of teaching. In addition, both these existing 'early career' labels perpetuate an artificial separation between staff members of the faculty and PhD students, even though the latter frequently contribute to teaching work (Rao et al. 2021; Mantai 2019). Even when doctoral candidates and early career academics are the joint subjects of research, separation persists in the analysis of PhD students' experiences and that of other casual or sessional teaching staff (see Bosanquet et al. 2020). The term 'Early Career Teacher' [ECT] can therefore provide a useful, alternative framework for exploring the forms of precarity experienced by this diverse group of academics,

which may include temporary lecturers, hourly-paid tutors, doctoral students, Graduate Teaching Assistants, and junior tenured faculty members.

To date, the ECT term has tended to signify newly qualified teachers in school contexts (e.g. Woodfine and Warner 2023). In the literature, these schoolteachers are sometimes distinguished by their felt sense of ‘dislocation, alienation, self-doubt, and sheer exhaustion’ (Johnson et al. 2014, 531). This has direct resonance with the state of flux that ECTs experience in HE. Previously, the early career position had been understood as a becoming process (e.g. Read and Leathwood 2018) or as a ‘waiting in the wings’ (Bazeley et al. 1996). Yet, the starring moment that the individual is imagined to be waiting for in these conceptualisations may never materialise. ECTs gain employment in a sector where precarity has become commonplace; they have fewer opportunities to gain tenured positions (Ott and Cisneros 2015). Fixed or institutional understandings of what it means for someone to be early in an academic career are therefore unhelpful (Bonsanquet et al. 2017).

Instead, as identity only acquires a stable signification once meaning is deferred, ECT identities in HE should be understood as *processual* (Hall 1996). This allows for a sharper focus on the multiple, and often circuitous, transitions that ECTs experience in their careers. A nonlinear approach sidesteps the inherent stagist and stymied implications of the term ‘early’ and does not necessarily anticipate a ‘mid’ or ‘late’ stage in academic careers that might exclude, or misrecognise, certain groups. Thus, an individual may slip in and out of an ECT valence multiple times, depending on the challenges and opportunities they encounter. Nevertheless, there are some distinctive features about this group. For example, those who are newer to teaching in HE often share a high level of idealism and expectations around what a university should be; these ‘imagined futures’ are often discordant with the professional expectations of the institution and/or the organisational culture (Sun 2023). In addition, despite their varied employment status in HE, it is striking that ECTs often have the heaviest teaching workloads (e.g. Brami et al. 2023, 240). This means that their identity and practice have a significant impact on student learning and the wider academy.

This study seeks to highlight the specific precarities faced by ECTs by drawing upon the narratives of fourteen academics working across a range of national context, who each independently self-define as an ECT. This sample allows for an analysis of a diverse range of subjectivities. As Zacher et al. (2019) note, mobility is important to international academic careers and more cross-national research approaches are needed. This paper aligns with a burgeoning literature that charts the experiences of ‘early career’ academics across international contexts (e.g. Castelló et al. 2017; Acker and Webber 2017). Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that there are regional differences across the HE sector (such as variation in the percentage of doctoral degree holders). For instance, 80% of lecturers in the Netherlands hold doctorates, while only 40% of staff working at the 124 universities across Nigeria have PhDs (Ates and Brechelmacher 2013, 15). Credentialism is increasing across the sector, but there is an uneven picture of development for ECTs’ training across the US, UK, Australia, and Africa (Teferra 2016). HE provision also varies greatly by size and type. A recent UNESCO (2022, 2) report highlights that enrolment in private Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) was highest in Latin America and the Caribbean (54%). Although half of the global total of 88,071 HEIs in operation in 2018 were in Central and Southern Asia (51%), Sub-Saharan Africa was

the fastest-growing region as it increased its count of HEIs by 153% between 2006 and 2018 (UNESCO 2022).

Yet, despite differences in national contexts, this article will demonstrate that the forms of precarity that ECTs encounter are similar. It will develop Sevil Sumer et al.'s (2020) conception of academic citizenship as multidimensional and hierarchical, which is attentive to the power relations that operate within a context of 'academic capitalism'. This forms a backdrop for highlighting how ECTs operate within/outside comparable frameworks, even across different national contexts. This article helps recapture ECTs' experiences of neoliberalism, marketisation and bureaucratisation, which in turn shapes the 'freedoms, autonomy, values, and individual motivations' that they draw upon as they work within the academy (Albia and Cheng 2023, 710). These experiences affect their participation as equal academic citizens. Consequently, it will contend that ECTs are best conceptualised as 'precarious academic citizens'. This characterisation has important ramifications for various stakeholders within HE, particularly those interested and engaged in the professional teaching development, mentoring and support of ECTs.

