The Precariat, Ph.D.

On Disposable Academics and the University System

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains, as its main content, work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

_____________________________

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Abstract

Teaching academics are typically in possession or pursuit of a Doctor of Philosophy, which is the highest level of educational attainment. However, the employment and work situations of these highly specialised individuals have been deteriorating, both in Australia and abroad, as universities adapt to the conditions of neoliberal higher education. In the higher education and sociology literature, this has been framed in terms of increasingly bifurcated and insecure workforces. Drawing on Standing’s notion of the “precarious proletariat” or “precariat”, this thesis contributes a conceptual analysis of the structural conditions, situations and views of sessional teaching academics. This is done using a neo-Weberian approach to class analysis, which treats the precariat as an ideal type for analysing groups operating in contemporary organisational contexts based on broadly shared characteristics. Such academics are precariatised, insofar that prevailing university structures see them routinely seeking work through informal and unreliable processes, in which the academics in more secure positions operate as proxy-employers. Although these situations offer little in terms of security, opportunities for advancement and institutional recognition, reports from academics reveal the value placed on lasting academic ideals and the pressure to remain in academe. This class-based analysis is then linked to an analysis of neoliberal higher education using a systems approach adapted from Luhmannian social systems theory. Here it is argued that universities are distinct insofar that they are academic institutions that explicitly produce their own future professional workforces, with the PhD serving as both a formal credential and a broad means of socialisation into academic values. However, universities have responded to the neoliberal environment through corresponding processes of differentiation that have seen the priorities and operational conditions of administrative sub-systems rise to prominence, according to which the unbundling of academic roles and the precariatisation of academics is viewed as a rational response to unavoidable environmental conditions.
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Journal Articles


Book Chapters


Conference Papers


Foreword

God knows how many times I have read over these chapters, doing my best to convey my thoughts with both my contemporaries and examiners in mind. I am inspired by Charles Wright Mills, who implored sociologists to avoid dense and convoluted prose in favour of everyday English. To this end I have tried whenever possible to provide examples that the reader can envision without too much effort, and often transition from theoretical prose (such as when talking about social systems) to a more relatable voice (such as when talking about universities in general) with little sign-posting. The intention here is to bring things down to earth when appropriate, while also striving to provide regular theoretical oversight. This is most apparent in Part 2 of the thesis, in which the lofty discussions of the various “ideas of the university” are addressed alongside descriptions of everyday university life and interview material gathered from PhD students. At the same time, however – and quite ironically, given that I draw on the kind of theoretical thinking that Mills so memorably critiqued Parsons for – I have done my best not to privilege the sociology of everyday life over the insights of impersonal sociological theory. That said – and keeping in mind the suspicion that a key thinker in this thesis, Niklas Luhmann, wrote deliberately difficult prose as a response to the aversion to grand social theory that pervaded much of Europe in his own time – I have aimed to be transparent even in the places where I should be absent. There will be ideas repeated in new ways to remind the reader of key points, as well as long and convoluted passages that seemed unavoidable at the time. I hope that you find something of interest and perhaps even some enjoyment in what follows.

Please note that an editor has not been used in the construction of this thesis.
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The first fruit of this imagination – and the first lessons of the social sciences that embodies it – is the idea that the individual can understand his own experience and gauge his own fate by locating himself within his period, that he can know his own chances in life only by becoming aware of those of all individuals in his circumstances. In many ways it is a terrible lesson; in many ways a magnificent one.

- C. Wright Mills (1970, 12)
Many of those who embark on a PhD are the smartest in their class and will have been the best at everything they have done. They will have amassed awards and prizes. As this year's new crop of graduate students bounce into their research, few will be willing to accept that the system they are entering could be designed for the benefit of others, that even hard work and brilliance may well not be enough to succeed, and that they would be better off doing something else. They might use their research skills to look harder at the lot of the disposable academic. Someone should write a thesis about that.

- Anon (2010)

So concluded the anonymously authored online article “The Disposable Academic” that inspired this PhD thesis. Framing academe in terms of supply and demand, Anon claimed that the growing population of aspiring academics far surpasses the dwindling number of secure academic positions available within universities. This growing disparity has allowed universities to demand more from academics in terms of credentials and labour, while offering them less in terms of security and opportunities for advancement. As a result, ever more of these highly educated individuals are finding themselves stuck in contingent cycles of short-term jobs for longer periods of time. Evidently, argued Anon, there has been a “breakdown of an implicit contract between universities and PhD students: crummy pay now for a good academic job later”. While Anon was writing with the United States in mind, the pervasive disruptions of, and prevailing responses to, globalising market forces, new technologies and funding conditions, and changing social expectations, mean that this is not limited to the United States. Rather, the decreasing security and certainties of academics in universities around the world, and the corresponding situations that characterise the burgeoning lot of “disposable academics”, reflect broader trends within the early twenty-first century economy.
What supposedly sets the university system apart, however, is a culture that has traditionally resisted the pressure to reduce organisational, professional and personal decisions to economistic calculations and instrumental ends. This is apparent in the titles that universities still hold a firm monopoly over, such as the Doctor of Philosophy or PhD, and the ideals and roles that academe is associated with. For Anon, this cultural dimension – as reflected in the tendency for academics to “regard asking whether a PhD is worthwhile as analogous to wondering whether there is too much art or culture in the world” – is crucial for understanding why the rising numbers of aspiring academics have not been tempered by their mounting disposability. I read “The Disposable Academic” in 2012. Resenting such grim, economistic tidings, I determined to “get back to work” on the preliminary research for my own PhD (then a different topic) and clicked the little red box to close the article. In this introduction, I cover the experiences that led me to return to the article and accept its invitation to look at the lot of the disposable academic. In so doing, I introduce the present project and the ideas and structure that have guided its formulation.

The desire to become an academic was sparked following my entry to university by the exposure to fascinating ideas and personalities, and was repeatedly stoked by the satisfaction that comes with sustained undergraduate success. By the end of my degree I was committed to pursuing a career in academe and planned to maintain this momentum by commencing a PhD as soon as possible. It was easy to dismiss my relatives’ advice to take time-off and consider alternatives, such as pursuing a career in business. To my mind, it was not time-off that I had earned but the ability to pursue my aspirations sooner rather than later; indeed, the notion of “other options” failed to recognise the PhD as a rite of passage along my already chosen path. This determination was supported by the academics at my university, who would occasionally describe me as “such an academic” and encouraged me to pursue a postgraduate degree all the way through my undergraduate years.
Still, voices beyond campus claimed that further study was simply a way to avoid the “real world” of work. Others warned against burdening my eventual entry into the job-market with over-qualifications and inflated expectations. I occasionally pushed back against these warnings, for they seemed to betray an ignorance of higher education – which, so far as I was concerned, was to be defended against attempts to reduce it to mere matters of employability. Eventually, I found that the best response was to point out that further study was a legitimate means to perfectly respectable ends: “Besides”, I would say, “a PhD will allow me to transition from being a student to the ‘real world’ of paid work as an employed, professional academic – so what’s the problem?”

I now realise that, sociologically speaking, it would have been better to have asked my interlopers about the issues. “Problem”, as I had used it, speaks to an unwelcome event or troublesome matter that is to be personally resolved or avoided, and so is useful for indicating distaste for a given line of conversation and the desire to talk about something else. Hence, the question “what’s the problem?” can yield three possibilities: it can be interpreted as a genuine question; as a cue to talk about something else; or as a passive-aggressive way to shift attention to the interlocutor – that is, to ask “what’s your problem?” If I had instead asked about the issues, then all sorts of other answers might have been given. These hypothetical answers might not have spoken so much to individual values or presumptions, such as aiming for a lucrative or high-status job that can then be accepted or rejected based on personal preferences. Rather, they could have addressed the material realities, prevailing trends and persistent myths of contemporary higher education, as well as what this all might mean for – and, just as importantly, to – current and aspiring academics. That is presuming, of course, that the interlocutors would have had a clear understanding of the relevant issues, a balanced position on life’s priorities (a subjective matter to be sure), and insight into realistic paths forward. In any case, given the complexity and the often-personal nature of such discussions, it can be difficult to express and appreciate these more sociological concerns.
In saying all of this, I have in mind Mills’ (1970, 4) distinction between the “personal troubles of milieu” (as in one’s own familiar environment) and “public issues of social structure” (as in the broader matters addressed when one is speaking sociologically):

Troubles occur within the character of the individual and within the range of his or her immediate relations with others; they have to do with one's self and with those limited areas of social life of which one is directly and personally aware… A trouble is a private matter: values cherished by an individual are felt by her to be threatened.

Personal troubles can include all manner of challenges. They can be material: being in debt and lacking an income, which could lead to having to move to a new house, going without heating or healthy food, and seeking other sources of income such as selling drugs or ghost-writing. They can be relational: such as ending or being abused, marginalised or exploited within a relationship. They can stem from the physiological or the psychological: a broken arm, chronic fatigue, anxiety or depression. Moreover, these troubles can overlap and affect one another: financial concerns can lead to strained relationships and stress, and this can contribute to ongoing “slumps” and the pursuit of solutions that might be more trouble than their worth. This can influence a person’s sense of worth and identity, as they are easy to relate to personal inadequacies. In short, a trouble is just that: a troubling matter faced by an individual and, by extension, potentially, those close to them.

Now, consider a handful of academics that are frustrated by their insecure employment. To be sure, their undesirable situations may be attributed to their lack of effort or competitiveness within an ostensibly meritocratic system (and the ideological force of the neoliberal economy is all too ready to reduce their troubles to such). However, if growing numbers of competent academics
are increasingly prone to these situations due to discernible institutional arrangements, then this is an issue of social structure. Mills (ibid) continues:

*Issues* have to do with matters that transcend these local environments of the individual and the range of her [sic] inner life. They have to do with the organization of many such milieu into the institutions of an historical society as a whole… An issue is a public matter: some value cherished by publics is felt to be threatened. Often there is a debate about what that value really is and about what it is that really threatens it. … An issue, in fact, often involves a crisis in institutional arrangements, and often too it involves what Marxists call ‘contradictions’ or ‘antagonisms.’

Save perhaps for those individuals that are afforded an extreme amount of agency by the system, such as kings and dictators, structural issues can cause individual circumstances, but not the other way around. This means that there is a disproportionate relationship between the “real world” of the university system and the personal and relational milieus of its subjects.

In spelling out such rudimentary sociological distinctions, I am already at risk of kicking down open doors by stating the obvious. However, the fact is that people at all levels of education can ignore or misunderstand the relationship between their milieu and broader society – even if it might be part of their job description to critically examine their environment, as is the case in academe. Indeed, one contention in this thesis is that such misunderstandings can be actively maintained by the very organisational contexts in which they operate, be it through the impulse to individualise the conditions and consequences of broader issues, or through discourses that frame certain conditions and agendas in respect to one set of values while incidentally omitting others. Examples of the former impulse are given in the chapters to come in respect to the pressure for individual academics to be as competitive as possible, while avoiding any actions that might alienate them from potential employers. Examples of the latter strategies are given in respect to aspirational values that are insisted on by academics and the priorities of university managers,
the latter of which are becoming less academically-oriented by the day. The point is that, just because we are dealing with people who are at the highest level of educational attainment (and so have proven themselves clever by conventional standards), this does not mean that they should be presumed to be aware of, understand or have an interest in any specific issue – and this includes issues that are relevant to their own lives and life chances, which because of their everyday character, can become taken-for-granted. So far as these interests are concerned, there is good reason that Mills critically related issues of social structure to cherished values and institutional contradictions.

I am not saying that such issues are simply the result of insufficient education on the part of universities, the scheming of managers or academics, or of concerted efforts within the media and other systems to portray academe in one way rather than another – although, of course, all such things do occur. Nor do I presume that everyone is knowingly out for their own interests at the expense of others, or that people in general intentionally dupe others to conceal real motives and contradictions – though these too can be the case. Rather, every organisational context is attended by a range of conditions and priorities, some central and some incidental, that shape people’s situations and concerns, and which are affected in turn by wider external forces. Moreover, the ability and willingness to engage with these conditions are tied to further factors, such as a person’s values, employment situation or position within the system, which also exist in connection to broader circumstances. For example, discussions regarding the university system were largely absent throughout my undergraduate sociology studies. We learned about how the relationships between individuals and institutions are tied to prevailing norms and discourses, and examined views on health, race, religion, governance, sex, economics, the law, the media and more – but we never looked at universities: we only ever looked out from the Ivory Tower to critique society, as if universities themselves were somehow set apart from the broader environment.
This oversight also characterised my talks with teachers and supervisors. Whenever we would talk about the academic profession and career path – keeping in mind that these people often promoted such things to students – these discussions would often hinge on the insistence to be passionate and strategic. The importance of publishing, networking and personally interesting research were always mentioned – but actual talk of prevailing academic situations, be they general or specific, rarely came up. Hence, by the time I was ready to follow up my undergraduate degree with at least several more years of postgraduate work, I knew more analytically about realms that I had never had much to do with, such as prisons and marriage and so on, than I did about the one that, up until then, had largely defined my adult life.

This changed when employment turned my former teachers into colleagues. Suddenly, previously unexpressed insights into the university and academe became abundant, as I began to learn of their own troubles. I recall when a former teacher who was teaching at three universities told me that he could barely afford to keep his car on the road, let alone attend academic conferences in his area of research. His admission provided a new understanding: it is not that insights into the university were not there to be shared earlier when I was a student (of course they were). Rather, they were not shared because I was a student – which is to say that my position within the university had influenced my exposure to some of its realities. I have since asked other academics about this lack of candour between staff and students. Some attribute it to a sense of professionalism over what is a part of their role and thus appropriate to discuss as a teacher, rather than as, say, a councillor or colleague – perhaps partly motivated by the desire to sustain student expectations concerning their elevated authority (one based on them being “set apart” from the common folk). Others want to preserve academic values and resist economic-rationalism, to “cultivate citizens, not produce capitalists and workers”, and this informs what is addressed in the classrooms and hallways, which is more about promoting ideals than facing realities. Others have instead come to see being forthright about “what’s actually going on
“around here” as a subtle form of activism – although this was often articulated in terms of personal troubles and perceived injustices, which explains why such candour is typically limited to anecdotal experiences. Finally, some admitted, sometimes tentatively and sometimes nonchalantly, to having never seriously considered such matters at all, largely because, as one securely employed academic put it, “it’s not our job to think about that”.

Now, years later, I have heard my students express their own desires to “become professors”. Just as I had been, these students tend to be unaware or unperturbed by the challenges that they would face. They want to lecture in their chosen discipline, even as their chosen fields are being phased out across campuses, along with the traditional lecture medium. They envision intimate teaching experiences but ignore the implications of their 90-minute/40-student classes – as if the overcrowded and pressurised classroom is only a temporary problem. They do not seem to notice that the professors themselves are increasingly being replaced in the classroom by sessional staff (for many of whom even becoming an assistant professor is unlikely). This latter trend is rarely seen for what it is: evidence of a changing profession and pervasive casualisation. Staff tend to not talk to students about this and students have other things on their minds. Indeed, some of the younger students interpret the youth of their teachers as evidence that an “academic career” (as they put it) is more attainable than ever. I have allowed many of these views to persist uncorrected for a mix of the stated reasons – as well as for my own benefit (for degrading the role of the academic in this context risks undermining one’s authority as a teacher).

To be sure, the different reasons that a person might give for what they choose to talk about accords to more than just their roles, for there is always room for norms, values, and taboos. There is also the fact that everyday life is a dynamic and idiosyncratic realm: under the right circumstances, rigid academics might “make exceptions” to professionalism, while candid academics might use “professionalism” to avoid tiresome conversations.
yet, without discounting all of this, it remains that these relationships between troubles and issues, individuals and institutions, and experiences and candour are connected by a distinctive social context: the university system – a system which, as this project will show at length, has its own roles and hierarchies, prevailing norms and values, popular narratives and hidden contradictions.

All this is to say that Anon was onto something in addressing the influence that universities and academe can have on the lot of the academic workforce. This is no revelation, for universities are well known for being sites for identity, belonging and status building. Consider how a person can seem an “academic type”, how universities still inspire thoughts of an august and leisurely lifestyle, and how being an academic working in a university suggests a measure of professional success. Also consider the sacrifices that academics are known to willingly make for their work and careers, and the popular aspirations and ideals that are associated with universities and academe. Contemporary research indicates that such impressions are still keenly felt and contended within universities throughout the “West” (Archer 2008; Brown, Noonan, Nugent and Scales 2008; Collini 2012).

This initial exposure to such complexities led me to return to “The Disposable Academic” and seek out studies and discussions that seemed related to it. It was a good time to do so: journals such as Nature and Australian Universities’ Review had both released special issues on the future of the PhD. Before long I was delving into discussions on the state of contemporary universities more generally. It was good timing for this as well: in the U.S, Ward (2012) had released Neoliberalism and the Global Restructuring of Higher Education; in Australia, Hil (2012) had released Whackademia: An Insider’s Account on the Troubled University, and in the United Kingdom, Collini (2012) published What are Universities For? The latter two texts provide insider accounts that are steeped in the candour that my teacher-turned-colleague had exhibited; while they are heavily anecdotal, I never had to look far to find peer-reviewed research to corroborate their reports. Moreover, I soon
discovered in the academic job-market and workforce that their stories reflected my own experiences, as well as those of my peers.

To briefly provide an account of these discussions: universities, and thus academe, are undergoing major changes. These changes are driven by the changing funding conditions issued by governments, which have led to the semi-privatisation of universities, which are under greater pressure than ever to attract students and produce quantifiable research output, while cutting costs and inefficiencies, typically through casualisation and managerialism. The subsequent increase in university graduates entering into an increasingly competitive and uncertain labour market has led universities, which are themselves increasingly tied to industry, to focus primarily on employability, funding and competitiveness in their marketing and organisation. This has led the focus of universities to shift away from the cultivation of critical citizens and the pursuit of scholarly knowledge (except as slogans for marketing). Now, they focus more on the development of “brands” and the promotion of outcomes that appeal to a wide range of potential students, and the preparation of flexible workers and “academic capitalists” that can efficiently service the students and produce research according to broadly-defined benchmarks (Rhoades and Slaughter 2009). These changing demands, coupled with the uncertainties caused by technological innovations, mean that the various disciplines are increasingly valued in terms of broadly conceived outcomes: Arts degrees are advertised for providing critical thinking and communication skills, which supposedly make individuals and businesses more competitive; social sciences are pitched in terms of changing the world; and degrees majoring in STEM (science, technology, engineering, maths) are pitched in terms of career outcomes and entrepreneurship, while business degrees are targeted at high fee-paying international students.

At the same time, corporatized executives increasingly dominate universities. These people are primarily concerned with reducing costs, developing the university brand, and deploying measurable performance indicators and
strategies – all while pushing a dual, often conflicting, narrative based around sustained institutional excellence on the one hand and dire financial challenges to institutional survival on the other. This is tied to the changing employment and working situations of academics, the restructuring of the academic profession, and the centrality of academe within universities. These processes of marketisation and precariatisation within universities may be referred to collectively as the neoliberal restructuring of higher education (Ward 2012), with the point being that, for better or worse, the expectations and aspirations pertaining to academe are being overhauled along neoliberal lines due to changing environments and corresponding types of responses.

It is partly due to their awareness of these restrictive conditions that many academics have started to look beyond traditional academic domains to express their concerns. For instance, one study that I present in this project is on Academic Quit-lit: an emerging genre that has illuminated widespread concerns that are rarely expressed in journals or on campuses, communicated by academics that have left or are considering leaving academe. A particular narrative flows through this material: the author developed a fascination with the possibility of an academic career, only to eventually “quit” following ongoing professional insecurity and personal uncertainty (this often involves a great deal of shame). It is not the case that these reports are just old stories that have been provided a platform by new technologies, for this would hardly explain their lack of expression on campuses. Rather, they reflect well-documented trends of academic precariatisation and workforce segmentation, and what Gill (2010, 6) describes as the pressure to “hide the injuries” – shame, exhaustion, frustration and fear – caused by the “defining experiences of contemporary academic life”. Put simply, these reports speak to the issues currently faced by academics and universities, and challenge the myth of the academic apprenticeship that leads to an illustrious tenured career. While these matters are not entirely reducible to such a notion, a primary theme that ties them together, at least conceptually, is neoliberalism.
On Neoliberalism

It is easy to allow the explanatory usefulness of neoliberalism to be overshadowed by the willingness to blame everything on neoliberalism and (typically non-self-identifying) “neoliberals”. Anecdotally, the words “it’s all neoliberalism” pop up in my social circles in casual discussions ranging from work to leisure and identity, often without clarification. Similarly, Rowlands and Rawolle (2013, 106) report how, during their attendance at an Australian international research in education conference, “… otherwise well qualified and erudite presenters explained the background to complex research findings with words along the lines of, ‘Oh, that’s all to do with neoliberalism’”, thus leading to the observation that neoliberalism is often assumed to be “so commonly understood that no further explanation is required”. They then reviewed 110 education articles published between 1997 and 2013 and found that “approximately three quarters of the articles within the sample provide little or no definition or explanation of neoliberalism, despite the word (or its variants) appearing in the title of the article”. Evidently, at least so far as these academics and their reviewers are concerned, the meaning of neoliberalism can be assumed to be self-evident – or, to borrow a phrase from Bourdieu (1977, 167), its usage in academic circles “goes without saying because it comes without saying”.

The extensive application of the notion is understandable. Neoliberalism touches on many areas of life, extending beyond politics and economics to influence world views and social relations. It is tempting to adopt a grander reading of neoliberalism as a monolithic force with a ubiquitous influence; more than just one influential force for social change among many, it is the preeminent condition: we live in an emerging neoliberal age as neoliberal subjects. This at least helps to explain why references to “neoliberalism” have become so common in critiques of contemporary organisational practices and experiences. In other words, as neoliberalism has come to be seen as the essential theme of this particular society, it has become synonymous with “contemporary”; hence, “neoliberal X” can simply mean “X at the moment”. However, there is the danger that stretching the notion to describe as much as
possible could lead to the proscription and exaggeration of the reality it is meant to describe. Suddenly, the influences of neoliberalism are not just evident throughout everyday life – everyday life is itself framed in terms of neoliberalism: students are dropping out of “neoliberal universities”, editing a digital profile becomes a matter of the “self-entrepreneurs” managing their “human capital”, and using the word “managing” without quotation marks becomes evidence of how taken-for-granted market-based “neoliberal language” has become.

Neoliberalism here refers to an economistic paradigm that frames as much of the world as possible in terms of competition and market logic, and attempts to subject as much as possible to measurement and calculation accordingly. For Ostry, Loungani and Furceri (2016) – who also acknowledges neoliberalism as “a label used more by critics than by the architects of the policies” – the neoliberal agenda is characterised by the increase of competition through the deregulation of certain markets and the implementation of new regulations to influence organisations and markets, institutional privatisation, and the opening-up of domestic markets to foreign competition. A major consequence of governments pushing through these changes is that public services and institutions, such as to do with higher education, are placed under pressure to become increasingly economistic and market-orientated. As Read (2009, 28) points out, such developments entail a massive expansion of the purview and normalisation of the market-metaphor to include any context in which economic calculations of costs and benefits can conceivably apply. Hence, as more of the world is framed in terms of exchange and competition, the social is, as Peters (2001, 15) puts it, “redescribed in terms of the economic”, while society comes to be viewed in terms of – or, indeed, denied in favour of – a rational, impartial and democratic “marketplace of ideas”.

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Ward (2012, 32) views neoliberalism in terms of the tendency to treat economics as the “final arbitrator” for decision-making in ever more domains of life, with the market being like a transcendent judge that punishes or rewards individuals and organisations tomorrow for the failure to “embrace change” and “future-proof” themselves. Within such a system, the preeminent rationality is that which can maximise responsiveness and efficiency in achieving instrumental ends – be these in the form of economic targets, benchmarks imposed by governments, or the type of visibility that builds individual or organisational “brands” and thus competitiveness. Speaking in terms of Weberian ideal types, Ward (2012, 66) relates this to a shift away from substantive rationality, whereby moral codes or “vocational callings” are enough to motivate and justify actions as their own ends, toward more instrumental and technical rationales, whereby people are motivated by economically rational goals that have ostensibly measurable outcomes. This poses significant problems for anything that is not easily reducible to economic calculations. As Chopra (2003, 423) puts it:

The irreducibly social that does not translate into mathematical terms is accordingly discarded... The chaff of the social cannot pose any legitimate objections to neoliberalism, since it cannot be represented as a variable in the equation.1

Such limitations are supported by a discourse that insists on the inescapability of an economic reality that reveals itself in expressions like “the bottom line” and “at the end of the day”. As a small example that is not necessarily limited to neoliberalism, the question “what are you going to get from that?” is often levelled at Australian students regarding their chosen degree. This question could be interpreted and answered in any number of ways: it could speak to potential employment, skills and experiences, networking and travelling, or the pursuit of the satisfactions of education and personal development. Yet – at least in so far as the iterations that I have observed indicate – the question

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1 On this point it is worth noting that the social can be accounted for in neoliberal terms as a form of social capital and/or market brandability.
is typically asked to clarify *instrumental outcomes*. This is described by Standing (2009, 129) in terms of the gradual commodification of education:

This is roughly what has happened. Education is imagined as a liberating experience. We revere the Renaissance spirit, the sense of curiosity, leaning and culture. Yet mass education, far from spreading this spirit, has been accompanied by increased instrumentalism and scepticism about the desirability of knowledge for its own sake or in the search for wisdom. Increasingly, knowledge is perceived not as the search for truth but as the search for *relevance* [to the market economy as jobseekers and jobholders].

It is in respect to this internalised economistic reasoning that Foucault (2008, 226) describes the “neoliberal subject” as an “entrepreneur of himself [sic]”, insofar that they must view themselves and their relations in increasingly instrumentalist and market-oriented ways: as part of a professional network, as a constantly developing portfolio and entity to be monitored and promoted. For Read (2009, 30), this is a pressure for people to operate as “companies of one”: to manage our biographies and learn to think of how our experiences and values can be strategically accumulated and deployed, with everything from holidays, to charity work, to public and private behaviour presenting documentable opportunities to signal worth, as well as potentially brand-damaging risks to be avoided. We become “individuals for whom every action, from taking courses on a new computer software application to having their teeth whitened, can be considered an investment in human capital” (Read 2009, 30).

For Wacquant (2012, 69), it is here that neoliberalism, which presents itself as an objective framework, exhibits a kind of “generalised normativity” that is “aimed at fashioning populations and people”. This hinges on a kind of *individualisation*, whereby people are expected to operate as economically rational self-entrepreneurs that are (ideally) solely responsible for their own destinies in an ever changing and competitive world. Success is the fruit of the individual’s ability to comprehend and strategically engage with the market, ideally by way of their own teleological niche (to “find a passion”),
and to continuously improve their competitiveness through upskilling and the accumulation of financial, social and cultural capital. Likewise, failures are reducible to poor decisions, and redressed as personal challenges to overcome and potentially transmute into capital as part a personal storied “brand”. In short, underpinning neoliberalism is an imperative revolving around the atomised, economically productive and competitively unsentimental subject. It is for these reasons that, far from being a neutral representation of reality, neoliberalism is, as Read (2009, 30) puts it, “a political project that attempts to create a social reality that it suggests already exists, stating that competition is the basis of social relations while fostering those same relations”.

For the individual and the organisation alike, the emphasis on adaptability requires the ideal neoliberal subject to not only overcome the uncertainties caused by an increasingly unregulated and disruptive environment, but to also embrace such uncertainty by becoming increasingly flexible and specialised. This fatalism is neatly captured by Parisot (cited in Dardot and Laval 2014): “Life, health, and love are precarious; why should work escape this law?” For Harvey (2005, 3), these conditions “become incorporated into the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in and understand the world”. Similarly, for Ward (2012, 206) this “naturalisation makes neoliberal ideas and practices seem simply as the right, smart or only prudent thing to do, or in the famous word of Thatcher, ‘there is no alternative’” (the “TINA” logic). The result, argues Dean (2014, 159-60), is:

… a regime of government that no longer promises an omniscient market order enhancing human welfare but simply accepts the evolution of complex systems and the inevitability of catastrophe… The only possible policy direction is to prepare against their inevitability.

A major part of this is that an emphasis on “change” comes to be viewed as a general social good, articulated in terms of “moving forward”, “innovation”, and “world leading”. According to such a view, and in keeping with the neoliberal tendency to overlook the uneconomical chaff of the social,
institutional traditions and aspirations are reduced to hurdles that stand in the way of progress (save for when they can be used for marketing purposes). As Malcolm Turnbull (2015) demonstrated in his maiden speech as Australian Prime Minister, this emphasis on change and resilience, as toted by politicians and business leaders alike, is the moral of the neoliberal narrative:

We cannot be defensive, we cannot future proof ourselves. We have to recognise that the disruption that we see driven by technology, the volatility and change is our friend, is our friend if we are agile and smart enough to take advantage of it.

To be sure, this focus on individualism, risk, rationality and traditions have long been key features of the modernity discussed by sociologists such as Weber, Giddens, Bauman, and Beck. In this respect, neoliberalism, if nothing else, can be viewed as a particularly strong revival of modernity, emerging in the wake of the spread and failure of Marxist socialism in Eastern Europe. However, while the development of neoliberalism is often traced to a meeting of scholars that was organised by the free-market economist, Hayek, and held in the Swiss village of Mont Pelerin in 1947, Peck (2010, 106) points out that, “the principal tenets of neoliberalism were not handed down, as policy commandments, in tablets of stone from Mont Pelerin; Hayek himself always insisted that neoliberalism must be a flexible creed” (though the term “neoliberalism” was applied to these scholars from the outside after the fact). Even if the “birthplace” of neoliberalism is identified, it has since become a fractured and crisis-prone transnational project that is rough-rided more by economic and political stakeholders, rather than any single thought-leader. As a result, it has advanced across and seeped into ever more of the mostly “Western” world via various channels and under varying conditions in waves. It is therefore worth stressing that its iterations are typically identifiable not by some explicit advocacy for free-market economics, but by resemblances to the constellation of trends and characteristics that have been outlined here.
One example of such a market-oriented reform in Australia is provided by the Australian Labor Government’s *National Competition Policy* (NCP)\(^2\) of the 1990s. As the National Competition Council (1999, 5) explain:

In essence, most NCP reforms are measures designed to reap the benefits that competition, properly harnessed, can bring. The objective is not to pursue competition as an end in itself, but, where appropriate, to inject competition into previously sheltered areas of the economy to boost economic performance and provide benefits to Australian consumers and households.

The central rationale for the NCP is that government regulation should only restrict competition if it can be demonstrated that the benefits to the community outweigh the costs. In determining “the community”, NCP agreements “give social and environmental values no more or less weight than financial considerations in determining where the public interest lies. In other words, the presumption is that all public interest considerations intrinsically carry equal weight” (National Competition Council 1999, 20). As this cost/benefit formulation indicates, such calculations are essentially economic in nature, with the goal being to “promote the best value for money in delivering goods and services which the community values” (ibid., 7). Under the policy of “competitive neutrality” this includes public enterprises and occupations that, be it through self-regulation or regulation by the state, had previously been relatively sheltered from market forces. Thus, self-regulation, as in regulations exerted by individual practitioners or (more often) occupational associations, were restricted by state regulations—a trend that likely contributes to the widespread misnomer that neoliberalism is characterised by systematic “deregulation”.

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\(^2\) Standing (2009, 184) uses this policy as an example of the attempt to address “regulatory capture”, whereby an ostensibly self-regulating occupation is at risk of turning into quasi-monopoly by restricting entry and controlling the behaviors of members (also see Parker, Cornley and Beri 1997).
As McMahon (2001, 106) observes, the “culture of competition” and “hegemony of market discourse” encouraged by such policies, which were already well underway in the United Kingdom, Canada, and New Zealand, have since been increasingly influential on Australian education and particularly on its university system. It is here worth presenting a question raised by Standing, who, citing an NCP declaration that the “primary objective of this regulation of the professions is to protect the welfare of consumers of professional services and to protect the wider public” (Deighton-Smith, Harris and Pearson 2001, cited in Standing 2009, 187), presents a pertinent problem for the discussion of academe to come:

If consumer protection is the ‘primary objective’, what weight should be given to ‘secondary objectives’, including that of protecting members of the profession against such threats as erosion of professional status and exploitation and oppression within the profession or by outsiders?

It is in light of this rapid encroachment of economic rationalism on the activities of academics and fears concerning various threats that it poses that references to the “neoliberal university” have become popular within the education literature. Here, it primarily refers to the pressures and tendencies for universities to operate like competition-oriented businesses dedicated to making money through students and grants, developing brands, increasing the power and pay of management to enhance decision-making and maximise “flexibility”. In Australia, this was also greatly influenced by the Labor Government’s so-called “Dawkins reforms” of the late 1980s and early 1990s, which made public funding of universities conditional on meeting targets that, among other things, required them to attract and retain more full-fee paying international students and “produce” more graduates (Osboldiston, Cannizzo and Mauri 2017). For Connell (2015, 93), these reforms put mounting pressure on universities to “act like firms competing against each other for funding, students, and prestige” – a transition that is reflected in the adoption by universities of approaches to recruitment, management and marketing that reflect those of private enterprises. Similarly, Gill (2014, 18) notes how these developments have led to the university emerging “as a
cypher or barometer of broader transformations within the economy, and thus a privileged space for ‘reading’ the contours of contemporary capitalism”.

A key point in this project is that the effects of neoliberalism are systemic, for they influence people and practices at every level of university organisation. Its conditions and consequences are not evenly distributed and are inflicted on lowly subjects from above (after all, precarious staff are less likely to assert themselves for fear of losing work). Moreover, as the Government policies described above illustrate, the relationships and situations of everyone within the system are shaped by external conditions to which the possible responses are subjected to widespread imperatives that are difficult to resist (the individual that does not demonstrate the ability to play the neoliberal game will not be very competitive for managerial or executive positions, and those that resist it will not keep their job for long). As such, neoliberalism exerts itself both as a diffuse force embedded in the practices and language of work and enterprise, and as conditions imposed from the outside and the top-down through structures of dominance and dependency. On this note, and as passage to the matter of precarity, it is worth quoting Bourdieu (1998, 3) at length:

Without a doubt, the practical establishment of this world of struggle would not succeed so completely without the complicity of all of the precarious arrangements that produce insecurity and of the existence of a reserve army of employees rendered docile by these social processes that make their situations precarious, as well as by the permanent threat of unemployment. This reserve army exists at all levels of the hierarchy, even at the higher levels, especially among managers.

**Framing the Lot of the Disposable Academic**

I frame what Anon refers to as the “lot of the disposable academic” in terms of an ongoing condition of precarity (Standing 2011; Jørgensen 2016). This is characterised by economic insecurity and organisational marginality as well as by uncertainty, exclusion, exploitation and domination. While this notion will be developed in due course, suffice to say that in respect to these
material and organisational dimensions, precarity can be formulated as follows: \textit{insecurity + marginality = precarity} (Figure 1).

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure1.png}
\caption{Insecurity + Marginality = Precarity}
\end{figure}

Precariatisation is the process whereby precarity is dispersed and normalised. In line with the above formulation, this can be framed in terms of casualisation and, for highly educated professionals such as academics, proletarianisation. Casualisation is the trend of escalating casual and limited-term appointments, relative to declining continuing appointments (Andrews, Bare, Bentley, Goedegebuure, Pugsley and Rance 2016; Brown, Goodman and Yasukawa 2010; Junor 2004), resulting in less economic and employment security. This all contributes to what Standing (2014, 969) calls the “precariatized mind”, as in “the sense of time in disarray, having no control over time”. Along with the decline of wages, job security and compensation, Berry (2003, 68) describes proletarianisation in terms of a “loss of autonomy, loss of control of work process, and finally, loss of the craft (“professional”) perquisites that have traditionally gone along with the work…” Bringing these notions together, McCarthey, Song and Jayasuriya (2017, 2) argue that one manifestation of proletarianisation has been “the break-up of the research–teaching nexus so as to segment and capture academic skills, the first stage of which was the casualisation of the academic labour force”. These processes in turn are connected to the rise of centralised managerial bodies that respond to the conditions of the state and the market by exerting control over, and reducing the autonomy of, workers. For Harvey (2014, 103),
universities are included in this decomposition of professional skills and roles, which are carried out within the “managerial machine” according to a “capital logic” that prioritises flexibility and profit.

Together, the insecurity and uncertainty that comes with casualisation, and the reduction in professional autonomy and status that comes with proletarianisation, can be viewed in tandem as “precariatisation”\(^3\), which Alberti, Bessa, Hardy, Trappmann and Umney (2018, 449) describe as “increasing insecurity in both subjective and objective respects, which can be identified across modern capitalist economies including in ostensibly privileged strata”. While this reflects the conditions broadly associated with neoliberalism, this is not to say that it is unique to neoliberalism. Rather, as Jørgensen (2016, 962-3) explains, “the precarization taking place today is not an exception but part of a process of normalization in neoliberalism”. It is likewise worth noting that, rather than casualisation and proletarianisation being new phenomena, the historical exceptions are in fact the security and unionism that workers in the modern “West” have had since the mid-twentieth-century (Fraser 2013; Munck 2013; Neilson and Rossiter 2005, 2008). It is therefore worth clarifying that, while I argue that precariatisation is relevant to understanding the neoliberal university and the academic workforce, I am not arguing that precariatisation is unique to such contexts.

Even so, while these trends and the structural conditions behind them are not new, Gill (2017, 5) observes that:

The speeding up of this process in the last few years has been devastating – echoing trends in other sectors which have seen the systematic casualization of workforces, and the degradation of pay and conditions. This is not a conspiracy – though it can feel like one – but it is the marked and patterned feature of this moment of capitalism...

More than 150 years ago, Marx explained how a ‘reserve army of labour’ operated as part of the dynamic of proletarianization. Today, the notion of a ‘precariat’, brings a focus on precariousness to novel understandings of the proletariat – a ‘class’ (if you will) that includes

\(^3\) The term “precarisation” is also used in the cited literature. Following Standing’s work, “precariatisation has been used to more closely contrast with “proletarianization”.

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increasing numbers of artists, journalists, doctors and academics alongside cleaners, janitors and others.

By emphasising flexibility as the key to maximising competitiveness, while also pressuring individuals to do the same, neoliberalism has contributed to an environment that ostensibly necessitates precariatisation in a way that seems new to many of its subjects. Hence, while Jørgensen (2016, 963) states that “precarity itself is nothing new”, he acknowledges that the “realization by some groups (middle-class, highly educated, non-migrants) that they also belong to groups in both real and potentially precarious positions is perhaps a more recent phenomenon”. As Standing (2015, 7) notes, “this is the first class in history for which the norm is having a higher level of educational qualifications than the labour the person can expect to obtain and be obliged to do”. Likewise, Millar (2016, 5) notes that “critiques of precarity are wrapped up with expectations, aspirations, and a sense of entitlement among the already privileged (in this case, doctoral students and PhDs) who fear losing their status and secure place in the world”.

This realisation, which Thorkelson (2016, 483) calls “elite disappointment”, certainly applies to the burgeoning academic precariat within universities. Members of the academic precariat tend to be employed on casual and limited-term contracts, and so face regular underemployment and unemployment. These jobs are secured on a contingent basis, through a largely informal market in which academics who are part of the more secure faculty act as the recruiters, benefactors and proxy-bosses of sessional academics. Seeking jobs through the informal market often requires regular unpaid work-for-labour, with the actual contracts typically providing far less remuneration in terms of prescribed hours than the actual amount of work that is done. Moreover, for reasons that will be further explored later, such jobs offer few opportunities for, and can even hinder, advancement and career development. The result is that, despite their credentials, ever more of the very highly educated would-be professionals that we call academics are
caught in contingent cycles of low-pay sessional jobs and unemployment for years at a time.

In terms of avenues for analysis, Standing (2011) argues that casualisation, the devaluation of educational attainment and the gradual erosion of occupational identities have seen the precariat emerge as a “class-in-the-making”. Whether this precarious segment constitutes a “class-in-the-making” (as Marxists might contend is open to debate – a debate that is returned to in Chapter 4), it is feasible that the shared situations of this segment present possibilities for consciousness of their interests, solidarity and collective action. While the operationalisation of the concept is developed later in this project, the point is that the rise of the precariat is connected to structural, cultural and systemic issues that cannot be explained away in terms of personal troubles and individual preferences. To give a sense of what I mean by this, and with an emphasis on the Australian context, the next section provides a broad snapshot of the thusly named “academic precariat”.

A Snapshot of the Academic Precariat

While the notion of the academic precariat is receiving more attention now than in the past, other labels for contingent academics are already established. For example, “adjunct” is popular in the U.S. and in Canada, and typically refers to “non-tenure-track” academics, who can have similar credentials and duties as their tenured peers but tend to be on the periphery of the workforce. In Australia, academic status is typically reflected in employment categories, academic levels, and, to a less-reliable extent, corresponding formal titles. For instance, an Australian university teacher can be employed on a limited-term contract as a level-A academic, with the title of “tutor” or “associate lecturer” (even when no lecturing is involved). A small number of associate lecturers/tutors (typically those on fixed-term contracts) may be formally

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4 In contrast, ‘adjunct’ in the United Kingdom and Australia often refers to a symbolic (i.e. not paying) position held by an academic, typically from another university institution or from industry, which allows them access to university resources, such as the library.
counted as university faculty, but most “casuals” are only counted in “full-time equivalent” (FTE) measures. Further, in accordance with the Human Resources scales used by many universities, they may not be classed as academic staff, but rather as administrative or professional staff.

Due to this ambiguity, Australian academics in insecure employment tend to be generalised under the broad label of “casuals” or “sessionals”. I use the term “sessional” when describing members of the academic precariat, with “casual” being reserved for the employment category itself. This distinction is useful insofar that “sessional” provides a narrower reference to the academic workers that are being dealt with here, while “casual” can bring any sector or comparably employed worker to mind. To consolidate these points, let us consider the employment categories typically used by Australian universities, which, in accord with the Australian Department of Industry, Innovation and Science, typically classify employees by contract categories as being continuing, limited-term or casual.

Continuing (or permanent) employment can be either full-time or part-time, and refers to secure, salaried positions that typically come with entitlements such as annual, personal and parental leave, maximum ordinary hours of work, and redundancy pay. In contrast, limited-term (or fixed-term) employment includes staff employed on contracts that can range from several months to several years. Sessional academics, on the other hand, are typically contracted for just a few months, as with sessional teachers and research assistants. It is worth noting that, as long as there is a tendency by employers to cut costs, increase flexibility, and thus undermine these secure categories through restructures and redundancies, “secure” positions should always be viewed as contingent and not as completely immune to dissolution. Hence, they can be accompanied by a certain precarity, although – for analytical purposes – they are not formally identified as part of the precariat.
“Casual” is a broad Australian subcategory of the limited-term category. Casual work is paid for by the hour in terms of individual shifts or sessional workloads, with the lack of a salary and entitlements potentially resulting in unpredictable or cyclical periods without pay or support. The employer can offer work to current or potential casual employees of their choosing, who may accept or reject the offer (although too many rejections may result in less offers being made and even the termination of the relationship). As this arrangement involves uncertainty for both parties, the category has reduced professional and legal responsibilities, meaning that either side can terminate the relationship with less notice, explanation or compensation compared to the other categories. To compensate for this, casuals typically receive relatively high hourly pay rates. These conditions are conducive to economic self-interest and relations of convenience, whereby casuals can treat employment as a short-term source of income, and employers can treat casuals as a source of disposable labour. While this formulation is useful as a link to casualisation and insecure workers in other sectors, the university context involves crucial distinctions that set it and its subjects apart both materially and in terms of status. As Gunasekara (2007, 3) points out, these labels:

… take on a life of their own beyond the strict legal interpretation of non-standard, periodic contracts of employment. They signify a marginal status, a peripheral role and a certain ambivalence towards the importance of the people behind the label.

While the reasons for this are explored later, here are a few reasons why I deem the term “sessional” to be more suitable than “casual” when referring to academics, and why the involvement of sessional academics – and particularly teaching academics – within the university system tends to be, as Coates and Goedegebuure (2010, 13) put it, “anything but casual”:

1. Sessionals are typically based on packages rather than individual shifts. In other words, sessional academic work, and teaching work in particular, is
typically based on semester-long contracts that can cover dozens of
guaranteed and more-or-less regular hours. This means that sessional
academics tend to experience more short-term security than casuals in other
sectors, due to their reliable weekly and seasonal routines (Junor 2004;
Pocock, Prosser and Bridge 2005). However, this also means that the
aforementioned ability to accept or reject shifts is replaced by commitments
to substantial workloads, thereby requiring the individual to think further
ahead, often in terms of semesters, rather than in terms of weekly rosters or
ad-hoc call-ins. This seasonal quality means that sessional academics must
factor in the non-teaching, and thus non-paying, periods between semesters,
which last from several weeks to several months. Thus, throughout the
semester, the sessional that was fortunate enough to find work has a source
of income and a chance to save some money. When semester ends, they often
become jobless and potentially without an income. The new semester is
preceded by the job-hunting season, and, if successful in securing further
employment, the cycle starts over.

