

## ID 032: Precarious Work in the Field of Academic Work

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### *Abstract*

In Denmark the labor market is strongly regulated by collective agreements and influential labor market organisations. It is surrounded by the so-called flexicurity model combining a high level of flexibility with a high level of social security. However - during the last decades the balance between flexibility and security has tipped in favor of flexibility and it is becoming increasingly difficult to access social benefits. Despite the strong labor market regulation precarious work is spreading in Denmark and tendencies also appear among graduates. Danish trade unions of graduates become increasingly aware, that a growing number of their members are affected as well. Fulltime academic permanent jobs are gradually transformed into time-limited, project-based or part time jobs. The question is; how does this affect and change the worklife of graduates?

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### *Introduction*

Precarious work is a term often associated with increasingly insecure wage and work conditions for unskilled or lowskilled workers, vulnerable groups and migrant workers working in the private sector (Kalleberg 2009; McKay et al 2012). Reasons for that are obvious, since this is where the tendencies are first depicted. However it seems that also high skilled, well-educated groups on the labour market experience changes towards more precarious work in terms of more temporary work contracts and generally more insecure work and wage conditions. In this paper, we present selected findings from an ongoing Danish Research Project, exploring how precarious work conditions begin to emerge in the academic part of the labour market. The Research Project is conducted by Professor Birger Steen Nielsen, Professor Peter Olsén, Associate Professor Niels Warring and Associate Professor Janne Gleerup, Roskilde University. Unlike the majority of current Danish Research on precarious work, this study is mainly qualitative and seeks to explore the subjective dimensions of precariousness. The research questions focus on what *precarity is about*, when it comes to graduates. How do the graduates interpret and respond to their conditions and how do they cope with the growing insecurity and unpredictability of their worklife?

The paper starts out by elaborating shortly on, to what extent precarious work is a problem on the Danish labor market of graduates at all, qualifying the relevance of our research on the matter. Then we reflect on the notion of precarious work, explaining how and why we define it the way we do, in terms of our Research Project. We argue that the complexity of the phenomenon calls upon an interdisciplinary approach, viewing subjective experiences in the light of current changes on the labor market, interwoven with globalization and the transformation of the Nordic welfare state model (Andersen 2014; Mailand, Larsen 2011). Secondly, we shortly describe the content of the Research Project and the meta-theoretical and methodological approach patterning the research design. Thirdly, we present selected empirical findings from our qualitative study, showing how precarious work is experienced and dealt with by graduates we have been interviewing. The paper concludes by asking openly how such new insights can qualify discussions and decision-making processes when facing tendencies of precarity among graduates. Can trade unions play a new role, addressing precarity through learning-oriented dialogues with the affected members?

### *Is precarity among graduates a problem at all?*

An current debate about precarious work concerns the question whether this is just a marginal phenomenon or if the tendency expresses a general societal trend that will eventually reach the core center of society and potentially affect a majority of employees, citizens and societies? Researchers in Denmark disagree on the answer, but if we view labor market changes in an international perspective, there is no doubt about the existing of the tendency towards more precarity (Standing 2011, 2016). Even though the labor unions in Denmark are well organized, the spread is depicted (Scheuer 2011, 2017).

Some also ask, if graduates are vulnerable to this labor market change at all? Compared to precarity among blue colour workers in the industries, the graduates are in many ways better off. Their high level of education enlarges the employment opportunities relatively and their economic positions are often stronger than among unskilled or low skilled workers. Even though the educational system produces more and more graduates, unemployment rates for graduates are declining and in the future, we will increasingly depend on a highly educated workforce, since work become increasingly knowledge based. In other words: Is the spread of precarious work on the high skilled part of the labor market a real problem or is it something that concerns only a smaller part of an otherwise privileged social group? Even though the society educate – and need - graduates, we argue, that the ways labor market changes take place indicates, that quality of academic *work conditions* is threatened by the spread of precarity. Research show that somewhere between 20-30 % of graduates are affected, depending on how precarity is measured (Pedersen, Ribe 2013; Eilertsen 2017; Bøttcher 2016; Eilertsen 2016).