### Academic citizenship, precarity and ECTs

Academic citizenship is a contested concept and practice (e.g. Beatson et al. 2022). Dominant attempts to distil what it means to be an academic citizen over recent decades have tended to reflect university-level policy documents that specify administrative, service-oriented leadership or pastoral work (separated from teaching and research), collegiality, civic outreach, as well as institutional belonging and esteem in a wider academic community (Albia and Cheng 2023). This can be realised through (or arise in tension with) the notion of academics as public intellectuals, whose mission is to critically redefining the public good within and outside academia (Forkert et al. 2022). Thus, a typology emerges, broad enough to convey established perspectives, which emphasises three interconnected elements: (1) political literacy, understood as active participation in organisational decision-making processes; (2) social and moral responsibility, which includes aspects of knowledge exchange and collaboration with wider communities outside of the university; and (3) community involvement, which incorporates pastoral duties, mentoring, and the development of academic disciplines (Macfarlane 2007, 16–17). These elements have become constrained to mean institutionally approved responsibilities, accountabilities, virtues, values and actions. However, strikes over pay, workloads, pensions, and casualisation are not framed by university management as expressions of academic citizenship, even though these interventions can form a cornerstone of another understanding of what to be an academic citizen – namely, one who revolts (Bay 1969; Burton 2021). The more corporate understandings of academic citizenship emphasise collegiality at the expense of contestations of inequalities within academia (Igloliorte et al. 2017). This is far removed from the politicised and radical understandings of academic citizenship that strive for an agonistic and egalitarian space of competing interests in the university (Davids 2022).

Indeed, institutional emphasises on duties and equal participation obfuscates a hierarchical academic citizenship regime, whereby 'membership (yielding certain rights and duties); recognition (yielding power, voice, and respect) and belonging (yielding a

sense of identity, entitlement and ‘fitting in’)) are differentially distributed (Sümer et al. 2020, 20). Sevil Sumer et al. (2020, 20) convey this hierarchical citizenship regime as: ‘full citizenship, limited citizenship, transitional citizenship and non-citizenship’. It is worth summarising this typology to foreground how ECTs do not easily conform to these discrete positionalities. For Sumer et al, ‘full citizens’ are within the scope of tenured employment. Yet, internal hierarchies persist along lines of wider social stratification, thereby fracturing equal belonging within academia as well as participation in decision-making (Dougherty and Natow 2019). In contrast, ‘limited citizenship’ refers to those academics within less prestigious institutions who have ‘poorer promotion prospects’ and less effective voice in shaping the ‘professional ethos’ of the institution; they find themselves in ‘career cul-de-sacs’ (Sümer et al. 2020: 21). ‘Transitional (or probationary) academic citizenship’ denotes early career academics who are on a route towards a ‘fuller’ membership, belonging and recognition within the HEI, but who may also be trapped in a state of ‘non-citizenship’. The latter term refers to those incorporated into the HEI as ‘guest workers’ via hourly paid positions and ‘precarious short-term contracts’.

Sumer et al’s ‘transitional citizenship’ and ‘non-citizenship’ come closest to what we identify as the ‘precarious academic citizenship’ of ECTs. However, a model of citizenship that presents a rank-ordered typology does not adequately capture the diverse experiences or positionalities of ECTs, which are dynamic and cut across all four types of citizenship outlined by Sumer et al. Our account of ECTs, as detailed in the following sections of the article, instead reveals the ways in which ECTs’ academic citizenship is shaped through multiple forms of precarity. Isabell Lorey (2015) defines precarity as the differential and stratified exposure to shared human vulnerabilities, which is organised and naturalised through ideology and state policies. Neoliberalism has become one prominent way of normalising inequality, urging individuals to subject themselves to an ever expanding and deepening marketisation of social life as means of mitigating against precarity (Lorey 2015). Sarah Burton and Benjamin Bowman (2022) extend the concept of precarity beyond the economic situation of academics to consider its effects on knowledge production and individual life more broadly. Individual academics navigate multiple forms of lived precarity, and therefore there have been recent calls for more socially and historically situated studies to better understand differentiated figurations of academic precarity (Burton and Bowman 2022). ECTs differentiated positions and liminal statuses in HE offer an important case-study to provide new insights into the way in which academic citizenship is configured through multiple forms of precarity. Their narratives will help to identify how official conceptions of academic citizenship obscure uneven experiences of membership, belonging, and recognition.

## Methodology

This paper analyses fourteen autoethnographic accounts, which were published as part of an edited book (Crutchley et al. 2021). Each chapter documented an ECT narrative that reflected on the contributors’ early teaching journeys. Contributors were recruited through an open call advertised through the editors’ networks. Respondents all self-identified as ECTs and contributed personal narratives that focused on the challenges they had faced and the opportunities available/negotiated by them – thereby articulating

‘insider knowledge’ of their early teaching experiences (Matthes et al. 2017). Like interviews, autoethnographic accounts elicit their disclosed experiences of the ECTs early teaching journeys (Méndez 2014). In a similar way to interviewers, editors are likely to influence the content and context of an interview knowingly/unknowingly (Heron et al. 2018). These autoethnographic accounts were therefore shaped by the editorial guidance given at the time (see Table 1). All contributors were employed in universities and HEIs at the time of writing and were working within eight different national contexts (sometimes outside their country of origin/education) that comprised Japan, Nigeria, UK, Australia, USA, Brazil, China, and The Netherlands. They represented a range of academic disciplines that included science, education, humanities, social science, health, sports, and management. The contributors also had a range of employment types, some were on fixed-term or hourly-paid contracts, others worked across multiple institutions on zero-hours contracts, some had junior faculty positions, and others were teaching while still completing their doctoral studies.