2. Sessionals are less likely to accept limited-term and casual employment by
choice (that is, “choice” understood as what they really want). This point is
perhaps the most crucial for the frustration and sense of relative deprivation
experienced by sessionals (Feldman and Turnley 2004). While around a
quarter of sessionals are happy to remain casual, most would prefer
continuing academic positions and desire long-term academic careers
(Bentley, Coates, Dobson, Goedegebuure and Meek 2013; May, Peetz and
Strachan 2013; Percy, Scoufis, Parry, Goody, Hicks, Macdonald, Martinez,
Szorenyi-Reischl, Ryan, Wills and Sheridan 2008; Pocock et al. 2005). This
is especially the case for sessionals in possession or pursuit of a PhD, who
often aspire to ongoing teaching or research work upon completion of their
degree. On this final note of employment preferences, it is worth noting that
many sessionals see their situation not just as a temporary source of income,
but as a “stepping stone” toward an academic career. As we shall see, part of
the issue here is that older understandings of academic apprenticeships and
careers are now becoming inaccurate (Brown et al. 2010; Gottschalk and McEachern 2010).

3. **Sessional teachers are “paid by the hour” in name only.** While casual shifts are typically sorted into blocks that allow the individual to explicitly “clock in” and “knock off”, the paid hours allocated to sessional academics are rarely enough to maintain an acceptable quality of work (Rea 2012). The same preparation time is typically allocated regardless of whether or not the sessional is familiar with the material and experienced in the discipline (Ryan, Burgess, Connell and Groen 2013), although some universities may pay for lecture attendance. While it is up to the individual how they spend this time, research shows that overwork has been normalised throughout the university sector. For example, Brown, Goodman and Yasukawa (2006, 174) report that teaching contracts at one metropolitan university included two hours of pay for “associated duties” for every hour of face-to-face tutoring, covering “research and scholarship required for the session, planning and preparation, student consultation, sending and responding to emails from students, photocopying… and up to 20 minutes of marking”. Moreover, developments in communication technologies, falling admission standards and rising class numbers have made “student-care” increasingly demanding. The hourly pay stipulated on contracts rarely reflects these working hours, with sessionals often doing such overwork because, if they do not, then they risk not being re-employed come the next semester or year (Gill 2010; Bradley et al. 2008; May, Strachan, Broadbent and Peetz 2011).

4. **Sessionals are often in long-term relationships with the university system.** Sessional academic staff will typically possess an honours degree, which means that by the time they enter the academic workforce they have spent at least four years within the university system. While some postgraduate credentials, such as a Masters, can be gained within a single year, most universities typically encourage their academics to either have or be in pursuit of a PhD. The PhD typically marks the entry point into a disciplinary
community and the academic workforce (McAlpine 2012; Swietzer 2009; Turner and McAlpine 2011), and its completion symbolises a professional and cultural “rite of passage” into academe. During this period the candidate and sessional will be encouraged to attend conferences and workshops in which they will be given advice on developing their academic networks and increasingly the visibility of their research. The result is that the sessional either has been or will be engaged with the university system on a variety of levels, ranging from teaching and research to community engagement. Hence, rather than sessional teaching just being a matter of “passing through” the sector, it can also mark a transition between roles within the system: from student to staff and, potentially, from casual to continuing employment (Probert 2014; also see: Coaldrake and Stedman 1998; Gappa and Leslie 1993; Marginson 2000).

5. This is all tied to occupational identity and a willingness to make sacrifices. While blatant economic self-interest may be expected of casual workers in some sectors, the idea of working in academe purely for monetary gain is incongruous with most academics. Here are two overlapping dimensions. First are the expectations that the aspiring academic may hold themselves to and feel others hold them to as well. Another way to put this is in terms of occupational identity and investment of time, which is why those academics who decide to leave the university system often speak of personal crisis, shame, confessions, and eventually the difficulty of admitting to others what was so hard to admit to themselves: they have ostensibly done a great deal of hard work to succeed in the education system, and may have come to see themselves and others as having a passion for their work and a mind suited to the job – in short, as being a “real academic”. This overlaps with the fact that academe has historically been aligned with intellectual, professional and institutional ideals that are still popular (Collini 2012; Gora 2012; McAlpine 2012). Moreover, Australians are taught from a young age that education is crucial to success in life – a message that is easily translated to refer to success in the education system and career outcomes. Hence, those who have done the very best in the education system – and who are accordingly seen as being
the most educated – are positioned to feel the pressure of these expectations in ways that limited-term and casual employees in other sectors might not.

This is all to say that sessional academics can locate their employment and work in respect to the “bigger picture” of an occupational identity via the contributions that universities and academics make to knowledge and society through teaching, training, research and critical discussion. This notion of dedication and sacrifice can be interpreted as being both personal and pressurised. Following interviews with young academics working in the U.K., Archer (2008, 276) suggests that aspiring academics often put up with exploitative conditions because “it feels like a choice”. Likewise, following interviews with sessional teaching academics working in Australia, Brown et al. (2006, 23) note that, despite many interviewees experiencing insecurity and occupational marginality, “a major reason” for remaining in higher education is “the sheer love of the job” and “the expectation or hope of some kind of more secure academic employment in the future”. Alternatively, Miller (2012, 259) describes the “dreamy self-exploitation” of academics as “autotelic subjects who regard being a part of the gentried [sic] poor and dedicated to the life of the mind as fulfilling in themselves or as passports to a labour market that will ultimately reward them fairly”. Whatever the case, many sessionals feel a commitment to their work, career and associated community that often takes them beyond their contractual duty (Bentley et al. 2013; Clarke, Hyde and Drennan 2013).

While the estimated percentages vary across countries and according to the models used, the international consensus is that the academic workforce is undergoing a process of precariatisation (Brown et al. 2010; Coates, Dobson, Goedegebuure and Meek 2009; Junor 2004; May et al. 2011; Ryan et al. 2013). With respect to Australian universities, sessional academics are estimated to make up over 40% of the academic workforce and do over 80% of the teaching (May et al. 2013). In the context of growth in the educational sector generally, these numbers have been on the rise for some time. For instance, the Australian National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) reports
that between 1996 and 2011 continuing staff in higher education increased by 37%, limited-term by 47%, and the estimated number of casuals by 81% (Rea 2012, 9). Likewise, following extensive reviews made in association with the Australian Higher Education Industrial Association (AHEIA), Andrews (et al. 2016, 1) report:

Over the period from 1989 to 2013, the percentage of academic staff (full time equivalent, FTE) employed on contingent contracts (fixed-term and casual/sessional) increased from 40% to 56%, with a corresponding decline in the percentage, but not the numbers, of academic staff holding casual appointments. We can only estimate the headcount number of casual staff, but the best estimates based on superannuation data indicate there are more academic staff working on casual contracts than those on continuing contracts of employment.

As for the composition and typical preferences of the academic precariat, Andrews (et al. 2016, 7-8) report that:

The similarity of outcomes allows preliminary conclusions to be drawn. Firstly, the casual academic workforce is heterogeneous, but the number of casual academics who see sessional teaching as a preferred career is minimal. Secondly, there is a significant number of well-qualified, predominantly younger female casuals, anxious but unable to embark on an academic career. Thirdly, while a substantial proportion of casual academic work is done by current research higher degree students, these casual employees constitute less than half of the academic workforce.

The literature indicates that men and women have similar aspirations and orientations concerning security and academic work, with secure positions involving both teaching and research being the preference (May et al. 2013). Some research indicates that nearly half of Australia’s PhD recipients would prefer to work outside higher education (Coates and Goedegebure 2012), with other Australian surveys showing that most PhD candidates (83%) have seriously considered pursuing a career within academe (Edwards et al. 2011). The PhD degree is relevant for a few reasons: first, the majority (<75%) of full-time equivalent (FTE) academic staff in Australia have a PhD, with most members of the academic precariat either having or pursuing one. Second, the degree serves as a typical entry point into university teaching and academic
communities (Austin 2002; Jones 2013; Probert 2014). Third, the effort put into the PhD, coupled with its ties to status and career development, plays into the sense of frustration experienced by those in ongoing precarious situations (Bentley et al. 2013; May et al. 2013; Rothengatter and Hil 2013). The great majority (∼90%) of the academic precariat are employed in roles pertaining to teaching and associated tasks, with less than 5% of the academic precariat being paid for research (unrelated to their PhD) they undertake (Andrews et al. 2016, 4). This is a significant point, considering the growing national and international importance that universities are placing on publications and research skills for career development (Bentley et al. 2013; Hermanowicz 2016a). To be sure, sessional academics might prefer casual employment over secure employment for a variety of reasons. They might be using it to support themselves as they work on publications and seek secure positions. They may already be working elsewhere, running a business, looking after children or supporting a partner. They might not want long-term obligations. Standing (2011, 59) broadly refers to those who maintain contingent employment as a matter of preference as the “grinners”.

In contrast, those who desire, but lack, secure employment, are what Standing refers to as the “groaners”. Groaners make up most of the academic precariat. In an analysis of 2,494 questionnaires completed by academics employed in Australia on contracts of less than a year in duration, Junor (2004) found that, while 32% of the sessional academics preferred continuing employment and 28% were satisfied with remaining as casuals, 56% desired permanent positions, typically along the lines of fractional-permanent status. Of these respondents, the main preference for casual employment came from much older “retirees” (43%) and “outside industry experts” (42%). Only 8% of “academic apprentices”, such as PhD candidates, and no “qualified academic jobseekers”, such as PhD recipients, desired casual employment. Likewise, analysing survey responses from 3,160 casual academics from 19 different Australian universities, May et al. (2013, 264) found that 56% of respondents aspired to an academic position; 24% were oriented toward work outside of the university sector; 12% wanted to remain in casual employment for at least
five years; and 7% were retirees who were either using casual employment as an extra source of income alongside their pension or were over 65 years old and looking to retire in the next five years. Finally, surveying 294 Australian sessional academics, Ryan (et al. 2013, 168) found that 69% aspired to an academic career, 17% preferred sessional teaching, and 14% preferred employment outside the sector.

Many more studies indicate that most sessional academics in Australia desire secure positions (for example; Bentley et al. 2016; Bexley, Arkoudis and James 2013; Dover 2010; NTEU 2016a; Percy et al.; 2008; Pocock et al. 2005). Hence, when I refer to the “academic precariat” I am not talking about a minority group, nor is this group too varied to be able to meaningfully say that insecure employment is generally undesirable in the context of academe. Rather, I am referring to a distinctive group that has many of the characteristics of a class: they share similarly structured situations, opportunities and interests, they operate in similar organisational hierarchies, and they are developing something of a “class-consciousness” insofar that these factors are often used as a basis for identification, discontent and action.

To summarise this brief snapshot: the academic precariat, over half of which are women, is primarily composed of people who are undertaking or who have completed a PhD. They do most of the university teaching and typically depend on cycles of relatively short and low-paying contracts that offer few security or career opportunities. They face regular periods without pay, which feeds into the routine unpaid work-for-labour of hunting for contracts. To adapt an analogy from Standing (2011, 14), they are academic denizens in comparison to the academic citizenry, working in the same spaces, but experiencing different modes of belonging. This is captured by Brown’s (et al. 2006, 7) observation that the casualisation of teaching is “a symptom of a deeper problem in the university system”. To show how this relates to the project, it is worth quoting Brown (et al. 2006, 4-5) at length:
Academia is traditionally not heavily casualised, yet academic work is today increasingly undertaken by casuals who do not have access to the benefits of continuing academic employment... Academic work, then, sits at the cusp of the transition from secure, high-status, unionized employment, primarily in the public sector, to insecure, low-status unorganized casual existence, at the beck and call of ‘the market’. The structure of academic work today is bifurcated. There is the one group of highly qualified academics employed on continuing or fixed term contracts who are afforded professional status as researchers, teachers and administrators who have a large degree of autonomy in balancing these different aspects of work. Another group, many of whom are also highly qualified are employed as casual academics and are afforded professional status only in a limited way as skilled teachers; they are expected to bring knowledge and skills from current developments in their field, but undertake this scholarship largely in their own time, unlike their colleagues in the first group, who have access to institutional time and support to do so. If this bifurcation is to be addressed in any meaningful way we must come to a closer understanding of the experience of casual academics.

The aim of this project is to make a contribution to our understanding of the lot of the academic precariat in respect to the contemporary university system and its relationship with neoliberalism. This aim is coupled with a more theoretical agenda: namely, to bring together two typically unrelated sociological approaches – that is, the analysis of groups using class-based concepts and the analysis of institutions in terms of system operations – to show why the pursuit of such understandings must go beyond the analysis of human experiences to uncover the underlying conditions of organisational change. In short, the goal is to contribute to both the higher education field and to the discipline of sociology.

**Interview Methodology**

In Part 2 of the project, I draw on original interview material, gathered through individual in-depth conversations with sixteen Doctoral candidates. Due to the small sample size, the interview data is not representative of any broader population, be it PhD candidates, aspiring academics, or males or females of any particular ethnic or professional background. Rather, the fieldwork was a way to generate ideas and see if what the PhD candidates had
to say might reflect or illuminate prevailing discussions in the higher education and sociological literature in a substantive, rather than representative, manner. While it is not necessary to include such qualitative dimensions in such a conceptual project, I find them useful in illustrating the ties between the theory and experience, and in occasionally bringing the discussion “back down to earth”. Moreover, this inclusion helps to weave those cultural and substantive points on the academic precariat discussed in Part 1 into the less human-focussed perspective provided by the neo-Luhmannian formulation of the university system in Part 2. In this section, I outline the approach for these interviews and address how a few ethical considerations were accounted for.

Invitations for PhD candidates studying in Australia to participate in individually conducted in-depth interviews were advertised through social media, on fliers posted on the campuses of four Western Australian universities, and through collegial emails and word of mouth. To attract respondents that reflected the “typical” Australian PhD candidate – that is, studying full-time and being no more than five years into the degree (Group of Eight 2013) – it was stated that full-time candidates who were within four years of their degree were preferable. It was also stated that the interviews were mainly aimed at people who intended to pursue work in academia following completion, or who felt attracted and open to the idea of doing so. Both international and local candidates were included for two reasons: first, because the number of international candidates in Australia is on the rise (Bradley 2008, 12; Edwards 2009, 21); second, the international literature on academic values (Meyer 2012, 209), standards of research (Group of Eight 2012, 12), and professional obligations and goals (Cryonaski et al. 2011), indicates that each of these dimensions are not unique to Australia.

Due to an interest in what commonalities might be revealed between how students in different disciplines perceive the topics raised, no special calls were made for any academic disciplines or educational backgrounds. While
sex and ethnicity have both been shown to influence the PhD experience and the development of academic career goals (Harman 2003; McAlpine 2012), the focus of this project and the ancillary role that the interview material was intended to play within it, meant that no special significance was assigned to these traits. As the reputation and financial strength of a university can be loosely ascertained with reference to these categories and the imagery they suggest (Kayrooz et al 2001; Marginson and Considine 2000), I tried to get a mix of students from the prestigious “Sandstone” or “Group of Eight” universities, the younger “Gumtree” universities, and the younger still “Redbrick” universities that were formerly known as technical colleges (though these distinctions were not a primary focus).

Twenty-one positive responses were received, although three respondents dropped out due to work related stress (n=1), personal reasons (n=1), and the later decision to terminate candidature (n=1). Two more international students failed to follow up on the actual interviews. In the end sixteen in-depth interviews with sixteen full time PhD candidates were carried out. The majority (n=10) were in their second or third year, some were in their first year (n=4), and two were nearing their fourth year (n=2). Ages ranged from 21 (n=2) to late 30s (n=3), with most of respondents being in their late 20s (n=10). In terms of prior education, most of respondents were from the social sciences and arts (n= 12), with only three being from the professions (n= 2 education, n=1 law), and one from the life sciences. That said, a variety of disciplines were present, including music, philosophy, literature, law, engineering, and ecology, resulting in a spread between the arts, humanities, sciences, and the professions.

Every participant had maintained strong ties with the university system, with twelve beginning to seriously consider candidature during or shortly after their honours year. Of the participants who did not commence candidature shortly after honours, three had been working at universities in the interim (n=1 lecturer, n=1 counselling, n=1 researcher), while one (a retired lawyer)
had observed his mother, brother, cousins and in-laws become successful in the sector. While the literature suggests that some of the participants are statistically likely to cease candidature prior to completion (Delamont et al 2000; Lovitts 2001), most participants were dedicated to completing within four years – with the only exception being the retired lawyer, who, due to his secure financial position and contacts within the sector, admitted to having little concern as to when or if he completes the degree. A list of the participants is provided below (Table 1). Pseudonyms have been used.

Table 1: List of PhD candidates interviewed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Discipline</th>
<th>University</th>
<th>Scholarship</th>
<th>Background</th>
<th>Sex</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Elizabeth</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Gumtree</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Australian</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sue</td>
<td>Psychology</td>
<td>Gumtree</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Australian</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ari</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Gumtree</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Nepalese</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tully</td>
<td>Cultural Studies</td>
<td>Sandstone</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Canadian</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Janice</td>
<td>Asian Studies</td>
<td>Sandstone</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anna</td>
<td>Media</td>
<td>Sandstone</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patrick</td>
<td>Ecology</td>
<td>Gumtree</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Polish</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ellen</td>
<td>English &amp; Drama</td>
<td>Gumtree</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Australian</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James</td>
<td>Literature</td>
<td>Gumtree</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Australian</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nick</td>
<td>Sociology</td>
<td>Sandstone</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Australian</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Harry</td>
<td>Law</td>
<td>Redbrick</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Australian</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ciaran</td>
<td>Music</td>
<td>Redbrick</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Australian</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jeremy</td>
<td>Gender Studies</td>
<td>Gumtree</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Australian</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serge</td>
<td>Literature</td>
<td>Gumtree</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Australian</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maureen</td>
<td>Life Sciences</td>
<td>Sandstone</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guy</td>
<td>Political Science</td>
<td>Sandstone</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Australian</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5 Sandstone est. 1850-1911; Gumtree est. 60s-70s; Redbrick est. from 1980s onward.
The interview questions were organised into three sections: the university, the PhD degree, and academe. Participants were informed of this structure prior to commencement and were offered the opportunity to reflect on their answers and return to previous questions at the end of each section. They were also informed that the questions in each section would start off broad and become narrower as the interview progressed, and that this was to give them minimum prompting; they could ask for clarification if they liked. For instance, the first question of the interview, “what are universities for?” provided no context, with no single institution, period, or country being mentioned. If further clarification was requested, then this was limited to the minimum required to get them started, for example: “as in, what do you consider to be the purpose or function of universities?” This generally tended to suffice, with only three candidates asking for further clarification with more specific questions (e.g. “as in, in Australia?”). Such open-ended questions were intended to reflect questions that the participants may have previously been asked in more casual discussions, thereby allowing for answers that were, so to speak, more rehearsed. This provided a space for anecdotes and the generation of further questions. The interviews typically lasted between one and two hours and took place in locations of the candidates choosing when possible to promote comfort.

While transparency and consent were core priorities, there were still ethical issues to consider. Research featuring surveys and interviews with aspiring and senior academics shows that discussions regarding career intentions, motivations and the likelihood of “success” – or, put differently, “failure” – can be highly sensitive (Jones 2013; Tomlinson 2008; Hermanowicz 2016b; Edwards, Bexley, and Richardson 201). As we shall see in Chapter 6, which deals with academic “Quit-lit”, there is a sense among some academics that the academe is so tied to their identity and the expectations of their community, that showing doubt or ignorance regarding this path can be a source of shame and a threat to wellbeing – hence many Quit-lit authors admitting to hiding such thoughts until the end. While this would not prove a problem for every aspiring academic, engaging in a discussion that could
highlight the extent to which one has seriously thought about such things might be an intimidating prospect for individuals who are experiencing uncertainties. For this reason, time was factored into the process before the commencement of the interviews, so that I could get to know the candidates and explain the intention and nature of the discussion to be had. I also shared with them my own background and, when appropriate, some of my own experiences and uncertainties as a PhD candidate. This allowed for some rapport to be built and opened a space for the candidates to express any reservations that they may be having – though the only such concerns expressed were from two candidates who were self-conscious about their current trouble with getting to know the administrative side of candidature. This personal approach also allowed questions to be asked in a manner that seemed most appropriate to each candidate. Pseudonyms have been used, and while each candidate was given the opportunity to strike any responses from the record during or long after the interview process, none did so. I now provide an outline of the project’s approach, arguments and structure.

Outline

The project is primarily conceptual, in that it deals more with conceptual models than with empirical data. Part 1: On Disposable Academics, draws on three main perspectives to analyse the material and social situations of sessional academics: 1. neo-Marxian approaches to class analysis; 2. Weber’s insights to show how these conditions can be understood in terms of different situations, motivations, and status; and 3. Standing’s notion of the precariat.⁶ This is done to convey how the academic workforce can be formulated in

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⁶ For Standing (2014c, 969) the precariat is not an underclass, but “a class-in-the-making”. An underclass is comprised of people who are outside the sphere of production. In contrast, those in insecure employment, such as sessional academics, are integral to the production sphere, and so are by definition not an underclass. It is thus worth emphasising that “underclass” is only used occasionally in this project when citing others who have seen fit to use the term, as well in the form of a contextual heuristic to convey the lower status and opportunities of casual and sessional academics compared to those in the salariat.
terms of disaggregated and subjectively salient groups in respect to their situations and experiences pertaining to security and status.

By “disaggregated” I mean groups that can be demarcated and analysed based on how they are objectively located in terms of the distribution of resources within their given structural context. Here we can refer to employment categories and the situations that these entail in terms of pay, security, opportunities to advance, the ability to plan for the near and distant future, and so on. This is tied to “life chances”, which Weber (1978, 302) described as “a shared typical probability of procuring goods, gaining a position in life, and finding inner satisfaction”. For academics, this involves such things as the probability of getting an office, a prestigious grant or a secure position, and enjoy the inner satisfaction of doing the work and contributing to the field of one’s choice. By “subjectively salient” I am referring to how people, individually and collectively, locate and view themselves and others within their organisational and professional contexts (Wright 2005, 183). This can mean status positions such as student and staff, casual and faculty, academic or professional, tutor and coordinator, the “core” or “tenuous”, or, as the Australian sessionals interviewed by Pocock (et al. 2005) put it, the “academic citizens” and “denizens”.

In terms of class analysis, it can be difficult to clearly distinguish theoretical schools, particularly in terms of the “neo” applications of these theories. “Neo” here indicates a focus on contemporary organisational contexts, such as institutions and communities, as opposed to grander formulations of modern society and its history, and builds upon original approaches, but departs from them in significant ways (Burris 1987). After all, the use of class to analyse the situations of groups in sets of social structures is often coupled with accounts of the cultural conditions that shape motivations and perspectives within, and in respect to, such groups and structures. This led Burris (1987, 87) to argue that it has become “impossible to classify many contemporary theorists as either Marxist or Weberian in any unambiguous sense”, and that this “becomes even more true when one moves from abstract
theory to more concrete investigations of social class”. Indeed, neo-Marxian and neo-Weberian distinctions now often have more to do with the “relative weight accorded to different explanatory concepts than a qualitative difference between distinct modes of explanation” (ibid).

That said, there are key characteristics of these approaches that, in my view, justify separating the Marxian approach from the Weberian approach. The Marxian tradition has typically focussed on structures that reproduce relations to production and patterns of exploitation, and which exist independently of individual subjectivities. There is a neo-Marxian angle to this project, for we are dealing with unidimensional and hierarchical stratification, based on ostensibly rigid social structures that benefit those at the top of the organisation at the expense of those beneath them. For instance, this is evidenced in the treatment of cost cutting measures – measures from which the extremely well-paid executives and administrators who implement them tend to be exempt. Hence, when it comes to the relationship between social structures, material conditions and exploitation, and thus to the precariatisation and bifurcation of the university workforce, the neo-Marxian approach will be useful. This materialist standpoint is often contrasted with the more microsociological and culturalist standpoints of the Weberian tradition, which assign greater significance to human agency and the influence that systems of meaning can have on social action (Burris 1987, 84). Weberian approaches have traditionally focussed more on intentions, values and social action, with class being one basis for group delineation among many, in which the pursuit of status and influence within organisational contexts can become an end in-itself according to non-economic rationales.

The question of why anyone would wish to work in sessional academic jobs in light of the uncertainty and marginalisation associated with such work is where the cultural dimension becomes important. The answer lies, at least in part, in the place that sessional work has traditionally had within higher education as a status progression pathway. The sessional work that academics
are increasingly dependent on has traditionally been akin to an academic apprenticeship or “stepping stone” into higher levels of employment and organisational status, with the PhD functioning like a rite of passage that is often undertaken in conjunction with sessional work. The issue is that many do not realise that, in the current university system, such work no longer provides the stepping-stone it once did, and that the path to better positions are being sectioned off and blocked. Matters of advancement aside, both sessional and secure academics, and even the “academics in training”, get to partake in the status associated with the academic profession, and while material conditions vary, the attractiveness of such status remains. These dimensions, whereby status and ideals colour in the material picture, are addressed by the neo-Weberian perspective. As shall be seen, these cultural factors have their role to play in the bifurcation of academics, and in understanding their relationships and motivations.

Following Standing’s (2014, 2) lead, I emphasise the usefulness of the notion “precariat” as an ideal type – that is, as a conceptual model that helps capture the key characteristics of a social phenomenon in order to better understand it, if not entirely depict it. This is essentialist in the limited sense that I identify those characteristics which I view, in an abstract fashion, as being crucial components to precarity and academe. However, it is intended mainly as a device for conceptualising a very broad notion, and not as a rigid and normative means of overlooking the various ways in which it may play out in real life and be viewed by others. Likewise, as elaborated in Part 2, I formulate the ideal type “academic” as a multidimensional role involving teaching, training, research and engagement. This does not mean that academics who do not teach, or lecturers who do not research, are not “real academics”, for such a signifier is itself multidimensional. After all, it is reasonable to frame what it means to “be an academic” with respect to any of the following three dimensions (which are by no means exhaustive):

1. Marxian/contractual: some people are formally/contractually designated as “academic staff”, rather than as “professional staff” by their university.
This provides a basis for shared interests, insofar that certain employment conditions or efficiency measures can specifically target “academic staff”. More to the point of neo-Marxian analysis, it provides a “class” position in terms the hierarchy of an organisational context.

2. Weberian/cultural: there is social status tied to “being an academic”. This is tied to the symbolism of credentials, positions, titles and affiliations, which can all bring to mind certain qualities, cultures and communities. So too is it tied to ideals, such as intellectualism and autonomy, as well as with expectations, such as with one’s intelligence and education. This presents a powerful symbolic constellation around which all sorts of distinctions, identities, communities, narratives and goals are formulated.

3. Luhmannian/systemic: “academic” is a distinct role that is specific to the university system, which in turn produces and employs academics. While a high school teacher could see themselves as having “academic qualities”, this is unlikely to be recognised from the perspective of the system. This is because, as with churches and priests or sports and athletes, universities and academics are systemically linked.

To convey these ideas, Chapter 2 provides a reflective account of entering the academic workforce as a sessional, and relates the experiences and lessons learned from this process to those addressed in the literature, particularly with respect to the informality and uncertainties that characterise the work and employment situations of sessionals in and beyond Australia. So too is the benefactor/beneficiary relationship between sessionals-as-job-seekers and coordinators-as-proxy-employers viewed at a micro-level, and related to broader issues concerning collegiality, bifurcation and merit. In short, the point of Chapter 2 is to show how the low security and status that defines precarity can be experienced and described in terms of personal troubles, while also indicating how these situations are not isolated, but widespread based on structural and cultural – indeed, systemic – conditions.
Chapter 3 draws on both neo-Marxian and neo-Weberian approaches to class analysis. The idea here is that contemporary organisational contexts can be elucidated by class-based concepts that focus on the situations and relations of different groups. In keeping with the Marxian account, these distinctions can be made in terms of material conditions, such as to do with organisational hierarchies and the distribution of resources (be they money, security or opportunities). This is complemented by Weber insofar that contemporary organisational contexts are also home to constellations of values around which aspirations and rationales are formed, and which facilitate the further differentiation and identification of groups across hierarchies. While academics may be viewed from outside the university as collectively part of the educated middle-class, within the university system academics can be distinguished in terms of inclusion and opportunity. Moreover, while academics can be delineated as such, they can also share values and interests that set them apart from other university-based groups (as shown in Part 2).

With this structural-cultural approach to class-analysis in mind, Chapter 4 addresses the scope and limitations of Standing’s conceptualisation of the precariat, while emphasising its usefulness as a Weberian ideal type that aids the analysis of groups according to shared situations and experiences.

These characteristics are substantiated and applied to the academic context in Chapter 5, with the academic precariat being formulated as a broad and disparate class operating under distinctive structural and cultural conditions. These conditions and corresponding employment and work situations are identified in relation to the bifurcated formal/informal job-market\(^7\); various

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\(^7\)Standing (2014c, 973) finds the “tired dualism” of formal and informal sectors misleading:

More and more workers labouring for large corporations are ‘informalized’, in having weak or non-existent labour contracts, no ‘rights’, no protection, and low or volatile
kinds of security being inhibited (this involves not just employment and benefits, but professional autonomy and recognition); relatively high levels of unpaid overwork and work-for-labour; and, consequently, the sense of relative deprivation and status-frustration relating to occupational identity.

To give a sense of why people continue to pursue or remain in an academic career, despite the precarious situations and frustrating experiences that are increasingly associated with the contemporary university system, Chapter 6 presents a look into the socially-situated genre known as academic Quit-lit. This illustrates how important the university system can be to a person’s sense of identity, with the decision to quit often being described in terms of shame, death and mourning. Quit-lit authors tend to share a common story: from early on in their academic-life (which can begin in the undergraduate or postgraduate years), they start to identify with a constellation of academic values and aspirations. Then, when these are contradicted or undervalued by the university system, they begin the long and difficult process of deciding to quit – a process that they associate with some loss of identity and status. While these experiences and the structural issues that are connected to them are rarely expressed in such a personal fashion on campus or via the “proper channels” of academic publications, they help portray the university sector and academe as a system that people become deeply invested in, and which even the “groaners” of the precariat can be loath to leave.

Relating these matters to higher education and neoliberalism, Part 2: the University System, presents a neo-Luhmannian approach to social systems theory, and conceptualises universities as differentiated, neoliberalised, though essentially academic, organisations. In short, Part 2 presents a
conceptual explanation for why current trends pertaining to the state of universities and the situations of academics are tied to various contingent and strategic attempts to adapt to, thrive within, or resist organisational and environmental pressures, according to a range of priorities and approaches. This should help convey the system as not just being shaped by deliberate actions of certain groups, but also by broader conditions and the relations between differentiated systems.

My approach in Part 2 is “neo-Luhmannian”, for it draws on Luhmannian systems theory to analyse the operational conditions of universities, while also observing the influences and relations of the sub-systems within them. In other words, the focus is on a distinct but increasingly differentiated system (universities) that is comprised of distinct sub-systems (e.g. administration, academe), which in turn have their own group categories (management, academics), priorities (business, research/teaching), and interests (profits, knowledge). Hence, contrary to Luhmann’s anti-humanist and non-empirical formulation of social systems theory, my approach draws on the theory to elucidate how different groups operating in the same system might relate to its various associated ideals and empirical iterations. This bears similarities to the structure-agency dialectic of Giddens’ (1984) structuration theory, albeit with structure being more hierarchical, as with Marxian theory, and agency being more passive, as with Parsonian theory, but not to the point of being irrelevant, as with Luhmannian theory.

To set the scene for such a discussion, Chapter 7 addresses the popular “ideas of the university” and the so-called academic “Golden Age”. While these notions are rarely fully realised, they remain influential throughout the system via widespread ideals and aspirations. These exist in tension with the other organisational pressures and priorities that shape our universities, such as the need to be as competitive as possible within the education and research sector. The term “multiversity” is introduced to account for this variety of potentially conflicting priorities, with the “ideas” and “uses” of the university, and, by
extension, the roles and situations of its various subjects, being subject to the dynamics of a complex internal environment. It is in this Chapter that I begin to draw on the interview material with PhD candidates.

Chapters 8 and 9 present a derivative approach to Luhmannian social systems theory. This emphasises the analysis of the internal environment of social systems, and the possibility for sub-systems and their associated groups to exert different levels of influence as they pursue different agendas according to different rationales. As management exerts greater influence on the other sub-systems, such as those pertaining to academic teaching, these sub-systems and the broader system that they are a part of in turn increasingly reflect these prevailing conditions and rationales. In other words, the key elements remain, but the surrounding structural and cultural conditions change. Hence, the university system or “multiversity”, with its various parts and subjects, can be framed in terms of the “neoliberal university”. Within such a formulation, it is still useful to conceptualise the university as the quintessentially academic institution of knowledge, insofar that it trains and employs academics, and, in so doing, works to maintain and reproduce the academic ideals and aspirations that still pervade the education system. As such, the point is that the tension that both academics and administrators are aware of is not just one of economics, vis-à-vis employment and work, but of culture, vis-à-vis competing organisational and vocational priorities.

This relates to the lot of the burgeoning academic precariat in several ways. The academic role can be broadly formulated in terms of four functions: teaching, which, roughly speaking, is to do with the cultivation of character and knowledge; training, which is more to do with supervision and skill development, particularly in the training of new academics; research, which involves scholarly expertise and professional autonomy; and engagement, which involves participation in scholarly discussions and communities, as well as bringing academic knowledge to the public sphere. While not all academics fulfil every one of these roles, they nevertheless help identify
academe in terms of profession, vocation and occupational identity, with the fragmentation of these roles being linked to proletarianisation and the tendency for sessionals to not be viewed or identify as “real academics”. The issue is that, in trying to adapt to a disruptive environment, and guided by a neoliberal logic that prioritises profit and flexibility, universities have been unbundling these roles. This can be seen as a case of “not buying the cow when you can get the milk for free”, with universities reducing the size and influence of the academic salariat (and thus of the influential academic citizenry of the organisational core), in part because aspiring academics are seemingly willing (though not necessarily happy) to fulfil a role as needed, one cheap and limited contract at a time.

These tensions and strategies are explored in Chapter 10, which presents an analysis of *Australian Higher Education Workforce of the Future* (PwC 2016). Commissioned by the Australian Higher Education Industrial Association, in association with Universities Australia, the report was produced by PriceWaterhouse Coopers, a multinational accountancy firm that promises to help organisations and individuals “create the values they’re looking for”. The report was criticised by academics and the National Tertiary Education Union for apparently being a designed from the outset to support neoliberal staffing policies – a charge supported by a critique of PwC’s research practices, whereby much of the relevant literature and the input of workers were ignored, while views of organisational leaders were prioritised. The recommendations made by PwC emphasised the disruptiveness of the environment and the need for universities to respond through organisational differentiation and the maximisation of flexibility, agility and specialisation. This differentiation is to be based on the identification of each university’s “value proposition”, as in that which gives it an edge against its competitors. This responsivity is to be achieved by attending to the three key dimensions of the workforce: ability, structure, and engagement, with the higher education workforce of the future being one in which workers can learn new skills and adapt to new work and employment situations, while maintaining a transferable sense of specialisation and professionalism. This in turn is
viewed as likely involving more recruitment of workers from the private sector into teaching, training and research roles, all of which can be strategically established or dissolved based on organisational priorities.

The thesis concludes with a reflection on how the ideas of Marx, Weber, Standing, and Luhmann, as well as attention to the experiences of academics working in universities today, can further our understanding of the academic precariat as it stands in the contemporary university system. While the project primarily concerns academics and universities, the ideas and issues dealt with in the following chapters are of a much broader sociological relevance, as precariatisation is a widespread trend driven by conditions that are not limited to any one profession, sector or nation. Indeed, in conveying how highly educated individuals working in roles that have traditionally been associated with a respectable profession and sector can be subject to ongoing uncertainty and marginalisation in the workforce, it is hoped that this thesis will contribute to our sociological understanding of the increasingly pervasive conditions of the contemporary social system.
Part 1

On Disposable Academics
Chapter 2

An account of entering academe

In this chapter I present an autobiographical account of my entrance to the academic workforce to highlight some of the structural and cultural conditions that shape sessional academic experiences. These conditions, which are reflected in the higher education literature, are covered here in three sections respectively: the informal job-market, the relationship between sessional tutors as employees and unit coordinators as proxy-employers, and the moral and professional uncertainty that accompanies sessional employment and the periods in between jobs. The section Entering the Workforce illustrates the so-called “casual approach” and “learning on the job” attitudes that often underpin the initial experiences of teaching academics (which differ significantly from teachers in most other sectors). Navigating the Periphery illustrates the isolation that can come with sessional jobs, as well as the benefactor-beneficiary relationship (which can make the difference between having a job and being unemployed). Finally, Sticking with It illustrates how it can be difficult to blame these conditions on any one thing, leaving the matter to seem like a purely personal trouble. This chapter should not be read as a rigorous argument based on evidence. Rather, it is in part inspired by “scholarly personal narrative” (Nash 2004), according to which the experiences of the author can be used as a basis for going from the particular to the general in view of the relevant literature. This should also help to establish key concepts and concerns in a fashion that is transparent in respect to the author’s position and interest in the topic, and (hopefully) engaging for academics (who may find the reports familiar) as well as for people who are unfamiliar with Australian higher education. In short, the aim is to give an impression of how the situations that are to be discussed in a more abstract fashion throughout the majority of the chapters to come play out “on the ground” – not for all academics everywhere and always, but for many of those working in Australia today.
Entering the Workforce

I received my first two academic teaching contracts the semester before commencing my PhD. Right from the start it was clear that my entrance into the academic workforce would be through the sessional jobs of the informal market, rather than the more prestigious and secure positions of the formal market. Following the advice of my former teachers, I sent emails asking for tutoring roles to senior academics whom I either knew directly or whom I had been directed to by others. No advertisements or interviews were involved; it was all done through networking and private conversations.

This was the first time I heard the phrase “first come, first served” used to describe the distribution of the work that I had always assumed to be meritocratic. Now, a phrase that I had previously associated with the times that my relatives spent working on the docks in the U.K., and which had served as a reason for securing the slightly larger servings and choice pickings at dinner time, was being presented as advice for securing teaching work at university. As the literature demonstrates (May et al. 2013), this personal approach to employment is not an exception to the rule when it comes to finding work. Rather, as one of my former teachers put it, it is simply “how it’s done”.

My emails received several replies. Some of the coordinators were not sure at the time whether they would require a teacher; others said that the positions had already been filled but promised to keep me in mind for the next time. I would later ask one of these respondents about what they meant by “keeping in mind” potential sessionals; they replied that they keep the email addresses of potential tutors in a list so that they can “call out” individually or collectively depending on urgency. Throughout this process, I found it strange that some coordinators knew precisely how many sessionals they would need and who they would employ well before the semester began, while others were unsure of both right up until the teaching weeks were upon
them. I would later discover that these situations, whereby sessionals and coordinators are caught in uncertainty until the last moment are not unusual at many universities (Brown et al. 2006; Rothengatter and Hil 2013; Ryan et al. 2013) – a consequence of staff leaving positions, getting sick, budget approvals, waiting to see enrolment numbers and, above all, trying to maximise flexibility when allocating contracts, with the resulting uncertainty of the coordinators being passed down to the sessionals.

This first attempt resulted in two jobs: one for an online first year sociology unit and one for an internal third year theatre unit. The sociology unit was appropriate, as my major and honours had been in sociology, and I had spent much of my undergraduate years watching my teachers and considering how I might one day teach the material and facilitate tutorial discussions myself. I made this plain to the unit coordinator, whose units I had taken a few years prior, by demonstrating my familiarity with the material and providing a few of my teaching plans. In contrast, my experience in theatre was mainly limited to one undergraduate unit in which I played a silent role and submitted a scrap-book diary and relatively short essay for assessment. I made this lack of experience clear to the coordinator, and gratefully got the job nonetheless. While I was paid the same amount for both units, my employment detail for the drama unit was not as a teacher, but as a “script consultant”. As no such consultations actually took place, I remain unsure as to whether this job was counted as an “academic” or “professional” position. At any rate, I was paid to direct two iterations of the same play and mark the unit’s assessments. This provided my first experience of the ambiguity that can surround sessional employment, and the strategies that coordinators can employ in handling contracts and workloads.

As the coordinators were very hands off, I received no training for either of these initial units. I would later be told that university teachers are generally expected to “learn on the go”, which is itself a fascinating point, given that I was responsible for over seventy first and third year students. As Ryan (et al.
2013, 169; also see Probert 2014) found following interviews with 297 sessionals at an Australian university, this lack of orientation is widespread:

Once a casual academic is appointed, they are frequently left to their own devices with minimal or no supervision. Despite the course coordinator’s considerable discretion over appointments … there appears to be little further interest in what the casual academic might actually do.

This hands-off approach gave an appealing taste of the professional agency I had come to associate with, and desire of, the academic role. However, throughout this early period, and even now, I cannot help recalling the complaints that I had heard from my undergraduate peers regarding their own teachers: they don’t know the material; they don’t know how to teach it to undergrads; they don’t know the course; they’re too hard a marker (rarely did I hear the opposite complaint), and so on, to the effect of: they don’t seem to know what they’re doing. While some of these complaints were justified (for there are bad teachers who lack experience) and others were not (for there are bad students who lack a sense of accountability), the concern that I felt over doing wrong by the material and the students was inflated by the significance that my former teachers (now employers) had placed on the reviews that students submitted. This desire to do right by my students as their teacher, coupled with concerns for employability, influenced how I dealt with the unit material, student’s requests for assistance and extensions, and (re)graded assignments. More unpaid hours were spent studying approaches to teaching and directing, as well as on the institutional rules and processes that were difficult to track down and which my coordinators seemed to have gradually learned through osmosis.

The following semester brought two teaching jobs. First, to use the language that the sessionals and coordinators alike tended to use, I was “given” a second-year sociology unit by a familiar sociology coordinator whom I had contacted several months prior. The other coordinators that I contacted had either already “given” or “promised” teaching roles in their own units to
others, were unsure if they would need teachers, or simply did not respond. In respect to how these exchanges took place, one could say that I was marketing myself, that teaching work was in demand, and that the coordinators were the suppliers. Such an entrepreneurial approach reminds me of how, as a youth, I would go door-knocking to offer car-washing around the neighbourhood. As a child with a sponge and bucket, I charged five dollars; then, as an early-teenager who actually knew how to properly wash and clean out a car, I charged twenty dollars. I was not the only boy in the neighbourhood who offered such services, and some neighbours learned that a muddy car on the lawn would likely see the car-wash service come to them.

A week before semester began I received an email from an academic whom I had never met, offering an internal teaching job for an unfamiliar third-year media unit covering material that I knew little about (presumably because the original tutor had dropped out at the last moment). No doubt the coordinator knew of me by asking colleagues for leads at the last moment. In contrast to the previous instance, whereby I had advertised myself and was “given” work, it can be assumed that the coordinator contacted numerous potential teachers, with the unit presumably going to the sessional that replied first and had an open schedule. Sticking with the suburban comparisons, this bears more of a resemblance to the work that is advertised on the fliers that make it into the letterbox and onto the bulletin boards at the local shops: a job needs doing: RSVP, ASAP.

Once again, my lack of experience did not seem to be a problem, nor did the extra preparation required for someone so unversed figure into the preparation time allocated by my contract – an estimation which did not distinguish between being steeped in or new to the material. So far as the coordinator was concerned, I just needed to “keep a week or two ahead of the students”. I was not alone in these experiences: a year or so later, the School invited its sessional teachers to a workshop on conduct, grading and equity. This was the first time that my teaching colleagues and I had been gathered
as a collective in a professional setting – before then our congregations had been limited to the lunches and paper-presentations that were occasionally organised within the School. Talking to my peers, it became apparent that they shared many of the experiences that I have described and which are described in the literature. Almost all of them had received their work through “fishing” and word-of-mouth. Many taught outside of their disciplines, and reported similar levels of unpaid “catch up” work. Two claimed to have received the same advice to “just stay ahead of the students”, while others described their teaching experiences as a game of “fake it ‘til you make it”.

Speaking of colleagues, it would later occur to me that at no point during any of these teaching roles was I put in contact with the other teachers working in the unit, whose names I only learned through email threads; nor did I think to contact them myself. Likewise, at no point in the unfamiliar units was I told about the tutors-of-units-passed that had come before me – this is unfortunate, for it could have benefited my effectiveness and contributed to the consistency and development of the degree. This lack of continuity is likely because many coordinators rarely meet or remember the sessionals that they have worked with (Brown et al. 2006; Ryan et al. 2013). To be sure, the reality can be more complex than this, as it can also be that they have unceremoniously dispensed with their former tutor(s) for reasons ranging from poor performance to personality clashes, or because they want to provide a favour to someone else (perhaps because they are a PhD student of theirs), or because it is not expected that a former tutor would have any obligation (certainly not a paid one) to be part of a “handover”. There is also a sense – rightly or wrongly – that handovers from one tutor to another are unnecessary.

On the third semester I secured a job teaching a third-year sociology unit internally. I initially attributed this to my teaching performance and favourable reviews from the last two semesters – either that, or I was the only experienced sociology postgraduate that was available. The truth was that I
had replaced someone who, along with having superior experience and credentials, had also expressed that they “really needed” the work in order to make ends meet. In contrast, it was known that my postgraduate scholarship meant that I was in no dire need of extra income; I was told that I had “been given” the unit because I “needed the experience”. This may well have been true, but I missed out on a similar contract the following semester so that it could apparently go to someone who, as the coordinator put it, “desperately needed it”.

This personal, needs-based approach illustrates a well-documented point: that coordinators are able to, and often do, act as benefactors when deciding on the sessionals they will employ (Brown et al. 2006; May et al. 2013; Rothengatter and Hil 2013; Ryan et al. 2013). Hence, the lack of oversight within the informal job-market, coupled with the autonomy that is afforded to coordinators as proxy-employers, results in a job-market in which the individual job-seeker (and thus their competitors as well) have at their disposal the ability to personally plead their case, often to a sympathetic ear who is already familiar with their circumstances. This can play a potentially significant, if inconsistent and thus unreliable, part in whether one secures employment or misses out, particularly if the sessional is already in an apprentice-like role, or if one of their PhD students is without a scholarship.