### *The notion of precarity*

The question about employment conditions has always been subject to research and public debate, but the specific focus on the content and spread of precarious work is relatively new in Denmark. This also – to some extent - explains why there is still a lot of debate on how to define and address the phenomenon within research as well as politically. Precarious Work can be defined and analyzed in many ways, depending on, what dimensions of the phenomenon you want to explore (Campbell & Price 2016). Guy Standing has suggested that precarity must be seen related to seven forms of labor insecurity: Labour market; employment; job; work; skill reproduction; income; representation (Standing 2011). Following this, insecurity is a central element, and labor market insecurity is growing for all groups on the labor market. Therefore, we suggest the term *potential* and *actual precarity* to underline the fact that the processes that form the growth in precarious work are related to broader societal and labor market transformations. Especially the expansion of different forms of labor flexibility have become core elements in the development of postfordist and neoliberal labor market regulations and state policies. (Lambert & Herod 2016, Harvey 2010). of precarity ; actual and potential precarity

Precarity is not a thing or substance, but a result of social practice and for a growing group of people, it's defining a way of living. Of course precarity is something that affects people through their participation on the labor market. But if we distinguish rigidly between labor market work and leisure time, we miss out on a lot of work activity. A lot of unpaid work takes place, especially by precarious workers who are constantly forced to spend time and effort on finding the next job and thereby maintain income. In our definition work is considered a basic *life activity* through which we achieve meaning and make sense of our lives as a whole. It is a fundamental part of human life to work – in the very many ways it takes place, in and beyond the labor market boundaries.

Researching the subjective consequences of precarious work has shown to be important in order to understand not only what effects precarity has, but also what might challenge the forces that create precarity. Research on subjective consequences of precarious work among graduates include Sanders' (2012) who has summarized a major empirical study with the construction of four different typologies that categorize ways graduates experience and handle precarity. Others have analyzed how the prospect of a precarious work life can influence how young graduates plan family life ("*Reproductive insecurity*", Chan & Tweedie 2015), while Armano and Murgia (2013) discuss, among other things, how knowledge workers' strong identification with the work can lead to self-exploitation.

### *The Research Project*

The Research Project is funded by the Danish Trade Union of Phd. and Masters (Dansk Magisterforening) who has chosen to support us, because the organisation experience, that more and more of their members are subjected to precarious work contracts and they want to learn more about, how this is experienced, in order to renew political effort towards supporting this group of member. Our empirical activities in the project consist of a series of individual and group-based qualitative interviews with around 25 people who – in their own view - have experiences of precarity. Participants recruited are graduates representing precarious work experiences from both the private and the public sector. The groups defined are: cultural workers, freelancers, university teachers and academic administrative personal in the public sector. In addition to these core interviews we have held some interviews with representatives from management level, interviews with shop stewards and various experts. We have analysed the interviews and produced a number of themes. The selected material used to exemplify certain insight in this paper derive from these interviews with the affected persons, hereafter named the participants. We pool and present research results in a book expected to be published in December 2017.

### *Analytical framework – how to interpret the subjective experience in a societal context*

The overall theoretical framework approach behind the research design is inspired by the tradition of Critical Theory, combining structural (marxist) analysis approaches with the Psycho-analytical tradition of understanding the subjective. When linking societal and subjective issues through Critical Theory we try to avoid approaches understanding subjective experience as a mirror of objective conditions. The subjective experience is always more than that, and the patterns within the dialectic connection between micro macro levels are difficult to grasp making use of one level of perspective only. In our Research Project as a whole, we combine a variety of theoretical views in order to grasp the complexity of the tendencies of precarious work from different angles, but in this short paper, we leave out this complexity and focus instead on selected empirical findings. The strategy of analysis as regards the empirical material is inspired by what we define as an everyday life perspective, theoreticly originating from the french researcher Lefebvre (Lefebvre 1991). With this point of departure we are aiming to illicit how tendencies towards precarious work are experienced and dealt with by affected academic workers in a life world perspective. Below we present some examples showing how precarity is affecting subjectivity, how it is experienced and dealt with.

### *Precarity in a life perspective*

Even though some participants emphasise that they don't see full permanent employment as the solution to all their problems, and even though some are able to find their ways combining different jobs or making a living as freelancers and solo independents, it's evident, that the majority finds a worklife in precarity stressful. Temporality and unpredictability are defining conditions of their everydaylife. This makes it difficult to plan the future and many experiences a gradual loss of control over their own lives. The sense of not belonging anywhere makes space for mechanisms of individualisation strikes hard and so does the sense of insecurity, lack of recognition, loss of professional integrity and sense of disappointment. All severe negative companions to the emerging precarity in the academic field of work.

Among the younger graduates we sometimes trace a more pragmatic or hopeful attitude than among the experienced. The graduates still have hope for a permanent job in the future and some also see positive opportunities in trying of different kinds of temporary jobs, while waiting for the right permanent job to show up. They grasp the opportunities to improve their qualifications and CV's through a series of time limited jobs. However most of them also fear, that this is not just an initial phase, but may instead reflect an emerging structural change on the labor market which they as graduates are the first to experience the full consequences of. As one of the participants puts it:

*"Both my parents are graduates with full time permanent jobs. I have good grades and I guess, I thought, I could be like them. Now I have had temporary work for more than 5 years. Maybe this is how it actually is! I hope not!"*

Others young participants argue that they have been cheated by the "educational promise". They were advised to choose higher education and trusted, that this would keep them as far away from insecurity as possible. Now they find that they apply for jobs they can't get, because they are overqualified as graduates.