Following Riessman’s (2008) approach to narrative analysis, each text was carefully read and re-read to understand the structure, content and meaning. The narratives were analysed for key events, characters, context, and the narrator’s interpretation of these elements. Themes were drawn from the narratives using Braun and Clarke’s (2006; Braun et al. 2022) thematic analysis framework. This six-stage process of familiarisation, coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining, and naming themes, and producing the report, was followed to ensure the rigorous and comprehensive extraction of themes. This study maintained a consistent reflexive stance to help ensure that the voice of the participants was elicited (Berger 2015). By using these established methodologies for narrative analysis and thematic extraction, the study discerned significant themes around the forms of precarity experienced globally by ECTs that enriched our understanding of their professional life and experiences.

Although it is to be acknowledged that these themes present a snapshot of illustrative experiences, Ellis et al. (2011) emphasise the value of personal narratives in understanding cultural experiences. More than merely recounting events, the narrative approach allows the researcher to delve into the meaning and significance of those events, as constructed by the subjects themselves. Autoethnographic narratives can take various forms and speaking positions, and importantly for this study, this includes ‘academics’ systematic efforts to analyse their own biographies as resources for illuminating larger social or cultural phenomena’ (Butz and Besio 2009, 1660). The cultural ‘phenomenon’ discussed within the narrative accounts here are *the forms of precarity* that are experienced by the

**Table 1.** Editors’ guidance to chapter contributors writing their narrative accounts.

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<p>Your book chapter should explore your experience as an Early Career Teacher (ECT) within your higher education context.</p> <p>You should:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Narrate your first-hand, personal experiences of teaching in Higher Education as an early career teacher – including how your approaches to teaching have been/are being shaped by the educational and cultural systems you have experienced.</li> <li>● Focus on any challenges that you have faced as you develop your teaching and pedagogical practice.</li> <li>● Explain the strategies and strengths that you developed to overcome these difficulties.</li> <li>● Explore any theoretical frameworks/ ideologies that you could use to explain or inform your current pedagogical practice/experience.</li> <li>● Include any other issues that might be relevant to your teaching practices.</li> </ul>
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**Table 2.** Pen portraits of the thirteen ECTs/ narrative authors.

Name	Gender	Disciplinary Area	Nature of employment	Job role	Work context
Jongsung Kim	Male	Social Studies Education	Full-time	Assistant Professor	Korean ECT working in Japan
Amos Pofi	Male	Public Health Education	Full-time	Lecturer	Nigerian ECT working in Nigeria after completing PhD in UK
Mandeep Gill-Sagoo	Female	Anatomy	Full-time	Lecturer	Indian ECT working in the UK
Leah Burch	Female	Sociology, Social Policy & Disability Studies	Part-time temporary	PhD Student	British PhD student teaching across two HEIs in the UK
Sarah Asada	Female	Comparative and International Education	Full-time	Assistant Professor	American ECT working in Japan
Clarissa Carden	Female	Historical Sociology	Part-time temporary	Postdoctoral Research Fellow	Australian ECT working in Australia
Diti Bhattacharya	Female	Human Geography	Part-time temporary	Adjunct Research Fellow	Indian ECT working in Australia
Erin Pritchard	Female	Disability Studies	Full-time	Lecturer	British Disabled ECT working in the UK
Ben Colliver	Male	Criminology	Full-time	Lecturer	British LGBTQ + ECT working in the UK
Thomas Larsen	Male	Geography	Part-time temporary	Lecturer and Senior Research Associate	American ECT working in the USA
Mariusz Finkielstein	Male	Sociology	Part-time temporary	PhD Student	Polish ECT working in the UK
Ana Zimmermann	Female	Physical Education and Sports	Full-time	Associate Professor	Brazilian ECT working in Brazil
Diwen Xiao	Male	Public Policy	Part-time temporary	PhD Student	Chinese ECT working in China
Natalie Shaw	Female	Education Studies/ Teacher Education	Full-time	Lecturer	German ECT working in the Netherlands after completing studies in the UK

fourteen ECTs, which shape their inclusion as academic citizens and transcend national boundaries. In analysing these narratives, the intention was not to highlight specific experiences that are shaped by intersectional identities, such as their country of birth, country of work, gender, etc. Although an overview of this diversity can be garnered from Table 2. It is interesting to note that eight of the fourteen contributors were female, and that half worked in countries they were born in and/or completed their doctoral studies in.

The edited book was published in hardback on 23 July 2021, and the narratives were available openly to analyse from this point. Using pre-existing documents, such as book chapters, poses limited ethical concerns as opposed to other qualitative methods (Merriam and Tisdell 2016). However, to protect against any potential issues, formal ethical approval was sought from Liverpool Hope University's Research Ethics Committee for this documentary analysis (LHU-13-04-2023). Although this paper draws upon data available in the public domain, the narratives were written by the chapter contributors for the purposes of the chapter rather than for the purposes of this research. However, authors of books are aware that anyone can read and access their content in various ways (Morgan 2022). Glaser defines this form of secondary data analysis as 'the study of specific problems through analysis of existing data which were originally



collected for another purpose' (1963, 11). The interpretation and analysis of the data are therefore those of the researchers/authors and we do not claim that these analysed findings are representative of the views of any of the chapter contributors. Only the final narratives were analysed, and no information shared by contributors outside of this published text was used. Finally, it is important to emphasise that these narratives were written before the WHO declaration of Covid-19 as a global pandemic in March 2020 and the pandemic was not a contributory factor for the precarity experienced by these ECTs at the time of writing these narratives, as it has been subsequently (e.g. Kınıkoğlu and Can 2021).