To be sure, I do not mean to imply that this social dynamic goes equally for all faculties and across all universities – but it is a distinctive feature of the university system’s informal market that such arrangements are made possible and, as seems to be the case, frequently eventuate. It is therefore unsurprising that certain strategies that play to particular representations and preferences, on the part of both the job-seeker and the proxy-employer, have emerged as a tacit means for improving individual “competitiveness”. For my own part, and following the advice of more experienced colleagues, a few of the emails that I have sent out to unit coordinators have alluded to my financial situation by mentioning the conclusion of my scholarship. I know
that many of my peers have done the same, with my own allusion being very mild in comparison. I here recall an exchange that took place in an office shared by a dozen or so sessionals: speaking about our concerns over finding work for the next semester, one colleague claimed that she “always flags” her troubles (e.g. that she is “a mother struggling to pay the rent”) as if she were “applying for welfare or a scholarship”. One colleague responded by joking that they “can’t compete with that”; and another retorted “you’re going to have to”. So it is that personal troubles coalesce with issues of social structure, becoming a collective experience.

This job-hunting process taught me the following: First, rather than there being a particular period in which one should send out requests for work (e.g. the end of semester, the middle or end of the break), the savvy sessional knows who to contact, when to do so, and when to send reminders. Second, the sessional must confront the fact that, when it comes to the opportunity to teach material that one is unversed in, there will likely be more appropriate people who are after the same job. They then must decide whether they are willing to take the job at the possible expense of said person, and, by extension, the students and even the discipline, despite this. Third, savvy sessionals must cast their net wide by seeking a range of opportunities through a range of contacts, while also knowing that they cannot commit to every job offer that comes along, thereby contributing to the uncertainty of both the sessional and the academic running the unit.

**Navigating the Periphery**

Over the next few years I received more contracts teaching in sociology, worked on my teaching approach and kept up-to-date lesson plans. Rather than just grading student’s assessments, I provided commentary and corrections, as well as recommendations for further material that they might find useful. Upon reviewing the essays that I had returned, one coordinator praised me for my hard work and then recommended that I could do far less,
“contractually speaking”. Following a couple of self-funded courses on public speaking, presentations at sociology conferences, as well as a few lectures presented for galleries and businesses, I presented my first paid university lectures, which received a shining written reference from the coordinator, and were identified numerous times in student reviews as some of the most outstanding and helpful lectures of the year. Both the units and my own performance received some of the highest reviews in the School, which in turn received reliably higher reviews than all of the other schools at the University. I was nominated by students for teaching awards, though after the time-consuming application process was initially unsuccessful (notably, one member of the review panel who encouraged me to apply again, advised against mentioning “unpaid” work in the next application). A few years later, following another lengthy application process, I received the early career citation for excellence in teaching – an accolade that is awarded to just one teacher at the University per year. Many sessionals put similar effort into their work, and many want to but lack the time (Bentley et al. 2012; Brown et al. 2006; Clarke et al. 2013; Rothengatter and Hil 2013).

Because universities celebrate their dedication to “excellence” in teaching – which presumably speaks to a teacher’s skills, knowledge, dedication and outcomes – I was beginning to feel relatively secure and confident in the prospect of being a regular sociology tutor, and so thought it of little relevance that my proxy-employers happened to be my PhD supervisors. But then the sociology course at the University was put in peril by internal politics between academic staff and management, coupled with the restructuring of the School and its courses. Leading up to the potential closure of sociology, one of my supervisors whose position was threatened by said closure was appointed to a newly created and safe managerial position. Shortly after, I received an email informing me that this academic had “disposed” of their

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8 The ceremony was a lavish dinner held at gorgeous city venue that would have cost no small amount per the many heads. I was sat with someone whose job was to help manage the University’s property portfolio. He said that he did not really know any of the award recipients, and just “comes to these things for the bar tab”. This sentiment was echoed by several attendees that night. Such are the benefits of being in the organisational elite.
PhD candidates and that I must find a replacement supervisor. I contacted my now former-supervisor and occasional proxy-employer to congratulate their developing career, as well as to express my regret over the communication breakdown. They replied to my email with thanks, attributed the lack of communication to administrative processes, and wished me well for my future endeavours. We did not talk much after that, save for the occasional hallway encounters, which, while always professional and brief, had a newfound awkwardness that professionalism and brevity made it difficult to address.

This was fine until the last few months of my scholarship, when work became the top priority. Thankfully, the sociology course had received a temporary respite from the attempts to close it down, leaving the sociology unit that I had taught several times and refined lesson and lecture plans for as the most appropriate option. Breaking the radio-silence, I emailed the unit coordinator, my former supervisor, well before the beginning of semester, and included in the email my academic and employment record, notes on unit reviews, and evidence of preparation. Even though the full-time sociology faculty were all too busy to tutor the unit themselves, this round of applications was attended by a great deal of anxiety. At the time, I was delving into the literature on sessional experiences, which featured no shortage of warnings, such as this one from Ryan (et al. 2013, 169): “You are reliant on friendly benefactors, lecturers and coordinators who are prepared to give you work … but the thing is, if circumstances change … if you lose that benefactor you might lose a whole section of work”. Hence, my self-assurance began to be hounded by less professional concerns: Have I lost a benefactor? Have I been working under a naïve misunderstanding of how this place operates?

The brief email that I received in response stated that the role had already been given away. I supposed that the new teacher would be a sociologist from another university who had been recruited thanks to their superior merit – I was, after all, still relatively inexperienced, all things considered, and had not
yet attained a PhD. I did not ask who the new teacher was, and experience gave me no reason to expect that my replacement would be told about me. Even so, I told the coordinator that my material was available should it be needed, and that I was happy to lend the textbook for the unit to any students that could not afford it (the library only had a few copies on three-hour loans, and many complaints had been made over the years about the book’s price). A few weeks later I was speaking to the librarian when a student approached and requested a copy of the said textbook. I gave them one of my copies and told them to tell their peers that more were available. A week later, three students arrived requesting the books. Accompanying them was the new teacher: the coordinator’s new PhD candidate, who had no background in sociology or the course and happened to be my officemate. As he was never in the office, he had not noticed the five expensive textbooks sitting on our shared bookshelf. The coordinator knew that we shared an office, and likely remembered that they had given me said textbooks; but, for whatever reason, had apparently neglected to mention any of this to either of us. This drove home the lack of communication and collegiality that is referred to in the literature in terms of “segregation” and “invisibility” (Osboldiston et al. 2017).

Sticking with it

Over the year that followed, the only available teaching jobs were in unfamiliar courses dealing with material that I had never read and concepts and thinkers that I had hardly heard of. I did not want to spend another semester “just staying ahead” of the students, as I keenly remembered the sense of dishonesty that comes with teaching and assessing students in unfamiliar material. I knew that taking such a position also meant the possibility of taking the place of an academic who might have an actual degree, research profile, or at least some reading history in the area. Much of the advice that came my way on this front struck me as having all the features of the neoliberal logic. “You need the money” and “it will be good to get experience in a new area” both overlooked the fact that there were more
people than myself in the equation: such as the students, who are expected to trust my authority as the teacher of our shared learning area; the academic, who misses out on the teaching work that they are suited to because a coordinator and a sessional overlooked merit and transparency for the sake of expediency or sympathy; and, by extension, the university system and the many students and teachers that operate in it. Reducing all of this to “I need the money” reflects the economic rationalism of neoliberalism, while the impulse to overlook the possible merit of others and the accumulative consequences of such oversights for the sake of experience reveals the neoliberal subjectivity: that anti-social “company-of-one”, who must diversify and be ever more agile, flexible and competitive.

But then, there is a certain individualised frustration that comes with seemingly self-inflicted under-or-unemployment, and ethical sensibilities do not pay the rent. Due to the ability of coordinators to act as reliable employers for tutors that they are familiar with, as well as the stress that seeking out a job only to turn it down can cause a coordinator, they must also consider whether turning down a job will mean being overlooked next semester. If a unit’s contact time and student numbers are low, then the sessional may need to secure at least two contracts, potentially across a few universities, with the contact times of each tutorial and lecture hopefully not clashing with any of the others. They must also account for the logistics of such commitments, such as the time spent commuting between campuses, and getting to grips with the administrative differences between universities. While considering these possibilities, they might also be awaiting clarification on the most appropriate contract in terms of knowledge, experience and preparation. One job could be rejected in anticipation for another for any of these logistical, only for said job to fall-through, with the previous offer being passed on and missed. The resulting under-or-unemployment can then easily be blamed on one’s own hesitation.
Something that no one ever mentioned at university is that, while a full-time PhD candidate is expected to spend at least thirty hours a week working on their postgraduate research work, the degree’s classification as a level-10 qualification also means that, when it comes to potential future study and retraining, its attainment makes one ineligible for the financial support that the Government typically provides to full-time students. Once the scholarship period expires, which is often the situation in PhDs in the social sciences that typically take longer than the mandatory three years, this can present a major problem. So, with my cash-in-hand work only doing so much to stem the depletion of my savings once my scholarship expired, and feeling the shame that I had unwillingly learned to associate with such a move, I swallowed my pride and began the time-consuming process of applying for the Government’s “Newstart” allowance, which is Australia’s welfare safety-net for the under-and-unemployed. This modest allowance requires one to routinely fulfil a job-application quota and meet with employment service providers. Due to the nature of the informal academic job-market, most of the jobs that I was going for were not publicly advertised and lacked the formal details that I could use as evidence, and so I provided the contact details of coordinators instead. When my employment officer, a young human-resources graduate who had commended my PhD candidature and former status as a university tutor, contacted one such coordinator to “check on an application”, they received the same explanation that I had been apologetically passing on to her for weeks: “it’s a confusing time, when we know, you’ll know”.

After some months on this allowance, I received word of two potential teaching jobs through my university contacts. The first was based in a prestigious university and was related to my area of knowledge. I asked how many tutorials the contract would cover, which was a way of implicitly seeing whether the contract alone would be sufficient, or if I would need to keep searching for a second job. The now familiar response did little to assist these considerations: “once I know, you’ll know”. The second potential job offer was entirely different. Rather than being based within a school, the course
was run by the professional staff at my university’s recently established centre for teaching and learning. The purpose of the course was to serve as an alternative route into university, with the focus being on developing the skills needed for success in university, rather than on any single field. After responding to an advertisement that I had been forwarded by a colleague, I received a number of documents on the nature of the course and the duties of the tutors involved, as well as calculations of working hours and a means to calculate pay-rates in respect to qualifications. Accompanying this was an application form and transparent details of the application process. While the prestige and field of the first potential job was certainly inviting, it could not compete with the transparency and organisation of this latter opportunity – which, incidentally, was stated from the start to be full-time equivalent.

In stark contrast to my earlier experiences as a sessional teacher, the new course required its staff to attend two days of orientation prior to the commencement of semester. I had read about the growing focus that universities were placing on training staff in everything from workplace safety, to personal well-being and student counselling; and so understood why some of the staff who had been teaching the course for years initially complained about the obligation to attend. Even so, the orientation was not merely about management and training, for it presented the opportunity to meet my colleagues and receive advice from the more seasoned staff. In other words, it enabled a typically fragmented group of workers to come together to share and reveal the commonalities of their experiences. During those two days, I met sessional academics who had worked at each of the Western Australian universities and beyond, and they each shared similar stories to those that I have described: entry into the informal market; losing work as coordinators come and go; applying for and losing welfare; trying to balance moral considerations and research work with the necessities of an income; “faking it ‘till you make it”; and marginalisation and exploitation.
Thanks in no small part to our shared office spaces and the staff meetings that were held every month or so, this dialogue with my sessional colleagues continued throughout the semester. Many of them had already earned their PhD, and a few had even formerly held secure positions, only to have lost them to the restructures taking place throughout the university sector. With few exceptions, it seemed that most of us put more time into our work than was stipulated by our contracts, with senior staff members often reminding the newer teachers that only the bare minimum of commentary and hardly any corrections at all is needed for an essay. On this note, I recall our final staff meeting, when several of us had taken up the request by management to present the results of extra projects that we ran alongside the course-work to improve teaching and learning outcomes – a task that many staff rejected as unpaid, extra work. When I presented examples of the extra commentary that I had been placing in student-essays as a part of my own project, two colleagues became frustrated and pointed out that they do not have the time to “compete with that”. It was a fair point, for, in getting to know them, I had learned that they both face financial and familial troubles. I tried to say that such competition had not been my intention, when one of them, whom I had come to admire as a considerate colleague and dedicated teacher, responded along the lines of: “It doesn’t matter. With neoliberalism, we all compete. That’s the way it is”.

As the end of semester approached, many of us began to share in the anxiety over whether we would return to the course following the dreaded periodical unemployment known as the “semester break”. In a particularly tense question time at the end of one staff meeting, management made it clear that the smaller student numbers that had been predicted also meant less contracts to go around. They initially declined any broad estimations of just how many tutors the centre would likely be looking for, and repeatedly declined to answer the reoccurring question over the factors that would likely be taken into consideration throughout the recruitment process. Instead, we were offered the response that we had all heard so many times before: “when we know, you’ll know”. With no real sense of where we stood, the old gnawing
uncertainties returned. The effect on the morale of the team was clear, with worries over paying the rent being written all over their faces. Like my peers, my staff number was cancelled the moment the contract ended, and so I could not access my staff email, student reviews, or the human resources site to check my final pay-slip. The fourteen weeks of income had made me ineligible for the Newstart allowance. So, relying on the small amount that I had managed to save, I once again began the process of contacting coordinators and seeking out work inside and beyond academe, ever mindful to be available for when it is decided whether my services are needed. *When they know, I’ll know*. Fortunately, I eventually received word confirming another contract – though, at the time of writing, I cannot say the same for many of my (potentially former) colleagues.

**Conclusion**

Entering the workforce in the year between honours and the commencement of my PhD, the “casual approach” to employment was just “how it was done”. Finding work in the years since has presented a range of pragmatic challenges and difficult moral decisions that are a consequence of structural conditions. The modest payment for sessional work means that multiple contracts are often pursued in an entrepreneurial manner, while uncertainty over workloads and schedules means that numerous jobs must be sought out but not necessarily committed to as a matter of strategy. In tandem with the focus on gaining experience and the need for an income, the lack of appropriate work can lead one to teach material that one has no experience with. This can be at the expense of the more appropriate teacher whose place one has taken, as well as the students, who are supposed to trust in and benefit from their teacher’s superior knowledge. This all takes place throughout contingent periods of under-employment and unemployment, with such circumstances in turn playing into the pressure to seek out work and make such self-interested decisions. Academics in similar situations often exist only on the peripheries of one’s awareness, reflecting the individualisation of the structure. The tutors-of-units-past who could assist the uninitiated are rarely
mentioned, with sessional tutors often passing like ships in the night or existing as faceless names on email threads. Thoughts are rarely shared for the tutors that one replaces or is replaced by. This is all to say that, for all the typical experiences that stem from their structured situations, sessional teaching academics can be a fragmented and individualised lot. I now realise that the conversations that were had with my fellow sessionals about the future tended to be in respect to securing re-employment, rather than ways of improving the courses that we taught – perhaps this is because we did not know if we would return to them, such is the precariousness of the risk society that universities have become.

The following chapters draw on class-analysis to help make sense of these conditions. The aim is to show how the experiences of sessional academics are based on shared structural conditions that bifurcate the academic job-market and workforce, and which influence their inclusion and opportunities in the university system. These matters were foreshadowed in this chapter in respect to entering and staying within the workforce (which speaks to the job-market and employment situations), and the treatment of and professional relations amongst sessional academics (which speaks to status, and, loosely speaking, class-consciousness and interests). I begin by laying out the class-based concepts that are to be used, which draw on both neo-Marxian and neo-Weberian approaches. This is followed by an analysis of the scope of the notion of the precariat, before finally bringing these all together to show how such contexts can be fruitfully framed in terms of an “academic precariat”.

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Chapter 3

*Drawing on neo-class-analysis*

According to Weber, understanding class is about more than delineating groups based on their relations to labour and ability to generate and deploy capital at the macro socioeconomic level. It is also about attempting to get a sense of how respective situations, life-chances, values and interests pertain to and are influenced by status and relations to various systems. So too is it about who gives the orders and who carries them out, who can speak out and how, and the weight and consequences that their words carry in such contexts. For example, while the employer has power over the worker, one employee working in one domain may make more money and be more secure than an employer working elsewhere, while another person – say, a local politician – might make less money than other people, but have more status and influence. In other words, even if a person is toward the bottom of the broader economic hierarchy, their position within a given context can still shape their situations and status within, *but not necessarily beyond*, said context. Hence, rather than focussing on the “Big Classes” of traditional Marxian class analysis (Wright 2005, 183), the approach outlined here is intended to address the situations and experiences of disaggregated and subjectively salient groups within contemporary organisational contexts.

This is key to examining the academic context and the question of why one might choose to remain in precarious employment despite having the option for more secure and lucrative work elsewhere. The answer is two-fold. First, sessional employment and obtaining a PhD degree has traditionally been part of an established pathway into academic positions that are widely associated with professional and financial security and high social status. Second, regardless of whether a person's employment classification is limited-term or permanent, the occupational identity associated with such work can be much the same, for one is an *academic* teacher or researcher working in a university; hence, even sessionals can share in the status generally afforded to academe.
This use of cultural explanations for accounting for the motivations of people to take up precarious jobs reflects Weberian approaches to class analysis, which expand beyond the Marxian emphasis on material gains to encompass other forms of reward, such as social status and vocational satisfaction.

Disaggregation thus has both material and sociocultural dimensions, with the sociocultural dimensions being not entirely reducible to ideology – that is, to manipulative tools that effectively help to subordinate groups in the interests of elites. Rather, in Weberian analysis, the cultural dimension is granted an importance equal to if not greater than material conditions. For example, while Marx sought to argue that culture is tied to modes of production that reinforce the material inequalities related to the means of production, Weber was concerned with the relationship between the values and rationalities at play in cultural domains, and the motivations and actions of those operating within such domains. For this reason, the cultural insights that can be provided by a Weberian approach can help explain what might seem from a Marxian perspective to be ultimately a matter of ideology and exploitation. In other words, while the Marxian approach is concerned with conflict and action across structural positions, the Weberian approach can help us to appreciate the meanings and motivations that are ascribed to these positions by those who occupy, aspire to, or seek to re-envision them.

This sociocultural dimension is more open to interpretation and negotiation, and has to do with identities and expectations, belonging and difference, and thus with possibilities for pride, shame, cohesion, conflict and social action. For example, regardless of whether they are accepted by the elites, a “lower class” person with “new money” may continue to identify as “lower class”. To relate these ideas to contemporary Australia, the so-called “mining boom”, whereby the value of Australia’s mining exports more than tripled in the

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9 For instance, many of my childhood peers – and many of my students today – consider being from a poorer background to somehow be more character building, more “real”.

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decade leading up to 2012, suddenly enabled people typically identified as belonging to a “lower socioeconomic” class and associated with the working class “bogan” subculture to quickly make lots of money. However, while their economic status improved, many retained their working class status, values and habits. Hence, these people came to be referred to as “cashed up bogans” or “CUBs”, which is an ostensibly pejorative term that implies a person who is “overpaid and undereducated”. A CUB’s pay is supposedly evident in the size of their houses, televisions and car engines – which can all typically be found in the developments of the sprawling outer suburbs. Their modest education is supposedly reflected in their political views, mannerisms, consumer choices and cultural tastes, and it is in respect to these factors that parallels are often (unfairly) drawn between the Australian bogan, the U.S. “red-neck” and U.K. “Chav”. These characteristics betray a CUB’s low social status despite their high pay, showing how having money is not synonymous with “having class” (see Pini, McDonald and Mayes 2012; Pini and Previte 2013).

The “overeducated and underpaid” academic is a comparable though far less popular example. To the public, “academic” is at once a way of associating certain characteristics with education, as well as a title for people whose work involves research, teaching, expertise, commentary, jargon and tweed jackets. The academic stereotype is not a figure of the “real world” of street smarts and hard labour, but a person whose presumed privilege and credentials locate them squarely in the middle class and upwards from there. In reality, most academics are paid less than comparable professionals in other sectors, with a growing majority being dependant on limited-term contracts. But these realities are offset by the sociocultural dimensions: unlike the more secure high school teacher or nurse, the academic sacrifices the pursuit of security for the idealistic “life of the mind” and supposed prominence within society. Hence, the credentialed lecturer can be money poor, precarious, and even on welfare for months at a time, and still be seen as “middle” or “upper-class” by virtue of their social status. Again, the “socioeconomic” portmanteau is upset, only this time “having class” is not the same as having money.
Webber (1978) dealt with these nuances by distinguishing between economic class and social status and the influences that these can have on life-chances. Like the Marxian formulation, economic class speaks to “what a group has”, and “what a group stands to make”, in relation to the production of capital, with the opportunities and limitations of social status being tied to the former. In a similar, albeit more limited and ostensibly less materialistic fashion, status reflects a person’s organisational or communal position, social circles, and, accordingly, their opportunities or life-chances. As these opportunities and networks are often linked to access to education, resources and different social groups, social status is closely tied to credentials and titles – hence, the tendency for academics to be generalised as “middle-class” due to their university degrees and despite their economic situations.

Economic class and social status are typically interrelated. For example – drawing here on notions of capital that were not developed by Weber, but by Bourdieu (2011) – attending an expensive school typically requires wealth (economic capital) and enables one to develop potentially beneficial relationships with other people and organisations (social capital). Such exposure will also help one to become familiar with the norms and attitudes that enable them to feel comfortable around wealth and “fit in” with the wealthy, and to recognise this ability to “fit in” with others (cultural capital). While economic capital can be measured so that people can objectively have more or less of it, social status can be very general, such as with judges having more status than janitors, or specific, such as the status afforded to big-name academics and champion computer game players within – but not necessarily beyond – their own respective domains. This focus on how socioeconomic and organisational conditions shape the situations of individuals and groups is key to my approach to class analysis. This chapter outlines these notions and the terminology that is employed in the analysis of the university system and academic context. To be clear, and in keeping with the formulation of precarity as insecurity coupled with relatively low organisational status, class
is used here to refer to the material and structural situations pertaining to security, as well as to organisational and cultural conditions pertaining to status and status-groups.

**Situations and “Life-Chances”**

A class situation is “a shared typical probability of procuring goods, gaining a position in life, and finding inner satisfaction” (Weber 1978, 302). An obvious example of goods is economic capital, as in the ability to make or inherit money, and then deploy this wealth to develop further wealth. In the university system, this generally takes the form of pay and funding. While the academic is only permitted to use their own pay for personal use, wisely attracting and spending funding can increase the chances of getting funding in the future, and thus the likelihood of promotion and higher pay. Hence, if continuing academics can have their name on grant applications, while sessional academics do not have the renumerated time or are not permitted by their university to do the same, then the two have different situations when it comes to funding, as well as prestige and pay.

This relation between situations and the probability of procuring goods also speaks to the support that is available conducting research and attending networking opportunities and publicising events – all of which can contribute to social and cultural capital, and thus to life chances. For instance, imagine a low-ranking academic who receives a few thousand dollars per teaching contract and occasional research funding ranging from a few hundred to a few thousand dollars. Compare this to an Australian Vice-Chancellor who, along with a salary and benefits worth close to a million dollars, has also amassed an impressive network and millions of dollars in research funding. Any grant application written up and submitted by the low-ranking academic stands to benefit if it includes the much higher-ranking academic, which in turn improves the latter’s “track record” and further cements their position. However, the applications and publications of much higher-ranking academics tend to add little to the status of their applications if they include
lower-ranking academics. As the number and value of grants procured is increasingly emphasised in academe, it is clear how this form of academic capital tends to flow upwards to senior academics and enhances their careers, while leaving much of the work of application writing to junior academics. Thus, a situation is the composition of positions and recognition, networks and affiliations, and the relation this all has to security and advancement. I narrow this down using Goldthorpe’s (1980, 40) distinction between market situations – which, I call employment situations in respect to the dual-market – and work situations. While these situations can overlap, such as when it comes to what the allocation of work means for the experiences of the worker, the distinction provides a useful basis for discussion.

*Employment situations* are the occupational category and financial conditions of employment, the sort of details that a HR manager would be preoccupied with. It covers whether a person has a job, and what kind of job it is in terms of employment mode (continuing, limited, etc.), pay, security, benefits, and opportunities for advancement. As I am concerned with the precariat, this includes the situation of being un-or-underemployed. To my mind, it is the employment situation that people are addressing when they ask, “what do you do?” While I write as part of my job, I do not answer with “I write,” for this would fail to answer the real question of “are you employed, and, if so, where and what as?” Similarly, for those who are more finance or career minded, it would be tedious to simply answer with “I am a writer,” for this would fail to give an idea of how I am employed, what my pay might be, and what I have going for myself. Alternatively, while it is only one part of my employment situation, the answer “I teach at a university” serves to locate me in a sector (higher education), profession (academe) and general group (“educated middle class”). This in turn provides a vague impression of my success and potential in the market, and how much I might make now and in the future by

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10 It should be said that there seems to be growing status accorded to mentoring early career researchers, but this is not a dominant trend at this stage.

11 In this case, such organisationally based situations can bridge Weber’s and Marx’s concepts of class, in that cultural (i.e. academic) capital is converted into financial capital.
way of both money and prestige. Finally, it is worth reemphasising that the employment situation also covers the formal conditions and entitlements of a given employment category.

Whereas employment situation covers the contractual conditions of employment, work situation covers the professional relations to people and work in an organisational setting, which in turn covers levels of authority, inclusion, autonomy and the opportunities to which these conditions relate. There is a material basis to this as well, for the work situation is tied to the employment situation in terms of security, payment and occupational identity. For instance, it would be improper to answer the question “what do you do?” with “I spend a great deal of time sending emails in search of tutoring jobs”, for this work-for-labour is not a part of my job in the conventional sense. Rather, work situation is better captured by questions such as “what does your work day involve?” Simply responding with “I teach at a university” would here be an insufficient answer, for it indicates my employment situation, but says little about the work involved. A more appropriate response would be along the lines of “I do X, which involves activity-Y and group-Z,” for these X and Y details convey the work, workplace and workforce relations that together make up a work situation. So that the conversational illustration does not mislead, it should be noted that both employment situation and work situation are used here as ideal types that cover typical situations, opportunities and characteristics. Hence, while the typical employment situation of the sessional teacher is to cycle between unemployment and contingent and low-paying jobs, and the typical work situation involves marginalisation and expendability, this is not to deny that the situations and attitudes of individual sessionals may vary.

The interplay of employment situations and work situations are central to delineating and analysing classes in an organisational context. For instance, the employment situation of a sessional academic in Australia will typically involve ostensibly pay-by-the hour casual contracts, a lack of security and
benefits, and no guarantee for future employment or advancement. Their work situations typically involve marginality and exclusion (Ryan et al. 2013), a sense of occupational identity and dedication (Bernstein 2000), but limited opportunities to accrue academic capital and develop their career (Gottschalk and McEachern 2010; Gunasekara 2007). Table 2 uses casual employment and sessional academic work to illustrate the general purview of these two notions, and in so doing also accounts for the idea that sessional academics are “anything but casual”.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Situation</th>
<th>General casual employment</th>
<th>Sessional Academic Teachers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Employment</td>
<td>• Shifts and rosters&lt;br&gt; • Paid by hours calculated as daily, weekly or fortnightly.</td>
<td>• Semester-based contracts, “Paid by the hour” according to a single semester/project long, contractual calculation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Weekly/fortnightly under-or-unemployment.</td>
<td>• Regular semester/project based under/unemployment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work</td>
<td>• Individual shifts accepted or turned down daily, weekly or fortnightly.</td>
<td>• Shifts are committed to on a single project/semester long contractual basis.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Risk of exploitation based on the distribution of work.</td>
<td>• Risk of exploitation and self-exploitation through unpaid overwork, and the allocation of recognition.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Taken together, class situations do not simply involve a vertical spectrum of money and authority, whereby those with less (employees) are exploited by those with more (employers) – although this is often the case – they also shape relations and opportunities (Langhout, Rosselli and Feinstein 2007, 146). For instance, while sessional researchers and teachers might experience similar employment situations regarding low-wages and the lack of benefits, the prestige associated with publications means that researchers will generally receive more recognition and opportunities for advancement than teachers. Both the sessional researcher and sessional teacher are in the same boat in
respect to employment categories, and so can share interests regarding security, but their different roles can result in them having different interests in addressing structural issues pertaining to involvement and advancement.

**Status and Status-Groups**

Status is described by Segre (2010, 220) as a “position in society, personal esteem and deference, a system of cultural and legal privileges,\(^{12}\) and a collectivity of persons having a similar culture and life style”. As “society” is comprised of a range of social domains, the status of a given position may be recognised, evaluated, desired or overlooked accordingly. A status group thus speaks to a “recognized social identity and social ranking… to the degree of social honour attached to positions in a social hierarchy of occupations and expressed by means of differential associations” (Segre 2010, 220 also see: Giddens 1973; Holton and Turner 1989). Status shares this positional quality with class, which Sørenson (1991, 72) describes as “sets of structural positions”, adding that:

> Social relationships within markets, especially within labour markets, and within firms define these positions. Class positions exist independently of individual occupants of these positions. They are ‘empty places’.

This focus on organisational structures allows us to talk about sub-systems, and thus to identify distinct status-groups and sub-classes accordingly. This is not to deny that there will be, for instance, research-only academics who, due to their academic publications, are more esteemed and potentially more employable than their teaching-only peers. Rather, it is to emphasise that sessional academics *in general* have more in common with one another in terms of structural conditions and status than they do with more secure staff.

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\(^{12}\) Status as a legal category does not necessarily overlap with status as a social category, for there can be inequalities in the latter even when there are equalities in the former.
A status-group can be thought of in several ways. It can refer to people who occupy positions of similar status within the organisational hierarchy, such as professors who comprise the “professoriate”. It is worth noting that this connection between roles and status is not limited to the organisation in question, but can exist as a cultural designation or more general stereotype around which narratives and expectations are based. Hence, people from outside the university system might call all academics “professors” irrespective of their actual rank (a particularly common reference in the U.S.), associate them with the qualities and foibles that are often linked to the “Ivory Tower”, and make further assumptions based on these associations. This latter point is certainly relevant to the experiences of aspiring academics, especially when it comes to how these expectations and ideals attract people to academe and keep them there. However, the focus here is the role that status plays in, and according to, the organisational contexts in question. For this reason, let us for the moment keep the formulation of status-groups as it pertains to positions in the organisational hierarchy at hand, and put the broader views of academics as a generalised status-group to the side.

The notion can also refer to people who occupy different positions and fulfil different roles, but have similar levels of organisational esteem and influence, such as with the executives or administration of a university, which can be composed of both senior academics and non-academics. These configurations of position and esteem can come together in exclusive ways based on such things as general employment categories. This is the case with the academic workforce, and what Kimber (2003) describes as the “tenured core” of the “real faculty”, and the “tenuous periphery” of sessionals, with the faculty being included in forums and events to which sessionals are often not invited. This bifurcation along the lines of inclusion and influence is particularly important to the class-analysis at hand, as it affects the ability of sessionals to express their interests, be it individually or as a distinct group. For example, there are often occasions in which only those deemed “real faculty” are
invited to staff meetings and events, even when the occasions are arguably relevant to contingent and continuing academic staff alike. As another example, while continuing academic staff who are leaving a university often receive send-off ceremonies complete with refreshments and applause from their colleagues, there is no shortage of reports of sessional academics being unceremoniously “dumped” or simply “disappearing”, even after working at a university for many years (Brown et al. 2006; Rothengatter and Hil 2013). Occasions such as these reveal the distinctions between the “core” and the “periphery” as being analogous to organisational “citizens” and “denizens” – with the former having status such that their “belonging” is recognised in events marking their leaving, while the latter can be around for years and leave without any such notice.

Notably, a status-group can be more broadly comprised of a range of positions from across the organisational hierarchy, based on shared values and norms around which a sense of occupational identity and community can develop, as is the case with the general formulation of “academic” or “administrator”. For example, while the professor may have more status than the sessional teacher, the two academics will likely have more in common with one another in terms of professional interests and goals, such as attending conferences and conducting research, than they would with, say, professional staff members who play different roles in comparable employment and payment categories. I here recall the chagrin among some academic circles when the new Chancellor of a Western Australian university was revealed not to be an academic, but a mining magnate. This new symbolic head of the University had the wealth of the super elite, the know-how of a successful entrepreneur, and the social capital of corporate partners, political figures and those at the top of the University's hierarchy. Yet, his status as a young-mining magnate led some to view him as being “not the right kind of person” for the role.

This shows how status-groups can be identified with, and boundaries and expectations drawn, based on cultural and other symbolic affiliations, rather
than organisational positions alone. The Chancellor was a part of the economic and organisational elite, but he was neither an academic nor from the high status role, like a judge or a governor, that are typically more commensurate with the status position of chancellor. In other words, it was not that people were concerned over how he would exert his influence, for the role of Chancellor is widely seen as symbolic; rather, it came down to the fact that he was, as one academic put it to me, “not one of us, not even symbolically”. The trouble with reducing status to positions in a “top-down” structure is that it overlooks such affiliations, whereby people who are low on the hierarchy can nevertheless feel like they have a more symbolic claim over the organisation than the people sitting at its top. It is in this sense that the notion of status-groups, which speaks to affiliations and ideals that can span the organisational hierarchy, can provide additional insights that might be overlooked in a more limited class-analysis.

**Interests and Influence**

Class interests cover the possibilities that might improve or worsen a class’s situation. As with the other notions, this involves both the contractual and non-economic conditions that people may or may not be aware of, as well as the experiences of such conditions and the contextually mediated understandings of their causes and consequences. There is a potential controversy here over the difference between a person defining for themselves what their situation and interests are (i.e. *emic*: observed from within the group), and being defined analytically, regardless of their opinion (i.e. *etic*: observed from the outside). As Wright (2016, 10) points out, “claims about the ‘objective interests’ of the working class can easily slide into an elite telling the masses what is ‘good for them’”. This is not of great significance here, for the growing sense among sessionals that they constitute an exploited and peripheral group being cut-off from permanent employment does not produce a contradiction between their class consciousness and their formal employment conditions (the main exception to this – in the sense that their understanding of sessional teaching as a reliable stepping stone is in
contradiction to reality – is returned to in greater depth later). At any rate, the focus on employment situations will here focus more on the etic, while the work situations and later discussions dealing with substantive experiences make more use of the emic.

Wright provides a useful description of the structural varieties of class interests by drawing on Alford and Friedland’s (1985, in Wright 2016, 11) distinction between systemic, institutional, and situational forms of power. Borrowing the metaphor of the game from these two authors and putting forward a Marxian reading, Wright states:

… systemic power can be thought of as struggles over what game should be played; struggles over institutional power are over the rules of a given game, and struggles involving situational power concern moves within a fixed set of rules.

Wright interprets the systemic matter of what game to play in terms of the kind of society we live in, with revolution and counterrevolution being the struggle over this. For instance, a Marxian revolution would supposedly be in the interest of the working class and against the interests of the wealthy elites. The institutional matter, as in the rules of the game, is to do with how such a society should operate once it is established, and thus concerns for instance the struggles and interests at play in reformist and reactionary politics, and the making of laws and regulations. Finally, the situational matter involves the potential courses of action that can be made within such conditions, for instance, the struggle between private businesses and conservationists over the uses of the woodlands, or between progressives and conservatives over political correctness. While none of these parties might break the law, there is enough leeway in the rule of law for vastly different situational contexts and possibilities to play out in the interest of one group, rather than another. The idea is that from the metaphorical game emerge distinctive groups with potentially conflicting interests and uneven abilities to realise these interests.
Returning to the academic context, the systemic matter would concern the purpose and structure of the university, such as whether it uses the pass/fail binary and grade-medium, positions teachers as authorities over students, and champions truth, or social justice, or employment, or technology and so on. An alternative to this would be to replace said binary and medium with economic transactions, substitute clerks for teachers, and shift from education toward direct-to-the-shop-floor training. The matter of “what game to play” thus speaks to the question: “what is the purpose of the university?” The potential conflicts of interest here would be between the state (universities should develop citizens), private industries (universities should produce workers and innovations – an interest that often, in the twenty-first century, often overlaps with the priorities of governments), and academe (universities should seek to preserve and further the ideals and aspirations of the Enlightenment). These points will be returned to the discussion of social systems theory that takes place in Part 2 of this project.

The institutional matter speaks to how academics are employed and organised: as securely or precariously employed researchers and/or teachers, supervised by peers or management, and to what ends (e.g. quality/quantity publishing, critical public engagement, or student retention). The institutional matter and situational matter intersect at the formal conditions of employment and the negotiation of relationships between work, peers, and employers. For instance, from some perspectives it might be in the interest of upper-management to dissolve secure positions and increase staff accountability and productivity, which would in turn be against the interest of academics who cherish their autonomy and argue that job security promotes academic quality (a conflict that plays out in meetings between unions and management). As another example, a number of Australian universities have expressed intentions to limit the academic freedom of its employees to the purview of their own field and discipline, while also becoming stricter in disciplining the social media activity of staff. So far as such managers are concerned, it is in
the interest of the university to discipline or fire/not-rehire academics who step out of line and potentially damage the university brand, and so decreasing the autonomy and security of staff provides an effective strategy for the university as a business. Coming back to the game analogy, it is worth noting that such strategies are supposedly done in the interest of “collegiality”, as university staff are expected to behave as being “on the same team” – even while the power to decide the rules of the game and how staff should behave is increasingly monopolised by, and in the interest of, universities as corporate employers. As Joseph’s (2015, 158) account of a redundancy process at an Australian university shows, this can play out in ways that undermine collegiality by isolating individuals, insulating information and abusing processes:

During the redundancy process, the union was treated with no more respect by university management than the targeted staff. Information presented to the union was invariably delivered in a fog of uncertainty. The union had difficulty working out what university management was up to. University management played with the union and did not even engage in a game, let alone a formal legal process. University management was able to play (to make up the rules as it went along) or to shift to a game. Even in game mode, the denial of information was sufficient to keep the union guessing about whether university management was cheating.

Class Consciousness

Finally, class-consciousness, which is more of a Marxian notion, speaks to the ability of a group to recognise itself as a class, see who is not part of their class, understand why this is so, and identify and pursue their shared interests. Regarding self-recognition, the manner in which some (though by no means all) academics see themselves as the custodians of academe and disapprove of the appointment of non-academic outsiders to positions of power within universities points to shared group identities and boundaries, which in turn influence interests and possible conflicts. Perhaps more important are the material dimensions of class situations, whereby members of a group do not just say, for instance, “as academics we have shared duties and values”, but
also acknowledge how certain conditions, such as those associated with the neoliberal university, segregate academics. While shared narratives speak to a distinctive identity within a generalizable group, the different shared material situations across this group make it possible to view and identify with it as something of a class in its own right. Only when this consciousness is present can personal troubles be recognised as structural issues that affect some people more than others, thereby allowing said people to together say: “this is our situation, these are the causes and the consequences, and this is what can make it better or worse”.

These tensions surrounding the notion of academic class can be understood in respect to the distinction between a class “in itself” and a class “for itself”\textsuperscript{13} (Figure 2).

\begin{center}
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{figure2.png}
\end{center}

\textit{Figure 2: Consciousness in relation to class in itself and class for itself}

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{13}A distinction which, while conceptually useful, has been shown by Andrew (1983, 584) to have never actually been articulated by Marx, and in fact represents a “Leninist constriction of Marxist politics” and a series of misattributions within the literature.
\end{footnotesize}
A class “in itself” is viewed here as a group within a given structural context whose members share common situations, opportunities and interests, in a way that distinguishes them from other groups within the same structural context. This provides a useful basis for conceptualising a social structure in terms of the situations and relationships that it maintains. For instance, it is meaningful to distinguish between workers who must sell their labour for wages from those who manage and pay the workers, for the situations, opportunities and interests of these groups will be very different. This extends to the segmented groups that Standing (2011), in discussing the precariat, refers to in terms of a “class in the making” – for while such groups have situations and interests based on their respective contexts, they can nonetheless have different forms of consciousness: as casuals, as being on the periphery and disposable, be it in respect to their workforce, sector, profession, state, or – expanding things even further – as being part of a particular ethnicity, age, or sex (hence, as we shall see in Chapter 4, Standing distinguishes between different “factions” within the precariat).

While it is possible for groups to be aware of the structural conditions underlying their shared situations, the presence of class consciousness is not a necessary condition for conceptualising a class in itself or in the making. A class becomes “for itself” when it consciously takes to organised action to protect and further its interests, often against the interests of other groups. While class consciousness is a necessary condition of a class being for itself, such an action-based formulation is not a necessary condition for conceptualising a group as a class in itself.

This consciousness among academics is reflected in the literature. Gottschalk and McEachern (2010, 47-8) report the overall frustration among 196 surveyed casual staff at a regional Australian university, who “realised that

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14 This does not necessarily require those involved to explicitly identify as a “class”, as terms such as “workers” or “management” and so on are sufficient.
the University’s use of casual/staff was largely functional and that transitioning to ... a ‘proper’ career was for many an impossible dream”. This indicates an awareness of market and work situations, vis-à-vis their limited opportunities and the acknowledgement that they occupy a different status group to academics with “proper careers”. This is echoed by the primary voice of the Australian sessional academic population, the National Tertiary Education Union (Rea 2012, 5), who claim that casual employment “is used primarily to deny people employment rights, to create a compliant workforce, and to cut costs. It is not a function of the nature of the employment itself”. In this respect, a key change in the neoliberal university has been that which used to be a transitional position has become a segregated economic and organisational position – hence, the change is not in the emergence of the academic precariat per se, but rather in the scope of the mobility from which members of one group can transition to another. In response to these conditions, the NTEU has set up the dedicated service, UniCasual, which serves not only as a site for information on employee rights and employer obligations, but also as a forum for the expression of “casual voices” and the organisation of national and international activism.

What these discussions have in common is the idea that there exists in universities a distinctive group that is particularly and increasingly prone to undesirable situations due to situational, institutional, and systemic issues. Such academics increasingly see themselves as part of a distinctive group whose shared situations and interests set them apart from other more securely employed academic peers, while their status and aspirations as academics set them apart from casual and limited-term workers in other sectors. This service has been late coming, and admittedly, the NTEU has struggled to represent the concerns of casual academics, due to the low numbers of casual academics who become members of the NTEU. In fact, it can be argued that the Union’s efforts to primarily protect the employment of permanent academic staff has in part contributed to the bottleneck of sessional academics trying to gain secure employment in universities.
Conclusion

Just as there is no shortage of applications of class-analysis to the university system, the notion of the “academic underclass” is not at all an original one. Indicating a Marxian approach, Brown (et al. 2010, 170) argue that Australian universities increasingly resemble “flexibilized factories” with a “the stark divide between a relatively secure manager class and the growing army of casuals”, and ask how “class status [is] experienced by casualized academics?” Similarly, Callinicos (2000, 26) insists on a link between casualisation and the “proletarianisation” of academics as “highly qualified wage labourers”. Berry (2005, 12) identifies a “class line” between this “contingent faculty” and those who “own, control and manage institutions of higher education”. As if by way of a more Weberian response, in the executive summary of Percy’s (et al. 2008) report on the contributions of sessional teachers, the former Deputy Vice-Chancellor of an Australian university candidly admits that:

… the analogy I’ve always made with sessional staff is to describe them as the proletariat of the academic profession, but that Victorian description of an industrial working class just doesn’t fit as well as that other part of Victorian life, the domestic servant.

The common status associated with being an academic aside, the average sessional academic – like academics in many parts of the world who depend on contingent cycles of short-term contracts – has more in common with similarly employed academics working in different states and disciplines, than with the secure academics with whom they share their campus(es) classrooms, cafes and taverns. In this chapter, these similarities and differences were addressed in respect to the material conditions of pay and security, and the social conditions of status. These in turn were connected to employment situations and work situations, such that groups within a given organisational context can be delineated into distinct classes according to
their relation to and position within that context, while simultaneously helping to situate them in relation to other class-like groups in that context. Hence, we can formulate sessional academics as the academic precariat, insofar that it is characterised and conditioned by such systemic conditions. While national, institutional and disciplinary contexts may differ between academics, it is these systemic and widespread precarious situations that characterise the experiences of those sessional “denizens” of the “periphery” – which is to say that these all provide a means of framing the same issue: the rise and lot of the academic precariat within contemporary universities.

To help clarify this conceptual effort, the following chapter takes a closer look at Standing’s notion of the precariat and the criticisms it has attracted. In so doing, I emphasise the use of the notion as a Weberian ideal type that, while not being consistent with more traditional and narrower approaches to class analysis, can nonetheless help elucidate the prevailing conditions and situations of the organisational and systemic contexts to which it is applied. Once this is done, I shall take these class-based concepts and address how the precariat can apply to the academic context and conclude Part 1 with a chapter intended to convey the difficulties that people have in “quitting academe”. This will consolidate the formulation of the academic precariat so that the analysis of its relations to the university system can begin.
Chapter 4

The precarious proletariat: scope and application

The notion of the precarious proletariat or “precariat”, which was previously used by French sociologists in the 1980s to describe sessional workers, is receiving revived attention due to British economist, Guy Standing (2011). Standing argues that spreading insecure employment and the erosion of occupational identities and social solidarity under neoliberalism have led the precariat to emerge as a “class-in-the-making”. Connecting this to education, Standing (2015, 7) observes that: “this is the first class in history for which the norm is having a higher level of educational qualifications than the labour the person can expect to obtain and be obliged to do”. So far as academics are concerned, and to again draw on Jørgensen (2016, 963), this “emergence” is tied to the “realization by some groups (middle-class, highly educated, non-migrants) that they also belong to groups in both real and potentially precarious positions”.