The spread of precarious work also influences the private lives of the participants. Especially among the young graduates, planning problems matter: Can we afford to have children, if both parents are loosely attached to the labor market? Can we afford to buy a bigger flat when we both are out of jobs in a few months? Should we move to another part of the country because one of us has got a time limited job offer there? What are the long term consequences of jobs without pension benefits? Will I suffer from poverty in my old age? Such questions make it difficult for the participants to keep faith in the future and a lot of them anticipate that social security in the welfare system will erode.

### *Precarity as a social and professional challenge at the workplace*

Besides the fact, that formal work and pay conditions of temporary and permanent staff are unequal many stresses the difficulties of *social* and *professional* integration at the workplace. Hence a lot of the participants working on time limited contracts experience difficulties in "finding their place" as temporary member of the workplace community. From a social perspective some point out that temporary workers are rarely invited to yearly summer seminars, Christmas dinners or other social activities. From a professional point of view some stresses how it hurts when temporary workers are not invited to take part in meetings about how to organize, conduct or develop the work tasks. Some experience, that permanent staff tends to overlook the contributions by temporary staff, others reason that permanent staff are unaware of who they are and the unequal work and pay conditions they perform under. Some feel almost invisible or taken for granted by permanent staff. As one puts it:

*“It’s the sense of not... You are just not important. It shows in so many ways, we are expected to do all sort of things, but we are not payed for it”.*

At small well-functioning workplaces employment differences seem to play a minor role since the need of close cooperation supports group solidarity and shared interests. At large workplaces like the University, the differences tend to exclude the temporary staff from important professional parts of the workplace community. As a university teacher from our interview puts it:

*“I would very much like to engage in a research group, but I know quite well, that when it comes to money and funding of new projects, I’m not included”.*

The examples show how lack of social and professional recognition from colleagues matters a lot to the participants. When telling about the inequality many participants try to balance their analysis and often they stress that permanent staff can be very friendly and some participants even take on the blame - reasoning that they should have been more outreaching or explicit in showing their qualifications and eager to invest in the workplace. Others state pragmatically, that they don’t expect to be treated as equals with permanent staff, as long as the temporary staff is not ignored and their position as co-producers is recognized at workplace level. As we shall see below, these problems are also interwoven with the participant’s relationship to management.

#### ***The difficult relationship with management***

The temporary staff is vulnerable in the interplay with management. A lot of them describe their temporary presence on the workplace as “a permanent exam” meaning that they feel continuously tested – sometimes without really knowing, what criteria they are judged by. As a consequence, many participants over-perform. They take on more responsibility that their contract obligates to and they accept unfair distribution of workload in order to show their dedication and willingness to work hard. Furthermore participants tell, how they are constantly looking for signs showing, that they might have another time-limited contract when their current contract finishes. As a participant explains:

*“You constantly interpret all kinds of signs that might reveal, if management is ready to prolong you for a couple of months extra”.*

Some argue, that it is impossible to report sick at work. The risk of negative consequences is simply too high. These examples show that temporary workers suffer under unclear performance expectations and this leads to a lot of worry about how no navigate in clever ways in order to maintain employment.

#### ***The workplace environment and quality of work***

Looking into empirical findings it is clear, that at the organizational level the tendency towards more precarious work lead to changes affecting both the work environment and the quality of work.

Increasingly unequal work and learning conditions emerge, and formal and informal privileges become more and more differentiated, and in several cases the temporary workers find that workload is unjustly distributed. Furthermore management and colleagues overlook qualifications among the temps that could improve quality of work. It is evident that not only the temporary employees are affected by such circumstances. Also permanent staff is affected - directly or indirectly. This is partly because continuity is lost, when large turnover becomes “the new normal”, partly because the quality of the social climate is

eroding within this fragmented atmosphere. At some large workplaces extensive use of temporary contracts results in competitiveness among temporary employees all striving for a permanent position. Hence not only work environment but also the quality of work is affected. Professional standards are undermined by an ill-functioning work environment if inequality and competition rather than cooperation and mutual learning define the atmosphere and set unsatisfactory conditions for conducting highly qualified academic work.