## **Precarity in ECT narratives**

Across the narratives a multifaceted view of precarity experienced by ECTs emerges. The pressures and demands of the market-driven university system create an unstable, precarious environment for academics, particularly those in early career stages or in insecure positions that are characterised by high workloads, stress and limited academic support (Hollywood et al. 2020). Thematic analysis of the narratives brought to fore the specific insecurities and diverse forms of precarity that the ECTs experienced as they navigated their way through teaching in HE. As Ivancheva et al. (2019) note in the context of Ireland, fuller exploration of the impact of precarity sheds light onto the 'affective relational security' in academic's lives. In this research, the themes that emerge cut across migratory, identitarian, economic, and ideological dimensions. However, it is important to note that nowhere are ECTs passive victims of precarity. This analysis also highlights ECT agency, moments of resilience, and the ability to adapt. Together, this offers a complex and nuanced view of experiences of precarity in ECTs' narratives.

## ***Migrant precarity***

Migrant precarity refers to the uncertainty and instability experienced by ECTs working outside of their national context. Migrant ECTs also experience the extra anxieties of having to validate their worthiness as academics in different geographical/cultural contexts as they seek to gain recognition for pre-existing qualifications (Mantai and Marrone 2023, 797). Jongsung Kim (a South Korean teacher working in a Japanese university) described his precarity as a consequence of his cultural and linguistic experiences as 'other' (2021, 19).

Working in HE in Japan was foreign to me in two ways: as a Korean stranger in a Japanese classroom and, also, as a newcomer in teacher education (Kim 2021, 19)

His Korean origin, cultural barriers to his practice, his limited vocabulary in Japanese and his accent all contributed to his sense of foreignness and the uncertainties he faced as a migrant. Academic mobility can cause challenges for those who are early in their careers and can be 'sticky with emotions' (Tzanakou 2021). The concept of 'protectionist fear' also suggests potential difficulties for the (im)mobilities of returning migrants in reintegrating into their original societies and workplaces (Jekayinfa 2000; Ortiga et al. 2023). Amos Pofi (2021, 27) shares his experiences as a returning migrant to Nigeria, where he feels that the pedagogic skills and knowledge, he had acquired abroad were not

valued in his home country. This makes him feel like an outsider in his own country and adds to the precarity of migrant experiences for ECTs.

In the UK, Mandeep Gill-Sagoo (2021) expresses related feelings of alienation and struggle owing to the cultural and professional differences which she learned to negotiate as she moved from her medical studies in India to teaching Anatomy in the UK. Her use of the metaphor ‘alien’ to describe her experiences highlights her vulnerability and discomfort, while the term ‘time-traveller’ conveys her feelings of uprootedness, dislocation and her need to adapt to a spatial and temporal displacement (Gill-Sagoo 2021). This fits with Courtois and Sautier’s (2022) critique of the framing of international academic mobility as a perk. It can instead place vulnerable early career academics in a form of probationary academic citizenship and alienation (Courtois and Sautier 2022). In Australia, Diti Bhattacharya (Carden and Bhattacharya 2021) also grappled with the challenges of having to conform to the established norms of the Australian academic system. The benefits of her international background, which could have contributed to cross-cultural exchanges and broader perspectives, were often ignored, or perceived as a disadvantage because students requested specifically Australian examples. Furthermore, her visa status limited her access to professional development opportunities and hindered her career progression:

Diti, who plans to continue teaching for the foreseeable future, is ineligible for this formal pedagogical training. An employee on a visa, even one who is working through the long and expensive process of applying for permanent residency, is not permitted to take part ... [her] experience demonstrates that opportunities are not available to all teaching employees. (Carden and Bhattacharya 2021, 79–80)

Mobility across national borders therefore presented issues of progression and inclusion for ECTs as they navigated hidden hierarchies of power (Courtois and Sautier 2022). Each of the participants experienced a feeling of liminality, and their emergence as precarious migrants was shaped, at least in part, by their international mobility.

Yet, academic mobility was a strength in some contexts as ECTs’ migrant status presented opportunities for pedagogical growth. Jack Lee and Aliya Kuzhabekova (2018) suggest that academics in their early career can benefit from international mobility, as it increases networking opportunities, facilitates knowledge transfer, and aids career progression. For example, Gill-Sagoo (2021) became engaged in a process of knowledge exchange as she began to adapt to her circumstances in the UK. She recognised cultural and individual differences within the classroom from her own experience and reflected that: ‘accepting my new situation made my teaching more relevant and my examples better contextualised’ (Gill-Sagoo 2021, 45). Moreover, Kim (2021) accepted his vulnerability in the classroom. He reinterpreted his ‘foreignness’ as an asset, using his position as an incorporated outsider to develop contexts for dialogue in the classroom (Kim 2021). These experiences highlight that ECTs were able to adapt to these situations in some instances and to make their own claims for academic citizenship, even as they were excluded from other forms of institutional support and metrics of belonging.