This chapter outlines the key ideas in Standing’s formulation of the precariat and considers how the notion can help elucidate the current academic context. For Standing (2011, 7), the notion is “useful in terms of images and analyses” as “it allows us to use what Weber called an ‘ideal type’” for viewing ostensibly separate groups as sharing distinctive situations, experiences and interests. Following this Weberian approach, I emphasise the precariat’s usefulness as an ideal type, “in which groups are defined by their modal characteristics” (Standing 2014b, 2). These modal characteristics include material situations, as well as the subjectively salient experiences that typically accompany them. Taking inspiration from Millar’s (2017, 6) description of the scholarly treatment of precarity in the global South, I use the notion not as a “fixed empirical object”, but as a “method of inquiry that asks how unstable work relates to fragile conditions of life in particular times and places”, with the times and places being the contemporary Western/Anglo-Saxon university system. In what follows, I consider the
scope of Standing’s formulation, its criticisms as a class-based concept, and its usefulness as a Weberian ideal type.

**Formulation**

Standing presents a loose hierarchy of classes based on different wealth, status, employment and work situations, and thus life-chances (Figure 3). The production sphere refers to relations of production and distribution, and thus to employment. By regularly going without work the securities that this brings, the precariat and the proficians are partially included the production sphere – though the impact of this for proficians varies due to their wide-ranging and entrepreneurial variety. The under-class or lumpenproletariat are those who are terminally unemployed and often homeless – they are outside of the production sphere and have extremely limited life-chances.

*Figure 3: An interpretation of Standing’s hierarchy of classes*
At the top of the hierarchy are the **plutocracy**: the 0.001% of super wealthy people who are able to directly influence economies, governments and other institutions, such as the media. With them are the wealthy **elites** who aspire to enter this plutocracy; these are the high-ranking administrators and bosses of small to medium scale business. The **proficians** are the new idealised workers: highly flexible and agile, they are the contractors of the knowledge economy, the entrepreneurs and innovators of niche markets, the jet-setting and laptop-armed royalty of Silicon Valley. The **salariat** are the educated professionals who generally tend to have careers, as opposed to just working jobs, which entail benefits, status and clear opportunities for advancement. The **proletariat** sell their labour to get by, and enjoy a certain measure of security and solidarity, though they typically have jobs, rather than careers. In part due to their lack of specialised skills (not being “professionals”), the proletariat tend to be lower on organisational hierarchies than the salariat, deemed more disposable, and generally attract less pay, benefits and status. Hence, these groups can be delineated by their situations and life-chances.

According to Standing (2014, 16-7), while “the proletarian norm was habituation to stable labour, the precariat is being habituated to unstable labour”. This insecurity is coupled with marginality, so the precariat pursues work like nomads that are employed as if mere organisational denizens. Hence, to be “precariatised” is to be “subject to pressures and experiences that lead to a precariat existence, of living in the present, without a secure identity or sense of development achieved through work and lifestyle” (*ibid*). In other words, the precariat is excluded from the salariat and broadly distinguished from the proletariat in respect to security and status, which in turn reflects their insecure employment situations and marginalised work situations, and, by extension, their limited chances when it comes to advancement. The point is that precarity, as conceptualised here, is not simply a personal trouble resulting from a preference for casual jobs, the lack of specialised skills and the inability to develop healthy collegial ties. Rather, it is shaped by structural issues that reduce security and certainty (such as with casualisation), and fragment workforces and isolate workers (such as through
organisational hierarchies and job and resource allocation), and limit opportunities (such as through systemic treadmills and ladders).

Standing divides the precariat into three factions: the atavists, the nostalgics, and the “bohemian” progressives. The atavists are the old and under-educated working class, and are so-called because they would likely have been among the proletariat in earlier times. The nostalgics are typically migrant and ethnic minorities that put up with insecurity in order to focus on economic survival. They are so-called because, according to Standing (2015, 8), they “have a strong sense of relative deprivation by virtue of having no present, no home”. The progressives (which make up most of the precariat addressed in this project) are characterised by being: “… plunged into a precariat existence after being promised the opposite, a bright career of personal development and satisfaction” (Standing 2014, 30). This speaks to the graduates who do everything that was ostensibly expected of them, only to end up in casual jobs, contemplating undertaking unpaid-internships and pricey postgraduate courses that will supposedly make them a bit more competitive. That said, while members of the educated precariat are mostly in their twenties and thirties, be it due to getting laid off or taking a break from work and then finding it difficult to regain permanent positions, many are “drifting out of a salariat existence” to join them (Standing 2014, 30). Standing calls this faction the “progressives” because their education and networks make them the precariat’s most probable mouthpiece for civil and political engagement. Standing (2011, 13-14) is the first to admit the breadth of this formulation:

However one defines it, the precariat is far from being homogeneous. The teenager who flits in and out of the internet café while surviving on fleeting jobs is not the same as the migrant who uses his wits to survive, networking feverishly while worrying about the police. Neither is similar to the single mother fretting where the money for next week’s food bill is coming from or the man in his 60s who takes casual jobs to help pay medical bills.
Even so, Standing’s (2011, 14) point is that these groups “share a sense that their labour is instrumental (to live), opportunistic (taking what comes) and precarious (insecure)”. While these common situations are looked at in the following chapter, it is worth outlining them briefly here for good measure.

The key characteristics of the precariat, as envisioned by Standing, cover work and employment situations, such as to do with security and cycles of unemployment and job-hunting, as well as the experiences that often accompany these situations, such as to do with occupational identity and what Standing (2011, 10) refers to as “status discord”, which describes “people with a relatively high level of formal education, who have to accept jobs that have a status or income beneath what they believe accord with their qualifications [and so] are likely to suffer from status frustration”. In short, Standing’s (2011, 9) formulation is both Marxian (in that it deals with material conditions) and neo-Weberian (in that it deals with status and values within contemporary organisational contexts), with neither approach alone being enough to capture his formulation, hence his contention that:

It is not right to equate the precariat with the working poor or with just insecure employment, although these dimensions are correlated with it. The precariousness also implies a lack of a secure work-based identity, whereas workers in some low-income jobs may be building a career.

Standing is also careful not to forget that his is a general description that does not deny the ability of the individual agent to escape precarity. However, this acknowledgement of individual agency is balanced with an acknowledgement of the structural and cultural conditions that (as we shall see) reproduce precarity and undermine opportunities (Standing 2011, 10):

To assert that the precariat consists of people who have no control over their labour or work would be too restrictive, since there is always ambivalence and implicit bargaining over effort, cooperation and application of skills, as well as scope for acts of sabotage, pilfering and
boondoggling. But aspects of control are relevant to an assessment of their predicament.

These characteristics are addressed in the next chapter in relation to the academic context; so, rather than covering them here, only to return to them in more depth later, let us turn to the criticisms that Standing’s formulation and its potential usages in class-analysis have attracted from other scholars. My intention is to acknowledge the theoretical limitations presented by restricting the formulation to a rigid Marxian reading, and emphasise the usefulness in treating it more as an ideal type via a neo-Weberian approach.

The Precariat in Class-Analysis

In *Is the Precariat a Class?* Wright (2016, 1) argues that, “while the precariat can be situated within class analysis it is not useful to treat it as a distinct class in its own right”. Wright makes the case that class is a matter of distinguishing between economic relations, material situations and, insofar that it is possible to do so, objective class interests. Regarding this point on objective interests, it is worth quoting Wright (2016, 10) at length:

> What this means is the following: for any given person it is possible to identify actions and social changes which would improve or harm their material conditions of life. Sometimes the term “material” is used very narrowly to simply mean income; sometimes it is used expansively to include many aspects of a person’s economic situation, including working conditions, opportunities, leisure, economic stability, control over time use, and much more. In both cases the claim is that it is possible to objectively assess the range of strategies and alternatives which will affect these aspects of a person’s economic situation.

Wright (2016, 21-2) insists that class is about “social cleavages”, whereby groups are to be delineated and their situations explained in terms of their disparate objective interests. Class analysis should therefore be confined to

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15 Standing (2016, 191) responds “All of us take actions that may or may not improve our conditions of life and we rarely know which is which. Life is full of probabilities and risks”.

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the purpose of trying to develop a “coherent, consistent way of theoretically understanding social cleavages and the possibilities of transformation”. If the interests of two groups are not sufficiently distinct from one another, then it makes little sense to talk about them as if they are different classes, and such delineations should not be used as a basis for class analysis. This means that, if the precariat is to be taken seriously as an emerging class, then it is not enough to conceptualise it in terms of different situations, via precarity, for it must also have sufficiently different socioeconomic interests to other classes, namely the proletariat. For Wright and his approach to class analysis – which focusses more on material interests than on how discreet situations relate to work and production – Standing’s formulation does not meet these conditions, and thus the attempt to treat the precariat as a class, or even a class-in-the-making, “obscures more than it clarifies” (ibid).

Standing (2016) presents a riposte in The Precariat, Class and Progressive Politics: A Response. Stating “My reading of Wright’s work is that for him material interests are the only criterion [for class analysis]” (ibid. 191), Standing (2016, 190-191) presents his own perspective in juxtaposition to Wright’s with the aphorism “…there is more to life than material interests”. He does this by emphasising the distinction between work, which has use value, and labour, which has exchange value. In what he describes as an attempt to give Marxian references to “human essence” a “modern flavour”,” Standing (2016, 190) focusses on work as occupation, as in “an evolving set of related tasks based on traditions and accumulated knowledge, part of which is unique”. Occupation can involve a sense of identity and becoming – of carving out, occupying, and, indeed, defending a space – that is not reducible to the material conditions of labour. For Standing, this is central to the precariat and to his differences with Wright.

For Standing (2009, 6), “Labour’s function is to produce marketable output or services”. This instrumental manipulation of skill is achieved by carrying out jobs and thus through employment, the standard twentieth-century model
of which involved a “social compact” where “employees received security, notably employment security, in return for accepting workplace controls that gave them a subordinated, disciplined role in the production process”. However, because labour involves the extraction of value from employees by those providing employment, employers would often exploit and oppress employees, thus leading to conflicting interests. For Standing and Wright, it is the contradictory dynamics of this model that generate the material conditions and social cleavages that class-analysis seeks to address.

Standing’s (2016, 190) point is that, as work is increasingly commodified, employment criteria become more demanding, and employment securities are undermined in pursuit of flexibility, we are seeing a shift away from the relatively stable subordination that defined proletarianisation, to the process of precariatisation, whereby people are “habituated to accept a life of unstable labour and unstable living as supplicants”. So far as this reflects a departure from the model of the twentieth-century, the precariat is thus “defined in part by having to do a lot of work-for-labour and for being exploited off the workplace and outside labour time” (Standing 2016, 189). Standing wants to address the class fragmentation that is emerging from these new dynamics, and questions Wright’s move to dismiss these attempts as “obscuring” the supposedly shared material interests of a “working class” broadly conceived based on a nineteenth-century dualistic model of class. Hence, Standing (2016, 191) asks if Wright’s approach gives a “more useful way into understanding the reality of the precariat and proletariat?” For the purposes of this project, which addresses both employment situations and occupational narratives, a less traditional approach than Wright’s is used.

Rather than focussing on social cleavages between opposing interests, the current analysis uses the expansive formulation which, as Wright (2016, 10) puts it, can include “working conditions, opportunities, leisure, economic

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16 Hence the widespread and ongoing economic, political and social struggle to recognise vitally important and gendered “unpaid labour”, such as “house work” and “child rearing”.

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stability, control over time use”. In saying this, I have in mind how one can usefully distinguish between the “middle-class” and the “lower-class” and point to substantively different situations and small conflicting interests without positing the kind of overarching macro oppositions that shape employers and employee relations. Likewise, the interests of the precariat are not in conflict with the proletariat and the salariat to the same extent that the interests of workers in general conflict with the organisational elites that shape their situations, though they can still be distinguished in terms of their economic security, working conditions, organisational status, opportunities, and control over time.17

As for who is included in the precariat, and in view of pervasive down-sizing and growing uncertainty, Choonara (2011: n.p. cited in Jørgensen 2016, 962) takes Standing’s contention that anyone can enter the precariat further, stating that, “all workers find themselves in a precarious position”. Likewise, building on the idea that “we are all the precariat”, Seymour (2012: n.p. cited in Jørgensen 2016, 962) observes that precarity “isn’t reserved for a small, specialised group of people – ‘the precariat’ or whatever. It spreads. It affects us all. The whip of insecurity disciplines even those who were recently comfortable”. The idea here is that precarity, or rather, the effects of precariatisation, is itself an effect of neoliberalism from which no sector or associated group is spared. So long as uncertainty and change are seen as the defining conditions of the environment, and so long as responses to this environment are framed in terms of economically rational adaptation – that is through efficiency, flexibility and increasing competitiveness – all workers will potentially be subject to this logic and threatened by its practices. Hence, members of the proletariat and the salariat can enter into the precariat at any

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17 This is not to dismiss the broader Marxian understanding, whereby workers are exploited by a system that favours the interests of the few over the interests of the many, with the key differences of sub-class categories being the allocation of the conditions and consequences of such exploitation (hence, the precariat is more exploited than the salariat). The point is to focus on objective circumstances as a basis for common experience and distinctions, elucidating the university system through neo-Marxian and neo-Weberian approaches.
moment, and it is in this respect that they are all always in somewhat of a precarious position.

Even so, it is worth acknowledging that, at least insofar that workers can be delineated based on their employment and work situations, it is possible for developments that worsen the situations of the precariat to be of little consequence for more secure workers. Indeed, the boons to one group can be at the expense another. One example is how the sustained ability of some academics to operate as virtually unaccountable proxy-employers adds to the precarity of sessional academics: for these proxy-employers, more accountable can mean more paperwork and managerial oversight, and thus less academic freedom. At the same time, however, such employment processes would potentially become more transparent and meritocratic, thereby potentially improving the situations and opportunities for employment and advancement of well qualified sessional academics, and potentially improving the quality of the courses that they teach.

Even though these groups might not necessarily be in fundamental opposition to one another, they might still be in some form of competition. This potential for conflicts of interest is reflected in documented instances where attempts by sessionals to speak out about their lot have been discouraged by their salariat colleagues (Rothengatter and Hil 2013). In this respect, there are indeed cleavages between those academics who are on the periphery, and those who can mobilise their own organisational power to stifle challenges from below. Hence, while Wright is correct to critique the specificity of Standing’s formulation as a class-based concept, this does not necessarily detract from its usefulness for considering how some groups are more prone to the conditions and consequences of precarity than others. Apparently aware of this leeway18, Wright (2016, 3) acknowledges that Standing’s concerns

18 To this Standing (2016, 191) responds that “Contrary to Wright’s snide assertion that I am not interested in a ‘rigorous general class map of contemporary capitalism’, the book to which he refers states this is done elsewhere” (also see: Standing 2011, 91).
differ from that of the typical class theorist, by noting that his lack of precision would only be a problem if:

…Standing were attempting to generate a general class map of contemporary capitalism, but he is not. His goal is to defend the concept of the precariat and provide a fine-grained account of the characteristics which distinguish it from the working class.

Speaking more generally, we have seen that the precariat, as a loose class-sub category, includes people with little in common beyond experiences of precarity rooted in shared objective circumstances pertaining to security and opportunity. This inclusivity is a problem for Frase (2013, 11), who argues that: “the precariat is problematic as a class category, because it attempts to draw together too many different heterogeneous strata of the population”. It is true that the uneducated members of the atavists and the migrants of the nostalgics are less likely to have access to, or knowledge of, the resources available to those who have been educated in the country in question, making them more susceptible to prolonged precarity and its consequences. These differences in situations and life-chances can in turn lead to the aforementioned “social cleavages” within groups that could otherwise be referred to collectively as the precariat, especially if one considers the blame that members of the different factions of the precariat can attribute to others in terms of national or ethnic background and competition for resources.

This critique of over-reaching inclusivity is taken up by McKenzie, who dismisses Standing’s inclusion of the progressive faction during an exchange that took place on the sociology podcast, *Thinking Allowed* (BBC 2015). Reversing Wright’s concern with material interests over socioeconomic situations, McKenzie focusses on the opportunities that are afforded to the “educated middle” by their credentials and networks. She argues that the time that progressives spend among the precariat tends to be concentrated in the period between university and employment, and is typically softened by their resources. This is a fair commentary, for many out-of-work graduates can return to their family home and access government support (at least in
Australia) in the interim, while their networks gained during university can include potential employers that are more likely to hire degree holders.

McKenzie’s emphasis on time and resources is well placed, for a brief spell of precariousness is different to being caught in seemingly inescapable cycles of contingent casual employment. However, far from being a “race to the bottom”, whereby only the especially-hard-done-by are to be counted among the precariat, McKenzie points us to a matter that is central to class: intergenerational social mobility. It is well known that class branches out from the family tree from which, as they say, the apple rarely strays. The economic and social-cultural conditions that a person is born into and raised within can significantly shape life chances (Leigh 2007). This is why it is more exceptional to say that the person who found exceptional success in life came from a working class background, and why it less exceptional to say that children raised by a single low-paid wage-working parent are more likely to live out similar situations. It is also why it is peculiar to see someone who is born in great wealth end up in poverty, but typical for them to attend prestigious universities and gain high-paying and high-status jobs. If we accept that class is largely decided by economic, social and cultural capital, then it seems odd to claim that a university graduate from a wealthy family is working class because they temporarily depend on contingent jobs.

The question raised here is whether spending time with precarity is enough to be counted as the precariat. For McKenzie, this depends on the privileges and challenges that shape the duration and severity of such precarity, along with the likelihood of these situations and consequences being reproduced. Standing’s response is to shift the focus from the exclusive question: “who are the precariat” – for instance, are they the young and educated locals, or are they the old and uneducated atavists or nostalgics – to the more inclusive and foreboding question: “who enters the precariat?” Standing (2011, 59) implicitly answers the first question through the answer he provides for the second: “everybody, actually”. To be sure, it has always been more exceptional for the privileged person to descend to a lower class than for the
uneducated person to rise to a higher social-economic position. Standing’s point, however, is that systematic precariatisation has put virtually everyone at risk of entering the situations that he is describing. Hence, rather than being an attempt to precisely identify a class-in-itself, for Standing, the precariat proposition can be viewed as an attempt to draw on class-based notions in an analysis of the homogenising and heterogeneous effects of neoliberalism. In other words, McKenzie’s critique is valid only so far that the focus is on the life-chances of individuals, rather than on the structurally determined work and employment situations that, along with (though not necessarily) shaping individual life-chances, also shape the experiences of uncertainty and frustration that accompany such situations.

In respect to this focus on systems and structures, and as a departure to the emphasis that McKenzie places on individuals and familial backgrounds, inclusion in the precariat can be viewed in terms of organisational positions. Whether the sessional in question comes from a poor or wealthy background, it can be useful to treat the position itself as the unit of analysis, for it is on this that the conditions, identity and processes of the academic precariat rest. The individual sessional may occupy a precarious position, but not have the financial concerns of their peers due to their personal circumstances beyond work, which in turn has little to do with how they identify with the broader lot of the academic precariat or view the treatment of this lot by other groups in the university. Thus, although McKenzie raises valid points on the broader societal and biographical application of class-categories, these do not necessarily detract from the neo-Weberian application that Standing’s formulation facilitates.

**Conclusion**

Based on the conditions set out by Standing, the precariat can be viewed in a Weberian sense as a class in itself, or – potentially, if one wanted to focus on broader Marxian formulations of the proletariat – as a sub-class in itself. The next question is whether the precariat could be a class (or sub-class) for itself,
with the answer being: Yes, potentially. For instance, contingent workers could demand that their government representatives, employers or their unions focus more on the grievances of the precariat, even if it means potentially taking attention and resources from the more secure workforces. However, this is not an easy thing, due to the fragmentation, vulnerability, contingency and dependency of the precariat, both structurally and ideologically. This is explored in the later discussions regarding the relationships between sessional academics, secure academics, and the influence of neoliberalism. Suffice to say the interests of the precariat and the salariat are not always aligned, and that changes that benefit one may be resisted by the other.

The next chapter employs Standing’s (2014b, 2) treatment of the precariat as an ideal type. Ideal types are not intended to capture every characteristic or to account for every case. Rather, they work to accentuate certain features and draw attention to particular parts of social reality: the impersonal rationality of bureaucracy, the ostensibly consensual disposability of casuals, and so on. To be sure, the “real-world” iterations of the precariat will vary according to the geographical, historical, economic and sociocultural contexts at hand. However, much like rejecting a caricature for not having the life-like qualities of a portrait, using empirical complexity to reject ideal types misses the point. There are indeed issues with the stringent empirical application of such ideas, and the more one attempts to hold the notion of the precariat as an emerging class for itself to the Marxian conditions of traditional class-theory, the more theoretically contentious and historically troubled the notion will become. With this in mind, it is well that Standing (2014b, 1) reminds us that: “Ways of looking at the world are rarely wholly right or wrong; they are more or less useful, depending on the images they convey and the questions they prompt”. It is to these images and questions that we now turn.
Formulating the academic precariat

Drawing on Standing’s (2011) class hierarchy, Figure 4 broadly portrays the typical workforce of the Australian university system. Internally employed staff are in the shaded segments on the left, while external or staff that are “outsourced” from private organisations are located in the unshaded area on the right.
The terms “bottom”, “middle” and “top” are intended to give a general idea of groups whose situations, interests and corresponding ability to identify with one another are tied to their respective position within the organisation. These locations are broadly connected to notions of mobility: those at the bottom find it difficult to join their effective “bosses” in the middle and unrealistic to seek roles at the top; tenured staff can move between various roles in the middle, and might realistically aspire to roles alongside their “bosses” in the top and worry about being stuck in their current position or descending to the bottom; while those at the top might move between various high-status positions and have few or no interactions with those toward the bottom. These positions are also tied to centrality, visibility and acknowledgement. For instance, unlike the peripheral staff on the bottom, staff in the centre are recognised via named offices, profiles on departmental directories, invitations to department meetings and team-building events, and by being addressed as “colleagues” by others in the centre. While not intended as essentialist or exhaustive, this chapter shows that such factors are distinctive enough to justify delineating groups within the university system, in so far that they relate to situations, chances and experiences.

Before moving on, it is worth noting that the focus that is here placed on the “internal” groups of academe and management is not intended to deny the importance of those providing services such as cleaning, catering, transport, security, groundskeeping, information technology, and library support work, to name just a few. These services were among the first to be outsourced to private providers, and this is reflected in their apparent decline in Australian university staff statistics from 1989 to 2007 (Dobson 2010, 33). As Berry (2003, 61) observes, these precarious and peripheral workers have enough in common with contingently employed academics (and many of their students) to present possibilities for shared consciousness and organisation. While these possibilities are considered in the conclusion, this project is primarily about academics and those who “manage” universities.
In the Australian university sector, the elite are the Chancellery, such as the Vice-Chancellor (equivalent to the university “president” in the U.S.), the high-ranking senate members, administrators and managers such as Provosts, Deputy and Pro Vice-Chancellors, and, to a lesser extent, the positions held by the School Deans. These people often have established successful careers as academics, although one need not have an academic background to be in the elite – especially for symbolic positions, such as with Chancellors, and industrial and corporate positions, such as with high ranking finance officers. Indeed, consultations with the organisational elite give good reason to expect that the elite will increasingly be composed of executives from external sectors (PwC 2016). Their main role is to “lead the team” and manage the sustainability and growth of the university through strategies for attracting and retaining funding and reducing expenditure. As such, they are expected to operate as stewards of university values and advocates of high quality teaching and research, but more than anything, as capable business leaders who can make shrewd financial decisions and be “forward thinking” in terms of organisational structures (Table 3):

**Table 3: Situations at the organisational top**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Employment Situation</th>
<th>Work Situation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Continuing, fixed-term positions /fixed-term contracts</td>
<td>Greatest status and influence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High to extremely high salaries</td>
<td>Exclusive circles and lavish events</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benefits, bonuses and raises</td>
<td>Control of resources and pay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Often part of many organisations</td>
<td>Often “above” budget cut considerations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Resign” rather than get fired. Often secure similar positions elsewhere</td>
<td>Greatest control over university’s structure, agenda and representation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The elite’s goal is to make their university as competitive, prestigious and profitable as possible. While they no doubt recognise that a balance between
casualisation and permanency is ideal, they also recognise that casualisation is ostensibly good for flexibility and efficiency. This is coupled with the pressure for the organisational elite to prove themselves excellent managers within a short period of time, with, for instance, Vice Chancellors being comparable to parties holding government in that they are typically employed on four to six-year terms. This lends itself to a concern for impression management and career building, whereby they must be seen as successfully pursuing some massive reform, with the result being that universities tend to undergo massive (and usually ineffective) restructures on a periodic basis, often involving cost-cutting exercises that tend to target courses deemed unprofitable and long-term staff deemed unproductive. In this respect, those in high status positions often lack long-term relationships with their institution, though often leave a lasting impact on it.

Their situations are characterised by careers that have led them to have the highest pay, great employment options, and the most internal influence in the university system. Due to the relationship between their own reputation and that of their institution, they are among the select few in society for whom the “decision to resign” forever replaces the threat of being fired (although in practice, the two are not distinct). Those who do resign, even amid controversy, might have high-status positions such as professorships in other universities that they are on leave from and to which they can return. Even those who do not have such positions to fall back on can often land high-status positions at other universities, as they are usually skilled and well-connected individuals. Another alternative is simply to use the end of their term as an opportunity to seek a cosy retirement, as a good proportion of the elite, particularly the Vice Chancellors, tend to be in the twilight of their careers.

The salaries of university managers range from over a hundred thousand dollars at the bottom of the elite to over a million dollars for the Vice-Chancellors, and some may receive regular raises and generous bonuses –
which are occasionally shown to be arbitrarily determined (Hare 2016). They have a great deal of influence over the situations of academics, for they control the levers for creating and dissolving schools and positions, cutting staff or funding, and shaping conditions of employment and advancement through the power they hold in enterprise agreements. Notably, the conditions of these highly coveted positions rarely figure into the cost-cutting efforts that are spearheaded by the elite, nor do they figure into the organisational discussions to do with such efforts. This adds an extra level of security to their situations, for they can tell a room full of people that positions will be cut unless a “viable alternative” is put forward, often safe in the assumption that their own exorbitant salaries, raises and bonuses are above consideration.

They also have a great deal of influence over how the narrative and operations of the university are framed and discussed. This is the case with external representations, insofar that they control the advertisements of the university and the statements made on its behalf, with their various messages of “the university is excellent at this and is committed to that” and “the university denies this or refuses to comment on that” being the standard issued script. In line with their concern over the reputation of the university, they have the power to discipline, suspend, blacklist (i.e. so that a person is not rehired by the institution) and fire those who risk damaging the brand of the university. This should be born in mind with the fact that the elite has control over the purse strings for legal representation, which means that they can spend university funds (often tax-payers’ money) on lawyers to intimidate employees (who must pay for their own legal fees). Hence, when it comes to potential conflicts between the elite and the academic workforce, the university structures tend to be firmly in favour of the administration (this is more the case in the wake of decreasing power wielded by unions).

Beneath the organisational elite, the salariat, corresponding to the academic faculty, enjoy the security (although becoming less so with time) of
continuing employment, benefits covering travel and leave, and respectable retirement packages and superannuation (Table 4).

### Table 4: Situations at the organisational middle

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Employment Situation</th>
<th>Work Situation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Continuing, fixed-term positions</td>
<td>Recognition as “real faculty”, named office spaces, “workplace citizenship”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average to high salaries</td>
<td>Access to travel and training expenses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clear channels for advancement and reallocation</td>
<td>Able to lead applications for grants, which helps career advancement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support and compensation for illness, leave and redundancy</td>
<td>Can operate as proxy-employers, sit on hiring and promotion committees</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The hierarchy of academic levels ostensibly reflects the organisational recognition of the academic’s worth, role and responsibilities. This is not always clear-cut, for instance, unless an academic in Australia has earned the title of “professor”, their level could conceivable be anywhere else in the hierarchy. Moreover, such denotations of status do not necessarily reflect security, for at any university one will likely find some professors on limited-term employment, who routinely face the possibility of their contract not being renewed. Likewise, such levels do not necessarily correlate to organisational influence, for a level-C academic can have as much of a voice within a School meeting as their level-B or level-D colleagues – with the “non-faculty” denizens of the academic precariat typically being the only staff to outright lack such a voice. Nevertheless, insofar that these academics have continuing or lengthy limited-term employment and access to formal avenues for advancement; and share similar situations and opportunities in terms of status and security; we can view them collectively as comprising the

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19 In Australia academics are employed on a five-point scale beginning with associate lecturers/research associates (Level A), lecturers/research fellows (Level B), senior lecturers/senior research fellows (Level C), associate professors (Level D) and professors (Level E).
“academic middle”. Let us now turn to the situations of the academic precariat.

**Employment, Advancement and the Dual Job-Market**

Precariatisation can be observed in what Kimber (2010) describes as a shrinking “tenured core” and growing “tenuous” – or precarious – “periphery” within the academic workforce. The periphery is inhabited by sessional academics, while the core is made up by the “real faculty” that occupy or are on a clear track toward continuing positions. Those on the periphery generally want entry into the core (May et al. 2013; Ryan et al. 2013). However, such a transition is not simply a matter of advancing through a linear meritocratic system, for the formal market of the core and the informal market of the periphery operate according to different rules and expectations, and present different trajectories for the academics involved, with success in one market not necessarily correlating to success in the other.

I treat the two markets as being analogous to *treadmills* and *ladders* respectively, as the informal market is characterised by horizontal and short cycles of work, while the formal market enables advancement up a hierarchy. While a person on a ladder can nestle securely on their rung while also having a fair sense of what is above them and below them in terms of working towards the next step, the ongoing cycles of a treadmill offer few opportunities for advancement. The significance of this bifurcation is illustrated in the “Andrews Report” (Andrews et al. 2016, 4) on contingent academic employment in Australia, which notes that different norms and opportunities apply to the different markets:

A competitive merit appointment process is generally required by university recruitment policies and procedures for continuing appointments and for fixed-term appointments of one year or more. Competitive processes are not the norm for fixed-term appointments of shorter duration and are invariably not used for casual appointments. Informal recruitment accounts for roughly 92% of all casual
appointments, with only 8% gaining their position via formal advertisement.

The dimensions of these markets are listed below (Table 5).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Formal Market</th>
<th>Informal Market</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Analogies</td>
<td>Careers, “core”, “ladders”</td>
<td>Jobs, “periphery”, “treadmills”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment category</td>
<td>Continuing and limited-term</td>
<td>Limited-term and casual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recruitment</td>
<td>University management and School</td>
<td>Proxy-employer, such as unit coordinator or project leader</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advertisement</td>
<td>Public calls for applicants, in and beyond institution, state, and county</td>
<td>Personal and professional networks; “the casual approach”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Process</td>
<td>Explicit criteria, written applications, interviews, reviews</td>
<td>Contingent, often ad hoc, discrete and unaccountable.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Character</td>
<td>Ostensibly meritocratic</td>
<td>Nepotistic, cyclical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Symbolic market</td>
<td>Mainly academic capital: credentials publications, awards, affiliations</td>
<td>Mainly social capital: “who you know”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Before continuing, it is worth noting that, while the market-metaphor is useful for describing such different conditions and situations, one must be careful not to reify the metaphor, or to take the supply-and-demand explanation of such conditions for granted. As Bousquet (2008) reminds us, such conditions are not merely the inevitable result of disinterested market and economic processes, but of internal and external attempts to influence structures (a point that will be explored further in Part 2). Moreover, it is also worth noting that these market-metaphors are intended as ideal types that offer a general sense of the structural and cultural conditions being addressed, rather than a fully detailed idiosyncratic account. This is especially so for the formal market, where, despite its superior transparency, the informal and often hidden factors of “who you know” can play a role in hearing of and attaining opportunities for employment and advancement.
The formal market involves opportunities for continuing-employment and for limited-term appointments that might lead to continuing appointments. This is the “proper channel” for transitioning from the periphery into the core, advancing through the organisational hierarchy, and developing a career. It is a large and highly competitive market, for universities can advertise positions both nationally and internationally. Positions are ostensibly filled according to the merits of the applicants, along with how well their skills and stated views align with the values and “mission” of the institution. This is assessed through lengthy application processes, which can involve explicit criteria, the provision of documentation and references, interviews and numerous reviews. Academic capital, such as formal credentials and specialised expertise, publications and citations, and potentially useful professional affiliations and personal references from academic referees, are very important to all of this. Beyond the explicit criteria of the application process, the social capital of who one knows, the cultural capital of familiarity with the dominant culture and the institutional culture, and traits that might be deemed useful for ethnic and gender balance in faculties, can also factor into the review process.

The informal market is the primary source of contingent academic jobs, such as with sessional teaching and limited-term contracts for research projects. In contrast to the formal market, it tends to operate under ad hoc and pressurised circumstances, with contracts being offered following unpaid non-teaching periods, when student numbers, workloads and pay rates are still uncertain. The casual-nepotism of “who you know” is central to this market, as contracts are typically offered or asked for in-person or over emails based on existing relationships and networks, rather than through transparent processes (Ryan et al. 2013). This systemic casual-nepotism is compacted by the lack of communication between proxy-employers regarding their proxy-employees. Alternatively, some proxy-employers save time through a “first come, first served” approach to distributing jobs (May et al. 2013). Either way, the result,
which is amenable to notions of academic freedom on behalf of the proxy-employer, is an agency-based culture of each to and for their own.

According to May (et al. 2013, 264-5), these informal processes have become the most common form of recruitment in Australian universities, with 90% of 3,160 casual academics surveyed having obtained their jobs through such “personal approaches.” Similar reports are made by Junor (2003, cited by Brown et al. 2006, 16), who, following a survey of 2,494 casual and fixed-term employed general and academic staff at five Australian universities, found that 80% of casually employed academics were employed “by word of mouth”, thereby “contradicting university equal opportunities policies”. This adds up to an informal market of countless and relatively regular exchanges, where academics-as-proxy-employers distribute jobs with little institutional oversight or accountability, while sessionals secure or miss out on work depending on their social capital. Hence, just as the processes of the formal market make it true to its name, the employment practices associated with “casual work” are, as Gunasekara (2007, 3) puts it, “literally just that: casual”.

Transitioning from one market to another involves a shift between employment systems, with the usefulness of social and academic capital between markets being contextually mediated accordingly. For instance, it is conceivable that an experienced academic could be overlooked in the informal market in favour of the potential employer’s favourite (though less skilled) student. In contrast, such favouritism will be less important in the formal market, where experience – as quantified in journal publications and research grants – takes on more importance (although we should not downplay the way favouritism operates in the formal market as well). In both instances, we see two somewhat distinct processes at play, whereby the conditions of one market allow it to reproduce the conditions that distinguish it from the other, via the processes and requirements that shape the application process, the mediation and evaluation of merit and resources, and the social norms and expectations that underlie these processes.
Significantly, May (et al. 2013) show how these two markets – and especially the informal market – are in turn segmented according to a variety of factors. For example, in both the formal and informal market, information technology faculties are more likely to recruit people who lack postgraduate degrees but have industry experience. Conversely, Arts faculties are more comfortable hiring people who have a postgraduate degree but lack prior experience with the actual discipline and material that they are to teach. This means that one can expect to be educated about information technology by someone who has never undertaken a Doctorate but has worked in industry for years, just as one can expect to be taught cultural studies by someone who went straight from high school into an undergraduate and then postgraduate degree in, say, history.

The treatment of academic capital varies too. For instance, a postgraduate or PhD recipient in the natural sciences is more likely to have far more co-authored publications than a postgraduate or PhD recipient in the Arts, who may have only published a single article or book (likely based on their thesis), or even developed a portfolio to demonstrate their skills and accomplishments in theatre or music. Hence, the standards associated with the formal and informal job-markets are themselves held to different standards, depending on the proxy-employer, unit or project, school and university. With this in mind – and without denying the usefulness of the general treadmills and ladders distinction – it can help to think of the two markets in terms of Kerr’s (1982) notion of the “multiversity”, whereby each university is comprised of structurally differentiated parts.

Even with these nuances in mind, however, it remains that a useful distinction can be made when dealing with the academic job-market in Australia. The conditions of this distinction are formality, oversight and relative meritocracy on the one hand, and more autonomous “casual approaches” on the other. Continuing and limited-term positions are secured through the formal market, with these positions bringing status and opportunities for career development. In contrast, most sessional jobs, particularly teaching roles, are secured
through the informal market, which is associated with proxy-employer
dependence, precarity and limited opportunities for career development.
Significantly, these markets represent distinct channels that rarely overlap,
even though the people who move through them often work with one another.

Such idiosyncratic conditions are open to both exceptions and exploitation.
For instance, a university might bypass the procedures of the formal market
to streamline a capable or well-connected sessional into a continuing position.
Alternatively, the university could insist on time-consuming formal processes
to deny or postpone a well-earned, though expensive, transition. For example,
Rothengatter and Hil (2013, 56) tell the story of an Australian academic
named “Julia” who had taught at the same university for over eleven years on
successive limited-term contracts, earned numerous awards for her teaching,
and demonstrated her dedication by working six trimesters without breaks.
However, when a continuing teaching-only position for a virtually identical
role arose, the university repeatedly denied Julia’s applications due to her
unimpressive research record – even though the teaching-only role in
question would not involve any research. Similar examples are provided by
Gottschalk and McEachern (2010, 46-8), with one sessional who had worked
at the same university for ten years stating:

I used to labour under the theory that if you say ‘yes’ to anything and
everything in the way of casual work, and had appropriate
qualifications and skills, eventually you would be rewarded. I feel naïve
and duped.

Far more so than accomplishments in the classroom, scholarly publications
are widely seen as evidence of expertise, engagement and productivity, which
can be aligned with the recruitment criteria of the formal market. Teaching-
only positions are therefore eclipsed by mixed and research-only positions in
terms of the calculable academic capital of the formal market. Those already
engaged in the formal market are generally aware of this. For instance, in a
nation-wide survey of Australian postdoctoral researchers, Åkerlind (2005,
29-30) found that, in contrast to the self-described “dupe” mentioned above,
respondents typically saw academics as “people in combined teaching and research positions,” and avoided positions that presented few publishing opportunities. Hence, the situations, opportunities and strategies of academics are influenced by the structural and cultural conditions of the bifurcated job-market, which in turn works to split the academic workforce in terms of security and status, and core and periphery.

(In)security

Standing (2011, 10) identifies the precariat by their lack of the following securities that the proletariat tended to have access to since World War 2:

“Labour market security – Adequate income-earning opportunities; at the macro-level, this is epitomised by a government commitment to ‘full employment’.

Employment security – Protection against arbitrary dismissal, regulations on hiring and firing, imposition of costs on employers for failing to adhere to rules and so on.

Job security – Ability and opportunity to retain a niche in employment, plus barriers to skill dilution, and opportunities for ‘upward’ mobility in terms of status and income.

Work security – Protection against accidents and illness at work, through, for example, safety and health regulations, limits on working time, unsociable hours, night work for women, as well as compensation for mishaps.

Skill reproduction security – Opportunity to gain skills, through apprenticeships, employment training and so on, as well as opportunities to make use of competencies.

Income security – Assurance of an adequate stable income, protected through, for example, minimum wage machinery, wage indexation, comprehensive social security, progressive taxation to reduce inequality and to supplement low incomes.

Representation security – Possessing a collective voice in the labour market, through, for example, independent trade unions, with a right to strike.”

These securities are material insofar that one either has or lacks secure employment, reliable income or transparent opportunities for advancement.
However, these securities are not always clear-cut and can fluctuate. For example, a person might formally have employment, job and work security insofar that they are protected from being arbitrarily fired, overlooked for promotion and entitled to compensation for mishaps. However, their relationship to the employer – or, for sessional academics, coordinators – might take the form of limited-term contracts. Hence, while they are entitled to such security throughout the contracted-period, these periods can be short-lived and their renewal unreliable. Moreover, the attempt to access such security may make them seem difficult to work with, and potentially jeopardise the coordinator’s willingness to recruit them again – which is to say that they are entitled to security when it comes to hiring and firing, but not when it comes to the re-hiring that they routinely depend on.

With respect to these complexities, which are rooted in the structure of the academic job-market as well as the structural stratification of the academic workforce, it is not enough to view the security of the academic precariat in terms of a have/lack binary. I account for this by considering whether sessionals have access to such security, as well as the conditions and consequences that influence their doing so, and how these conditions and consequences in turn compare and relate to other groups. With this in mind, one can relate the securities presented by Standing to the academic context in terms of: formally having security that can be accessed without reasonable concern for informal consequences, such as not being rehired; outright lacking such security, which Standing argues is generally the case for the precariat; or, the third option, whereby access to such security is inhibited in a manner that can be viewed as part of an issue of social structure. In this section I attempt to show how, while this third possibility is complicated, accounting for such substantive barriers can provide greater insights into the lot of the academic precariat.

Labour market security, as in adequate income-earning opportunities, is inhibited by the contingency of sessional jobs and the lack of oversight in the
informal job-market. As this point has already been made at length in the sections on the informal job-market and typical sessional experiences, I will not linger on it here. Suffice to say that, if we avoid assessing security according to a glass-half-full interpretation of contingency, and instead look at how such employment processes can actually play out in practice, then it is fair to say that the income-earning opportunities of sessional academics, seasonal as they tend to be, are also highly contingent, occasionally made with inadequate information for planning income (such as not knowing if a contract will even be offered until the last moment), and little oversight.

*Employment security*, as in protection from arbitrary dismissal, is often *inhibited* by the lack of oversight on hiring and, if not firing, then not-rehiring. This is worsened by the poor communication and record-keeping between coordinators, which can lead sessionals to miss out on work due to their own peripheral status in the workforce, often despite experience (Ryan et al. 2013, 168). Moreover, as proxy-employers can use a range of potentially contradictory criteria to guide their recruitment choices, there can be an opaque arbitrariness to the distribution of employment. For instance, a coordinator could refer to individual financial needs in order to justify the replacement of one sessional for another (as is often the case with PhD students), while simultaneously being able to ignore the financial needs of other sessional job-seekers ostensibly for the sake of fairness and merit, or because said job-seekers did not strategically declare their dire financial situation. Alternatively, the job may be given away on a first-come-first-served basis, due to the coordinator’s own lack of time and resources. Finally, as Australian universities seek more ways to protect their brands – such as by lowering the standard for firing staff from misconduct – employers terminate contracts on increasingly flimsy pretexts.

*Job security*, as in the ability to retain a niche in employment as well as the opportunity for advancement in terms of status and income, is *inhibited* by the bifurcation of the job-market and allocation of resources for sessionals.
Limited-term academic employment does not guarantee upward mobility, and instead tends to be cyclical, as in being reappointed on the same contract, or horizontal, as in comparable contracts for different units and institutions. While some aspiring academics consider such work to be a stepping stone toward a secure position and academic career, this is decreasingly the case (Chalmers and Waddoups 2007). Indeed, Brown (et al. 2010) aptly frame the limited opportunities afforded to Australian sessionals by such conditions in terms of a “paradox of casual permanency”. This is not to say that one cannot break out of such cycles by competing for secure positions, but this is discouraged by the impression that such positions exist within a separate labour market (May et al. 2013, 264), which typically focus on publications and impact, and so require more than a mere PhD and/or years of sessional teaching experience and awards. Thus, while the possibility to advance is available to all academics, these opportunities are inhibited by the structural conditions of the university sector as it pertains to sessional employment.

With regard to retaining a “niche”, let us suppose that this refers to what one offers in terms of talent and training, research and teaching area, and work and life experience. To “retain a niche” in academe is to draw on one or more of these qualities to carve out a space in which one can be put to use and acknowledged for one’s usefulness. It is here that the horizontal dimension of casual employment comes to the fore, for the need for work can lead one to teach in academic areas that one has no experience in, have had no opportunity to demonstrate any particular affinity for, and under structural conditions in which any such affinity can be quickly forgotten or arbitrarily overlooked. That said, there will be no small number of ideal instances in which the sessional will retain their niche, such as when someone with a long background in history lands the history unit, or when the teacher who has repeatedly demonstrated a talent for handling large first year units lands such a unit for this very reason. However, due to structural conditions of the university sector itself, such qualities might just as likely be rendered

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20 This includes fixed-term contract positions and postdoctorates.
inconsequential to their employment and irrelevant to their work, with the historian instead teaching advanced quantitative research methods, and the first-year teacher being forgotten. That said, it is worth noting that such conditions can also advantage job-seekers by not restricting them to areas in which there may be no work available – for instance, the sessional trained in history is glad to have found work at all. Hence, the horizon of job opportunities is expanded at the expense of the ability to retain a niche in the positions that one is most suited to – which in turn feeds back into the issue of advancement, for the formal market cares more for specialised experience in the area studied than it does for experience in the informal market.