### *Professional identity and learning opportunities*

The empirical findings show, that the possibilities of maintaining and developing professional identity matters a lot to the participants. In some branches the graduates are recruited for specialized tasks and they experience good opportunities for using their professional competences, even if it is only for 6 months or less. Such – yet rare - examples are given among cultural workers referring to specialized archaeologists recruited for exiting excavations. Mostly however, the employees experience poor opportunities of making use of their competences. Some of the participants have chosen to supply the income from academic precarious work with part time unskilled jobs. Some work in the care sector, others have cleaning jobs in the evenings. In this way they hold on to their profession, but the basic income derives from the unskilled work. Sometimes the reasons are economic, sometimes the professional interest explains the double strategy. Either way such double strategies are characterized by ambiguity and doubts. “Shall I give up on my professional identity or keep trying to get a fulltime academic employment?”

Participants tend to hold on to their professional identity striving for academic employment. However, conditions for professional development within the academic field tends to weaken and become differentiated, leaving the temporary employees with little or no access to further education. Management invests educational effort in permanent staff and exiting development tasks are given to them, rather than to the temporary staff. Long term strategies do not include the temporary staff and their individual qualifications are often not recognized as potentially useful in the future planning. In the long run, these conditions can lead to de-qualification of temporary workers.

### *Professional responsibility*

In the above described scenario some temporary workers struggle with their sense of professional responsibility. They want to engage and take responsibility for the quality of work, but their time limited contracts and lack of professional inclusion in the work community stands in the way. The interview material shows different strategies to deal with such circumstances. Some engage even harder when contracts are soon to run out. Others tend to let go of professional standards in order to protect themselves from disillusion because of the unrecognized engagement. Some tell us, that this is a very ambiguous situation to be in, since they don't want to downgrade their engagement, but they are forced by circumstances to withdraw from engagement – sometimes also for practical reasons because the need to spend increasingly more time and effort on finding a new job, when the contracts are soon to run out. It can be a contradictory challenge, leaving an unfinished business behind, when a contract runs out:

*I was prolonged illegally for 4 months. They don't feel bad about it in their belly, and I wanted to be prolonged. Then they gave me the tasks nobody else wants... But I write everything down in manuals for the next temp. It's fair to do, when you know, you're out of here soon. But I'm thinking; good luck! Being a temporary worker, you have to protect yourself a little bit. You can't get to emotionally involved, wondering how they are going to make it, when I'm gone.*

As the quote shows it is an ambivalent matter to maintain the sense of moral and professional responsibility and often the participants are struggling to balance between engaging and self- protection. Participants also exemplify that a lot of knowledge is lost due to large turn over and sometimes initiatives or projects must start all over or end before time because it is impossible to establish continuity. As one explains about an important development project that fell apart:

*It leaves a ruin of unfinished work. I was allows to take up the project left behind, but I had to give up on it. It was work initiated by temps who are not here anymore - angles on the matter have vanished with them. What a waste, it could have been so great, doing the project. 90 % of all the work never done relates to the fact that there is no structure, people are gone simply.*

### **Need of change?**

Finally we have asked all interview persons, what kind of improvement of work and pay conditions they wish for. Some would like the public to know more about the precarious work and pay conditions spreading in the fields of academic work. Others ask for networks and trade union support to negotiate better conditions in temporary contracts. Some suggest - quite the opposite – that, Trade Unions should strive to abandon temporary work contracts at all. This strategy however can also backlash to the precarious workers. A university teacher explains how she sometimes feels caught between principles and reality:

*“I am so much against all the time limited job offers – we are exploited, it should be prohibited! But every time I get a new offer, I agree. Sometimes I even ask my trade union to help me out on a formal level, so that I can be prolonged once again”.*

This last quote provokes the question: Are the precarios workers well supported by their trade union or do the trade union fail to grasp their specific needs and interests? Some participants don't believe that the trade union really care about them, others argue, that organizing the precarious is the most important current trade union challenge and they provide with practical ideas and suggestions on how to improve work life conditions through the trade unions.

### **What can we learn from the empirical insights? Concluding remarks**

The empirical examples above show that precarity exists within the field of academic work and the affected struggle with a lot of challenges and dilemmas. It is not easy to predict consequences in the future but the results of our project indicate that it is important to continue identifying the variety of consequences making use of both sociological and humanistic approaches in order to interpret how the spread of precarious work effects individuals, families, work communities and the quality of work itself - and thereby society in general.

The complexity of the phenomenon also indicate that overcoming problems related to the spread of precarity is not something that can be left to the labor market parties to solve alone since the problem is rooted in the development of capitalism and heavily interwoven with political aims to reorganize systems of social security in the welfare state. However it is possible that trade unions could engage in dialogues with members affected by precarity and develop new strategies of political interest in cooperation with them. Gathering and exploring the precarity experiences in a shared learning environment could pave the way for politicizing and translating insights into new demands within and beyond the labor market negotiation system.

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