### ***Identitarian precarity***

Identitarian precarity relates to unwanted instability or insecurity in self-identification, as institutional structures ‘(re)produce inequalities’ (Burton and Bowman 2022, 499). In the

context of ECTs, this is often related to a vulnerable and insecure teacher identity, often labelled ‘imposter syndrome’ in the literature (Addison et al. 2022). For Leach Burch (2021, 49–55), her precarity originates from:

... my movements between student and educator, across two different UK universities, is dislocating and disorienting. ... My own feeling of imposter syndrome relating to my physical appearance, lack of experience and accent becomes heightened during these periods of last-minute teaching preparation.

(Burch 2021, 49–55)

Her negotiation of two competing identities across two HEIs universities thus results in a precarious sense of self-identity and academic identity. Furthermore, Sarah Asada’s (2021) struggles to navigate her dual identities as a mother and an international faculty member within the context of Japanese society. Patriarchal norms restricted Asada’s career opportunities as she wrestled with the pressure to adapt to a heavy professional workload of her profession, while also fulfilling her maternal role. Similarly, Carden negotiates her multiple identities as a working-class woman, mother, and academic (Carden and Bhattacharya 2021). Carden’s sense of precariousness is evident in her need to piece together a professional identity course-by-course while aiming for stable full-time employment. Her professional and personal roles influence each other and contribute to an identity that is constantly being shaped and reshaped, especially in an academic environment that often does not align with caring responsibilities (Ivancheva et al. 2019). Indeed, a ‘key challenge in the development of an academic identity is establishing the boundaries between one’s private self and one’s identity as a teacher.’ (Carden and Bhattacharya 2021, 81). This form of precarity can sometimes destabilise ECTs’ academic identity.

Moreover, ECTs can experience forms of othering in their teaching activities. Erin Pritchard’s narrative illustrated that her identity changed when she moved from being an individual with dwarfism in public space to an ECT with dwarfism in a teaching space (Pritchard 2021). Her struggle with sharing personal experiences, without being seen as a ‘freak’ reflected the tensions inherent in managing identity in a professional setting (Pritchard 2021, 90). She experienced insecurity and a lack of acceptance due to her disability, which often caused her to feel as though she did not belong to academia. Her identity as a disabled, female ECT therefore exposed her to unique forms of intersectional discrimination: ‘... I have been told that I am stupid because I am small, and schoolteachers told my mother that I would amount to nothing. ... Being both female and disabled created a unique form of discrimination that posed difficulties in performing as an ECT.’ (Pritchard 2021, 92.)

Conversely, Ben Colliver (2021) experienced a different form of othering as he negotiated his professional identity in a social setting that has specific expectations about how LGBTQ+ individuals should present themselves. His personal identity, which was once central to his professional role as a youth worker, contributed to a sense of uneasiness and uncertainty about his place in HE (ibid). His personal and professional identity is contested and complicated by institutional norms, student responses, and his position as an ECT (ibid).

Negotiating a professional identity that remains true to my authentic personal identity in a social climate that seeks to silence my voice, to suppress my existence and to position me as the ‘immoral other’ is a complex and difficult task (Colliver 2021, 96)

In academia, then, his commitment to LGBTQ + issues and identity as an activist was not accepted as readily. This led to a tension between establishing a professional identity that satisfies his personal values and a heteronormative academic discipline (ibid). This tension also has consequences for his academic integrity and sense of belonging:

As an ECT, these experiences make me apprehensive about continuing to address these issues for fear of student disengagement and dissatisfaction. ... This is because it is important for me to establish myself as a 'team player', and part of this involves participating in activities and initiatives that may increase the emotional labour I experience. (Colliver 2021, 100 –105)

These issues of self-identification can lead to chronic ennui amongst ECTs. For instance, Mariusz Finkielsztejn (2021) expressed a sense of disaffiliation, alienation, and detachment. He does not feel a strong teaching identity and struggles to find a sense of belonging within the institution or any specific academic community (ibid). He also highlights his lack of strong teaching identity and the limited career opportunities after obtaining a PhD, which contribute to identity precarity and a decreased sense of belonging in academia:

I did not belong anywhere ... I felt 'disaffiliated,' alienated, and detached. ... The lack of strong teaching identity certainly contributes to a decreased sense of belonging. ... Institutional circumstances can shape the attitude, motivation, and emotions of early career teachers. (Finkielsztejn 2021, 127–132)

The perception that people occupying teaching positions have failed in their research reflects a sense of identity precarity for individuals who primarily focus on teaching, and this is exacerbated when professional identification is also in transition and flux. Natalie Shaw (2021) navigated a shift in professional identity from being a schoolteacher to becoming a university lecturer. She had to reinvent her approach to teaching for an HE context. *'What I had thought of as a strong pedagogical conviction and the "telos" of my professional identity was not actually as firmly located at the core of my beliefs as I had previously thought.'* (Shaw 2021, 161). This precarity, or uncertainty, about her identity as a teacher is especially evident when her actions contradict her core belief as a social constructivist (ibid).