Work security, as in protection through health and safety regulations, is available to sessionals. For example, a sessional will receive compensation in the unlikelihood of injuries suffered at work that are clearly the fault of the employer. However, the limits on working time is difficult to account for, due to both the normalisation of uncounted overwork, as well as by the fact that some sessionals are driven to work several contracts at a time. This is looked at more in the next section. Suffice to say here that, while the work time of sessionals is formally limited by the units of pay stipulated in their contract, such figures are widely considered inadequate in accounting for the actual work done. This is tied to what Gill (2014, 24) calls the “hidden injuries” of academic work, whereby increasing numbers of people “feel themselves to be ‘on the edge’ physically and especially emotionally, suffering from extreme and chronic stress, and in a semi-permanent state of being close to collapse.” These hidden injuries have no “proper channels” of expression and can betray a lack of enthusiasm or an efficient work ethic. This is compacted by the lack of support in times of illness, for what good is a sessional employed on a coveted fourteen-week contract who can only work for ten or so weeks? For instance, in considering how aspiring academics handle stress, Archer (2008, 276) describes one interviewee’s “feeling that to complain (‘to bang on about it’) would be illegitimate because ‘it feels like a choice’”, and later reflects on how neoliberalism “infiltrated their bodies and minds and made it difficult for them to speak about what was happening to them and the
injustices and losses they experience” (Archer 2008, 282). Simply put, the options available to sessionals in response to “burning out” are typically limited to unemployment, underemployment or carrying on undercompensated.

Skill reproduction security, as in opportunities to gain skills though training and clear opportunities to make use of these skills, is inhibited, depending on the circumstances of the sessional in question. The focus is primarily on demonstrable or documented skills, such as in using the latest teaching technologies, which can overlap, but should not be conflated, with the ability to engage with and contribute to academic research. On the one hand, universities often offer workshops to keep staff up to date with learning technologies, to develop professional skills to do with writing and networking and engage with academic discussions via collegial presentations. However, as these tend to only be offered occasionally, they may be missed entirely by sessionals that work across a variety of campuses, effectively making such access contingent on the availability and location of work and the employment status of the sessional at the time. Still, so long as they do have employment at the time that the workshops are offered, sessionals can often access this security, but this can be inhibited by the contingencies and inconsistencies of sessional employment. In contrast, permanent staff tend to have more opportunities for upskilling, with a range of free courses being available that are not available to sessionals. On the other hand, Brown (et al. 2006, 172) observes that, “unlike continuing or fixed-term staff, casual teaching staff are not paid to develop and maintain their knowledge-base, yet are expected to deploy it in the teaching process”. Skill reproduction is typically covered by separate roles, with sessionals often developing such skills as PhD candidates and the expensive workshops that candidature can entitle them to. Thus, if these ancillary roles are not part of the sessional’s job, and if resources for learning are not provided by the university (for not all universities feel compelled to do so), then skill reproduction may be lacking.
Income security, as in the assurance of an adequate stable income, is lacking, while the protection of wage-rates is inhibited, insofar that formal contracts ostensibly make pay transparent, thereby minimising disputes, yet fail to account for the unpaid labour that has become the norm for sessionals (Brown 2010; Bradley et al. 2008; Gil 2014; May et al. 2013). Ideally, the use of explicit payment criteria means that universities cannot easily pay sessionals less than their contract has guaranteed. However, these same criteria put the onus on individual sessionals to decipher what are often obfuscated calculations. For example, rather than stating payment per hour or for the employment period, the contracts received by sessionals at one Australian university stipulate “Ordinary Hours of Work” as: “Part time fraction: at 77.3% fraction (28.9875 [fluctuating] hours per week)”. To find out what this means for income, the sessional must locate the University’s electronic salary scale, find the code for their position, and calculate either the hourly or total pay using the fraction and hours stated on their contract. A particular kind of literacy is thus required to figure out what to expect in terms of income and how this might fluctuate across each payment package. For those who are new to such systems, and especially for those who are provided no support in such interpretations when presented with a contract or throughout the contracted period, this can result in what Standing (2014b, 970) describes as “chronic economic uncertainty (‘unknown unknowns’)”. This uncertainty, coupled with the hourly calculations of remuneration, put pressure on the sessional to work as efficiently as possible, and make it difficult (and, in respect to re-employment, unwise) to negotiate payment for any “extra work” done. More important than this, however, is the fact that sessionals literally lack income security, insofar that they routinely face uncertainty over (re-)employment and continued income.

Representation security, as in possessing a collective voice in the labour market, such as through union representation, is present, though inhibited. Academics of the core and the periphery generally share opportunities for
representation through the union and their academic associations. However, these two groups can have different interests and levels of influence when it comes to employment and work, and this can discourage collegiality and candour. For example, Rothengatter and Hil (2013, 55-6) observe how “to question institutional orthodoxies in relation to employment practices is, like much else in the university sector, to run the risk of being regarded as opposed to hegemonic corporate governance”. They illustrate their point by reflecting on a former sessional colleague who, after presenting data on sessional situations to his superiors, “was almost immediately cold-shouldered by his unit supervisor and the head of school. He was never reappointed and nothing was heard of him again”. While this sessional could have presented his data to university management, or to his union or whatever academic association he may have been a paying member of, the fact remains that, like many of the other sessionals around Australia, the consequence for “rocking the boat” is often marginalisation or even – come the next round of contracts – unemployment. Thus, while it is clear that sessionals are gaining more of a collective voice within the sector through the work of unions and other academic associations, their engagement with this security is inhibited by the fragmentation, marginalisation and precarity that currently characterises the employment situations and work situations of the sessional workforce.

All that said, it is worth noting that many sessionals start off knowing little about their jobs in terms of security and where to find useful information about such matters. While the onus for this lack of information must ultimately fall to the individuals concerned, there are also two structural issues that must be taken into account: 1. Due in part to the “learn as you go” attitude within universities, as well as the general marginality and isolation experienced by many sessionals, academics and managers often fail to inform sessionals about such things. 2. Sessionals working at more than one

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21 For example, The Australian Sociological Association regularly seeks to represent sessionals, and at the time of writing hosted a live discussion targeted at sessionals, titled #securework.
university deal with a variety of employment conditions and information systems, often without the help of peers experienced with such systems, and – due to the lack of being a staff number in the periods between employment – even without access to the university intranet that may provide such information. Thus, academic sessionals can be seen to lack, or at least face structural and cultural challenges in accessing the seven labour securities listed by Standing as defining the precariat. In other words, sessionals lack formal access to many of the securities that are enjoyed by more securely employed peers, as well as by Australian workers more generally. Even the security that they do have access to are only available on an unreliable, sessional basis – which is to say that the average sessional teacher might have access to them throughout a fourteen-week contract, and then be without them for the intervening months leading up to the next job. On top of this, such access is often inhibited by the structural conditions of the university system, vis-à-vis the informal market and employment categories, as well as by the norms and expectations that these are tied to.

Unpaid Work-for-Labour

Standing identifies regular unpaid work-for-labour as being central to the precariat. This is the additional work a person does to compete in the labour market. A basic example is job searching, which can involve numerous applications that may include all sorts of criteria, the tailoring of multiple resumes and cover letters, and planning for transportation to and from interviews. This can be a time-consuming process, especially for those who engage in searches for weeks or months on end, as well as for those who are driven to do so regularly due to short-term employment. While people have always had to work to find work, the focus here is on the regularity and costs of such unpaid work-for-labour. This can be especially frustrating for people seeking some control over their employment situation, especially if they want a job that enables them to engage with what they are doing and develop their skills and knowledge.
This is coupled with the unpaid work that goes into increasing employment competitiveness, whereby people are expected to spend more time and money pursuing higher levels of educational attainment, and gaining the new skills and work experience that may be required for the job but not for the work. Standing (2015, 7) believes that these pressures are on the rise, as it is increasingly the norm for people to require higher levels of educational qualification than is needed for the actual jobs being applied for. This can be seen in higher education, where, for example, academics seeking ongoing positions are expected to have increasingly lengthy publication lists (Hermanowicz 2016b; Pitt and Inger 2016), even for teaching-only roles (Rothengatter and Hil 2013, 56). These increasingly steep expectations are connected by Berry (2003, 63) to the “spectacle” of academic hiring and promotion committees rejecting applicants, when “the majority, or at least many on the committee, could not pass the bar themselves”.

This feeds into pressure to improve competitiveness in other ways, such as through costly training courses and projects that can help fill out applications. Without being paid to do so, the savvy sessional academic would be wise to:

1. Prepare papers to present at the “networking opportunities” of costly and often distant academic conferences (which occasionally clash with contracts);
2. Contribute to panels and university events; and, occasionally without access to the expensive journals that universities provide for their staff and students, produce articles that can take many months to write, have reviewed, and – should they be successful – revise. In this respect, a significant portion of the work that an aspiring academic might do is not viewed in terms of immediately rewarded instrumental labour, but rather in terms of an ideal future: unpaid work now, for a desirable position later (Osbaldiston et al. 2017). Sessionals often do this while holding or pursuing a postgraduate degree that can take years to complete, but which is now widely considered to be the minimum for most secure positions (Cryanoski et al. 2011; Tomlinson 2008), and which the proxy-employers of the informal market may simply overlook in favour of one of their own PhD students (May et al. 2013) – moreover, as Bousquet (2002) points out, PhD students are often
cheaper to employ than recipients, which may also help explain the preference for less qualified sessionals (while Bousquet was writing with the United States in mind, this can also apply to Australia, where many universities provide different levels of remuneration according to the attainment of postgraduate credentials).

Blackmore and Kandiko (2011, 405) demonstrate that the university system is home to a symbolic market of non-monetary motivations. This “academic capital” can come in the form of publications and the hierarchy of authorship on such publications, awards and less prestigious “citations”, the granting of money to be used for teaching or research, the allocation of an office space and the permission to have one’s name in the slot of the door of such spaces, and so on. These are all tied to status and are treated as capital insofar that they ostensibly make one more “competitive” within the university system, and thereby provide an incentive for academics to do far more than a mere contract might stipulate. These factors contribute to the ability of universities to, as a sessional teacher interviewed by Brown (et al. 2006, 175) succinctly put it, “get the best of us for bugger all”.

For example, one way for teachers to have their overwork acknowledged by the university is through the non-obligatory and unpaid process of competing for an award or citation. This process can involve being nominated by a student, colleague or self-nomination, and confirming that one would like to pursue the reward; attending a workshop on the application process; and reviewing previous successful applications in order to get a sense of what kind of statement, evidence and references the review panel might reward. The application will likely require a brief biography and personal statement on teaching philosophy and pedagogical approaches; anecdotes to illustrate initiatives leading to success, and failures resulting in the increased likelihood of future successes (though one must not mention whatever structural issues might lurk behind any of this); data and quotes from reviews supported by graphics; and a passport style colour photograph. While the whole process
can take many hours, if not days of work, unsuccessful applicants will receive advice from the reviewers to improve their application the next time. Thus, recognition for good (typically over-) work requires further unpaid work.²²

To sum up, the unpaid work that sessional academics do is threefold. First, it involves the routine stressful work of seeking out contracts through either the formal or (more likely) informal job-market. Second, it involves the under/unpaid extra work that sessionals often have to do in terms of preparation, correspondence and grading (particularly when it comes to unfamiliar courses and providing high quality student feedback). Third is the optional work required to improve one’s competitiveness in the formal job-market and for career advancement; from paying to attend expensive conferences, to the time-consuming and assignment-like applications for formal acknowledgement of excellent work (such as for teaching awards), to the hundreds of hours that can go toward publishing a single journal article.

Relative Deprivation and Occupational Identity

Standing (2014, 30) treats relative deprivation as being particularly relevant to those who are “plunged into a precariat existence after being promised the opposite” and become frustrated by the sense that they are “not doing what they set out to do”. For Feldman and Turnley (2001, 285), this is particularly relevant to sessional academics – who have typically been high achievers in an education system that is broadly treated as being important for success:

[I]ndependent of the “objective” rewards they receive, contingent academics may find their positions lacking relative to what they feel entitled to after several years of graduate school, relative to the jobs their peers received, or relative to the jobs many of their current colleagues possess. This relative deprivation approach provides a useful framework for illuminating how demographic status, standards of comparison used to access job quality, and motivations for entry…

²² That said, research indicates that teaching awards hold little value in the formal academic job-market anyway (Brown et al. 2008; NTEU 2016a; Rothengatter and Hil 2013).
influence the amount of resentment and frustration experienced by academics in temporary employment.

While these themes will be explored in greater depth in the next chapter, one can get a sense of them by imagining a sessional teacher in their thirties. Due to their desire for an academic career, the encouragement they received from older academics, and the unwillingness to account for changes to the sector, they spend four (or more) years on a PhD. Now, five years holding a doctorate, they are far from where they thought they would be, being stuck in cycles of low-paying jobs, their résumé limited to university teaching, and their academic vitae being less competitive each year. The time they can set aside to prepare publications is limited, and the distant conferences that cost non-students hundreds of dollars to attend, let alone travel to, are well beyond their budget. Due to their level-10 qualification, they cannot receive government support to reskill. And so, instead of “settling down” in a home of their own as they gradually develop their career in their own discipline, they depend on cycles of contingent contracts, often in unrelated courses, are steeped in financial stress, and rent with other adults in similar situations. To be sure, with respect to education and the opportunities it is associated with, such an individual might be more privileged than someone who has never had a university education. However, this would not decrease their worries and frustration. Indeed, their level of education and academic ties may well be salt in their wounds.

For Standing, the precariat is also defined by a lack of occupational identity, as in the ability for an individual to locate their work within a professional narrative that can be positively associated with their identity and aspirations. Members of the salariat can identify as lawyers, police, bankers, and teachers, and in so doing identify with their sector, profession and career. They have been trained and educated to do their job, and so can connect it to past goals, and the challenges and eventual accomplishments they involve. In other words, while some jobs are just a way to socialise and make money, some
occupations can be viewed in terms of a “bigger picture” or “journey”, with people becoming alienated from their occupation when this is absent. In contrast, a primary preoccupation for sessional academics is finding work, while the jobs that they find may have no relation to their discipline, field or previous jobs, and thus to their interests, expertise or experience.

For many among the precariat, this lack of occupational identity is twofold. On the one hand, it is tied to the insecurity of contingent employment situations, whereby regular unemployment and job-changes can undermine any lasting sense of a coherent occupational identity, collegial community or the development of expertise in a specific area of teaching or research. On the other hand, it is tied to work situations, via the marginality of occupying a peripheral position and the sense of frustration that this brings. Hence, for Standing (2011, 12), even in periods of employment, members of the precariat are likely to be: “in career-less jobs, without traditions of social memory, a feeling they belong to an occupational community steeped in stable practices, codes of ethics and norms of behaviour, reciprocity and fraternity”. It is for this reason that Standing (2011, 14) likens the precariat to occupational denizens, as in “someone who, for one reason or another, has a more limited range of rights than citizens do”:

The concept could also be extended to corporate life, with corporate citizens and denizens of various types. The salariat can be seen as citizens with at least implicit voting rights in the firm, covering a range of decisions and practices that the other group of citizens, the shareholders and owners, implicitly accept while having their own explicit voting rights on the strategic decisions in the firm. The rest of those connected to corporations – the temps, casuals, dependent contractors and so on – are denizens, with few entitlements or rights.

This lack of occupational identity does not go for all members of the precariat, and there are plenty of examples of people persisting in the cultural industries and academe precisely because of their perceived vocational dimension (Bain and McLean 2013; Gill 2010; Miller 2010). To use Standing’s own words,
universities are steeped in “traditions of social memory”, and one need look no further than an organisation dedicated to an academic discipline to find an occupational community that is steeped in “stable practices, codes of ethics, and norms of reciprocity and fraternity”. Moreover, occupational identity is not confined to one’s occupational status at any given time: an unemployed academic can still attend university seminars or events as alumni, engage with scholarly discussions and attend conferences (that is, of course, if they have the time and money to do so).

Even so, one can have a sense of occupational identity while still being akin to an organisational denizen in terms of status, situations and opportunities. For instance, drawing on in-depth interviews with fifty-five casually employed academics, Pocock (et al. 2005) note how some sessionals described their experiences of marginalisation and exclusion in terms of a perceived lack of “workplace citizenship”, which would presumably be reflected in the ability to be included and have a say in the decisions that affect the workplace. Drawing on this concept in tandem with their own Australian research, Brown (et al. 2006, 19) report that “such ‘workplace citizenship’ is only available to fifteen percent of academic casuals”, with the majority being akin to denizens. Thus, the typical sessional academic does not necessarily experience the lack of occupational identity that Standing associates with the broader precariat. However, be it in terms of their field or teaching, they tend to face a lack of recognition as academics within their organisations, limited opportunities for advancement, instability and the pressure to repeatedly prepare for new, potentially unrelated, jobs. This all contributes to what Standing (2014c, 969) calls the “precariatized mind”, as in “the sense of time in disarray, having no control over time”, and it is this that undermines the sessional academic’s ability to develop a sense of occupational identity in the manner that is available to the salariat.
Conclusion

For Standing, the precariat is defined by insecurity, limited opportunities, unpaid work-for-labour, the lack of a stable occupational identity, and the sense of frustration and relative deprivation that accompanies such situations. This chapter addressed how many of these modal characteristics are present among sessional academics, to the extent that they can be formulated as the academic precariat. Although such an educated group seems an odd fit among the more general precariat formulated by Standing, their situations show the pervasiveness of the trends behind the burgeoning of the precariat. This formulation is based on the precariat as a useful ideal type, which in the chapters to come provides a basis for addressing the university system and academic workforce as a site of precariatisation. Before moving on to Part 2, the university system, the final chapter of Part 1 addresses these questions of precarity and occupational identity through an analysis of online “confessions” regarding the decision to quit academe. In so doing, the goal is to give a sense of why the “groaners” of the academic precariat persist within the university system despite such undesirable situations, and the experiences that those who eventually do leave attribute to this decision. This will also provide insight into some of the ideals and expectations that are broadly shared by academics around the world, and the tensions that exist between these notions and the realities of contemporary universities.
Chapter 6

Leaving academe: a Quit-lit review

For every person who has transitioned into the world of #alt-ac and #post-ac, there's an "I Quit" story to be told. And it seems like more and more people are willing to tell their stories, to throw up their hands and say, openly, that they're through. It's partially a vent, a cry to a world that still believes that professors have it oh-so-easy, that we've all got cushy tenured jobs with summers off and tweed jackets. And it's partially a service: a moment to let others – people like me, people like some of you – see themselves reflected in the words of others, a chance to impart some hard-won wisdom to those who are thinking of academia with stars still in their eyes. … I wish someone had told me their story before I started. … So then. I quit. And here's my story.

– My “I Quit” Letter (Dagleish 2013)

In late 2013 a string of articles posted by otherwise unrelated academics in the U.S. went viral. Although the authors were from different disciplines and at different stages of their respective careers, these essays on quitting academe were quickly sewn together in the media as a singular literary phenomenon. An Al Jazeera reporter tweeted a call for a “Norton Anthology of academics declaring they quit,” while Slate published Schuman’s, ‘I Quit Academia,’ an Important, Growing Subgenre of American Essays. A name for this new genre was coined before the month was through: Quit-lit.24 In a matter of months, Quit-lit spread beyond the U.S., with so-called “quit-pieces” featured on Australian news sites, such as New Matilda and The Age, and in the different national iterations of The Economist and The Guardian. The main show, however, was on the personal blogs and networking sites of social media, where “#Quitlit” quickly became the genre’s primary identifier and means of proliferation.

As the scope of the genre continued to expand, “#Quitlit” was also used to tag pieces on reasons for entering, remaining in, or avoiding academe. Taking

24 Because many Quit-pieces are authored anonymously and not formally peer-reviewed, they will be cited using footnotes to distinguish them from the in-text scholarly-citations.
stock of all this, the academic career hub for *The Chronicle of Higher Education, ChronicleVitae*, posed the question “why have people taken to publicly quitting academe?” and set about cataloguing quit-pieces for the first (albeit, informal) study on the genre. Vitae’s answer to this question was fourfold: these academics want (and, thanks to developments in communication technologies, are now more able) to: 1. reach beyond their own milieus and explain the factors that influenced their decision to quit; 2. speak out about the conditions that shape or silence such decisions and conversations; 3. strike a chord with fellow academics, or provide advice or warning to aspiring academics; and 4. make a parting, typically reflexive and emotional, and cautionary or cathartic statement.

To be sure, the publicising of the decision to quit is not unique to academe. As Garber (2015) points out, Quit-lit:

…in its contemporary form, isn’t specific to academia. Quitting itself has in some ways become a decidedly active thing, and the subject of contemplation across the culture. People quit Twitter, and write about it. They quit watching TV, and write about it.

Yet, there are factors that play into quitting academe that do not compare to quitting gluten, or the internet, or even employment in other sectors. While quit-lit writers are not a uniform group, they are connected by the university system, and demonstrably have similar aspirations, situations and concerns. I therefore propose that Quit-lit can be viewed in a similar fashion to the conversations and emails studied by Gill (2009, 4), in that they convey the “hidden injuries” of contemporary higher education that are “often kept secret or silenced” and “don't have 'proper channels' of communication”. As such, such material offers insights and, as Dagleish puts it, “hard-won wisdom” pertaining to academe that are rarely aired on formal academic channels.

For this reason, I frame Quit-lit as a *socially situated genre*: which is to say that I have considered not only the prevailing themes within the material, but their contexts, reception, and correspondence to the scholarly literature. According to Hyland (2000, 4-5), the socially situated genre is a means of “representing information in ways that reflect the social contexts of their construction and the beliefs of their users”, thereby “providing insights into the norms, epistemologies, values and ideologies of particular fields of knowledge”. It can “point beyond words to the social circumstances of their construction” and “offer a window on the practices and beliefs of the communities for whom they have meaning”.

This is relevant to the current project, insofar that Quit-lit authors address “structural issues” (Mills 1970, 4), by dealing with the relationship between cherished values and aspirations, and contradictory institutional conditions. They are also insightful, insofar that they describe personal troubles, with the main themes concerned with frustration over a lack of security, recognition and career progression, and the impact that ongoing precarity has on the ability to develop a stable occupational identity and “settle in”. The decision to quit academe is reliably framed as being among the hardest choices that they have ever had to consider, discuss and follow through on. Indeed, showing how invested people can be in the idea of securing a rewarding academic career, these relationships to the university system are often described in terms of identity and love, while quitting is often described in relation to shame and resentment, and death and renewal. On this front, Quit-lit reveals why it is that people who are dissatisfied with the university system and their situation within it find it so difficult to leave.

Responses to individual quit-pieces, as well as to the genre itself, also offer insight into influential attitudes and expectations in the university system. For instance, I have personally heard Quit-lit described by some academics as a
“guilty pleasure”, while others dismiss it as being “too depressing to read”. This is reflected in the online responses to the articles themselves, where the Quit-lit authors are viewed as being either “brave” or “bitter”. This extends to its coverage in news media and limited acknowledgement in scholarly publications, where Quit-lit authors are praised for their candour by some academics and rejected as unprofessional “Jeremiads” by others. Such responses reflect the expectations that academics must make continual sacrifices for academe, that stories deemed unscholarly or unprofessional can be ignored, and that the system ultimately rewards the truly dedicated. In each of these respects, Quit-lit offers structural and cultural insights into contemporary academe that transcend national and institutional borders.

This chapter analyses these themes and insights in their own respect, as well as in respect to the relevant scholarly literature. The intention is to further illustrate and explore the sense of relative deprivation and concerns over occupational identity that can accompany academe and academic precarity, as well as to help connect these discussions of the academic precariat to the upcoming discussion of the university system and academic role in Part 2. To give a general idea of the position of the authors and tone of their pieces, I begin by offering a snapshot of the reviewed Quit-lit and related material. To orientate the discussion, I then briefly provide a case for why Quit-lit is worth including in discussions on the contemporary university system, despite it not being part of the formally peer-reviewed scholarly literature. This is followed by an analysis of material that has proved to be particularly representative of the relevant themes and influential in terms of responses. In so doing, an emphasis is placed on how the material relates to the stated interest in precarity, occupational identity, relative deprivation and the decision to quit.

**Breaking the Silence**

Quit-lit first took off in the U.S., as is apparent in the many references to “tenure” and professors (terms that are far more prevalent in the U.S. and
Canada than in Australia and the U.K.). Along with these varying national contexts, the personal troubles and structural issues addressed in the material reflect organisational contexts ranging from Oxbridge and the Ivy League to countless less-known urban community colleges and universities. Moreover, many pieces are authored anonymously and do not provide ways to ascertain their national or institutional contexts. One possible explanation for the choice to remain anonymous lies in the fact that universities are under increasing pressure to maintain and promote their institutional brands, not just through the presentation of their own successes via advertisings, but also via the management and avoidance of perceived threats to their brand. As such, academics are often employed on the condition that they do not besmirch their institution, be it through their research, teaching, or activities in the public sphere, which includes writing in the social and news media (which in turn implies that the authors either want to avoid legal trouble or want to remain open to the possibility of one day being re-employed by universities).

It is therefore unsurprising that many of the quit-piece authors expressed frustration over the willingness of universities to compromise intellectual freedom and personal expression in order to defend their brands, as well as over the reservations that they previously held over expressing themselves. An example is provided by a Professor of Clinical Medical Humanities and Bioethics from the U.S. who, in response to her Dean’s move to censor a colleague’s article that she had edited, publicly released her letter of resignation and set up a web page to explain her decision. The Professor expressed doubts over her University’s commitment to academic freedom, and attributes her previous silence to concerns for her colleagues:

… I now find myself in the painful position of having to choose between the work I do—which has been and presumably always will be high-risk and controversial—and loyalty to my colleagues, who are reasonably afraid that my work might further irritate the dean in the future, with unpredictable consequences for them and for our program. I cannot continue to work in such circumstances and in such an institution. Vague statements of commitment to the principle of
academic freedom mean little when the institution’s apparent understanding of academic freedom in concrete circumstances means so little. Hence, my resignation.

Her experience may relate more to research academics, and perhaps reflects the community-inclusion and awareness that the sessional teachers on the organisational “periphery” are often excluded from (Kimber 2010). However, her statement also illustrates how the situations of academics and their ability to express concerns are shaped by the dangers of speaking out. While this danger is especially pronounced for sessional academics – who, lacking the security, visibility and support of their more secure colleagues, can simply disappear from the organisation (Rothengatter and Hil 2013) – it also shows how the issue of prioritising university brands and partnerships over academic freedom is a systemic matter.

Another prevalent concern, which likewise speaks to the tendencies of the neoliberal university, was with the tendency within the university system to gloss over the structural issues that shape employment and work situations, while framing their consequences (e.g. precarity, limited opportunities, and, for some, eventually quitting academe) in terms of individual integrity and resilience (i.e. that the suitably strategic and “real” academics will succeed). This ties into the emphasis that contemporary universities place on the self-entrepreneurship at the potential expense of candour – an emphasis that is intimately related to the neoliberal university and “academic capitalism” (see Davies and Petersen 2005; Slaughter and Rhoades 20014; Ward 2012). The following author decided to quit their PhD “just a few months shy of completion” partly because (at least they claimed) of this perceived overemphasis on business, and chose to publicise their resignation letter so that it could be viewed by other researchers at their institution as well as by the school’s management:

…you learn that being ‘too honest’ about your work is a bad thing and that stating your research’s shortcomings ‘too openly’ is a big faux pas. Instead, you are taught to ‘sell’ your work, to worry about your ‘image’, and to be strategic in your vocabulary and where you use it.28

The alleviation of such limitations provides a space for confessions that are rarely voiced on campus, and in terms that are far from scholarly disinterest. Even if such “confessions” might mask other motives for quitting, they nevertheless speak to a discourse where the stated reasons have legitimacy as part of a growing neoliberal critique. For instance, every week, The Guardian’s Australian higher education web-series, Academics Anonymous, features such provocative titles as: “I've lost out on 100 academic jobs. Is it time to give up?”; “I've been dumped by the job I love”; “I’m a lecturer, and I don’t feel I can speak freely any more”; and “The pressure of academia drove me to heroin” (to name just a few). As indicated in the introduction of this chapter, similar material is provided by news sites in the U.S. and the U.K., and while the examples provided above are intended to show the more provocative examples of such material, they all help show academics who might otherwise feel isolated and silenced on such matters that they are not alone in their experiences.

It is in illuminating these commonalities that Quit-lit shines; allowing the quitting academic in the U.S. to corroborate experiences and advice with sessionals in the U.K. and Australia. For instance, while it is well-known that the challenges faced by sessional academics extends to their status and inclusion among faculty (Brown et al. 2008; Gill 2014; Pocock et al. 2005), Quit-lit reveals how this can be a source of shame that can make people unwilling to discuss their situations with others. Likewise, while there is

much to say about the individualising ethic of neoliberalism (Archer 2008; Davies and Petersen 2005), Quit-lit grounds these rather abstract notions in daily life by laying bare what Gill (2010) calls the “hidden injuries of the neoliberal university”, such as depression and exhaustion from overwork, self-loathing for the lack of progress, and the fear of appearing undedicated. Although such experiences are evidently addressed in the peer-reviewed literature, Quit-lit airs them in ways that often goes unheard on campuses and unpublished in academic journals, thereby making it more like a forum for speaking out and sharing than a lectern for lecturing or consulting.

That said, it is understandable that such material is kept at arm’s length by academics and from students. Forsyth (2015, 5) notes how Quit-lit writers and other higher education critics (e.g. Hill 2012) have been dismissed as “Jeremiads” who are known mainly for their woeful lamentations. Grafton (2011, 2) notes the Jeremiad tendency to shirk rigorous research in favour of “stories clipped from popular media” and “individual experiences, often egregious ones, as if they marked a general rule”. Some Quit-lit authors explicitly discourage people from pursuing a PhD due to the perceived unlikelihood of gaining a secure academic position afterwards – a troubling message, given the importance of morale to candidature (Hughes and Tight 2013), of recipients to the maintenance of the disciplines (Golde and Walker 2006), and the current tendency to view higher learning simply as a means of getting a job (see: Ball 2013; Collini 2012; Connell 2015). Even so, the benefit that much of the reviewed material attributed to Quit-lit was presaged by Pannapacker (2009) in his two-part essay (published under a pseudonym), *Graduate School in the Humanities: Just Don’t Go.* Pannapacker saw the spread of such un-academic candour as a tonic for an issue that, according to many in and beyond the Quit-lit oeuvre, has been causing unnecessary grief for aspiring academics for some time. He writes:

29 http://www.sauvonsluniversite.com/spip.php?article5129
30 http://chronicle.com/article/Graduate-School-in-the/44846
[The] lack of accurate information available to students about graduate school is not accidental; it's an essential component of the academic labor system. Even assistant professors, who should know what's going on, encourage their students to go to graduate school because it is professionally risky to do otherwise. One might be seen as "doing a grave disservice to the profession," as one writer said to me in a tone of bureaucratic menace. … But of the many letters I received last month, the majority included some version of "Why did no one tell me?" and "What am I going to do now?"

**Academe and Identity**

After four years of trying, I’ve finally gotten it through my thick head that I will not get a job—and if you go to graduate school, neither will you. You might think your circumstances will be different. So did I… Don’t misunderstand me. There is unquantifiable intellectual reward from the exploration of scholarly problems… But there is one sort of reward you will never get: monetary compensation from a stable, non-penurious position at a decent university… I should have known better, but I didn’t. Now that you know better, will you listen? Or will you think that somehow you can beat odds that would be ludicrous in any other context?

The words above are from Rebecca Schuman’s (2013a) forebodingly titled: *Thesis Hatement: Getting a literature Ph.D. will turn you into an emotional trainwreck, not a professor*. Published by Slate in 2013, the essay has since been shared just shy of 45,000 times on Facebook alone, and was often cited or linked to in the primary and secondary material (for instance, Dagleish, cites Schuman as a “favourite pundit on the post-academic problem”). This popularity, along with her commentary on the rise of Quit-lit back in 2013, has led Schuman to become something of a figurehead for the genre. She has since become a popular critic of postgraduate education and the U.S. university system more generally, having featured on panels alongside (and against) highly successful academics and university managers, such as for the elite non-profit debating organisation, *Intelligence Squared, U.S.*
Schuman’s writing has been accused of hyperbole concocted with the express intent to discourage. For instance, ostensibly using the worldwide availability of tenure-track positions within her own academic field as an example, Schuman compares the likelihood of landing such a position to the survival rate for small-cell lung cancer; she then asks her readers: “If you wouldn’t bet your life on such ludicrous odds, then why would you bet your livelihood?” So too has she been accused of presumptuousness, mainly due to her seemingly deeply held belief that academe influences not only the aspirations, but the otherwise good sense of clever people. This leads her to project her self-described experiences of being let-down by the university system onto her readership – hence her message in the above quote: “You might think your circumstances will be different. So did I”. However, having reviewed Schuman’s writing and interviews on Quit-lit, I suspect that her use of emotionally provocative language and hyperbole is not merely the consequence of a deep resentment toward the university system, but rather part of an attempt to, as Bourdieu (1987) might put it, “arouse the reader [in this case, aspiring academics] from their doxic slumber”.

For example, Schuman states that: “by the time a professor makes tenure, she has usually been so heavily socialized by the ‘Total Institution’ of the Academy that to leave it would be almost akin to death”. Consider Schuman’s description of academe as a Total Institution. While universities can certainly resemble cloistered communities at times, they are a far cry from the asylums described by Goffman (1961), or even the “austere institutions” described by Foucault (1991). Schuman, whose own research covers Kafka and Wittgenstein, is likely aware that such loaded language is unnecessary; indeed, she has called her writing “satirical” more than once. At the very least, that she attributes the perceived failure among academics to appreciate such irony to the “wrath of a discipline scorned” (which she in turn views as the “gesture of initiation into the I Quit Oeuvre”), suggests that an alarming break

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31http://www.slate.com/blogs/browbeat/2013/10/24/quitting_academic_jobs_professor_zack_hary_ernst_and_other_leaving_tenure.html
from academic conventions is precisely her intent. Hence, the value of Schuman’s work lies in its ability to attack those encompassing barriers between the university system and the outside world, which, while easy to overlook or exaggerate, can be hard for people outside of academe to understand – as she explains in no uncertain terms:

During graduate school, you will be broken down and reconfigured in the image of the academy. By the time you finish—if you even do—your academic self will be the culmination of your entire self, and thus you will believe, incomprehensibly, that not having a tenure-track job makes you worthless. You will believe this so strongly that when you do not land a job, it will destroy you, and nobody outside of academia will understand why. (Bright side: You will no longer have any friends outside academia.)

Schuman’s point is clear: just as academe offers a living, if not necessarily a viable livelihood, the significance that academe can have to a person’s identity and aspirations can make quitting seem like a kind of death. This played out in a common story across much of the primary material: the relationship of the author to the system has defined much of their adult life, first as a successful student, then as a highly motivated aspiring academic. This relationship is often retrospectively related to the tendency to overlook certain realities, such as with the burgeoning glut of the academic precariat. They have spent years in a system that tells them they must love it, love their work, and sacrifice time and security for their passion, discipline and career. These multifaceted ties to academic ideals, professional communities and career development instils in the person a deep sense of vocational identity, and they learn to think of present work and lifestyles in terms of the realisation of an ideal future academic livelihood (Osbaldeston et al. 2017). Then these ideals and aspirations are repeatedly challenged, often by years spent in precarious employment and rejections from continuing positions, or behaviour on the part of the institution that contradict strongly held values.

32http://www.slate.com/articles/life/culturebox/2013/04/there_are_no_academic_jobs_and_getting_a_ph_d_will_make_you_into_a_horrible.html
Finally, compacted by the frustration and sense of relative deprivation of being highly educated yet underpaid and underappreciated by the system, and perhaps motivated by financial needs or the desire for ongoing stability, they start to seriously consider quitting academe – an often heartbreaking decision that can in turn be put off for years or even indefinitely. In illustrating this high level of biographical and emotional investment, references to mourning and the anxiety of challenging a strong sense of occupational identity were common throughout the material:

My identity was so tied up with being an academic that contemplating not being one was something like contemplating my own death. It was terrifying and paralyzing and profoundly awful (Dagliesh 2013) 33.

I’ve lost a lot of my dreams by leaving chemistry. I’ve treated this loss much as I would mourn a death. I gathered my close friends for a wake of sorts and we shared food and tears and hope. I cried until I was sick of it (Hocutt 2014). 34

After six years on the job market, I found myself burned out. … The harder I worked, I thought naively, the more likely I was to get a job. Optimism is a hard habit to kick. … I mourn what my career could have been, and I struggle to redefine who I am now (Baker 2013). 35

I enjoyed my #altac position, but I’d be lying if I said that I didn't mourn a little when I thought I would not be able to teach graduate students or be valued primarily for my scholarship (Whitson 2012). 36

I’ve lost a huge part of my identity, and all of my book learning on identity construction can’t help me now. What hurts the most, in a way, is that my loss has been replicated a thousand times over, and will be replicated a thousand times more (Bartram 2018). 37

33 http://www.hookandeye.ca/2013/11/my-i-quit-letter.html
34 https://modelviewculture.com/pieces/i-didn-t-want-to-lean-out
36 http://chronicle.com/article/Altacthe-Tenure-Track/131935/
37 http://erinbartram.com/uncategorized/the-sublimated-grief-of-the-left-behind/)
To be sure, there is no shortage of work in the higher education literature on how attachment to the university system develops over the years, especially during the postgraduate years in which students begin to associate with scholarly communities and their values (Austin 2002; Bess 1978; Gardner 2008; Gerholm 1990; Golde and Walker 2006; Parry 2007; Raineri 2013). To this Quit-lit adds the insight that, for many aspiring academics, the decision to leave these communities and pursue a livelihood in a different sector that may not prioritise such values becomes deeply associated with failure, thus the decision to stay can seems like the easier social option. On this matter of aspirations and dependence, and with the humanities in particular in mind, Pannapacker (2009) (himself a professor) observes:

What almost no prospective graduate students can understand is the extent to which doctoral education in the humanities socializes idealistic, naïve, and psychologically vulnerable people into a profession with a very clear set of values. It teaches them that life outside of academe means failure, which explains the large numbers of graduates who labor for decades as adjuncts, just so they can stay on the periphery of academe.

Likewise, in reflecting on the sacrifices that she, like so many Quit-lit authors, had made in the pursuit of a secure academic position despite the fact that she “should have known better”, “Lord”38 reports that the “message I heard in graduate school, over and over, was that a true scholar sacrificed for her career”, and describes how she “bought into a culture that told me that leaving academe indicated that I was not a serious scholar or teacher and that I just did not love history enough”. She goes on:

Academe is, as a faculty friend once put it, incredibly infantilizing. It is one of the only places where faculty members feel no qualms in telling adults in their late 20s and early 30s how to approach the most important decisions of their lives. It is also a culture in which those who leave are often treated with disdain …

Recently a new Ph.D. told me that he had just turned down a "good" job as he recognized that taking the position would be a mistake in terms of his personal life. He struggled greatly with the decision and worried that his advisers and colleagues would view his choice as a lack of commitment to his scholarship. What does it say about the power of academic culture that this adult almost made a life-changing decision against his better judgment?

In response to this, Lord started up Beyond Academe, a website for people with PhDs (particularly in Lord’s own discipline of history) who are considering leaving higher education. Hence, in both the pessimistic writing of Schuman and the more encouraging work of people like Lord we see a similar theme: a challenge to a cultural system that treats itself as the be-all and end-all. In the next section I bring all these factors together by looking at a single quit-piece. While the example is not a typical one in terms of employment and work situations, the ideas that it deals with and the responses that it was met with help illustrate the more cultural and experiential themes of ideals and identity, frustration and regret, and the prevailing attitudes and social pressures regarding academe that have been covered thus far.

**An Illustrative Case Study**

The exchange took place over three days in September 2015. It began when Vox published Oliver Lee’s quit-piece: *I Have One of the Best Jobs in Academia. Here’s Why I’m Walking Away.*[^39] Lee was an exceptional example of academic success, having received a tenure-track job at a prestigious U.S university at age 29. Lee was aware of the frustrations of other academics, which he had observed personally and through his own experiences with quit-lit (which he provides numerous internet links for). Notably for a quit-piece, Lee is well aware of his own good-fortune:

Tenure-track jobs at large state universities are few and far between. … I had read all of the doom-and-gloom think pieces about the status of the American university system, of course, but it felt like none of that applied to me. I had a full-time position, secured early in my career — the possibilities were endless.

Lee attributed his decision to quit to his disillusionment with universities and academic work, stating that he felt like a “priest who had lost his faith, performing the sacraments without any sense of their importance”. He could not come to terms with the organisational culture in which he worked, whereby his peers and administrators often critiqued his “easy going personal style (He doesn't use the title "doctor!" He teaches in T-shirts!)”, and “relatively calm demeanour (If a young academic doesn't seem stressed beyond capacity, he's not working hard enough!)”. Reflecting a culture that many Quit-lit authors have taken issue with, these criticisms tended to be delivered to Lee “through backchannels… secondhand [sic] or not at all”. This was made worse when Lee “watched administrators and donors who had championed my career be shown the door, or at least swept under the rug, by an incoming presidential administration”, teaching him that “the autonomy I had imagined upon entering academia really was an illusion”. Hence, while Lee’s situation was different to sessional academics in terms of status, security and opportunities for advancement, he still articulates the themes raised by less-fortunate academics: the sense of disposability and the reduction of autonomy, pressure to behave and present in certain ways, and a growing awareness of the gulf between the ideals and realities of academe.

Lee goes on to address what he believes to be some of the primary issues with the current system: the unsustainable overproduction of postgraduates, exploitative management and ineffective online-courses. He acknowledged the growth of the academic precariat and takes issue with the widening gap between the tenuous periphery and the “real academics” of the tenured core. This concern for the bifurcation of the workforce is reflected in the higher education literature, with Ryan (et al. 2013, 170) observing that, although
most academics and administrators are aware of the situations of sessionals, “they are, for whatever reason, unable or unwilling to make change”. As if to illustrate this point, and thereby give credence to the sense of marginality and status-frustration described by other Quit-lit authors, Lee states:

As someone who has sat in department meetings, served on hiring committees, and powwowed with other "real" academics at conferences, I can offer the following statement with confidence: No matter how bad things are for the adjuncts, they're effectively non-people to their ostensible colleagues. We won't save you. It's not that we full-timers don't care; it's that we can't.

Reflecting the aforementioned view that a career in academe is often treated as the primary goal for aspiring academics, Lee also resents the push toward “alt-academia”, whereby aspiring academics are directed to use their skills to pursue careers outside of academe: “The concept is good enough in theory, but in practice it's just another way of phrasing the problem: There's not enough room in academia. Go find a job in a different field” (see: Bousquet 2008; Tomlinson 2008). As illustrated above, in practice, and for reasons tied to academic culture, aspiring academics often find such alternatives to be unconscionable signs of failure. Finally, Lee is frustrated by the perceived unwillingness of staff and students to candidly discuss what these issues might mean for aspiring academics. Hence, by way of “some departing thoughts”, Lee concludes with:

Had I known sooner, I would've given up on this shrinking side of academe many years ago, saving myself plenty of grief while conserving the most valuable quantity of all: time. No one should have to wait so long or sacrifice so much of it for a system like this. Time is money, and we must spend it wisely. Until something is done — something that isn't just a quick fix, something that looks long and hard at the structure of the present university system and tears it up from the
foundation, if that's what it takes — the academy is no longer an investment of time worth making.\(^{40}\)

The next day, *The Atlantic* published Ian Bogost’s (2015) response to Lee’s article: “No One Cares That You Quit Your Job”.\(^{41}\) A professor of interactive computing, Bogost took issue with both Quit-lit and Lee’s perseverance, stating that: “everybody knows that quitters quit,” and “if you’re writing a quitpiece [sic] you’ve already lost”. In contrast, Bogost concluded thusly:

Here’s the truth: academia is an amazing sector with some of the best features of any job, even if it also has substantial problems. Folks on the way out might feel like they’re biting their thumb at something, and those still “stuck” on the inside of this troubled-but-typical career might feel some welcome-if-temporary solidarity. But after that, it’s just more fodder for legislators, corporations, and the general public to undermine the academy. …Why should anyone be impressed that somebody can quit something? Much more impressive is figuring out how to live with it. More staypieces, please.

Bogost was not alone in his rejection of Quit-lit. A few days later *The Atlantic* published “The Rise of ‘Quit Lit’: And man created a literary genre composed entirely of humblebrags, and the world wept”, by Megan Garber,\(^{42}\) while the call for “staypieces” was taken up by a Twitter feed titled “No More Quitlit”, in which the alternative genre, “Commit-lit”, was proposed. These responses have in common the attempt to issue a “reality check” to people who, in the author’s views, should not be complaining or be celebrated. In short, this is a dispute over who is more noble – the person who perseveres or the person who walks away.

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\(^{40}\) This commodification of time will strike a chord with some and likely raise the ire of others. Either way, it reflects a neoliberal sensibility that is worth pointing out.


To be sure, Bogost is right on two points. First, it is clear that Quit-lit has provided an avenue for academic solidarity. Second, it is true that there is something impressive in the individual ability to persevere through and strive to make something out of precarious circumstances. However, these are both undermined by his question as to why anyone be impressed by the decision to quit academe, for the Quit-lit genre is full of people explaining exactly why such a decision can be so difficult and, giving this sociocultural context, why it is that quitting academe can seem so impressive. On this note, we need only recall the work of Lord, Schuman, Pannapacker, Dagleish, or any of the other quit-pieces that they provide links to. Hence, while it is understandable that some would view Quit-lit as the indulgence of self-pitying and highly-educated groaners, this fails to recognise just how central academic ideals, aspirations and expectations can be to the aspiring academic’s sense of professional and personal identity (not to mention the highly demanding employment and work situations that such people face), and hence how hard it is for some to leave them behind.

As if to illustrate these socio-cultural nuances, the conversation was concluded on the third day, when the senior editor of The Atlantic, Chris Bodenner (2015), responded to Bogost in defence of Lee. He stated that:

As someone who just spent four years figuring out that academia wasn’t for me, bailing pre-dissertation and returning to the private sector, Lee’s piece would have been useful for me at a certain point. A piece that let me know that the vision I had of academia in my head didn’t match the reality (which, in my experience, Lee describes reasonably well) could have saved me a few years of feeling like I was quitter for deciding / realizing that finishing a dissertation for the sole purpose of getting people to call me “Doctor” wasn’t worth it.

Here we can once again observe the common Quit-lit story: the quit-piece author states that they spent years in postgraduate or sessional work before

deciding that academe was not for them. Then they reflect on how this time could have been reduced if they had known better sooner – here the stories of Lee and Bodenner overlap, even though the former was more successful than the latter. So too does the author observe how this information could have helped them to reconcile their expectations with the realities that they would eventually experience. This reflects how Lee felt like a “priest who had lost his faith” following his recognition that the values he cherished (in this case, professional autonomy) were illusory. The author then considers how long they are willing to continue pursuing an ideal future in academe in the face of such realities. Finally, they reflect on how their willingness and ability to consider such things have been shaped by the university system.

It is in respect to this seemingly typical story that Bodenner rejects Bogost’s contention that Quit-lit “helps nobody in the long run”. After all, to maintain such a claim requires one to overlook the thematic reflection that pervades Quit-lit: “Had I known sooner”. This sentiment has appeared many times over the past few pages in the words of Schuman, Dagliesh, Pannapacker, Lee, Bodenner, and many other contributions to the Quit-lit oeuvre besides. This goes to the heart of the attempt of such authors to not only explain their own decisions, but to reach out to and strike chords with other academics. For these people, whether their act of sharing such insights is viewed as unacademic, self-indulgent, or fodder for detractors is likely beside the point. Indeed, part of the point of the more challenging Quit-lit is to critique the socio-cultural boundary maintenance of academe, which encourages a great deal of sacrifice and the formulation of highly idealised aspirations, while also discouraging the reports of those academics who, having seemingly pursued such aspirations and made such sacrifices within the contemporary system in vain, experience quitting as an object of shame and mourning.
Conclusion

That so many Quit-lit authors claim to wish they had known more about the university system sooner speaks to the insulation of such information and stories within academe. It is not that such information is formally censored: the neoliberal restructuring of universities and their workforces have been the centre of much attention in the higher education literature (Bousquet 2008; Brown et al. 2008; Hill 2012; Kimber 20010; May et al. 2013; Ward 2012). Even those who do not read such material will likely know of “survivor’s guilt”, whereby a successful academic feels guilty for “overcoming the odds” while watching their fellows fall by the wayside. PhD candidates that frequent university campuses may have seen the activism of unions pushing to improve the situations of academics, and will have likely experienced the growing emphasis that universities are placing on employment skills, impact workshops and “alt-ac” routes. And yet, when the Quit-lit author publicly states that they wish they knew what they now know sooner, they are reliably met with comments along the lines of “I wish I was told sooner”, “I wish I had listened”, “why didn’t I listen?” and “this can’t be true”. Hence, while Quit-lit is not a scholarly part of the higher education literature, and while experiences and aspirations of academics will vary depending on any number of factors that went unaddressed in this analysis, such material nevertheless provides insight into the role that occupational identity and prevailing norms and narratives play in the attractiveness of, and aversions to leaving, academe. It is hoped that this insight into why many academics, and the academic precariat in particular, would rather put up with undesirable situations and limited opportunities for years than pursue alternatives outside of the university system. Part 2 of this project turns our attention away from the academic precariat in order to consider how these structural and cultural conditions can be conceptualised in respect to the contemporary university system.
Part 2

On the University System

Focussing primarily on teaching academics, Part 1 began by identifying academics on limited/fixed-term and contingently secured contracts as the academic precariat of the Australia university sector. Members of the academic precariat tend to depend on casual, limited or fixed term contracts, and it is with respect to these contingent employment situations, coupled with related discussions of casualisation, that they are often referred to as “casuals” (Brown et al. 2006; Gottschalk and McEachern 2010; Ryan et al. 2013). However, as Gunasekara (2007, 3) points out, these labels can “take on a life of their own beyond the strict legal interpretation of non-standard, periodic contracts of employment”. For instance, in Australia the “casual” label often (but not always) reflects short-term and flexible relationships of convenience, based on the clear and mutual self-interests of the employer and the employee. In contrast, and in a sociological manner, rather than in a purely contractual capacity, the relationship between academics and the university system is often, as Coates and Goedegebuure (2010, 13) put it, “anything but casual”. The contingently employed academics that teach throughout the semester at our universities do not work based on ad hoc shifts that are paid by the hour, but rather according to carefully determined (but rarely adequate) contractual commitments that cover whole semesters (hence the term “sessional”). Moreover, rather than being based on the simple desire to make money and a preference for casual work, around a third of sessionals desire long-term academic careers, and over half would prefer a continuing academic position (Bentley et al. 2012; May et al. 2013; Percy et al.; 2008; Pocock et al. 2005). Hence, when we talk about the sessional teachers of the academic precariat, we are talking about a highly educated workforce that, due to structural and cultural changes across (but not limited to) the university sector, and quite independently of the still widespread preferences of aspiring academics, is gradually being proletarianised and casualised.
This precariat class position was not always such a large part of the academic experience, with sessional teaching formerly being more of a transitional stage akin to an apprenticeship or rite of passage for those entering the sector. A neo-Weberian framework was applied to make sense of the expectations, rationales and status group positions that underpin the academic profession. In other words, rather than focusing solely on the actual material conditions and prospects of academics, attention was also paid to the influence that sociocultural factors can have on academics in terms of vocational ideals and professional relations, with the university system being framed as the site of ideals that can become intimately tied to one’s sense of identity and career aspirations, often independently of current employment and work situations. In this respect, the academic precariat was formulated not just as a workers, but as members of a cultural system that supports different kinds of attitudes to those championed in more economically-oriented industries, and which are retained despite conditions that might deter or drive away highly specialised workers of comparable levels of education in other sectors. Simply put, while an effort was made to show how universities and academics are being affected by the neoliberal trends that are increasingly affecting ever more domains, this was done while striving to account for that cultural dimension – that academic element – that makes this particular faction of the precariat distinct.

I then provided a sketch of how the situations and opportunities of sessional academics, and, by extension, the bifurcation of the academic workforce, relate to the structural conditions of the formal and informal “job market”. The formal market is ostensibly transparent and meritocratic, and represents the proper channel for secure academic positions as well as for advancement. This market, which is the domain of the “real faculty” of the academic core, is highly competitive, emphasises lengthy formal processes and reviews, and rewards publications over the experience gained through sessional teaching. The informal market is the domain of the academic precariat, and it is through this market that contingent “jobs”, as opposed to formal positions, are found. This market situates those in the academic middle as the largely autonomous and unaccountable proxy-employers (and potential benefactors) of sessionals.
Jobs are typically secured through this market, often at the last moment, on an unreliable basis, often through “personal approaches” (May et al. 2013). This undermines the ability of sessionals to make plans and makes them dependent on proxy-employers in a way that can undermine collegiality. These jobs typically offer no opportunities for advancement, leading many sessionals to face the “paradox of casual permanency” (Brown et al. 2010). The casualisation of sessionals is underscored by the increasing dependence of this informal market and its widening separation from the formal market, while their proletarianisation is an effect of the effect that the corresponding bifurcation between the tenured core and the tenuous periphery is having on professional relations and autonomy.

Drawing on the social systems theory of Luhmann, Part 2 of this project aims to further elucidate the precariatisation of the academic workforce and the corresponding changes to university organisation through a conceptualisation and analysis of the conditions that are shaping – and being shaped by – the internal and external environments of the contemporary university system.
With the exception of institutions funded by churches or other significant endowments, the top priorities for the administrative heads of most of today’s universities are financial. In Australia, this is underpinned by the tightening of public funding, semi-privatisation, the uncapping of student numbers and the potential deregulation of degree prices making universities more responsible for tending to and expanding their sources of income (Coates and Goedegebuure 2010; PwC 2016). Universities attempt to do this in a variety of ways, such as by attracting and retaining students, securing research grants and corporate partnership funding, and through the maintenance and expansion of assets, which can include investments in technology, intellectual property and land. These techniques are needed for providing student services, attracting talent, funding marketing campaigns, building and maintaining facilities, and offsetting the ostensibly spiralling costs of employment (including the salaries of the administrators tasked with such management). Efforts to minimise costs through restructuring are particularly concerning for workers, as the execution of such efforts often involve precariatisation, redeployment and job-cuts. The result, which is the same for most not-for-profit organisations in an increasingly neoliberal environment, is universities that increasingly employ corporate management narratives and techniques, ostensibly geared toward efficiency and income generation as a necessary requirement for “survival”.

The priorities of the neoliberal university are in conflict with the traditional formulations of the academic profession and university system. These hark back to when universities operated under different pressures to the present economic and professional conditions. With funding being more assured through governments and sponsorship, universities and academics received more and were not called to account to justify their activities in the same manner or to the extent that they are now. Not being so driven by the market allowed universities to get on with teaching and research without the
overriding concern for market competitiveness. As a result, at least ostensibly, the values and operational conditions of these institutions placed a greater emphasis on academic leadership and autonomy, and less of an emphasis on corporate management and market demand.

In Australia, the shift from the former to the latter came to a head following the so-called “Dawkins reforms” of the late 1980s. Among other things, these reforms saw: the conversion of colleges of advanced education and technical institutes into universities, thereby increasing internal competition across the sector; the introduction of income contingent student loans, with the intent being to increase consumer participation within the sector; and the introduction of new funding and transparency provisions, whereby universities had to provide statistics and strategy reports to justify their research and education programs, thereby encouraging universities to treat students as both education customers and products for industry. As a result of these changes, argues Gill (2014, 17), it is “no longer enough to say that Universities are like businesses; Universities are businesses” (of course, this is not to say that they are the exact same sort of businesses encountered in the private sector – as we have seen, there is still much that characterises universities as distinct institutions).

These differences are expressed in the notion of the academic “Golden Age”, which speaks to an idealised past that took place at different times, depending on the country and ideals that one has in mind (Bloom 1987; Gross 1981; Thelin 2011). According to this formulation, academics were previously able to work with little managerial oversight and did so in secure and relatively well-paying positions with access to good opportunities for advancement. Their duties primarily revolved around teaching, research and public engagement, rather than the accountability-oriented administrative duties and hunts for grants and contracts that increasingly underpin academic life today. According to Forsyth (2014, 89), many Australian scholars locate this Golden Age in the Whitlam years of 1972-5:
Federal money flowed steadily. Moreover, as universities had not anticipated the need for so many academics, there were too few. This made things very pleasant for those of the ‘right’ background who wished to teach and research in higher education; many had little difficulty getting and keeping a well-paid academic job.

Of course, this Golden Age had problems of its own, such as gendered and racial disparities, along with structural and cultural issues related to organisational hierarchies and nepotism. Accordingly, Connell (2014, 57) is critical of the desire to add a “nostalgic tinge” to the history of Australian universities, because “there has never been a complete consensus about what they should be or how they should work”, not to mention their discriminatory “Eurocentric history”. Even so, like Forsyth, who links the decline of the Australian Golden Age to a volatile political environment and growing tensions between economic and academic priorities, Connell uses similar points of contrast to distinguish the universities of the past from the increasingly market oriented universities that followed from the late 1980s, and which have led up to the neoliberal institutions of today. In this respect, the usefulness of the Golden Age notion need not be confined to the distinction between presumed pasts and present realities. Rather, it can be seen as the expression of what Collini (2012, 87) calls “cherished values”:

Whatever the reality of the experience of actually attending one of today’s semi-marketized, employment-oriented institutions, there remains a strong popular desire that they should, at their best, incarnate a set of aspirations and ideals that go beyond any form of economic return.

The possibilities of such incarnations are supported by Connell’s (2015, 95) reflection on how, at the best of times, it can be so pleasant to work as an academic within the university environment: “there is an occupational culture here that embeds the passion for knowledge, and makes workers of all kinds proud to be working specifically for a university”. 
There is a dynamic at play here that is worth our attention. On the one hand, there is what Collini refers to as the “set of aspirations and ideals” that academe can bring to mind, which, according to Connell, can make academic staff of any employment category proud to work at a university. On the other hand, there is the economistic and managerial “real world” of contemporary university organisation. In keeping with the discussion of status, commitment and occupational identities that took place in Part 1, it is clear that universities have objective realities and pervasive cultural associations and narratives – or, as I have heard a number of academics say (in different circumstances but similar tones), “there is the university that exists in here [a tap on the head], and then there are these places [a gesture around the red brick, or the limestone, or the glass and steel buildings of the university campus at hand]”.

Hence, as contentious as the Golden Age notion might be, there is something to be said for the idea that universities and academic life can be closer or further away from some shared, if vague, notion of what they should be like.

The tensions that arise from this dynamic are illustrated by Archer’s (2008) study on changing constructions of higher education and professional identities in the U.K., for which she interviewed early career academics. While these academics were, as one of them put it, “instinctively suspicious about this notion of a Golden Era” because “it is constantly reinvented and reconstructed and many things are projected onto it” (Archer 2008, 270-1), Archer observed that many of them:

... recognised that there have been substantial changes in the organisation and nature of academia and academic work over the years and that some of these changes are evoked within a ‘Golden Age’ discourse, which commands popular currency. Thus, irrespective of the ‘truth’ (or not) of there having been a ‘golden age’, the Golden Age—as a discourse—was mobilised as a symbolic resource in the construction of boundaries and identity positions and to locate themselves within ‘the present’.

This use of discursive techniques and references to popular ideas and desires is vital to any attempt to think about the university as an attractive and
influential cultural system. As Considine (2006, 257) argues in his own formulation of such a cultural system: “What establishes a system as a system are the distinctions actors use, and have others use, to define themselves, and this typically comes to light at the border of one system and another”. The borders that Considine are referring to are not just those changing criteria used by governments to determine what institutions count as universities. Rather, such borders can also be cultural: hence, a strategy can be more-or-less “in the spirit” of the university, an academic can do more-or-less “serious” academic work. While the formal distinction used by the political system is not so up for scholarly contestation, the matter of cultural identification is the subject of ongoing discussions. Hence, as Collini (2012) observes, the very word “University” now evokes a “single institutional essence which in reality has generally tended to bewilder us”.44

In this chapter, I address this diversity in perspectives and values pertaining to the university system. The intention is to show that there is not any one way to correctly frame the university, and that such framing instead can be viewed in connection to different groups in different sub-systems. I present the notion of the “multiversity” as a useful shorthand for acknowledging that the university can be conceptualised in a variety of ways based on a range of ideals, positions, pressures and interests. This is further illustrated using interview material with Australian PhD students, showing that, while they have ideals and aspirations pertaining to university, they acknowledge the incongruities between these views and current realities. This will set the scene for formulating the university as a differentiated system, with its sub-systems and participants being part of broader internal and external processes that are beyond any individual group’s complete control. I begin by reflecting on a university debate that I attended early on in this project.

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44 Such mythologies are also reflected in non-English speaking countries. For example, in Krücken’s (2003, 327) interviews with senior staff from German universities, many of the interviewees invoked the “von Humboldt myth”.

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The Modern Multiversity

A debate was organised by the Teaching and Learning Team and Events office of a large urban university to celebrate the institution’s fortieth birthday (for which I sat at the back and took fieldwork notes). The proposition was that “the purpose of a university degree is to get a job”. Right away, it is worth noting the singularity of an institution that celebrates its birthday by having a public debate regarding its own purpose. While similar events have undoubtedly taken place at many other universities around the world, the same cannot be said for most institutions outside the higher education system. Such reflective activities are just one part of the academic culture that is maintained and celebrated within universities, and which extends beyond the “birthday events” and into the classrooms and staffrooms, campus taverns and cafes, theatres and online forums.

The proposition triggered a lively exchange over the purpose of universities. Rejecting the notion of “one-size-fits-all” outcomes, a senior academic emphasised the “centrality” of personal development and intellectual collaboration. A law student responded that it is the responsibility of the university to align the skills and production of students with the demands and pressures of the “real world”: “Most students don’t come to university to find the meaning of life. They come because they need a degree to get a job; universities know it, we all know it”. A former Dean then insisted that, “while all this is well and good, the reality is that universities must maximise bums in seats. They need a sustainable model if they want to produce philosophers or lawyers” (to which a nearby whisperer added “or baristas”). Another student vehemently stated that “the point of universities is to build knowledge as its own end”. An older teacher mentioned von Humboldt (much to the confusion of most attendees), which caused a business school lecturer to reiterate the point on economic externalities. Someone tried to conclude with “we can all agree that, ultimately, ‘the point of the university’ is a political matter” – but was humorously intercepted by the Chair, who draconianly ended the discussion on schedule.
Sitting at the back of the theatre, I was reminded of what Clark Kerr (1982, 8) said in his 1963 lecture, *The Uses of the University*: “the university is so many things to so many different people that it must, of necessity, be partially at war with itself”. Kerr was addressing what he believed to be the most influential ideas in the history of the modern university, both in the U.S and abroad. He referred to John Newman’s (1982, 80, cited in Collini 2012, 47) 1852 publication, *The Idea of the University*, which envisioned a teaching only, religiously grounded institution that championed the idea of knowledge as its own reward. This was coupled with the idea that universities should shape “the whole person”: that the university graduate should be in possession of “a sure tact which enables him to trifle with gracefulness and be serious with effect”. Collini is one of many scholars to point out that Newman’s text is often referenced in order to give contemporary views on the university some historical and literary weight, rather than as a serious institutional model (also see Gilbert 2000). Even so, both Collini and Kerr appreciate the idea that higher education is about more than material outcomes and the transfer of skills from one generation to the next; it is also about developing a strong character and culture.

In respect to social function and organisation, the universities envisioned by Newman were not just seen as a way of producing workers and were not solely in the service of government or industry. Rather, they were places where intellectual interests (albeit, of a decidedly theological orientation) could be pursued as their own end, rather than as a means toward external ends. Moreover, these interests were not to be pursued in just any fashion, but would instead be subjected to standards of analysis and critique along the expansive lines of a liberal education. Hence, along with universities being *relatively* autonomous institutions (for they must be funded somehow, and so have and always will be subject to some external interests), they were also answerable to standards of their own internal devising, which were in turn expected to be maintained through the socialisation of students and teachers. While there is, of course, much more to Newman’s idea of the university than
indicated here, the current point is the contribution that it made to the ideal of pursuing higher education as its own end, as well as to the ideal of universities being run by autonomous, though internally accountable, academics.

Kerr also touched on Wilhem von Humboldt’s ([1809] 1970) early nineteenth century vision of what would come to be recognised as central to the modern university. This style of university was dedicated to both teaching and research, which aside from being kept separate from each other in the universities of the previous centuries (or, in respect to research, even being wholly absent), also involved different practices and relations to what we recognise today. For instance, earlier universities often focussed more on monastic instruction in accepted knowledge than on teaching and individual character (Delanty 2001, 33), with Durkheim (1977, 90) pointing out that the concrete student and teacher distinction was not stable in many Medieval universities. Newman’s idea, which concerned the university of Dublin, had major differences to von Humboldt’s, which concerned the then reforming Prussian State and its people. Nevertheless, they shared the concern that, whether it be in service to the state, to nationhood, or to the pursuit of knowledge as its own end, the university should strive to maintain some autonomy. The thinkers also shared a concern that over-specialisation and professionalisation could lead to a narrow-mindedness that would undermine intellectual vibrancy and growth. Von Humboldt was of the view that a university should be comprehensive in its dealings with established knowledge and ways of learning, as well as in its stewardship over culture. Keeping in mind that von Humboldt placed an emphasis on research that was not present in Newman’s teaching-focussed universities, von Humboldt championed the dialogue between and the integration of the academic fields and knowledge into teaching, research and civil discussions.

I will not linger on Newman or von Humboldt here for the same reason that I did not further dissect the idea of the Golden Age of higher education. Suffice to say that these ideas, broadly speaking, provide an understanding of the modern university as being dedicated to the relatively autonomous pursuit
and regulation of intellectual interests and knowledge, and the corresponding reproduction of academic expertise and aspirations among emerging academics that comprise the precariat. Crucially, this idea is bound up in a conceptualisation of academic standards and communities that, for instance, allow an academic from a university in Glasgow to review the work of an academic based in Australia, according to the standards and knowledge of their own field, as well as according to the accepted standards of academe more generally. That such academics can share these professional standards, despite their different locations, and that academics in different fields and institutions can engage with and draw from those beyond their own, is, at least in part, testament to this systemic ethos.

While Kerr appreciated how these ideas worked to provide the university system with a distinctive purpose and structure, he had also come to view the singular notion of “the University” as being insufficient for conveying the conglomerates of schools, departments and the increasingly disparate groups over which he presided as a university president. Indeed, as a spin on Newman’s concern that over-specialisation could lead universities to become “a sort of bazaar, or pantechnicon, in which wares of all kinds are heaped together for sale in stalls independent of each other” (an apt description of the annual “open days” that are held at most Australian universities), Kerr joked that the modern university is best understood as “a series of individual faculty entrepreneurs held together by a common grievance over parking” (in Collini 2012, 45, 41). In other words, while universities are tied to ideals regarding the development of knowledge and character, they are home to all sorts of groups and concerns that are not just academic. With this organisational and conceptual complexity in mind, Kerr offered a term to better capture the modern university: “Multiversity”.

Kerr’s efforts were fitting, for, as attendance at any university staff meeting or public debate will show, the university system is not at all reducible to a single set of ideas or priorities, nor are universities or their workforces primarily governed by academic faculties. Rather, universities are answerable

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to all sorts of stewards and stakeholders, with the influence of corporate-style executives, middle-managers, governments and industries, and student expectations dominating reports on the higher education sector in Australia. Of course, it is not surprising that the priorities and operational conditions of the university system would change over time. As Forsyth (2014, 2) explains, the more influential “ideas of the university”, such as those conceived by Newman and von Humboldt, were:

… developed in a world where education at all levels was changing … the adjustments, moreover, are not just incidental. Ideas have power. Shifts in ideas about universities in Australia have not been achieved in a disinterested or objective manner: every new idea about tertiary education represents someone’s interests.

These interests can be idealistic, such as with those that concern the ability of academics to pursue knowledge and projects in areas of their choosing with minimal interference. As detailed in the previous class-based discussions, they can also be strategic and economically orientated, such as with the efforts of administrators to reduce the security and autonomy of workers, or with the push by governments to make universities increasingly accountable to the national or industrial priorities of the time. Any of these interests can be supported by organisational structures and strategies, and control of these conditions plays a major part in the influence of their associated ideas. Moreover, these interests and conditions are not necessarily limited to single institutions, as Considine (2006, 260) observes:

Scholars understand their research in an intensely local-universal way. Their peer group gives priority to colleagues in the next office and in other countries over those further up the hierarchy or across in a neighbouring department. Department heads, on the other hand, want the teaching program to be well evaluated… managers want to meet financial targets… while those on the governing bodies focus upon the institution’s status and ranking against others.

To give a sense of how these ideals and interests are viewed on the ground, and to look further into the responses in the aforementioned debate, the next
The section provides the responses that Australian PhD candidates gave when asked about the university system and their relationship to it.

According to PhD Candidates

As Collini suggested would be the case, when the PhD candidates interviewed for this project were asked the broad question “what are universities for?”, most responded right away by reducing the complexity of the implied plurality by using the singular “University”. When answering questions that encouraged them to consider universities in the plural (e.g. “do you think this varies much, or is it ‘standard’ for most universities?”), they quickly returned to the singular formulation. Indeed, many participants said that they had little knowledge of such empirical idiosyncrasies, and admitted to using such generalisations to communicate their ideas without getting “bogged down” in thought about varying national or organisational contexts. Hence, at least initially, most of the interviewees tended to universalise the university. In answer to the question itself, the idea of the university as a distinctly academic institution of knowledge, based on higher education and research, tended to dominate (at least initially). This was generally communicated with reference to the system’s dual-function of teaching and research. On this note, Jeremy, a candidate in his mid-twenties researching feminist philosophy, gave what was perhaps the most concise and representative response:

The point of the university is twofold: first to provide education to the new generation of people, and secondly to perform research functions in various areas – I probably wouldn’t narrow it down any further. (Jeremy)

Reflecting both Collini and Connell’s emphasis on the impression of certain ideals, aspirations and intellectual working cultures within universities, these initial responses were almost always accompanied by a strong emphasis on the importance of a university, academic or scholarly culture. Prior to being encouraged to do so by later questions, few of the interviewees provided explanations of these notions, suggesting that they were taken for granted as being mutually understood. One example of these early responses is from
Elizabeth, a thirty-something education candidate at a “Gumtree university” as they are referred to in Australia (as in universities founded in the 60s and 70s): “A university is a place to hone academics so that research can be done in an environment that (I mean, this is idealistic, but) fosters that kind of culture”. Likewise, reflecting the emphasis on education as an end in itself, Tully, a Canadian cultural studies candidate working at an older, “Sandstone university” (typically prestigious universities founded in the late nineteenth century or early twentieth century), described the general university as follows:

It is a place to achieve higher learning, which I’d describe as a state where you can reflect on culture and society and develop high quality skills… [as well as] searching for a sense of understanding for its own purpose without necessarily looking for a specific end. (Tully)

Such sentiments were articulated by over half of the interviewees without prompting, and were supported by the rest of the interviewees when asked further about the supposed roles of universities. Nick, a sociology candidate at a Sandstone university, suggested that it is this dual-function and associated culture that put the university “at the top of the education hierarchy”. Likewise, Serge, a thirty-something literature candidate at a Gumtree university, stated that the “key-role of the university” from which “everything branches off” is “advancement of knowledge [and] study for the sake of study… Without that it’s just a training centre”. Many interviewees pointed out that their views of the university system were based on the ideals and trends they observe within their own universities. For instance, much later in the interview, Tully reflected:

I think deep down I want to give an idealised version of the university and push forward what I would hope to be core values. I hope this development the university is going through is a phase, and I am ever hopeful that we’ll swing back into a more humane and individualised society that will be reflected through the university. (Tully)

This was echoed by Ellen, a young English and Drama candidate at a Gumtree university:
In recent times academia has been going through cycles where everything is horrible and then fantastic. At the moment a balance needs to be struck between professional and academic values. I think a balance would be healthy … I knew that I would have to balance that cynical side with the ideal side… Going through university, my experience of these ideals hasn't been there. Which isn't to say it isn't good – it's been fantastic. Just, with ideals, everything is golden rainbows. (Ellen)

Nick was more sceptical of the distinction between ideals and reality:

I'm not necessarily aware of the extent to which I distinguish between one and the other, because what we project onto the institutions around us influence a lot of what we think we're experiencing, so it's difficult to pick apart those two things. (Nick)

In a similarly reflective vein, several of the interviewees acknowledged that their own views and ideals were tied to their respective positions within and relationships with the university system, both as research students and as aspiring academics, and acknowledged that their views and values may not be shared by people in different positions accordingly. For example, Guy, a late-twenties political science candidate at a Sandstone university stated:

How one envisions the university depends on one’s relationship to it… There’s obviously not a universal understanding of what the university should be amongst the administrators, the academics, etc. … As for what that actually means we would have quite different takes on it. (Guy)

This point was taken further by James, a literature candidate at a Gumtree university, who provided an extensive response to the first question:

I guess I couldn't say for the entire university, but for the disciplines I'm interested in I would say that the main role is to encourage critical thinking around those ideas and values people take for granted as normal. ... I don't know what people are doing in other disciplines, so I can't comment on that. I expect there would be differences from department to department. ... I imagine there could be conflicts between
academics’ goals and the goals of the administration. … I guess that there are some ideas about universities being primarily for skill acquisition or training or increasing the money you can earn – this approach I find more dubious than the idea of the university as an institution that allows for critical thinking skills, ordering the way people think, and creating more critical citizens. (James)

A couple of the interviewees took this point further still by describing how, just as these views and values accord with different positions within the university system, so too do some of these positions and their respective priorities seem to have primacy over the others. For instance, Sue, who was undertaking both a PhD and a Master’s in applied psychology at a Gumtree university, responded to the question on the point of the university and then to further prompting (following the ellipsis in the statement below) with:

Initially I’d say [the purpose of the university is] to make money. Then I would say to educate … A part of me wants to believe it’s a place of integrity and a place where you can develop yourself intellectually. But I’m not naïve. I think it’s blatantly obvious that it’s a money-making machine. I see a lot of decisions on a day to day basis that have nothing to do with integrity or imparting knowledge on students, and have everything to do with getting more students through so more can come through. (Sue)

Likewise, this time in response to questions regarding the attractiveness and purpose of the PhD degree, Elizabeth said:

We’re sacrificing our pursuit of knowledge for the university that is very outcomes based in terms of how many people we get through and how much money can be made and measured. I think this is at odds with what knowledge is about. The pursuit of knowledge and development of people is completely separate to those neoliberal sort or ideals that have infiltrated the system. They’ve created a beast that is completely different to what a higher education should feel like for individuals and society. (Elizabeth)
Conclusion

The interplay between ideals and real and perceived reality, as illustrated in the views expressed by contemporary academics and students, is not simply reducible to any single “idea of the university”. Rather, these are part of a collection of broad ideas and values to do with learning, research, autonomy, accountability and competition, that are acknowledged, be it begrudgingly or enthusiastically, to exist in a dynamic and often tense relationship with a range of other institutional trends, interests and priorities. In this respect, the university – or rather, multiversity – is simultaneously a disinterested site for intellectual and development and inquiry, and an arena for competing agendas ranging from student outcomes, to worker situations, to the efficiency, competitiveness and sustainability of the organisation.

To narrow things down in a manner that will hopefully serve to clarify the lot of the academic precariat in connection to the neoliberal university, the next chapter presents a revised approach to social systems theory. This will provide the basis on which I conceptualise the university as a distinctively academic institution of education, albeit with the academic role and associated operations being just one set of sub-systems among the many that make up the broader multiversity. The argument is that, as some of these sub-systems come to exert more influence than others, such as with administrative and managerial bodies within universities, and as the growth and character of these influential bodies are in turn influenced by other systems, such as with the spread of neoliberalism into universities, so too are the other sub-systems and their subjects effected. This will set the stage for the final argument of this thesis: that while the rise and lot of the academic precariat can be framed in terms of different interests and levels of influence operating within and across the university system, these conflicts can in turn be elucidated by acknowledging the systemic and environmental conditions that work to drive, shape and frame them.
Chapter 8

Drawing on social systems theory

Conceptualising a social system involves identifying its general structural components – that is, those distinctions and conditions that tend to play out across the system’s various empirical iterations. For example, imagine a university teacher failing a student’s assessment. We can imagine this scenario without taking into account his or her physical location; so too can we do this without considering the background of the people or the learning material involved. This is because the scenario involves familiar components (teacher, student, assessment) that we can imagine coming together to make up a familiar practice. This can be applied to educational institutions the world over to reliably predict their basic operations. Hence, at most educational institutions you will find one distinct kind of role (teacher) applying a distinct kind of binary (pass/fail) to another distinct kind of role (student). Such recognisable distinctions occur all throughout society: the delivery of a legal verdict (judge, guilty/innocent, defendant), or the purchasing of a car (seller, transaction/non-transaction, buyer).

Social systems theory provides a useful way to conceptualise these structural conditions. First, it is useful because it provides a host of concepts that can be used to delineate social systems based on simple and generalizable structural elements, which is to say that the theory is useful for conceptualizing organisational conditions. Second, it is useful because it provides a theoretical framework for explaining how these systems maintain their boundaries, adapt to the environment, and differentiate themselves, which is to say that it is useful for understanding continuity and change. Third, and most relevant to the project at hand, it has the potential to provide a basis for analysing such changes in terms of the characteristics and influence of systems and sub-systems, and thus for analysing conditions and situations in respect to the external environment, as well as in terms of the sub-systems and relationships that comprise a system’s internal-environment.
However, it is a sophisticated theory, and attempts to faithfully unravel and apply it require a tremendous amount of research into a body of work which, according to its chief proponent, Niklas Luhmann (1995, lii), “resembles a labyrinth more than a freeway off into the sunset”. This can be seen in the more contemporary uses of the theory, which have tended to either focus on the more accessible concepts and specific organisations (Considine 2006; Martens 2006), or attempt to clarify the framework and its concepts in an exclusively theoretical manner (Seidl 2004; Wagner 1998). While the former derivative approach demonstrates the usefulness of systems theory, it overlooks Luhmann’s aversion to applying it to the analysis of real entities and events. In contrast, the latter traditional approach has succumbed to the tendency within sociology to repeatedly retrace steps across the theoretical field in case a misstep has been made or something overlooked, leading to the theory becoming increasingly insular and peripheral within sociology and academe more broadly (which perhaps partly explains the lack of recognition given in contemporary sociology to Luhmann’s theoretical framework).45

This chapter begins by providing a brief sketch of the general social systems theory framework and offers a critique of the theory’s scope and limitations. I then provide a closer look at the structural conditions (that is the general elements) that make up a social system. In so doing, I introduce distinctive roles as an element that will play a central conceptual part in Chapter 9. Finally, I outline how the theory can account for continuity and change, with the derivative approach also incorporating an account for conflict. I hope to show how sacrificing some of the closure of Luhmann’s labyrinth can help to elucidate continuity and change within the university system, as well as in respect to the relations between, and changes to, its various sub-systems and subjects. This will set the scene for the closing chapters of this project, in which it is argued that the university system is characterised by the centrality

45 That, and also perhaps his close association with Talcott Parsons (his mentor early in his career), whose structural-functionalist theory was (and continues to be) widely critiqued by critical theorists and poststructuralists.
of academic roles, with changes to this system being evident in the changes to the centrality of academe within the neoliberal university.

**Scope and limitations**

The traditional systems approach orders the world in terms of *environment, systems, and sub-systems*. These are based on a hierarchy of complexity, with the environment being at the top and sub-systems (rather than the actor, which is omitted entirely from Luhmannian systems theory) being at the bottom. The environment is the domain of everything external to the system in question and everything that is not communication, including anything from geography and climate, to the private thoughts of individuals. Given its complexity, people can never deal with the environment in its totality, and so any attempt at communication necessarily sets boundaries that distinguish what is to be considered from what will be passed over. Hence, a system is comparable to one who, when faced with an overwhelming amount of information and possibilities for action, narrows their focus to a specific task of their own definition; with the resulting limits opening up the possibility to order action in respect to *this, and not that, in this, and not that manner*. These distinction-based processes comprise and fall into the domain of the general system of communication, which, for Luhmann, is interchangeable with the general term “society”. Communication is thus the defining feature of Luhmann’s social system, being that which reduces the complexity of the environment through systems of communication, and which in turn give rise to increasingly complex sub-systems. Thus, in this formulation, “society” is composed of distinct, interrelated and productive systems of communication.

The general concept of a system can be split into four categories (Luhmann 1995, 2): mechanical systems (which concern the technological sciences); living systems (which concern the biological sciences); psychic systems (which concern psychological research); and social systems (which concern sociological research and is thus the focus of this project). This explains why
an analysis of a social system that is heavily dependent on mechanical systems need not concern itself with deciphering the technological sciences in order to understand the functional processes of its own organisations (a point that will be demonstrated later in Chapter 10’s case study of a major report on the higher education sector, in which technological development is framed as a primary “external environmental driver” that universities must adapt to). It also demonstrates how any attempt to describe a given system can only ever do so from within the social system, with communication thus being like the indissoluble filter that separates theory from the environment. Crucially, according to Luhmann, social systems can operate independently of the experiences of the individual actors that pass through them, and thus qualitative analysis can only ever give a limited impression of such systems. In other words, just as natural events carry on independently of whether individuals experience them, a focus on actors only produces human-centric information rather than scientific information regarding the social world.

This formulation entails certain limitations concerning the objects of analysis with which the theory deals. For instance, just as the behaviour of fauna reflects the conditions of an ecosystem, so too are group actions and organisational processes reflective of the limiting functional conditions of a social system. While Luhmann (1995, 283) acknowledges that the analysis of social behaviours can provide a worthwhile avenue for developing qualitative understandings, he insists that qualitative material alone is insufficient for developing a general theory; and promotes an analysis of the conditions that facilitate organisation that does not get caught up on the superfluous politics and idiosyncrasies of everyday life. Hence, Luhmann (1988, 34-5) describes his goal as being “a radically anti-humanist, radically anti-regional and radically constructivist concept of society”. This is an extreme move away from the concern with actors and actions that has long been the focus of sociology (particularly in the U.S.), and has had a major impact on the theory’s relationship to empirical analysis. So too has it insulated it from what might be called “interest focused” agendas or “social justice” criticisms –
which are both seen as missing the “anti-humanist” point of the theory’s agenda (Lee 2000, 322).

The strength of Luhmann’s framework lies in its ability to account for contingency (for the environment can be formulated in any number of ways, and so systems could have been different) and change (as sub-systems are a response to complexity by the system to the changing environment). By operating at the general level, the empirical and human-centric idiosyncrasies of social reality are not denied, but rather passed over in a project aimed at understanding the processes that make such idiosyncrasies coherent within an organisational context to begin with. In this regard, systems theory presents a powerful approach for developing functional accounts of the grand social system that we call “society”, without limiting the potential for ongoing analysis of the sub-systems that make it up. Luhmann (1995, 2) himself acknowledges this in the introduction to his monograph Social Systems, where he notes that the “general systems theory thus unexpectedly becomes a theory of the general system”.

Making use of such a general theory is easier said than done, for the traditional Luhmannian approach has a way of pulling investigations into a realm of theoretical abstraction from which there is no escape. Hence, while passing over empirical detail was an acceptable cost for Luhmann, actively applying systems theory to specific cases requires a derivative approach. My revised framework does this by adjusting Luhmann’s hierarchy as follows (Figure 5): within the environment in which we find ourselves there are social systems (e.g. education; politics; economics), in which there are increasingly specialised sub-systems (e.g. education > higher education > universities > academic disciplines). In short, while the traditional approach treats the environment as everything that falls outside of communication, society as the “autopoietic system par-excellence” (Luhmann 1995, 408), and systems as domains within this broader system – I shift this all of this down a notch.
Whereas *environment* is traditionally the domain outside of communication, it is now taken to refer to the all-encompassing and deeply complex realm of structural and cultural forces: the modern world, along with the physical environment and the psychological dimensions of the world as well.\(^\text{46}\) As such, technological developments, changing political and policy contexts, market trends and competition within a sector, can count as environmental disruptions to a system. Hence, much like how the natural forces of climate, terrain and flora and fauna comprise the abstract general “environment” for the environmental scientist, so the all-encompassing dimensions of modern society comprise the “environment” in my derivative framework.

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\(^\text{46}\) This is logically implied by Luhmann’s approach. If systems are wholly self-referential, then it follows that everything outside any system (including other systems) must be part of the uncommunicable realm of the “environment”.

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As with before, a *social system* works to reduce this complexity by splitting the environment into different domains through the functional development and maintenance of boundaries. *Sub-systems* perform the same role in a narrower sense, allowing for more specialisation through differentiation. This narrower focus is why I refer to universities, which are technically a differentiated sub-system of higher education, which in turn is a sub-system of the education system, simply as the “university system”. I am not denying that all such systems are sub-systems of a sort. Rather, I am taking advantage of the concision granted by the fact that, by the same logical token, all sub-systems are systems. Once the university system is formulated as such, we can consider the relational and operational factors pertaining to its respective sub-systems, such as in respect to academe and management.

While we will get into these conceptual formulations soon enough, it is first worth outlining the theoretical concepts that I draw on in my analysis. In regard to functional distinctions and continuity, let us first turn to the basic *elements* that work to define the boundaries, characterise, and orientate the operational and reproductive processes of each social system. The element that will be of the most interest in the discussions to come (and which is often overlooked in the traditional approach) is *role*, as it is around this element that constellations of ideals and aspirations, along with norms, narratives and expectations – in short of *culture* – are formed in conjunction with a sense of organisational, professional and personal identity (the role that is specific to the university system, “academic” is dealt with in Chapter 9). Once this is done, I further consider the limitations of the traditional approach, and turn to an outline of four further Luhmannian concepts that are key to the ability of systems theory to account not only for structural continuity, but for contingency and change: these are *autopoiesis, differentiation, operational closure*, and *interactional openness*. The chapter concludes by considering how this derivative approach can help elucidate the limitations and flexibility of operations in the context of a university.
Elements

Table 6 lists essential elements of five broadly conceived modern systems, and tentatively adds: the university system, which is rooted in education; and neoliberalism, which is rooted in economics and politics. Note that this list is not exhaustive, for a system can conceivably use multiple binary codes and have more than one function. The elements focussed on in the analysis are intended to assist understanding of the system to be discussed, as opposed to reducing it to an exclusive set of single elements.

Table 6: General social systems and elements, and a tentative formulation of university and neoliberal elements

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>General Social Systems</th>
<th>1) Binary Codes</th>
<th>2) General Mediums</th>
<th>3) Basis of Authority</th>
<th>4) Language Discourse</th>
<th>5) Social Functions</th>
<th>6) Roles</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Pass/fail, learning/ non-learning</td>
<td>Grades, credentials</td>
<td>Curriculum</td>
<td>Pedagogical, comparative</td>
<td>Transmit assessable knowledge</td>
<td>Teacher, student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science</td>
<td>True/false, supported/ unsupported</td>
<td>Evidence or facts</td>
<td>Credentials</td>
<td>Theory, method</td>
<td>Render truth claims</td>
<td>Scientist, peer-reviewer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economy</td>
<td>Transaction/ non-transaction</td>
<td>Money</td>
<td>Economics, Capital</td>
<td>Prices, economics</td>
<td>Value goods and services</td>
<td>Producer, seller consumer, owner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Law</td>
<td>Legal/ illegal, Innocent, guilty</td>
<td>Laws, justice</td>
<td>The Law of the Land</td>
<td>Legal Jargon</td>
<td>Render legal judgments</td>
<td>Judge, lawyer, defendant, plaintiff, jury</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion</td>
<td>Sacred/ profane</td>
<td>Doctrine</td>
<td>God</td>
<td>Word of God, prayer, faith</td>
<td>Execute God’s Will</td>
<td>Believer, leader, heretic</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Particular Systems</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
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<th></th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>University</td>
<td>Scholarly/ unscholarly</td>
<td>Academic knowledge</td>
<td>Expertise, credentials, Reviewed literature</td>
<td>Disciplines, academic jargon</td>
<td>Generate, preserve, disseminate knowledge</td>
<td>The academic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neoliberal</td>
<td>Profitable/ unprofitable</td>
<td>Measurable outcomes, performance indicators</td>
<td>The Market, admin and senate</td>
<td>Competition, economics, opportunity, uncertainty</td>
<td>Privatisation, limited deregulation and re-regulation</td>
<td>Economic actor: the self-entrepreneur</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Following Luhmann (1989) and Rempel (1996), I identify five elements that characterise systems: 1) binary codes; 2) basis of authority; 3) mediums of communication; 4) language of social communication; and 5) social functions. Drawing on Aakvaag’s (2015, 347) work on institutional differentiation, I add to this: 6) roles. The form that each element takes is distinctive to its system and provides the basis for the structural aspect of my framework.

1) **Binary code.** The function of this element is to reduce complexity by framing reality in terms of a basic dichotomy. Simply put, this is a way for the system to frame the world in terms of *this* rather than *that*, in a way that is conducive to the purpose and operations of that system. In a manner of speaking, a binary code *belongs to its respective system*: it is that system’s binary code and does not usually have much relevance beyond it. For example, the purpose of the legal system is to reduce the complexity of what social actions are permissible in a given territory (such as a nation) or sector (such as transnational markets) by rendering judgments using the legal/illegal binary. A person crossing the road can therefore negotiate this action and be judged as behaving legally or illegally according to those conditions that come under the purview of the law. Hence, the presence of a pedestrian-crossing is brought into view as a matter of legal consequence, while the race, gender and religious orientation of the pedestrian is overlooked as being irrelevant (that is, unless such characteristics themselves figure into the law – as was the case with road crossing regulations in South Africa under apartheid). In the religious system, the binary works to distinguish between the sacred and the profane: life and afterlife, heaven and earth, mortal and immortal, perfect and imperfect, and so on. Whether or not one has been guilty of jaywalking is irrelevant to these religious concerns and could only come into the purview of religion if it were connected to revelations of good and evil (i.e. being “sinful”).

The most prevalent binary code for the education system is pass/fail. This distinction is central to the operations of the system’s subjects, be it students
(performing in such a way as to pass, rather than fail) or teachers (for whom applying this code is a central duty). Generally speaking, only that which is framed in terms of formal educational evaluations is subject to this binary. For instance, going to class becomes a matter of passing attendance, and voicing an opinion becomes a graded and therefore passable contribution. Conversely, a parent does not issue a formal pass to an obedient child; likewise, if a person in court fails to submit the appropriate documentation, this does not mean that they have failed a formal learning assessment.

2) **Generalized medium of communication.** This allows the operations of the system to be carried out and communicated without too much need for context. In the economic system, this medium is money. Money enables people to engage in transactions with minimal need for words or human contact – indeed this happens in shops and on markets all over the world at every moment. In the legal system it is justice that connects the plaintiff, defendant, judge and jury as subjects of the legal system. In the religious system it is religious doctrine, in science it is evidence, and in the political system it is the formal distribution of political power. In both the scientific system and in terms of academic research, the medium of communication is knowledge that has successfully passed the peer-review process, which, at least ideally, involves ostensibly disinterested experts acting as gatekeepers for scientific and scholarly publications (Hermanowicz and Clayton 2018; Johnson and Hermanowicz 2017). Provided that the theories and methods involved are deemed acceptable, this allows scientists and scholars to share an understanding of a given scientific claim as being true or false, quite independently of who the scientist is, who they work for, or to what ends. In the education system the medium of communication is grades – which can be understood and evaluated independently of any knowledge of their backstory or owner; in the university sub-system this is extended to publication records and academic “impact” measures, which ostensibly quantify and represent the productivity and influence of a given academic. The generalized medium of each system is like a common resource that people exchange as part of their functional performance within that system: religions interpret their doctrines,
scientists have their facts, transactions are made with money, and a grade of 80 is better than 75.