However, there is some cause for hope as ECTs can negotiate and subvert expected teaching identities. Thomas Larsen, in his articulation of the multiple identities that have helped him to adapt to the uncertain circumstances of HE, posits three different personas (politician, comedian, busker) that might help ECTs construct 'performative' identities (Larsen 2021, 106). These personas reflect a fluid sense of self that adjusts in response to external pressures and changes. Drawing on his resilience, Thomas created a way to circumvent the clash he experienced between his professional identity and his personal values (ibid). These forms of identitarian precarities therefore highlight the way in which ECTs seek to fit in and belong, but also have potential to challenge established academic identities.

### **Economic precarity**

Economic precarity refers to financial insecurity, low pay, and the proliferation of unstable, temporary, and casualised employment, which has intensified under

neoliberalism (e.g. del Cerro Santamaría 2019). Many of the ECTs included in this research were on precarious employment contracts. For instance, Gill-Sagoo (2021) started as an hourly paid demonstrator and Burch (2021) had to commute to different cities for work as she had part-time hours in two different institutions. The unpredictability of these patterns of employment demonstrates the precarity faced by some ECTs, who needed to organise their lives and schedules around casual work contracts. Burch states that ‘the unpredictability of casual teaching contracts has often meant that I am unable to develop a regular weekly schedule’ (Burch 2021, 54). The uncertainty of her teaching hours, owing to her zero-hour contract, directly affected her economic stability. Likewise, Asada’s economic precarity is reflected in her non-permanent contract-based position. In her role, she felt the need to continuously prove her commitment by taking on additional roles, with a view to secure a future permanent job opportunity: ‘In light of my precarious job situation and having caring responsibilities, I feel I must demonstrate that I am giving it my all to prove that being a female academic with a child does not hamper my work productivity.’ (Asada 2021, 69). In China, Diwen Xiao worried about poor feedback impeding his future job prospects and thus highlighted the market-driven performance measurements in academia (Xiao 2021). His employment stability was contingent on students’ feedback, reflecting a competitive, market-driven approach to education. This power dynamic introduces a level of precarity for Xiao as a lecturer.

Maintaining academic integrity was challenging for me because I was concerned about receiving poor feedback if I did not cave into student demands. As an ECT, I was, and am, particularly vulnerable to these performance measurements. ... Their final comments would weigh heavily with my teaching contract the following year. (Xiao 2021, 149–153)

These economic precarities impact ECTs working conditions in other ways, too. For example, Pritchard feared not obtaining a permanent contract if she voiced concerns about accessibility issues (Pritchard 2021).

The structural conditions of the academic labour market, especially the trend towards casualisation, are further illustrated by Bhattacharya and Carden’s experiences. Their insecure underemployment within the HE has led to feelings of ‘powerless[ness] in addressing the structural issues’ that ‘perpetuate inequalities between sessional labourers.’ (Carden and Bhattacharya 2021, 81) According to Andre Brett ‘casualisation has created a vast underclass of academics scraping together jobs simply to get by – bad jobs not designed with the best outcomes in mind for employees or their students.’ (Brett 2019) Financial insecurity and short-term contracts affect motivation among ECTs. Finkielstein highlights the shift in the UK sector from permanent positions to short-term employment contracts, often dependent on the availability of grants (Finkielstein 2021). These conditions caused him periods of doubt owing to the lack of job security associated with his employment.

I am a full-time employee but on a one-year contract that gives me no security ... The lack of security and feeling of instability ... resulted in ‘periods of doubt in the chosen career path, which in turn results in a lack of deep involvement in the work. (Finkielstein 2021, 126–132)

This pervades Larsen’s narrative too, when he talks about the hardships in securing a stable or tenured academic job. The examples that he drew from include discussions

of the challenging job market for PhD holders ('PhD Population Bomb'), the presence of student debt ('Lingering student debt burdens postgraduates') and shifting enrolment patterns affecting university budgets ('Peak Enrolment') (Larsen 2021, 109). ECTs find ways of surviving, often picking up extra hours, but for most, the only long-term solution is the hope of a future, permanent position.

### *Ideological precarity*

Ideological precarity refers to the dissonance between individual and institutional expectations, which interferes with the continuation or formation of a subject's values and belief systems. Burch internalises the systemic and structural issues in academia:

... in order to 'write myself in' and get a 'seat at the table' within academia ... At many points, I have internalised these organisational difficulties as a personal problem; I berate myself for being unable to keep up with the fast-paced regime of teaching and learning within academia ... I have become frustrated with my own body for failing to work long enough hours and questioned my ability to become a university teacher. (Burch 2021, 51–55)

Here, structural issues in academia are reframed as personal shortcomings in an effort to belong. Ideological precarity emerges as she grapples with the tensions between her personal values and the competitive, individualistic ethos of the neoliberal university. Larsen refers to a similar lack of ideological belonging: 'Like many teachers, I endure times when I feel like I am an impostor, fearful that students will discover how little I know' (Larsen 2021, 115). Finkielsztejn (2021, 126) 'experienced chronic boredom ... associated with a sense of meaninglessness, futility, and general dispiritedness' in his work. He indicated a state of ideological precarity, which stems from a mismatch between his teaching expectations and the institutional requirements of a research-teaching position. He questioned the impact of his teaching activity on his career, viewing it as a 'devalued' activity where teaching conditions were comparable to 'assembly-line work' (Finkielsztejn 2021, 131). Finkielsztejn's journey showcases the disillusionment faced by ECTs, as the need to succeed prompts a conflict, which leads to ideological uncertainty and precariousness.

The ideological precarity faced by Carden and Bhattacharya (2021) reflected a challenge to their authority. In this case, they were told they were 'too young' to understand Sociology by 'a mature-age male student' (Carden and Bhattacharya 2021, 77). The way in which age and knowledge is connected sometimes thus became a source of precarity for younger less experienced academics, as it undermined their authority to claim epistemic expertise and legitimacy in their field. Analogously, Ana Zimmermann (2021) found the composition of the student body challenging:

It was very difficult for me to prepare classes for a public system that should bring together all different social groups when I actually faced a group that were exclusively white middle-class and who had attended private schools. (Zimmermann 2021, 139)

Ana felt that the homogeneity of the classroom and their ideological expectations could limit the diversity of perspectives and the depth of discussion in the classroom. Colliver (2021) experiences ideological precarity when the gender and sexuality narratives he seeks to promote confront the binary understandings of students. The resistance from students places his ideological stance in a precarious position:

This has been a particularly difficult experience for me as an ECT who tries explicitly to engage students in critical thinking around the gender binary and non-normative sexualities, especially when my discussions and suggestions are met with resistance from students who may hold very fixed, binary understandings of the world. (Colliver 2021, 100)

Despite his efforts to bring issues of gender and sexuality to the forefront, he struggles with the dominant binary understanding of gender and sexuality that pervades both Criminology and HE in general (ibid).

Most strikingly of all, Pofi experienced ideological precarity represented through the institutional and societal norms he encountered that undermined his values and ideals, especially concerning teaching ethics. For example, he confronted corruption in the form of student bribes, unethical behaviours from colleagues, and resistance to pedagogical innovation from older academics (Pofi 2021). All of this contradicted his professional and personal values. Furthermore, his teaching approach, formed by experiences in both Nigeria and the UK, often did not align with the established norms in either setting. There was an ideological clash between his pedagogical philosophy and the local norms (ibid). This dissonance was reflected in a student evaluation of one of his modules, which suggested that ‘they may have been dismissive of my active teaching approach’ (Pofi 2021, 30). The disjuncture between the values of ECTs in terms of personal teaching expectations and institutional expectations are glaring. This produces a dissonance that leaves ECTs in a position to feel frustrated in terms of how their own values and expertise can flourish in classroom settings. Sometimes this adaptation leads to fatalism and disengagement:

I, as an ECT, am ‘the last in the food chain’ ... I am delegated with some of the least ‘popular’ courses ... My enthusiasm and sense of mission have decreased ... some elements of cynicism have also crept into my approach to teaching (Finkielsztein 2021, 131–133).

This is another important form of precarity that emerged from the narratives, and one which has clear ramifications for teaching in the wider academy.

## Discussion

ECTs are incorporated into an academic citizenship regime that is underpinned by conformity to the value and service-based expectations of the institution. The pressures and demands of the commodified university system create an unstable, precarious environment for academics, particularly those in early career stages or occupying insecure positions – like many of the participants of this study. A common experience is (forced) adaptation to this neoliberal situation, so as to remain within gainful employment and institutional acceptability. Academic citizenship has formed part of a ‘wider pre-scripting of academic subjectivity’ where one’s membership is measured according to success in delivering market-oriented performance indicators on productivity and outcomes (Morrisey 2013, 805–806). Furthermore, institutional understandings of academic citizenship are at risk of tethering academic knowledge production to ‘profitability’ (Sümer et al. 2020, 2). Across the fourteen narratives analysed above, everyone tried to negotiate this situation in some way. Different forms of precarity intersected with (but remained irreducible to) the economic dimension, with the effect of conditioning ECTs’ academic citizenship.



ECTs are especially at risk of cognitive dissonance if their emphasis on instilling academic integrity, passion for research, or bringing political interventions into the classroom do not align with profit-making enterprise or student satisfaction (e.g. Sun 2023; Peacock 2016). These difficulties became apparent as ECTs navigate their ‘learning and teaching regime’, whereby new entrants on their probationary period (or those still occupying a tenuous employment position) are steered to reflect the prevailing institutional culture (Smith 2017). The term ‘ideological precarity’ helped convey the modality through which ECTs academic citizenship was conditioned in the classroom. Through this, it became clear that the recognition and belonging dimensions of academic citizenship were not satisfactorily realised for the ECTs. A more ‘limited citizenship’ (Sümer et al. 2020, 21) was present in these instances, as ECTs were inhibited in redefining the professional ethos that governed their practice. Thus, some ECTs saw their position in terms of stagist development, an arduous movement from ‘limited academic citizenship’ to ‘full academic citizenship’ (Sümer et al. 2020, 21). However, this narrative of development was not shared by all ECTs. This means that the experience of academic citizenship should not always be reduced to one of inclusion/exclusion or completeness/lack. Precarious academic citizenship marked a heterogeneous set of ECT reflections, which ranged from being stuck in perpetuity to an optimism of moving away from marginalised membership and recognition. Importantly, though, the individual motivations that shaped their engagement with academic work were shaped by their unique experiences of precarity.