3) **Basis of authority.** A system operates via an internal logic that is all its own. This logic is self-referential, with the reach and limitations of systemic processes being justified according to its own distinctive elements. Whatever queries or conflicts may arise from a system may be responded to by the same system – for what good is a system that is not an authority on its own operations? Hence, even if a law seems to be unfair, it remains that “the law’s the law”; if the cost of a product or the decision to cut expenditure in any particular way seems excessive, then this can be explained according to the market; a seemingly pointless assessment can be crucial to overall grades; a scientist who argues based on facts that are incomprehensible to the layman is supported by the strength of their credentials; and for a theologian the problem of evil is met with the expansive mysteriousness of God. In the education system, the curriculum provides the basis for teaching and the teachers are its arbiters, allowing them to tell students what material they should be dealing with, what they are expected to learn from it, and how they are expected to go about demonstrating their knowledge accordingly.

This element extends to the monopoly that one system can have over the legitimate application of its other elements. For instance, the so-called “illegal moves” that occur in sporting contests will only constitute a “real legal issue” if they are recognized as such by the legal system; without this recognition, an “illegal” rugby-tackle is a legally inconsequential figure of speech. Moreover, if the illegal move were to become a legal issue, then power would be transferred from the roles of the sport system (the players, referees and sporting tribunals) to those who have the credentials required for determining a legally binding decision, such as a judge and jury. This too is a self-referential process, for the legal/illegal binary can be determined according to the basis of authority of the legal system according to its own internal logic.
Any challenges to this authority must be communicable in a way that is coherent to the rules of the system. In bureaucratic speak this is called “following the proper channels”: if you have a problem with the courts, appeal; if you have a religious query, pray or seek council in the scripture or its interpreters; if you have a problem with your grade, ask for reassessment. Veering from these proper channels can prove perilous, and often reveal the rigidness of rules and the Kafkaesque absurdity of systemic limitations: beyond the ruling of a “crime of passion”, the too-violent athlete cannot reject a legal verdict based on their “passion for the game”; the failing student who appeals to the teacher’s grasp of the Divine might as well be speaking in tongues; and the individual who is faced with formal rules that are both unreasonable and internally contradictory must bend to them nonetheless. Simply put, the confounding wisdom that “rules are rules” and the deferment to those seen as authority figures will reliably occur in every social system.

4) **Use of language.** This is the broadest of the elements and refers to the discourses with which a system frames the horizon of possibilities and corresponding concerns. Simply put, there exists in each major system a general way of speaking: prices and economics in the economic system, legal jargon in the courts, curriculum based and pedagogical language in educational institutions. This facilitates possibilities for framing the world and coordinating action: depending on the context, we can treat people as legal entities, economic actors, organic systems, or credentialed authorities, and then behave accordingly. This also involves limitations, whereby certain realities or alternative courses of action are rendered invisible, irrelevant or incoherent: according to the legal system there are no legal alternatives to the rule of law; what is true and what is false is a matter of fact for the scientific system; the concerns of the economic system are to do with market forces, rather than with philosophy or personal experiences. Hence, scientific language cannot account for the sacred, a scientific falsehood cannot be made true through legal jargon, and the vagaries of “life experience” do not figure into formal education. As we shall see in the considerations of the neoliberal university, this element plays into the interactions between systems in
interesting ways. For instance, the discourses that are used by the organisational elite of the managerial sub-system may well paint the world in a way that is quite at odds with the views and values of those that identify more with academe – with the pre-eminence of a given group and corresponding sub-system being apparent via the dominance of their corresponding discursive practices.

5) Social Function. This is the general purpose of a system’s operations. Supposing for a moment that a system could speak and attend dull parties, I imagine this as its answer to the question “So, what do you do?” These operations are functional insofar that they make meaning and organisation possible according to the internal logic of the system. It is crucial to note that this element is more like a blind and basic guidance mechanism, which is partly why internally rational institutional processes can still be unreasonable. For instance, while the purpose of the legal system is to render legal judgments, this does not guarantee fairness, only that a very narrow formulation of “justice” is served. The function of the economic system is to render the world in terms of potential values and transactions, with all things either being subject, or irrelevant, to it accordingly. The function of the scientific system is to discover facts about the world, although not all scientific discoveries are useful, and some can potentially cause significant disruptions and harm. Simply put, the social function speaks to the structural conditions that orient processes, rather than to the value systems that guide specific strategies toward desired outcomes.

According to Rempel (1996), the social function of the education system is to evaluate students in preparation for future opportunities. To be sure, this is an important part of the education system. However, the focus on future opportunities runs the risk of conflating function with efficacy, insofar as it ascribes a forward-thinking and utilitarian orientation to a system that does not necessarily require either. Consider a graded compulsory rote learning exercise that would make no impact on final grades; here we see a hypothetical that has potentially no educational benefit, but which is still
functional in that it reproduces the modes of authority and communication of the education system. Indeed, hypothetically speaking, any number of things can be rendered educational by subjecting them to the elements of the education system: whether it be home economics, dancing, theoretical physics, homeopathy, political indoctrination, surfing, etiquette – whatever the lesson, and quite independently of future opportunities, the general social function (or “continuing line”) of rendering assessable knowledge remains the functional “point”. A similar argument can be made for the scientific system and the academic sub-system, which have both shown a proclivity for revealing facts and furthering knowledge without necessarily caring for the opportunities (or calamities) that such efforts might lead to. This too is evident in the values and attitudes that these systems are popularly associated with, and in the resistance that has occurred on the part of scientists and academics to the pressure (often exerted by managers and external stakeholders) to seek out “innovations” and produce knowledge that can be measured, privatised and made profitable. In this respect, it can be argued that science and academe share functions that are not in themselves necessarily concerned with instrumental ends or “social goods”.

6) Roles. This refers to a functional position that an individual occupies in relation to a system. In adopting a distinctive and impersonal role that is conditional on the system, the individual becomes a subject of that system, and thus subject-to those conditions that limit and facilitate actions and relations according to its own internal logic. Hence – insofar that we are discussing the characteristics of traditional academe – the teacher, rather than the policeman, has educational authority over the student, and the student, rather than the customer, is expected to sit an assessment that they may well feel to be a waste of time (though, of course, these lines can be blurred – for instance, a paying student at a neoliberal university may be permitted to pass a unit despite not submitting an assessment for the sake of retention and hence more fees). This is functional insofar that it reduces human complexity and personal details to that which is relevant to the system: reducing people to silhouettes before the systemic horizon of possibilities. It is therefore the role,
rather than the people who occupy it, that is of concern here: the political office, rather than the individual politician; the rights afforded to all legal defendants, rather than the apparent guilt of the suspect in question; the formal duties of the university teacher, rather than the ideals of the academic; the structure of the workforce, rather than the troubles of individual workers.

The role element is a constellation of conditions that people learn to comply with, as opposed to something that they can alter at will. Aakvaag (2015, 350) relates this impersonal aspect to what he calls “desire-independent” rights and obligations, whereby the possibilities for what a person “should” be doing are provided by the system to which they are subject: obey the law and be protected by it; apply yourself to the assessment and be rewarded by good grades; produce research through the “proper channels” and potentially get published, and so on. For instance, suppose that the university teacher regretted delivering the failing grade to a student that had proven to be particularly bright and polite. Both parties have limited power in this situation, for they are subject-to the structural conditions of the system by their respective roles, which have bracketed out such personable qualities as brightness and politeness. Indeed, beyond delivering and accepting the failing grade, the only other courses of action must follow the “proper channels”; the student could request reassessment by another teacher, or the teacher could grant the student an additional assessment.

So far as these structural conditions go, being subject-to a system in the negative sense without playing an active role does not satisfy the positive aspects of this element; it would be superfluous and specious to count the man at the stop-sign as a subject of the legal system merely by virtue of the fact that he is not breaking the law. Nor should we count any role-playing in which the individual is not subject-to the system in a positive sense. The alternative is to count as a judge any tourist who visits a court, dons the wig, and shouts a verdict – needless to say, such role-playing is not the real thing. Consider what this means for the values and qualities associated with an institutional role. According to the university at which they work and the government to
whom they pay taxes, an academic is an employee and it is to this that their duties refer. It matters not whether they agree with the decisions of management, take pride in their work, or aspire to a secure and fulfilling career. All that matters is that they continue to uphold their institutional duties. Hence, the role is not so much a cultural matter as it is a functional one: an academic can produce a string of inconsequential publications and be deemed an “active” researcher, or be seen as quite the opposite due to their choice to publish what may be very good work in media that is not counted by the university, such as on an online blog.

**Continuity and change**

A system is self-referential insofar that it the draws on its own elements, according to its own internal logic, to operate and adapt to change. Luhmann (1988) adopts the biological concept *autopoiesis* to explain how these self-referential processes maintain and reproduce a system. The concept refers to a process of circular self-production, in which the elements of a system are reproduced by the elements of that system (Seidl 2004, 5). Drawing on the concept’s roots in biology for an analogy, consider the cells in a human body: they reproduce themselves through their own processes (and so reproduce their own reproductive conditions), to the point that the entire organism will eventually be composed of new cells – and yet, despite this total change of composite parts, the organic system itself, the human body, remains. Now, consider an institution that, despite continuous changes of employees, organizational structures, agendas, even physical location and appearance, remains as the same recognisable institution. For both the biological system and social system, this continuity is possible so long as the reproductive processes particular to the system in question continue to be reproduced. Thus, an autopoietic system consists of a distinctive network of operational conditions and reproductive processes that reproduce its own operational conditions and reproductive processes.
As Collini (2012, 8) observes, the university system offers an excellent example of this via the PhD degree:

Universities are among the very few institutions whose rationale includes selecting and shaping their own future staff. Schools educate everyone: it is not a distinctive part of their remit to form and prepare future school-teachers. Companies recruit new staff and train them in the appropriate techniques, but this is a secondary task, not part of their primary rationale, which is to produce goods and services and make a profit. By contrast, the forming of future scholars and scientists is not just an instrumental necessity for universities, but intrinsic to their character.

Building on this observation, those looking for secure academic employment in a university are typically expected to undertake the post-graduate degrees offered by the system as both a formal and cultural rite of passage. Indeed, the PhD is the primary means of training both the next generation of academic staff and the stewards of the academic disciplines (Austin 2002; Golde and Walker 2006). Only those who have received a PhD are typically permitted to supervise and review PhD candidates. As May (et al. 2011) observes, this has important ties to the reliance that Australian universities have had on PhD candidates for their undergraduate, mostly first year, teaching, with such work being framed as part of the candidate’s “academic apprenticeship”. Many senior academics still opt to give teaching positions to these inexperienced candidates, rather than to more experienced teachers, for this reason (along with other reasons, such as to help provide them with an income as they complete their degree). Hence, the PhD is part of a system that enables academe to maintain its own boundaries through the production of academics.

As systems must interact with and respond to other systems, they should never be thought of as being completely independent from the environment. They can, however, be seen as operatively closed, so long as the operational conditions that guide their reactions remain the same (Seidl 2004, 3). For instance, while laws, transactions, and learning material may change, so long as the distinctions and elements of the legal, economic, or education system
remain, their operative closure is kept intact and said system is maintained. Conversely, if the operative closure breaks down, such as if the education system fully replaces the pass/fail binary with payment/non-payment, then, at least in this limited respect, it has been subsumed into the economic system.\footnote{Of course, it is never truly just one or the other, because a system never has complete operative closure. Consequently, pass/fail has become tied to payment/non-payment, such as when a student is not awarded their grades due to the non-payment of fees. There are other examples where different system rationales and processes have become highly intertwined in universities, such as the prior mentioned student-consumer conflation.}
If all systems adopted the payment/non-payment binary as their core focus, then the economic system itself would lose its operational closure and become an indistinct dimension of the environment. Hence, Considine (2006, 258) argues that the survival of a system is undermined by the erosion of its distinctions from the broader environment; or, to repeat the hyperbole of Thatcher, if all our institutions were subsumed into the market there would be “no such thing as society” (and even then, the market would need to allow for distinctions in order to function).

While systems are operatively closed, they must adapt to the environment to survive, and so must maintain their interactional openness (Seidl 2004, 3). This occurs primarily through the adaptive process known as differentiation, which involves a system splitting itself up into sub-systems that might better respond to challenges arising from the environment (Luhmann 1982, 230). This is comparable to Durkheim’s (1964) notion of the division of labour as the basis of the modern social system, marking the shift from mechanical systems of small scale, interdependent groups with little specialisation, to organic systems of increasingly complicated processes and specialised roles. Differentiated sub-systems deal with different dimensions of the environment according to the elements of the broader system that they are located within, as well as the more specialised elements that the sub-system has developed to deal with the changing conditions that relate directly to it. For example, as universities have adapted to an increasingly globalized and unpredictable market-oriented environment, they have developed new marketing and public relations offices, and established ancillary campuses and recruitment offices,
overseas, which in turn are coupled with new domestic offices and discourses. This is all to adapt to changing external conditions, such as the conditions of income via government funding, broadening and increasingly competitive student markets, and possibilities of developing ties to new domestic and foreign organisations and industries.

Differentiation allows the environment to be thought of not only in terms of the general society in which the system operates, but also in terms of how the external environment influences the development of sub-systems, thereby creating within a system a complex and dynamic internal environment. This is reflected in how universities are comprised of differentiated academic sub-systems that focus on different domains of research and skill reproduction, and deal with different domains of the environment, such as technology, biology, ecology, psychology, laws, markets, art, politics, religion, and so on. Coupled with differentiation, this diversity is reflected in the formulation and expansion of degrees types and courses. In short, a new problem is identified (e.g. more international students are required to attract government funding, or new technology leads to the development of new fields and disciplines) and so new sub-systems are developed (e.g. international-marketing offices, or new degrees in, for example, computer science or counter-terrorism).

As some of these developments are in response to unpredicted disruptions, we can talk of contingent differentiation (for instance, the development of a computer science department was contingent on the invented technologies). On the other hand, the attempts of universities to capitalize on changes and differentiate themselves from the competition, such as by marketing their own specialised “products” (be it training in computer science, or the development of potentially valuable intellectual property and prestige through research), reflect something more along the lines of strategic differentiation (with the development of courses in counter terrorism, women’s studies, and sport science being recent examples of this). Of course, it could rightly be argued that this is not a valid distinction, as the strategic focus of an organisation is
ultimately a contingent development. Hence, the distinction is best interpreted as a means of distinguishing between the differentiation of the traditional approach as it concerns the external environment, and the seemingly more deliberate (and hence “strategic”) operations and distinctions that occur in respect to a sub-system and how this influences the internal environment of the system.

Significantly, differentiation can reflect hierarchical relations and interdependences, insofar that each system stems from a parent system, which in turn is differentiated from further sub-systems as they adapt to the environment (Figure 6). For instance, academic and administrative roles are established and dissolved as parts of the university, rather than the other way around. This also relates to operational closure and interactional openness, as well as different levels of organisational authority, in that a higher system has disproportionate influence over the operations of lower systems; hence, university management can influence the differentiated systems of administration and teaching more than the other way around.

![Figure 6: Simple depiction of the university system hierarchy](image-url)
In line with this system > sub-system hierarchy, those organizational parts that are subject to the institution are generally not able to dissolve one another, though they can become more or less influential over time. Hence, while management and academe are situated side by side in the above table, the former can develop increasing control over the latter, and this could in turn influence the relationships between each subsequent sub-system: thus, as universities are put under mounting pressure to act as financially minded businesses, administrators, who might have once served simply as support for academics, may instead (and in many universities already have) come to have more authority over academics as “middle-managers”. By the same token, there is always the possibility that changes that benefit one part of the system and its respective subjects may be disruptive to other parts of the system and resisted accordingly. For instance, a managerial strategy intended to increase academic publication rates may improve the competitiveness of the university and the employability of its researchers, while producing and maintaining structures and expectations that undermine academic autonomy, undervalue teaching, and implement disruptive new criteria to justify new priorities. It is in this respect that the presented framework can account for conflict.

While collaboration and conflict are consistent with the focus on organization that is at the heart of systems theory, conflict – including those system-level contradictions that produce conflict in the system – has been largely ignored. This is due to Luhmann’s (1988, 12) focus on a “radically anti-humanist, radically anti-regional and radically constructivist concept of society”. However, Wan (2011) points out that Luhmann’s approach is not the only perspective possible in systems theory, and proposes a critical realist approach in which some semblance of reality informs our comprehension of the world and vice-versa. In fact, there is nothing intrinsic to systems theory that necessitates such a radical constructivist approach, particularly if Luhmann’s assumption of operative closure is questioned. This is picked up along different lines by Jürgen Habermas who, having co-authored with Luhmann and debated him on several occasions, warns that theories concerned only with developing scientific frameworks can lead to a break
between understanding and application (see Bausch 1997). The result of this break can be thought of as a framework that, given the fair scholarly treatment of the material, coherently fits together to make a closed circle whose structural integrity is sourced from within and threatened from without. This allows a theory to sustain its claim to objective scientific certainty without depending on the empirical observations that connect the scientific method with practical knowledge. By casting this break as a pillar of systems theory, Luhmann responds to the quintessentially Marxian principle that theory ought to have practical intention by relegating this understanding of practicality to the humanist sociology that he rejects.

Even if we look beyond Luhmann to uses of systems theory that do attempt to account for human actions (e.g. Aakvaag 2015; Considine 2006; Rempel 1996), the remaining tendency to veer away from considerations of conflict is not surprising – for the core problem remains a functionalist one: how is organised complexity possible? With the operational description, conflict involves the contradictory interests of groups, and so is not a functional condition of organization, but a contingent consequence or by-product of it. Moreover, conflict is different to disruption, which stems from impersonal systems adapting to impersonal environmental conditions, rather than shared or contradictory interests. In other words, while the conditions of conflict can be systemic (as is the case with market-based economic and political systems), the question of organisation must precede the question of conflict. Hence, as systems theory relies on second-order observations, it makes sense that conflict is overlooked as a human-centric concern. If we follow this rationale, it would be pointless to consider a theory that seeks to understand society via accounts of conflicting values and interests (Luhmann 1988, 30).

Leydesdorff (2002) introduces another dimension: the misunderstandings that inevitably attend social action and result in unintended change. Here, the act of communication brings into being new alternatives that arise from the resulting uncertainty as part of the intention to reduce complexity. Giddens’
(1984) structuration theory is an exemplar of this approach, which sees structures that influence action and action that reproduces structures as the two sides of the same coin. From this perspective, systems might constrain the actions and frame the interests of people, but they do not determine actions and interests in a comprehensive way. Rather, there is scope – be it by differentiation, conscious reflection, interactional openness, or an interpretive gap – for people to act in ways contrary to the norms and limitations imposed on them by systemic conditions.

Luhmann cannot have it both ways: systems cannot be overly deterministic yet mutable enough to adapt to changes in the environment. People are the vehicles through which social systems reproduce, as Giddens (1984) states, and therefore they are the agents of disruption and change. Yes, systems of communication facilitate organisation and its permutations, but, as Mingers (2014, 103) observes: “Systems, structures, practices or whatever do not, of themselves, act – only people can do that”. In short, this is a critique of the “mechanistic worldview”, or “robot model”, of society being composed of fundamentally closed and self-referential systems that, in tending toward some imagined equilibrium, fails to account for the significance of human action and interactional openness (Bertalanffy 1968; Moeller and Valentinov 2012; both cited in Valentinov 2014, 14). There must be some elasticity in the system to allow for innovation, and because people are the vehicles for the maintenance of systems, this elasticity can in part be found in the choices made by actors – and, to the extent that it is possible to account for such things, the discernible interests, pressures and rationales behind these choices.

This is the reasoning behind the derivative approach being presented: while it is possible to argue that systems (through norms, linguistic binaries, etc.) limit the range of options, or even positively shape choices, this is by no means self-evident in all cases. Moreover, as people operate in groups and within sub-systems that have different purposes and levels of influence, so too are the real-world processes of reproduction and change intimately tied to
the situations and interests of different groups operating in organisational and institutional capacities within a systemic and broader environmental context. Thus, while I draw on systems theory for its conceptual usefulness, influences pertaining to values, interests and conflict in the internal environment are central to the empirical usefulness of my approach.

To show what I mean by this, and to illustrate some notable blind-spots of the traditional approach, let us briefly consider the example provided by a crisis that unfolded in a public university in Western Australia. This crisis took place against the backdrop of efforts by the Australian Federal Government (the main funder of public universities) to introduce a set of reforms that aim to deregulate course fees for students. Already facing budgetary struggles as a result of being overshadowed by larger cross-town rivals, the gumtree University had initiated a series of reforms aimed at restructuring its teaching and research practices in an effort to become more economically viable. In particular, a strategic plan had been initiated that would see the University become a research – rather than teaching – intensive institution.

A new Vice Chancellor (VC) was appointed with the task of overseeing these changes but was confronted with the obstacle of engrained practices in the traditional university model – namely, tenured academics that tended to pursue their own research interests, rather than align their work with the University’s consolidated research agenda. The VC’s strategy to deal with this was to allegedly push out senior academics from their posts and offer a suite of voluntary redundancies, whilst simultaneously recruiting his own brigade of senior leaders, many of which were acquaintances of the VC. A group of some thirty-disgruntled staff-members complained to the Chancellor – who is usually just a figurehead comparable to the chairperson of a corporation – about the activities of the VC and his senior leadership in allegedly bullying staff members, appointing friends to senior posts, mishandling expenses, and channelling resources into the pet research areas of the VC. The Chancellor initiated an internal investigation, with the results
warranting the submission of a report to the Western Australian Corruption and Crime Commission (CCC) and the suspension of the VC, who subsequently resigned.

One might argue that the University functioned as it expected: it responded to disruptions from the environment (changing funding conditions put forward by the Government) by seeking to focus on research production (with the administrative systems thereby exerting new conditions onto the academic systems, which in turn furthered the divide between teaching and research). The intervention of the legal system (via the CCC) led to the University’s governing body, the Senate, to address alleged impropriety among its senior leadership and clear the way for new VC and VC-support appointments, all in accordance with its Constitution. In short, the institution adapted to changing environmental conditions through hierarchically exerted and operationally closed differentiation, and similarly responded to internal disruptions while maintaining interactional openness to the authority of the legal system. Ultimately, the system roles and operations were preserved, though the occupants and processes underwent changes.

While time will tell if the University’s strategic plan changes following these events, there are some important points to derive from this account:

1. Universities cover several sub-systems (e.g. teaching, research, management), and have options regarding which of these they will focus on and how. *This highlights the complexity and flexibility of the system.*

2. These “strategic” decisions may well be defined by a single sub-system, but they are conceived in respect of and responded to by a variety of sub-systems and groups. *This highlights the internal environment of the system,* via both the disproportionate levels of influence of a single sub-system, as well as the interdependent relationship between sub-systems.
3. The behaviour of these sub-systems and the groups within them can be unexpected within the predictive parameters of each sub-system, leading to issues that they are ill-prepared for. *This highlights the potential disruptiveness of actors within and beyond the limits of rules and roles.*

4. The penetration of the political system (via the Federal Government’s reforms) and the legal system (via the CCC) show that the functioning of the university and the higher education system in general is not a purely internal affair. *This highlights the disproportionate relationship between systems, as well as that the smooth functioning of universities can depend on intervention from other systems, and that such interventions are contingent as they can be called on by some actors and resisted by others.*

5. Through strategic differentiation, an organisation’s internal environment can become just as complex and disruptive as the external environment. *This highlights how operational closure and interactional openness, as well as how the relations between subsystems, and the operations that they carry out and how, can be influenced by a given subsystem or group.*

It can certainly be said that, even with the above example, the ongoing result is that the system is still maintained and reproduced in one form or another. However, the specific functions that the organisation focuses on, and how it deals with threats can lead to greater internal complexity, via the potential for internally disruptive conflicts, and thus the need for intervention and further adaptation. While Luhmannian social systems theory can help us to conceptualise the functional conditions of continuity and change, it falls short when it comes to how these processes play out: it can tell us the abstract “how” and “why” of systemic change, but not much about the contextual and the practical. Such understandings require investigation not only of structural conditions, but also of the group and sub-system-centred factors that shape organisational contexts and situations, and which are shaped by them in turn. This is not to imply that political manoeuvrings within institutions are central
to system-analysis, but simply to show that such matters are among the factors that need to be accounted for when analysing institutional and organisational change.

It is in attempting to account for these complexities and conflicts that my approach deviates from the traditional one. My reasoning is as follows: the survival of a system is supported by the operative closure that distinguishes it from other systems and the interactional openness needed for adaptation. This occurs through differentiation, whereby sub-systems are developed to meet the changing demands of the environment. As these demands change, so must the sub-systems. Now, if it is accepted that differentiation involves the development of a complex internal environment within systems, then each sub-system has the potential to develop its own distinctions and operational trajectories. If it is also accepted that sub-systems prioritise their own roles and survival, then a system thus involves a complex internal environment of sub-systems, the form of which is contingent on the adaptive processes within the system and the broader external environment. In this way, systems theory can account for conflicts between systems, sub-systems and changing internal and external conditions (Figure 7).

**Figure 7: Conflict as consequence of system differentiation**
With the reformulated approach to social systems theory now developed, let us return to the university system. The next chapter focusses on the medium of knowledge and the academic role, drawing on more interview material to show how these conceptual formulations are more commonly articulated. Changes to the treatment of knowledge and the academic role are framed via the prioritising of interactional openness and strategic differentiation along the lines of neoliberalism, which in turn is reflected in the growing influence of administrators and the corresponding efforts to make universities more competitive and reimage the academic workforce – hence the apparent conflict between the values and goals of universities and the burgeoning academic precariat.
Chapter 9

Formulating the academic sub-system

The modern university is an institution of higher education that conducts research and teaching with respect to technical skills and discourse that can collectively be referred to as “academic”. This is done in respect to a medium that can be concisely called “academic knowledge”, which, pragmatically speaking, is supposed to encapsulate and advance human understanding. The fields of academic knowledge include not only the physical environment (the physical sciences) and mental processes (psychology), but also other social systems (the social sciences, economics, business, law) and intellectual and cultural systems (the arts) – so it is that universities treat all environments and phenomena as potential areas for academic inquiry. While universities share their educational elements with other learning institutions, such as secondary schools and technical colleges, they are distinguished by being the primary generators of academic knowledge through conducting research and (ideally speaking) emphasising intellectual autonomy. Hence, universities are often seen as being at the top of the education hierarchy, from which they maintain academic standards and professional skills, and generate knowledge that spreads downwards to the other domains of education, as well as outwards to the public through the media, culture, policy and industry (Levin 2004). In this respect, it makes sense that universities are often viewed by scholars, professionals, politicians and the general-public as being the preeminent “institution of knowledge” in terms of teaching and research.48 In this chapter, I draw on this initial formulation of universities, along with the derivative approach to systems theory, in order to conceptualise the university system and further elucidate the “academic” part of the academic precariat in the context of the changes that contemporary universities are undergoing.

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48 Whether this is socially valued is another matter – some sections of society view academics and their practices to be disengaged from reality or to smack of elitism.
Universities are composed of numerous sub-systems, including but not limited to: management; human resources; marketing; student services; information technologies; security; equity; counselling; career hubs; and academic sub-systems, which include teaching, research and various field or discipline-based associations. Reflecting the impact of neoliberalism on universities and the relevance of systems theory to understanding this impact, the former sub-systems are supposed to primarily play a supportive function for the academic sub-systems, but with rising managerialism ostensibly geared toward accountability and income-generation, this is decreasingly the case (Ward 2012, 59). Academic teaching and research are further sub-divided into differentiated departments and schools based on various specialised disciplines and fields of study. It is in this respect that universities converge with the scientific system, not just through the delivery of scientific education (for teaching and research regarding external systems requires engagement with the elements and practices of such external systems), but through maintaining the operational conditions of the scientific enterprise. More precisely, producing academic knowledge involves a range of elements from the scientific system, such as peer-review. Institutionally speaking, the two systems also converge through scientific organisations and research institutes, which use similar standards and technologies to universities, can be based on university campuses, and recruit people into roles based in part on their university performance.

The conglomeration of these different systems presents problems in terms of continuity and change. As Meister-Scheytt and Scheytt (2005, 89) observe: “the multifaceted disposition of the university as an organisation ‘stretched’ among diverse sub-systems of the society, causes paradoxical effects that make change in universities complex”. Similarly, in considering the place of ideals concerning teaching and research in contemporary higher education, Morgan (2011, 240) asserts that “comparisons cannot be made system-wide and possibly even institution-wide”. This complexity has in part been addressed by Delanty (2001) who, in focussing on the academic elements that still largely define the university system, takes to task the formulation of
universities as “institutions of knowledge”. Driven by his observations of the
democratisation and instrumentalisation of universities, Delanty argues that
understandings of knowledge (and, by extension, institutions of knowledge)
are being subjected to far-reaching processes of rationalisation. To frame
these changes, Delanty draws on Gibbons, Limoges, Nowotny, Schwartzman,
Scott and Trow’s (1994) heuristic distinction between mode-1 knowledge and
mode-2 knowledge, which roughly follows the pure science/applied science
(or theoretical/practical) dichotomy in academic discourse.

Mode-1 knowledge is characterised by understandings of different cognitive
models and their historical contexts within the broader academic community.
It is sympathetic to slow research and esoteric discussions that do not
necessarily factor into the economic concerns or political agendas of
governments, business and industry, or university managers. Hence, the kind
of work involved in developing and disseminating mode-1 knowledge can be
associated with the more “traditional” or “Golden Age” conceptions of the
academic profession. In describing these older forms of professional practices
in universities, specifically with respect to the rationale behind the pursuit of
such knowledge, Ward (2012, 66) draws on Weber’s notion of substantive
rationality, which he describes as “a social ordering and form of action that is
based on and oriented by a broader set of ideals and ethics … [that can be]
largely unconcerned with practical outcomes”. Ward continues:

Under such conditions, people in knowledge organizations have
historically spoken of and are motivated by such things as the “love of
learning,” “teaching as a calling,” “knowledge as enlightenment” or the
importance of students’ being “well rounded,” “enlightened” or “good
citizens.” While these ideals may be relative and their fulfillment
unrealizable, they have historically provided an emblematic basis and
orientation for moral action within the group.

Looking at this formulation, we can see the parallels between the aspirational,
if unreachable, ideals described by Humboldt and Newman, Collini and
Connell, and (as we shall see more of soon) by the interviewed PhD students.
Moreover, as the personal experiences that I described earlier in this thesis
illustrate, the references to the “love of learning” and “research as a calling” intertwine via ideals of pursuing knowledge “as its own end”, as well as the aspiration to “become an academic” and, in so doing, defend such rationales. In short, mode-1 does not just pertain to a kind of academic knowledge, but to pervasive academic attitudes concerning its formulation, value and pursuit. Significantly for the discussion of the ascension of managerial sub-systems to come, Ward (2012, 67) notes that such substantive rationality and “its accompanying inner dedication” require the “boundaries between inside and outside to be comparatively protected” from external or top-down control.

If mode-1 knowledge is imagined as cultural and intellectual traditions that take years to master, then mode-2 knowledge can be thought of as tool-kits, skill-sets, and instruction manuals. It is the practical and professional knowledge of putting know-how to use to solve technical problems, innovate, and adapt to the disruptions caused by such innovations. It does not require a historical or philosophical understanding of the knowledge being used or the assumptions on which it is based, and so is more accessible and demonstrable. Carrying on from the Weberian description, this type of knowledge can be framed in terms of a shift from substantive rationality to a more instrumental or technical type of rationality. In respect to how this relates to neoliberalism and the restructuring of higher education, it is again worth quoting Ward (2012, 66) at length:

In this instance, action is governed primarily by a consideration of what is countable, pragmatic, measurable, efficient and manageable. Under these types of conditions people in knowledge organizations speak first and foremost about such things as “excellence,” “best practices,” … “research productivity,” “rankings” and “accountability to stakeholders.” Under the new regime of technical rationality, substantive and ethical considerations are viewed as sentimental, inefficient and out-of-date, although they may be useful organizational ideologies to be deployed time to time by managers to inspire workers in knowledge organizations to work harder, create more effective “work cultures” and increase organizational productivity and efficiency.
Rather than being regulated specifically by academics in specialised fields, mode-2 is more open to potential use in any area for any number of purposes. For example, where a form of mode-1 knowledge may be concerned with the history of labour and class relations (knowledge which government and industry may not see as being very useful), mode-2 knowledge may relate to improving business administration or professional relations. Likewise, while mode-2 knowledge may be concerned with data collection skills that can be put to use for policy or marketing, mode-1 knowledge may involve a critical analysis of the relationship that such approaches can have to governance. While a mode-2 approach to the current project would focus on how aspiring academics or universities can become more competitive and successful, a mode-1 approach would provide a theoretical critique of such imperatives. In each of these examples, the potential usefulness of the mode-2 knowledge is apparent in its ability to deliver ostensibly measurable and practical results, which supposedly makes such research easier to disseminate and market. Conversely, the potential knowledge in the mode-1 examples can be difficult to articulate or measure, and so presents less obvious worth and marketability.

While this description of mode-1 knowledge and mode-2 knowledge is a simplistic one, it highlights the shift that Delanty has observed in universities that increasingly prioritise the measurability and profitability of mode-2 knowledge, while often treating mode-1 knowledge as subordinate. For academics like Delanty (2001) and Collini (2012) in the U.K, Hil (2012) and Connell (2015) in Australia, and Ward (2012) in the U.S., this is evident in the way that endeavours deemed marketable are prioritised over the more introspective and theoretical fields. Across the board, universities are increasingly advertising courses that are designed alongside industry experts to produce “work-ready” graduates with “real world” skills. For instance, a look at the handbook of any Australian university will show that the descriptions for philosophy or literature courses typically emphasise the market value of critical thinking and problem solving, communication skills, and the ability to work in groups (i.e. “teamwork”). This shift is attended by the pressure for academics to attract research grants and partners in industry,
and therefore to “advertise” and “sell” their research and talents (Marginson and Considine 2000; Slaughter, Slaughter and Rhoades 2004).

At a broader level, this can be observed in the emphasis that governments are placing on increasing national competitiveness in the “knowledge economy” by increasing enrolments in science, technology, engineering and maths (the “STEM” fields), as well as on research funding schemes that emphasise private industry partnerships and key-performance indicators. This is in turn seen as an attempt to meet the changing expectations of students, government and industry stakeholders, who, along with ostensibly being increasingly concerned with competition, are increasingly coming to behave as consumers engaging in exchanges for credentials, skills and information (PwC 2016). Hence, the shift to mode-2 knowledge is intimately related to the dissolving of the boundaries between the academic sub-systems and external interests.

This service-provider attitude toward organisation, research and teaching, whereby it is an explicit priority of universities to attract and retain students, coupled with the effort to maximise income and minimise spending, can help explain the changing organisational conditions and situations of academics. After all, once the emphasis has shifted from the cultivation of an in-depth understanding of a given field of knowledge toward the task of cultivating “soft skills” (such as critical thinking and effective communication) and more general knowledge (such as to do with the most accessible theories and thinkers of a given intellectual tradition or discipline), then the teacher no longer requires in-depth knowledge of the area that they are teaching in. Hence, strategically speaking, universities do not need to hire staff based on their specialised expertise, and teachers in turn only need to stay one or two lessons ahead of their students, with any extra focus on more esoteric theoretical questions – assuming the teacher is familiar with them – or “harsh” approaches to teaching becoming a sidenote that could potentially damage the teacher’s reviews and, in turn, their employability come the next semester.
Analytically speaking, both modes of knowledge have their place in the modern university – indeed, as Considine (2006, 256) observes, “university is a system for distinguishing a certain kind of knowledge from other types of know-how, and both of these from ignorance”. Even so, this broad shift in emphasis and attitudes from mode-1 to mode-2 knowledge is a driver and a symptom of the changing relations surrounding and within contemporary universities, and, by extension, the changing situations of academics.

For the time being, the history and size of the university has allowed it to maintain the prestige of being the primary intellectual site in society. However, the growing emphasis that universities are putting on orienting teaching and research toward the purposes of measurable outcomes and external demand has resulted in them being widely viewed, alongside the growing industries of think tanks, private and public laboratories and other education providers, as an appendage of the “knowledge economy”, in which nations simultaneously compete to drive change and struggle to adapt to it (Cuthbert 2015; Connell 2015; Harman 2010; Ward 2012). Along with these shifting organisational priorities and corresponding professional imperatives, there is the pressure for increasingly differentiated institutions to behave like businesses that operate and relate to the environment according to a decidedly neoliberal logic. This is an example of how external systems can lead a sub-system, in this instance university management, to gain and exert growing influence over other sub-systems, such as with academe. In respect to the neoliberal university, changes to government funding conditions have led to private sector executives and their ways of doing things being imported into public universities as, and by, managers and administrators, to whom the rest of the university is then subjected. As Considine (2006, 258) observes:

Scholarly domains are now infused with managerial values and goals, pedagogical actions are now dominated by organizational imperatives, and the life of the student is increasingly intersected by the priorities of work, finance, and future returns. The new “everything” [the environment] that must be included in academic thought is not simply the many new forms of knowledge erupting inside and between the
disciplines; it is also expressed in multiple, non-intellectual projects – that is, in projects that are primarily strategic, not substantive.

Considine argues that shifts in intellectual style alone do not threaten the viability of the university system – after all, a university could arguably teach and research anything from medicine to homeopathy and at least get by financially, depending on demand. Rather, he argues, “the threat comes from the potential failure to distinguish the university from a range of other systems and functions” (Considine 2006, 256). In other words, Considine is concerned with what he sees as a threat to a relatively distinct socio-cultural system, rather than just the strategic matter of material viability within the economy. Just as Delanty notes that the growing variety of higher education providers, and the changing attitudes towards the value and uses of knowledge, is undermining the university as the preeminent “institution of knowledge”, Considine (2006, 257) is interested in what this means for the ability of universities to maintain boundaries and a sense of academic identity. Hence, he argues that “…we should investigate the question of institutional identity from a systems perspective rather than, say, from the perspective of demand (what the market or the state want) or supply (what academics do)”.

As shown in the previous section, one way to do this is by focussing on the relationship between the different sub-systems, as well as to consider what sets the university apart from other systems. However, the institutional identity that Considine refers to cannot be accounted for by broad references to the medium of academic knowledge alone. After all, there are growing numbers of higher education providers, as well as growing numbers of private research laboratories and firms that can count as “institutions of knowledge”. With that in mind, let me draw on the revised approach to systems theory outlined in the last chapter and consider the multidimensional element that

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49 Considine tries to formulate the university as a “cultural system”, and is interested in “the distinctions actors use, and have others use, to define themselves”. In contrast, Luhmann (1988, 101) avoids the concept of “culture”, which he found to be too humancentric. Hence, while Considine does not offer an explicit critique of the traditional approach, he clearly has a derivative approach in mind when he endorses a “systems perspective”.

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helps set the university apart from other institutions of knowledge: the academic role.

**The Academic Role**

Here we can use Delanty’s (2001, 9) insight that universities are the only institutions where four functions pertaining to knowledge are brought together by the single ideal type of the academic; namely, education, which is closely related to training, and research, which is closely related to engagement, and the corresponding roles of teacher and trainer, and expert and intellectual (Table 7). To this I add the underlying role of service provider to highlight what many commentators have identified as a defining condition of contemporary higher education, via the pressure for academics to be subject to and engage in ever more administration (Hil 2012, 164) at the behest of university management – this is elaborated on later. The current section provides an outline of these four overlapping dimensions of the academic role and draws on interview material as additional illustration.

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<th>Table 7: The key dimensions of the academic role</th>
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Taking these functions together to formulate an ideal type of the academic role helps to distinguish the university from other institutions of knowledge. For instance, non-government organisations and private laboratories are not expected to concern themselves with the cultivation of critical citizens, and colleges for teaching hairdressing or metalwork do not seek to generate and publish abstract theories and critiques. It is in this respect that the academic roles are closely connected to the perceived functions of the university – that is, to provide a liberal education, generate and disseminate knowledge, cultivate discussion, and train new academics to reproduce these functions. It is also worth noting that, theoretical models aside, being an academic has historically been defined as being someone who has trained at and works for a university, with expectations and identities often developing in respect to this system-relation. In other words, as the various functions of universities shift, so too do the functions and distribution of academic roles (hence the usefulness of treating such functions and roles as an ideal type at this point in time, as opposed to a normative and supposedly timeless set of criteria).

Much of this was reflected in the views of the PhD candidates interviewed. As Collini (2012) suggested would be the case, they also tended to associate academe with traits and lifestyles connected to the values and aspirations outlined previously. However, this was grounded by an emphasis on the importance of academic credentials and the fulfilment of academic work through an ongoing relationship with a university; this is to say that, overall, they viewed academics in connection to universities, and viewed universities in terms of their academic functions. This reflects Considine’s (2006, 257) claim that the boundaries of the university as a cultural system are partly defined by “the distinctions that actors use, and have others use, to define themselves”. Conversely, Nick formulates the academic in respect to how they relate to the institution: 

50 Notably, as we saw throughout Part 1 as well as in Chapter 7, there is truth to both Considine’s allusion that the university is defined with respect to how actors view themselves, and to Nick’s view that academics define themselves in respect to the university. There is thus something of a self-referential cycle occurring, whereby the parts (academics)
An academic is a knowledge professional who works specifically within higher education institutions, potentially engaging in both research and teaching, but also in some sort of administrative component or managerial component. To be an academic really is to define yourself within the context of a specific institution, in this context a very formalised bureaucratic institution… others share that definition with me.

The *education function* and *teacher role* concern the encouragement of intellectual virtues, such as critical thinking, rigour and dedication to pursuing the truth, or at least to that which is deemed to be appropriate academic inquiry. It also concerns the intellectual growth and civil character of students beyond that which can be accounted for in terms of graded outcomes and reviews. In this respect, it is more closely related to mode-1 knowledge and relates to students and to the priorities of the neoliberal university (i.e. the focus on students-as-customers, measurable outcomes, competition and industry demand) in a different manner to the trainer role. The teacher role also plays an important part in the status that is afforded to the academic by students, not only as authority figures and experts (as with trainers and researcher), but as role models for values and philosophies. Hence, the teacher role is tied up with status and what the Weberian might call the “social honour” of academics, which aspiring academics can find so attractive. This can be seen in the expectations that people often have of academics, whereby, regardless of the field or reputation of the individual in question, academics in general are often viewed as well-read and “learned”.

While such stereotypes are not always accurate, the underlying assumption is a reasonable one, for it is expected that the academic has a talent for learning that has seen them progress through the education system, and this is tied to the expectation that they be learned and interested in “intellectual” matters. The same assumption is not so often made of people who provide training in

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are defined by the whole (the university system) and the whole is defined by the parts. It is in respect to this dynamic, which brings to mind Gidden’s (1984) notion of “structuration”, that I have avoided reducing the analysis to either structures or actors.
secondary schools, or who research pharmaceuticals in a private laboratory. To be sure, such people may well have “academic” proclivities and talents, though the point is that these traits are not so central to the narratives (and corresponding senses of occupational identity) surrounding their profession. The academic, on the other hand, has two distinct titles that speak to this very formulation: “Doctor of Philosophy” and “Professor”. While the latter title is rarer than the former in Australia, both are often used in public discourse to help distinguish academics from non-university teachers and trainers. The point here is simply that the academic is expected to do more than keep students in line and facilitate learning: they are expected to model the character and qualities that the university system is often associated with. In respect to such expectations of what an academic is like, Janice offered an insightful response when asked about becoming an academic:

They [academics] seem to have a relatively high social status, but their job is so hard... Sometimes they can be like freaks, like really into their research and not many other interested things… My friends don’t think I’m suitable for a PhD. In their eyes I’m not very academic; they think it’s too boring for me.

The training function concerns the practical task of supervising and passing on skills to postgraduate students, as well as the “gate keeping” task of examining their work and granting or denying accreditations. The trainer is often expected to be impartial when it comes to contentious matters, for their role is not to, so to speak, “profess” their personal views or defend their part of the field from potential competition, but to effectively supervise and examine the development of academics in training. At present, this boundary maintenance is crucial to the reproduction of the university system as it pertains to the academic sub-system; though it has already been quoted in this thesis, it is here worth repeating Collini’s (2012, 8) observation:

Universities are among the very few institutions whose rationale includes selecting and shaping their own future staff. Schools educate everyone: it is not a distinctive part of their remit to form and prepare
future school-teachers. Companies recruit new staff and train them in the appropriate techniques, but this is a secondary task, not part of their primary rationale, which is to produce goods and services and make a profit. By contrast, the forming of future scholars and scientists is not just an instrumental necessity for universities, but intrinsic to their character.

That said, the spread of non-university organisations seeking to differentiate themselves within the higher education sector, along with the emphasis that many universities are placing on recruiting based on professional experience that need not require a postgraduate qualification, means that this boundary maintenance is not a given. In other words, such operative closure, whereby academic skills and academic workforces are maintained and produced according to credentials currently monopolised by the university system (as in academics training academics), is potentially at odds with the push by universities for interactional openness and private-sector expertise (a push that is explored in greater depth in the next chapter).