Forms of vulnerability were often intersectional, thus ideological precarity was sometimes connected to that of identitarian precarity. For instance, the indirect gendered dimension reveals liminal forms of membership along more hidden axes of power. Academic citizenship is deeply entrenched in the ‘separation of career and family life’, with little institutional support for caring responsibilities and the demands of mobility for career sustainability or advancement (Sümer et al. 2020, 154; O’Keefe and Courtois 2019). This was reaffirmed when ECTs described the tensions between their teaching and caring responsibilities. Other forms of identity—migration status, sexuality, disability, class, age – were also considered significant by ECTs for equal membership and recognition in HE. Certainly, visa status can inhibit equal belonging as part of a ‘continuum of vulnerability that coincides with race, national origin and geographic mobility’ (Courtois and Sautier 2022; cited in Burton and Bowman 2022, 507). Yet, certain contributors felt that their gender, sexualities, and disabilities jarred with some students’ expectations about what identities ought to hold authority in the classroom. This negatively impacted their sense of membership and belonging. In relation to bodily identity, the issue of acquiring equal recognition was irreducible to a singular movement from what Sümer et al. (2020, 20–21) call ‘transitional academic citizenship’ to ‘full citizenship’. This avenue of academic citizenship presumes an undifferentiated body and largely uniform path of transition. Yet in our case, such an avenue was not open. Instead, the ‘precarious academic citizen’ is articulated as an embodied subject upon which existing axes of social inequalities act.

Furthermore, ECTs, especially those on the lower salary grades and temporary contracts, have disproportionately higher teaching workloads (particularly in research intensive universities) and greater duties of pastoral care for students (Macfarlane 2007). Furthermore, a discourse of ‘going above and beyond’ through unpaid labour (frequently

recorded as academic citizenship) has become part of an academic's evidence-based portfolio, which management can use to adjudicate career progression (Ibid). These activities are not given institutional recognition in the same way as other elements of academic citizenship, such as research, teaching and 'collegial service' (Macfarlane 2007, 71). The desire and need to take additional workload conditioned, but also sought to mitigate, ECTs tenuous membership and recognition within academia. They were steered to adopt this strategy due to the economic precarity they experienced.

In spite of their liminal positioning within the academy and subordinated status, ECTs all demonstrate conformity to the student-centred aspects of academic citizenship. In addition, there was no mention of leaving the community of academic citizens. Yet none of the narratives raised grievances about workload or autonomy to higher levels of faculty. This silence is significant. It is perhaps indicative of ECTs inclusion into an academic citizenship regime that has not prioritised dissent; feelings of powerlessness and risk in taking matters to higher tiers of the institution may circulate. A defining feature of precarious academic citizenship has been to navigate this context.

## Concluding thoughts

The paper has explored the various forms of precarity experienced by ECTs that emerged from a thematic analysis of their published autoethnographic narratives. In so doing, it has demonstrated that this overlooked group is worthy of further scholarly attention. Specifically, as career and employment patterns shift, ECTs experiences as new entrants to teaching in HE illuminates a fuller picture of the realities of the academic precariat (Spina et al. 2022). It also blurs the artificial separation in the literature between early career academics – including those on temporary, part-time, or zero-hours contracts – and PhD students who teach. Moreover, the paper highlighted a range of anxieties and vulnerabilities, experienced by ECT contributors working in diverse national contexts and disciplines.

As the focus of the paper was to bring to light the forms of precarity experienced by early career teachers, we have not highlighted their stories of resilience in any detail. These narratives, which convey their survival and success within academia, have been presented elsewhere (Crutchley et al. 2021). This paper has provided a snapshot of the lives of early career teachers predominantly in the Global North (except for Amos Pofi and Diwen Xiao). Future lines of inquiry into the experiences of those within the low-income regions of the Global South should be pursued. The levels of precarity are likely to be exacerbated in these settings, owed in part to economic and political circumstances.

Nonetheless, our study is an attempt to draw attention to the circumstances under which ECTs occupy a liminal position within an academic citizenship regime. Through the different configurations of precarity – ideas, bodies, and economic positioning – experienced by ECTs, their academic citizenship was structured in equally varied ways. The account of ECTs precarious academic citizenship brought to light differentiated experiences of membership, recognition and belonging. This provided further insight into academic citizenship as fracturing, rather than unifying. It emerged as a technique of ranking and ordering the faculty. In addition, this article demonstrated how some ECTs sought to express or redefine academic citizenship on their own terms.

Recognising this inequality and ambiguity within the academic citizenship of ECTs is important for policy makers within HE. If ECTs' plight is not recognised and addressed, it may have a negative impact on their teaching careers and a consequent effect on the learning experience of the students they teach.

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