Both the education and the training functions are tied to the basic structural elements of the education system, via the basis of authority required for determining the grades of students and applying the pass/fail binary. Approaches to undergraduate education as content-delivery, the facilitation of student-directed discussion, and assessment as generalisable calculations, potentially allow for university classes to be run by staff with little prior experience with the area of study; for all that is needed is sufficient credentials for the position (which might not necessarily mean having or pursuing a PhD), access to the learning material and assessment rubrics, ties to a coordinator, and potential review processes and moderation meetings. As such, this dimension is more subject to proletarianisation and the shift from mode-1 to mode-2 knowledge in education. In this limited sense, it is understandable that university staff members whose duties and activities are restricted to sessional teaching are sometimes seen as “not real academics”, despite their place of employment – a denial made two-fold when paired with the tendency of some staff to view sessionals as “not real faculty”. Notably,
these formulations were reflected in the views of a few of the PhD candidates. For example, in describing what an academic is, Ari stated:

Let’s start with what is not academic. That means the factory type of education that prepares people for industry rather than intellectual self-sustainability. This means more research and more humanity.

The *research function* pertains to the use of the skills required for reviewing and conducting academic research, and thus to the regulation and production of academic knowledge. As the *expert role* is played out in respect to the various academic disciplines, and thus through academic perspectives and language, it is through this function that the world is framed as “fields of study” from which academic knowledge is yielded and to which it is applied. In accordance with this function one role of the academic is to identity and attempt to fill “gaps” in academic knowledge using approved methodologies. This in turn is tied to the conditions of the scientific system, and, albeit in a less structured manner, to the cultural norms and expectations pertaining to accepted professional standards of scholarship. This dimension connects academics and universities to a range of external and differentiated systems and associations based on science and scholarship. Conferences and congresses are arranged by these associations, which in turn are often connected to publishing organisations and further sub-associations. All of this revolves most directly around the research function, with even the publications and events that are organised in respect to the other academic functions typically being formally expressed through peer-reviewed research. Hence, while the other dimensions of the academic role relate the academic to the student, to the public, and to industries and the professions respectively, the research function connects universities and academics to the professional world of academe, via specialised associations and exclusive publications (Hermanowicz and Clayton 2018).

This emphasis on active involvement in research and academic communities was articulated by several interviewees. For example, according to Serge, an
academic “is someone who has produced knowledge that has been peer-reviewed by his peers”; while, for Harry, it is “someone with extensive and in-depth knowledge of a particular field of interest who can also teach”. With respect to these academic processes, Brubaker (1993, 213) observes that becoming an academic researcher involves the development of a “feel for the scientific game”, which guides the formulation of problems, as well as strategies to do with funding, publishing and visibility. He goes on to argue that, when it comes to research, there are always factors that influence “the kinds of problems that are posed, the kinds of explanations offered, and the kinds of instruments… that are employed”. In this respect, the research function and expert role involves institutional factors relating to processes, material factors to do with instruments and resource allocation, and social factors to do with scholarly communities. Hence, while academic research is ideally or at least relatively autonomous, it is always subject to and shaped by the structural and cultural conditions of a variety of systems.

This means that, along with requiring the knowledge and skills required for research, the expert role involves the kind of socialisation that enables academics to symbolically enter and strategically navigate the world of academe, and so is tied to occupational identity and career opportunities. It is partly because of this that the PhD, which is the quintessential research degree, and which the university system maintains a monopoly over, is so central to the production of academics and the maintenance of the academic dimension of the university system. While there are senior academics who do not have PhDs (although this is less the case as time goes by as retiring academics are replaced by the new generation of PhD qualified applicants), the degree is often required for academic positions advertised by universities on the formal job-market, and its significance to being viewed as a “genuine academic” is often emphasised. For example, according to Elizabeth, an academic is “… someone who has studied a PhD and has a doctorate, who is working in a university environment”. While a few other interviewees were cautious of being too exclusive in their formulation, they all acknowledged
that there are ostensibly key social and structural conditions for, as it were, becoming and being an academic – a point made at length by Jeremy:

I have a number of problems with the concept of authenticity, but to the extent that I see being an academic as being part of a particular community, that's a gated community insofar that others have to accept you in order to be a proper member; there's always a bit of anxiety over whether you'll be accepted.

He says further:

… I would say an academic is a person who is engaged in research, and within that particular academic system, to differentiate it from corporate research. In that sense, it’s self-definitional: there’s a group of people who call themselves academics and the people who research in that same area are academics, but the people who do the same thing though are privately employed are not. There’s a blurred line between corporate and academic work, though I would say it’s a closed issue of association for those who do academic work.

Finally, the *engagement function* reflects the openness of the university system in a way that distinguishes it from other institutions of research and education, as it is through this that academic knowledge is disseminated and credentials showcased beyond classrooms and peer-reviewed publications. The corresponding role of the *intellectual* intersects with the role of the expert, insofar that academics are expected to stay up to date with scholarly discussions in their field, which in turn connects them to the world of academe though journals and associations. It also intersects with the role of the teacher, for it is in the role of the intellectual that academics go beyond their specialised circles to contribute their knowledge and perspectives to public discussions. Hence, the engagement function and intellectual role serve to bridge the gap between the academic worlds and the public.

This helps to distinguish universities and academics within the education system, for teachers from technical colleges or high schools are generally not
so often sought out for expert commentary. Moreover, the opportunities and perceived authority of experts operating outside of universities are often tied to the university system via references to their academic engagement. There is a structural dimension to this, insofar that academics must engage with academic knowledge through their professional networks and duties. There is also a cultural dimension that relates to the general expectations that the public has of academics and universities, whereby academic titles and institutional affiliations, along with contributions to the literature, are usually identified for the few that feature on expert panels and in the media. In other words, much like how the clergy and athletes, as opposed to the people in the aisle, serve as the respective “faces” of their church or sport and, by extension, their respective systems, so too do the academics, rather than managers, continue to be the public “faces” of the university system. This public representation also helps maintain the formulation of universities as the preeminent institution of knowledge and academics as intellectuals and experts, with these ties in turn being mutually reproduced whenever academic credentials and institutional affiliations are cited.

It is here worth noting that the engagement function and intellectual role depends on the ability of academics to speak publicly without the threat of being punished by management, and why overly stifling the intellectual role in order to protect university brands could either preserve or undermine institutional prestige. This is partly why the academic role and the university system are tied to notions of “academic freedom” in teaching, research and engagement (Kayrooz et al. 2001, 4), which also works to distinguish universities and academics from other educational institutions and their associated subjects. For these reasons, the role of intellectual is intimately related to a broader occupational identity among academics (in terms of autonomy and status) and institutional identity among universities (in terms of representation and differentiation) to such an extent that the stifling of engagement is often met with questioning over what it means to be called an academic or a university (Nelson 2011; Hil 2012; Collini 2012).
While the academic workforce is becoming more bifurcated and casualised, and thus less populated by people fulfilling all four of the functions outlined above, this multidimensional formulation remains useful as both an ideal type and a basis for a shared sense of occupational and institutional identity. However, as we have seen, this has been challenged by the unbundling of full-time roles and the piecemeal redistribution of work based on ostensibly measurable demand. One result of this is that the “university experience” is increasingly “delivered” by sessional staff who may have no background in the subject or influence over the construction and logistics of the course. The next section considers these changes to the academic sub-system in connection to the influence of management within the neoliberal university.

**Administrating Academics as Service Providers**

Instead of the traditional formulation of bifurcated systems within universities (e.g., administrative sub-systems versus academic sub-systems) that for the most part operate independently of one another, neoliberalism is seeing academics increasingly drawn into administration and business, such that their roles are shifting to resemble service staff as much as traditional academics. While administrative systems have previously served primarily as support for academics as teachers and researchers, decision making power regarding such functions and roles has increasingly shifted into the grasp of managerial and administrative staff (Whelan 2015, 139). Rather than being due solely to some concentrated effort by a single group or university, this shift is the result of system-wide adaptations to external conditions, primarily to do with funding, according to a particular – namely, neoliberal – logic. This section addresses the impact of this shift on the roles and functions of the academic systems and, by extension, on the situations of academics.

In Australia, where student numbers have doubled since the Dawkins reforms of the late eighties, the number of staff working in administrative and managerial roles has far exceeded the growth of teaching staff (Dobson 2010, 32). This is associated with the “new public management” of universities,
whereby governments reduce the amount of public funding that is available to universities and increase the administrative conditions of transparency under which these funds are attained, with the result being that universities must account for more while receiving less. This reflects attempts by government to “rule at a distance” by creating an “accountability architecture” (Jayasuriya 2015, 975), as McCarthy and Song (2016, 1023) elaborate:

This state regulatory framework in turn leads universities to develop regulatory compliance instruments and officers, to ensure full academic adherence to this market logic all the way down to what is taught and researched. A whole new layer of senior managers have over-arching power in Australian universities as regulatory intermediaries.

Hence, the rise of the administrative sub-systems within universities reflects top-down responses to changing conditions of funding and governance. While these conditions are ostensibly intended to increase transparency, the inefficiencies in how these accountability measures are coordinated create administrative burdens for universities that call for more administrative staff. As Dobson (2010, 36) observes:

Most Australian universities were established under state legislation, which requires them to report periodically to state parliaments. This requirement is not inappropriate per se, but the states have not synchronised their requirements with each other, nor with the reporting requirements of the federal government. Therefore most universities find themselves reporting similar (but different) information to two levels of government. No thought of efficiency by governments here, just accountability!

Two conditions of this trend, whereby the growing need for administrators leads to the growth and spread of administrative functions, are as follows. First, universities employ more administrators and top and middle-managers. This is done in respect to central administration, with the organisational elite growing as new executive-officer and high-level support positions and teams are created, reconceived or rebranded along with new priorities and strategies.
Notably, some of these positions are institutionally classified as “academic”, with many executive and support-officers that do not carry out any of the academic roles previously described still being counted as “academic staff”. As Dobson (2010, 32) points out, many of these academic staff are reported by their universities as having a “non-academic function” – which is to say that they are classed as such for administrative purposes unrelated to the tasks that they carry out. This reveals how control over the institutional formulation of the academic role within universities can shift from professional recognition and regulation of academics (Golde and Walker 2006; Austin 2002), toward contractual designations and administrative processes (Bexley et al. 2011). In short, as the administrative sub-systems become more influential within universities, the borders of the academic sub-systems and roles begin to blur.

Second, as the influence of the administrative sub-system continues to grow, so has the centrality and pressures of administrative processes for academics. For instance, as academic roles and skills are unpacked and employed piece-meal according to quantitative projections of demand and labour cost, academics must increasingly account for the economic value of their work. As illustrated at length in part one of this project, this emphasis on student numbers affects the employment and work situations of teachers, with sessionals often not knowing if they will have a job or their schedule up until (or beyond) the beginning of semester, when student numbers are finalised. In respect to teaching and training, this means that a burgeoning population of academics are no longer being viewed as initiates to the academic career or as “part of the team” in an ongoing collegial and institutional sense, but as an expendable and transient source of front-line service providers.

As they are precariatised, so too do they lose their professional autonomy in respect to both their security and their control over their own work, for the teaching material (such as designated readings and assignments) and conditions (such as tutorial class size and length) are determined by administrators and the unit-coordinators who are in turn subject to higher-up
management. Dearlove (1997, 64) describes this in terms of “dual pressures” exerted on academics: by institutionalised managers, whose concern for productivity and quality has “led them to try and shape both teaching and teachers”; and by the degree-choices and evaluations of students-as-consumers in an increasingly student (rather than teacher) centred system. For Scott and Watson (1994, 35), this has shifted teaching from “an inner-directed and artisan process into an outer directed and quasi-industrial operation” that “requires a much higher level of integration and co-ordination at the level of the institution”. In this respect, the operational closure of the academic system, as it pertains to the autonomy and organisation of academics and academic work, wanes in the face of its interactional openness to the economistic, administrative system.

For the sessional teacher, research is unpaid work that is carried out in one’s own time and – particularly when denied access to scholarly resources during the none-teaching periods of unemployment – at one’s own expense. These academics do not have research as part of their role but are nonetheless expected to develop a publication record to compete in the formal market for continuing – including teaching-only – positions (Rothengatter and Hil 2013). Of course, the time and resources required to engage in such unpaid work leads many sessional teachers not to bother and to simply focus on teaching, thereby contributing to the view that they are “not real academics” (due to the lack of research activity) and thus further undermining professional identity. Those academics who do have expertise in a given field may find that this has no bearing on their employability through the informal market, and that their expertise may be overlooked even when they are relevant to the work at hand – with, for instance, lectures being given by academics who admit to having no background in the topic and “not being an expert”, while sessional teachers who do have the relevant expertise are not permitted to present such lectures due to the extra administrative work that such one-offs would entail.

The engagement function of academics is influenced by the preoccupation among the organisational elite with pursuing their visions and developing the
organisational brand, unhindered by the workers that they preside over. This tendency to see universities as brands to be strategically leveraged in the market has a vital relationship to the restructuring of academic sub-systems and the precariatisation of academics, for staff that might threaten the university brand or do not fit in with the latest strategic plan can be eliminated by not renewing contracts, with less security thus meaning less risk. Universities in Australia have also attempted to alter the conditions for even the more secure academics, such as by lowering the standards for disciplinary measures, potentially leading to demotion or even termination, from serious misconduct to minor misconduct; altering the conditions of “consultation” pertaining to such processes so that staff are informed of managerial decisions after the fact; by limiting the freedoms with which academics can speak publicly or confide with others about such institutional processes; and demoralising staff through excessive workloads, lack of appreciation and in some cases outright bullying. These conditions of engagement mean greater risk and less autonomy for academics, and less risk and more control over the workforce and brand for management. This increased control over the academic sub-system and workforce will be explored more in the following chapter, via a case study of such a vision for the higher education workforce.

**Conclusion**

The university system is made up of a range of sub-systems, which each have their own roles to play within the system, and which relate to other sub-systems according to their own operational conditions and goals. For this reason, the university can be framed as a multiversity incorporating a range of group-based interests and priorities that will not necessarily support or even understand the operations and rationales of other sub-system groups. This has significant implications for how people view the university system and the roles and relationships within it. For instance, an academic may be more inclined to communicate with a fellow scholar in their field working in another county than with the academics working in different fields on the other side of their campus, and, in this respect, can be viewed as working in what Considine (2006, 260) describes as an “intensely local-universal way”.

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Likewise, an academic may have more appreciation for the abstract idea of the university and the aspirations that it brings to mind than, say, the non-academic administrator that works just down the hall.

Hence, while one way in which universities are distinct is insofar that they are decidedly academic institutions, aspiring and sessional academics are increasingly encountering a changing system that does not provide the recognition of academic roles or the path to secure positions that it once did. So far as each university is formulated as an individual enterprise within the education sector, such revisions are not necessarily a threat to their viability, for the differentiated organisation is not reducible to any single sub-system – indeed, such managerial efforts are attempts to improve (financial) viability. Rather, as Considine and Delanty observe in their own ways, the threat is to do with the proposition of what universities, as opposed to other knowledge-based organisations, can offer to its subjects and to civil society. The changes that are relevant to this analysis are to do with the functions and influence of the various sub-systems within our universities, and what this could mean for those working, or seeking work, within them.

With the advent of the neoliberal environment, spurred on in Australia by the Dawkins reform and the National Competition Policy, the rationales and conditions that previously characterised academe are being subordinated to concerns for organisational accountability and economic competitiveness. The administrator might not identify as an academic or hold any such ideals, and yet be acutely aware of the internal and external politics that affect the institution and the students and staff that they preside over, and in this respect their focus is on adapting to the environment, rather than maintaining ideals (except in so far that these ideals might be marketable). In other words, executives and the administrators are under pressure to view the university as a firm that is locked in competition with other universities and subject to internal and external pressures that must be adapted to, rather than resisted. In one sub-system universities may be viewed in respect to values, projects and communities that transcend the institution, while in others it is viewed
primarily as a firm dealing with funding conditions and measurable outcomes within a disruptive and competitive environment. As strategic restructures of increasingly numerous and powerful university managers are having a disproportionate impact on university workers – as is reflected in the relatively disproportionate growth of the academic precariat – the contemporary university is increasingly treated in the latter respect. To give a sense of these strategies in the Australian university system context, I now provide a case study of the Universities Australia commissioned report: *Australian Higher Education Workforce of the Future.*
Chapter 10

Case study: the “Australian Higher Education Workforce of the Future”

On the eve of the 2015 Christmas holidays, a “sandstone” university in Western Australia announced the intention to cut 100 academic and 200 professional positions. A statement issued by the Vice Chancellor (VC) explained that the cuts were in response to the need to confront budget challenges by “changing how the university operates”. Not long after, a similar announcement was released by another university nearby, where between 100 and 150 academics were expected to lose their positions. These cuts were also attributed to budget challenges, and while the VC also insisted that their university “remains in a sound economic position”, this would be contradicted shortly after as further restructures were proposed.51 These events were linked by a joint statement, issued by four Western Australian VCs to their university staff in April 2016, in an email subtitled Embracing Future Opportunities. Along with emphasising the economic importance of the university sector to both the state and the nation, the two-page document stated “While our past is something to be proud of… global competitiveness, changing environments and disruptive technology applies to our sector as much as any other. It’s not an individual university issue, it’s a global higher education issue”. At the centre of the statement was a reference to a single report, produced by Pricewaterhouse Coopers (PwC 2016) which was commissioned by university managements’ industrial arm, the Australian Higher Education Industrial Association (AHEIA). Perhaps not surprisingly, the report, titled Australian Higher Education Workforce of the Future, mirrored the neoliberal rationale that university managements were espousing:

Recently, Pricewaterhouse Coopers consulted with 340 stakeholders across the country and found that the University workforce of the future will need to be increasingly agile and flexible; that we will need to

51 Two years later, this university would become the first university and largest employer in Australia to terminate its Enterprise Bargaining Agreement.
continuously and proactively develop the technical and professional
capacity of our staff; and will need to enable greater role specialisation.

The PWC report also featured heavily at a summit of the Western Australian
VCs. Organised by the Committee for Economic Development in Australia
(CEDA), the event was held in a beautiful ballroom in an inner-city hotel, and
included steak and red wine early on a weekday afternoon.52 The report also
featured heavily in the VC open forums at my own university, which were
attended by high numbers of both academic and professional university staff.
This chapter presents an analysis of the background, content and implications
of this high-flying report.

There are a few reasons for this analysis: first, to give a sense of how the
changes to the university system and the situations of academics are tied to
prevailing views and strategic visions among the organisational elite. Second,
to consider the approaches, inputs and controversies that underlie the report
and its recommendations. Of particular interest is the idea that occurs
throughout the report, whereby a “traditional and change averse culture” is
broadly framed as a “… detriment of the future competitiveness of Australian
universities” (PwC 2016, 39). This is contrasted with the market-oriented
insistence for universities to identify their “value propositions”, strategically
“differentiate” themselves, and “foster a culture of continuous change and
advancement”. According to the report, this new culture requires universities
to “hardwire” the behaviour of workers with skills and values that revolve
around “three key future workforce attributes” that “all university workforces
will need to exhibit”: agility and flexibility, professionalization, and
specialisation (ibid, 32). Together, the analysis helps illustrate how the
neoliberalism that suffuses such influential reports reflect the attempt to

52 While everyone I met at this event viewed the occasion as an excellent networking
opportunity, I met no other academics, only professional staff. This may have been because
tickets cost $160 for CEDA members and over $200 for non-members. Some tickets would
have been given to administrative staff as a work-based event. The event was also held in
the middle of a teaching week and received little advertising at the universities being
represented.
reformulate the place of academe and the situations and roles of academics within the university system.

**Background and Reception**

*The Australian Higher Education Workforce of the Future* was released in February 2016 by AHEIA in association with the Deputy Vice-Chancellor Corporate (DVC) group of Universities Australia. AHEIA is the employer organisation for the nation’s higher education providers and, like any industry association, its stated duty is to protect the interests of its members, in this case, senior university managers. It is sometimes referred to as the “industrial arm of Universities Australia” by the National Tertiary Education Union of workers (NTEU). Universities Australia presents itself as the “voice of Australian universities”, whose duty is to “represent Australian universities in the public interest”. While Universities Australia is not explicitly designed to serve the interests of employers over workers, its membership is not comprised of individual staff, but of universities, which in turn are represented by the VCs and their teams – effectively making Universities Australia mainly a voice for the organisational elite. As part of Universities Australia, the DVC supports the VCs concerning matters of administration and management. Hence, the report was commissioned by the corporate arm and the so-called “industrial arm” of Universities Australia.

The AHEIA and the DVC group commissioned the report from PwC for AU$350,000. The advertised purpose of PwC is to “help organisations and individuals create the values they’re looking for”, as well as assisting in “motivating and taking care of your key people”. This focus on key people was reflected in the engagement process: PwC consulted with VCs and their teams and delegates, human resource directors and their delegates, Deans and the heads of schools, and Human Resource Directors (Figure 8).

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53 It is notable that only eight of the forty-eight DVC representatives, and two of the seven 2015/16 executives, have PhDs.
PwC experts and “sector thought leaders” were also consulted, as were “broad sector stakeholders” such as ministerial and industry representatives. Students, international universities, and employee representative groups, such as the NTEU, were also included as university specific stakeholders. However, the NTEU (2016b) has been highly critical of PwC’s engagement process, with the NTEU national president stating: “PwC met once with the NTEU late last year, but our commentary and analysis based on it must be agreed, considerable expertise is almost completely ignored [sic]”. Notably, apart from the proxy representation by the NTEU and other employee representative groups, it seems that no academics outside of the organisational elite were consulted. PwC gave no explanation for this, though the impression is that the namesake of the report – that being general members of the university workforce – were not deemed “key people”.

As stated on the AHEIA website, the purpose of the report, was to “put the spotlight on how to enable universities to compete in a globally competitive market”. With this goal in mind, AHEIA posed two questions to guide the research and analysis that PwC (2016, 6) would undertake: 1. “Which drivers of change will have the greatest impact on the Higher Education sector in the next 10-15 years?”; and 2. “What does this mean for how universities will need to structure their workforces in the future?” To help address these
questions, PwC (2016, 32) identified three key dimensions of the higher education workforce:

1. **Capability**, as in the “skills, capabilities, experience and behaviours required of university staff and leaders” – that is, what employees are expected to be able to do.
2. **Structure**, which pertains to the “design of new and existing roles” – that is, how and why they are to be employed.
3. **Engagement**, which covers the “manner in which capability is matched to the workforce structure, through contract models, investment in development and the talent pipeline, as well as performance” – that is, how they are to be managed.

Notably, the report overlooked a great deal of the growing body of scholarly literature on the experiences and concerns of academics. This is surprising, given that one of PwC’s (2016, 7) five “in-scope activities” was a “review of best practice and analysis of workforce data as well as researching of local and global workforce transformation trends”. If this review was undertaken in earnest, PwC could not have missed the fact that the preeminent trends affecting the workforce pertain to the conditions and consequences of neoliberalism, such as semi-privatisation and casualisation. Literature that accounts for such matters was cited throughout the report, though these discussions were not addressed directly. For example, the Grattan Institute’s (Norton 2014) report, *Mapping Australian Higher Education*, was cited, according to which, in 2010, 116,000 academics were in secure employment, while 67,000 were in casual employment, with the relative rise of the latter far outstripping the former; hence, the effects of casualisation were “on the map” of the relevant literature. By extension, the literature cited by PwC also cited material that, by first or second degree, addressed the issues associated with the increased precarity of workforces (e.g. Coates and Goedegebuure 2010; Gottschalk and McEachern 2010; Kimber 2010; May et al. 2013; Ryan et al. 2013). This material was either not followed up on by PwC or deemed beyond the purview of their “scope”. It is possible that the latter is the case,
as the NTEU claim to have pointed PwC to such material only for such input to have no impact on the report.

AHEIA has commissioned reports on these issues from other organisations (e.g. Andrews et al. 2016), as have many Universities Australia VCs (e.g. Percy et al. 2008). Moreover, while the PwC report was released with a statement from the AHEIA president (a VC, himself) that the sector should ensure that “casual staff are not treated as a means to balance the budget but recognised as a core part of the academic community”, the voices of this core were not included and their documented situations went unaddressed. This indicates that PwC engaged in very selective reading and consultation of the relevant material and stakeholders throughout the research process. The result was a report that, as an adjunct professor of higher education at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology put it in The Australian (Hare 2016), seemed to be “designed to feed back to university leaders just what they fed into it — that staffing policy was crucial to universities’ future and that staff had to be more flexible”.

This background is not intended as a reason to reject the information and suggestions provided in the report out of hand. However, it is worth noting that such an influential report on the future of Australian universities was formulated from the top down in a manner that ignored major portions of the literature and concerned parties. This gives insight to the relationships between the sub-systems and groups within and beyond the university system, as well as a sense of the strategies through which neoliberalism, as Read (2009, 30) puts it, works to “create a social reality that it suggests already exists”. In respect to this strategic approach to the research process and higher education literature, the NTEU (2016b) issued this response:

The dangerous subtext of the report for casual and sessional academics is that the report normalises casual employment through the coded language of ‘contract diversity’… The report wilfully side steps a decade of discrete and recurrent academic research into university
staffing attitudes, which has persistently highlighted insecurity of employment as the leading issue amongst university staff…

Although the impact of changes on staffing attitudes might not be considered by some as relevant to institutional survival and prosperity, it would be short-sighted indeed not to see issues of staff morale and staff turnover (which a decline in morale contributes to) as relevant matters to the future health of universities in Australia, including their efficiency and competitiveness in a tightened market. Hence, to ignore staffing attitudes is not just an ethical oversight, but arguably a pragmatic one. Its omission in the PwC report could therefore be interpreted as a strategic attempt to sweep a detrimental impact of reforms under the carpet in the interests of advancing a neoliberal agenda. On the other hand, there is a view prevalent among university management that the unreasonable and unrealistic “culture” of staff, including excessive rights and privileges associated with the “Golden Age” of academe, is what is contributing to dissatisfaction and resistance to reforms. This is a view that, given the controversy it would engender if aired, has strategically remained hidden in public comments made by management, but does find expression in the PwC report, as shown below.

**Approach and Recommendations**

Following consultation with university leaders, PwC (2016, 11-13) list five macro trends that are “driving change in the higher education system within Australia and globally”. As these trends are expected to “effect change individually, and as a part of a system of influence”, they are viewed in terms of a complex environment of interdependent influences. PwC does not seek to critically analyse the basis of these trends, nor address how universities might seek to influence them in a proactive manner. Rather, the trends are treated as a kind of inevitability, with the only reasonable option being for universities to adapt and transform. These five macro trends are as follows:
1. *Industry expectations*, which includes the production of “work ready” students, and concern over the displacement of old jobs by new jobs and technologies, including deliberate internal replacements.

2. *Technology*, the development and implementation of which is expected to be “the second highest feature of the changing nature of work”.

3. *Competition* for “increasingly scarce resources: domestic and international student enrolments, academic and professional talent and research talent and funding (though the latter was less frequently cited)”. This includes competition with global online universities and non-university higher education and research providers.

4. *Student expectations*, whereby larger and more diverse student cohorts than ever are “expecting a more customer-focussed and convenient offering”. This trend is connected by the report to the fact that graduate employment prospects are “the lowest they have been since the 1970s”.

5. *Policy and funding*, which includes the push toward semi-privatisation and deregulation, with 45% of the consulted university leaders tying this to massification (i.e. larger student cohorts) as a response to slower funding growth and uncertainty due to the rate of policy changes.

In response to these trends, PwC (2016, 36) state that “we do not believe there is a ‘one size fits all’ approach to workforce reform in the sector”. They advise that their recommendations will vary in practice according to each university’s “value proposition”, as “each university will have a unique response to these external drivers of change as they seek to differentiate their value proposition in what will become an increasingly diverse market” (PwC 2016, 41). This emphasis on complexity reflects the insight of systems theory, insofar that universities are expected to react to change with differentiation (in this context, market and workforce differentiation), and thus become increasingly complex in turn. Growing competition requires universities to do this through specialisation and long-term plans (i.e. *strategic differentiation*); while mounting uncertainty requires them to be able to adapt as efficiently as possible (*contingent differentiation*). Strategic differentiation is articulated in the report in terms of the identification and development of
“value propositions” – an imperative that flows from management through organisational sub-systems to individual workers. Contingent differentiation is articulated in terms of flexibility, agility and professionalisation. The idea is that, once the trajectory of a university is established, it should be consolidated by “communication and behaviours that come from the top and are instilled in every layer of the workforce to ensure that all staff are taken on the journey”, with the meta-goal being to “benefit from disruption and not be victims of it” (PwC 2016, 40).

The emphasis on disruption and differentiation offers insight into why the experiences and concerns of workforces were not deemed in-scope by PwC. Contrary to what its title suggests, the report is less concerned with the situations of workers than with an industry of competing organisations that each have complex internal environments within a disruptive environment. In contrast to this focus on the broader system and individual organisations, the criticisms levelled against the report directly pertain to the individual and collective views and experiences of human beings – that is, to the qualitative situations and interests of the people that make up the workforce. As we have seen, there are other ways of viewing the social world (such as those based in systems theory and organisational studies) that are concerned primarily with operational conditions, rather than with actual human beings. For example, from the view of the neoliberal university, the abstract student-as-consumer serves as a source of income and measurable product, while costly organisational elites are leaders who carry out strategic plans. From this perspective, workers become indistinct and disposable service providers and potential subjects of, or obstructions to, such strategic plans.

The point here is not to excuse PwC by projecting a theoretical approach onto it, but to show how its aims may have been on a different track to those who would later critique it. On the one side (such as the side of the NTEU), we have real individual experiences and concerns, where personal problems converge with issues of social structure, which is all expressed in interviews and other research on the situations of the workforce; we can call this the
human-centric side, in that it ostensibly has real people at its core concern. On the other side (the side of PwC and AHEIA), we have the impersonal domain of perceived organisational and market realities, as interpreted and described by experts and stakeholders (e.g. the interests of universities are communicated by VCs acting as leaders, rather than as individuals); we can call this the business-centric side, in that it pertains to what is deemed best for the organisation and stake-holders (as defined by the neoliberal logic). Simply put, while the report’s perspective speaks mainly to that of the organisational elite, the abstract approach and conceptual language that it uses oftentimes resembles (and can be elucidated by) systems theory. For example, PwC identify the need for strategic differentiation throughout the sector. This differentiation is expected to reflect the answer that each university gives to the question, “what are we producing?” This applies both to the production of graduates (e.g. will we produce competent learners, flexible and work-ready graduates, or something in between?) and the production of research (which can provide a market-niche for institutions). For the university leaders interviewed by PwC (2016, 14), this signals a departure from a homogeneity believed to be “unsustainable in a globally competitive sector over the long term”, with the report stating that: “increased engagement with industry, community, and local and global peer institutions will be critical to survival. We believe that differentiation will be driven by universities’ choices to open up to, and respond to, these external factors”.

Central to these recommendations are “three future workforce attributes” that PwC (2016, 14) believe all university workforces will need to have, “given the anticipated changes to the sector”: agility/flexibility; professionalisation; and specialisation. Agility refers to the ability of a university or individual to quickly adapt to changes in the environment. The idea is that the supply of funding and the demand for services can shift suddenly and universities need to be able to respond quickly. This speaks to mitigating risk, increasing efficiency, and pursuing competitive advantages. This often translates to casualisation in practice, with universities seeking to reduce the limitations on hiring and firing, so that they can quickly shut down or replace a position
or person with little notice. Similarly, flexibility speaks to the ability for universities to alter the workload allocations and duties of their employees at short notice, such as by relocating someone who teaches unpopular units to another course or school, allocating them more administrative duties, or altering their hours or workload calculations. As PwC refer to these two qualities as a single attribute, I refer to them using the portmanteau, *flexigility*. Flexigile individuals take advantage of opportunities, adapt their skills from old duties to innovate new ones, and use their new found free-time to gain experience and establish links in other industries, produce publications, or become increasingly interdisciplinary. The reality may be something quite different (as the NTEU suspects), but the PwC report takes a positive spin on the potential of flexigile employees, both in terms of the institutions and from the point of view of employees. Taking this notion to its logical conclusion, the most flexigile university will be one in which roles can be created and dissolved, and members of the workforce relocated or removed, as quickly and easily as possible.

The next key attribute is *professionalization*. PwC (2016, 14) state that:

… increased and continuous professionalisation of both staff and leadership as a lever to ensure the sustained relevance of capability and skill set of the university workforce is critical. This encompasses both continuous development of skills to deliver in current roles… as well as the acquisition of new domain expertise.

Someone who values professionalisation will be dedicated to keeping their skills updated and learning new ones in anticipation of new circumstances. This quality thus serves as the scaffolding for flexigility; the ideal employee will not only be willing to be relocated, they will ideally already have the skills or (at least the learning skills) required for their new position or job. While this can be cultivated through work-provided training, it can also be encouraged as a moral expectation for workers, if not as a tacit condition of precarity and the imperative to be as competitive and flexigile as possible. This is tied to the shift from mode-1 to mode-2 knowledge as described in Chapter 9, insofar that it involves a shift away from the kind of expertise that
come from years of dedication to narrow scholarly pursuits, whereby the academic knows “more and more about less and less”, toward something that is perhaps more adequately captured by the old adage that, while a Jack of all trades is a master of none, it is oftentimes better than a master of one. In this respect, it is clear that the formulation of professionalisation presented by PwC is different from what Berry (2003, 68, also see: McCarthey et al. 2016; Harvey 2014) has in mind in describing de-professionalisation (which I have described in terms of proletarianisation) – that is, to a “loss of control of work process” and “the craft (‘professional’) perquisites that have traditionally gone along with the work…”. While PwC’s formulation does account for sustained relevance of capability and skill sets, this is meant as maintaining relevance in a changing environment. Thus, in contrast to professionalization as the control over and maintenance of “the craft”, for PwC, professionalization is the ability and willingness to shelve old roles and crafts in favour of new ones within an uncertain world.

The third key attribute is specialisation. According to PwC (2016, 14), this involves “moving away from the 40/40/20 academic workload allocation model and changing the ‘one size fits all’ expectation regarding research participation”, as well as the move of universities away from being “the (paramount) custodians of knowledge”. The idea here is that universities must differentiate themselves from one another, and that this will require their employees to in turn become more specialised. For instance, along with having publication records that mark them as experts in their own academic field, an academic might also specialise in digital technologies and education, the gathering and analysis of data on learning outcomes, or hold industry positions. So far as these latter “practitioner academics” are concerned, the idea is that they might only come in to teach or lecture a few times a year, and spend the rest of their time on fieldwork or, better still, working within external public or private organisations.

Specialisation can go hand in hand with the organisational motivations behind flexigility, for it means that the employment relationship between academics
and universities can be increasingly specified. Rather than a single teacher having a contract that spans the whole semester, a host of experts could be paid to come in and cover classes on their own technical area by the hour. Notably, while this can complement professionalization, it is potentially at odds with the situations of academics who might deliver lectures or classes on a range of topics over the semester. For example, due to the informal casual employment processes currently used by most universities (May et al. 2013), sessional academics often teach in units that are outside their own academic areas (e.g. creative writers teach advanced research methods, tourism graduates teach sociology, etc.); hence, they are “specialised” in that they only fulfil teaching and training roles, but they are not specialised in terms of the employment of their academic expertise. Likewise, a lecturer might be “specialised” in their ability to construct and deliver a unit, but part of their role may be threatened by the greater use of externally sourced “specialised casual employee roles” (PwC 2016, 43).

Consider these three key attributes relate to the academic precariat:

1. Increasing numbers of academics are casually employed for longer periods of time and are under increasing pressure to work in unfamiliar disciplinary areas and campuses – which speaks to flexigility.
2. Sessionals rarely receive internal training or compensation for external training, and face structural conditions that limit their opportunities for advancement – which speaks to and undermines professionalisation
3. The expertise that sessional academics already have are regularly overlooked in the informal job-market, and, although they do most of the teaching, they often do so in unfamiliar areas according to the plans of coordinators – which speaks to and undermines specialisation.

These issues (for they are issues, insofar that they have been identified time and again in the higher education literature as being systemic) stem in part from the precariatisation of the academic workforce and the institutional
conditions that shape the situations of sessionals. It remains to be seen whether the emphasis on developing and employing new specialised roles will improve the lot of sessional academics, or if it will simply broaden and normalise the already burgeoning population of academics going from one-off contract to one-off contract. Suffice to say that many academics already face challenges when it comes to finding and securing employment, having their credentials and skills acknowledged, and accessing the resources and support required for professional and career development. Potentially, such precarity could lead to a decline in PhD enrolments and completions, a decline in the quality of teaching and research, and any number of other detrimental impacts on institutional prosperity. At the very least, one would think that any balanced appraisal of the future of the higher education sector should address such effects. However, none of these possibilities are acknowledged in, yet alone factored into, the strategies proposed in PwC’s (2016, 37) “hypothetical future university” (Figure 9).
Figure 9: PwC (2016, 37): “Workforce interventions – An example university”.

Strategic focus of the example university
- Needs to actively differentiate through its response to external drivers or change.
- Focuses on delivering practical and employable skills to students through key industry partnerships and evolving curriculum offering.
- Fosters a culture of continuous change and advancement, supported by an agile workforce.
- Embraces the new opportunities for lecturing delivery to access a wider audience through digitisation by making several post-graduate programs available in blended and pure online settings.

Results in reforms to

WORKFORCE CAPABILITY
- Leadership
  - Requires new leaders with strong backgrounds in leading change from outside of the sector
- Skills
  - Invests in developing the analytical capability of the professional workforce to better leverage data to drive insights into operational improvement
- Experience
  - Sets objective for 10% of its leadership and academic workforce to have industry experience in three years
  - Supports this aspiration through hiring, secondments and flexible working practices
- Behaviours
  - Embeds values of collaboration, agility and innovation into the employee lifecycle to ensure adoption into actions and decisions

WORKFORCE ENGAGEMENT
- Diversity of employment contracts
  - Introduces contact options for face-to-face and online courses to allow them to maintain roles in industry
  - Introduces flexible working arrangements to allow leave of absence to pursue industry opportunities
  - Redevlops all academic contracts to support ‘generalist’ roles
- Performance and reward
  - Implements performance management frameworks across all academic roles, including casual staff
- Mobility
  - Facilitates all courses in a flexible, channel agnostic manner with some content delivered by global experts
  - Maintains partnerships and secondment programs with international universities

WORKFORCE STRUCTURE
- Career path
  - Introduces secondments to and from industry partners, to develop business ecumen, and encourage collaboration and different career paths
  - Creates hiring and promotion policies that recognise industry experience
  - Formalises a career path for high potential casuals to transition to permanent roles
- Development
  - Formalises learning and development to support capability aspirations, with a strong initial focus on professional staff development
- Academic pipeline
  - Sources new academic roles from both traditional pre-service backgrounds and industry experts in equal measure
  - Develops ‘equivalence’ criteria to map industry experience into academic roles
- Redesign of existing roles
  - In support of a more agile workforce, redesigns academic roles to reflect a coherent, generic set of responsibilities, with actual responsibilities changing year by year, depending on demand (e.g. moving between blended teaching/ research and pure research roles)
  - Role expectations include working a full day outside the standard university working hours, on an as needed basis
- Design of new roles
  - Creates new roles to initiate and maintain industry partnerships both embedded in industry and the university
  - Invests in a new digital and student experience team to analyse and design for future student demands
  - Some of these roles are embedded directly within industry, and some are onsite at the university
Value Propositions and Impediments

Following consultation with the selected key stakeholders, PwC (2016, 39) identify three “hurdles university leaders will need to overcome as they embark on implementation of these workforce reforms”: industrial limitations, lack of alignment between “university and people priorities”, and a “traditional and change adverse culture”. Industrial limitations involve existing Enterprise Bargaining Agreements (EBAs) which, as the interviewees put it, “limit our flexibility and ‘protect’ our staff from change, no matter how inevitable it may be” and “limit our ability to articulate and enforce performance expectations”. One aim of reducing or removing industrial limitations is to put the university in a position where it can hold staff to account so that renumerated time aligns with desired types and levels of engagement, work and productivity. For instance, staff who are expected to produce a certain amount of research outcomes, be it in terms of funding, publishing or impact, can be a drain on the budget despite their performance, and can potentially resist attempts to restructure their loading, or relocate or terminate them based on levels of security and representation. In this limited respect, it makes sense that universities – which ostensibly face mounting uncertainty in terms of student and industry expectations, future funding policies, and technologies that could lead to redundancies – would seek to remove any structural conditions that could hinder flexibility.

So too is it unsurprising that attempts to terminate EBAs would be met with trepidation by workers and resistance by unions, for what the organisational elite may view as overcoming “limitations” to their ability to do their jobs as business leaders, can be seen by others as an attack on the security of workers, the roles and values of academics, and the character of universities. For instance, following the termination of an EBA, serious misconduct as a basis for termination could be downgraded to simple misconduct, channels to challenge allegations and disciplinary measures could be put at the employer’s discretion, and the ability to negotiate payment and security in bargaining rounds could become even more slanted in favour of employers.
Conditions that previously covered workloads and remuneration can also be reset, as the EBAs are replaced with the far more basic, nation-wide awards, with anything above these being granted by the grace of management. In effect, this means that the security, bargaining power, work situations and conditions for advancement or dismissal for employees are all reduced.

Notably, Murdoch University succeeded in 2017 in terminating its EBA, making it the first university and largest employer in Australia to do so. Reflecting the comments made in the PwC report, Murdoch’s stated reason for the termination was that the EBA constrained its ability to operate within the current environment and secure future economic sustainability – though the expenditure on the University’s management, branding and other such costs did not factor into the financial challenges addressed in its application, being viewed as necessary costs. For these reasons, the attempt to remove “industrial limitations” based on budgetary challenges has been viewed as top-down attacks on the security of the workforce, rather than as a full review of the whole university staffing-costs. Or, to put it differently, it reflects the influence of some sub-systems within the university over what is and is not counted in attempts to determine the structure of its sub-systems and the situations of its subjects. That said, such details were not of much weight and the odds were stacked in the University’s favour, for all its management needed to do to satisfy the Fair Work Commission (FWC) was convince the Commissioner that the termination would not be against the broader public interest (ultimately, the argument that ensuring the university did not go under financially because of the need to observe the conditions of the EBA was deemed as consistent with this requirement).

While the meaning of “lack of alignment between university and people priorities” was far from clear in the report, it seems to speak to the complex internal environment and corresponding variety of priorities in universities. For instance, to save money the organisational elite (who receive the highest salaries, raises and bonuses in the university, and, so far as Australian universities measure up, amongst the highest in the world) tell the academic
schools to cut courses and expenditure, including teaching staff. This speaks to the imperative that universities maintain a “strong ship”, for which the priorities of some sub-systems and their subjects (e.g. the preservation of academic communities and their security) must be sacrificed “for the team”. The criticism of, and resistance to, such methods, as well as the academic proclivities behind such behaviour, seems to be the basis of this “lack of alignment”, and relates to the “traditional and change averse culture”. While the limited consultation meant that the PwC offered little clarification on this front, the report (2016, 39) states that:

University cultures have withstood the test of time, supported by the high degree of academic freedom inherent in the sector. However, a number of university leaders told us that cultural limitations are one of the most significant barriers to responding to, and anticipating, changes impacting the sector, to the detriment of the future competitiveness of Australian universities. In some respects, many in the sector are comfortable and do not believe that a burning platform exists which necessitates change. Student union representatives also supported the view that a top heavy governance culture is detrimental to innovation in teaching and research.

Such resistance is not surprising, for academic freedom and institutional autonomy are often viewed as central to Western universities (Bleiklie 1998; Collini 2012), including in Australia (Connell 2015; Hill 2012). Universities and academe have long been like peas in the pod: comparable to sportsmanship and the parameters of any given sport, or to religious dispositions and rituals and the organisation and continuity of the church. Universities are the home of the academic vocation, and there have been times when they have done well in capitalising on this fact: be it in the marketing of their public image to attract students, or in attempting to maintain their autonomy while simultaneously justifying the financial assistance they receive from government and industry. PwC (2016, 22) offers no reflection on this front, and instead focus on economic and technological drivers of change as forces sweeping in from an uncontrollable market environment in which universities must adapt or be decimated:
While universities are still responsive to both government and the public, they are forced to run more like a business. This includes achieving efficiencies, higher productivity, competitiveness, flexibility and agility. Like business, they need to respond faster, minimise overheads and change strategy and direction in response to markets, trends and opportunities.

In the face of such conditions, change is critical to survival, and so becomes a moral imperative for anyone who cares about the needs and opportunities of future generations. From this perspective, the agents of change, as in the key people in higher education, government and industry, are the sober stewards of the future, while those who question them are impediments to progress. Hence, for these agents of change, it is not the changes proposed that are being resisted, nor is it the people proposing such changes or their reasons per se; nor is it a matter of the rejection of a particular narrative, or of resistance to an increasingly pervasive and reductive paradigm; it is especially not a matter of groups operating in their own interest, whereby proposed changes have clear winners and losers. Rather, according to the VCs consulted by PwC (2016, 39), it is a matter of the “cultural limitations” of a “historically change resistant sector” being “one of the most significant barriers to responding to, and anticipating, changes impacting the sector, to the detriment of the future competitiveness of Australian universities”.

To be sure, universities must have some conservative elements for the system to maintain its own distinctiveness. As discussed in prior chapters, this is reflected in a historically rich culture and persistent aspirations that help distinguish universities and academics from other institutions and professions. However, academic autonomy and the self-determination of the disciplines engender the potential for continuity as well as change, and so cover both the preservation of traditions and the pursuit of innovation. Indeed, the literature on neoliberalism makes it abundantly clear that the issue is not some general aversion to change itself, but rather an aversion to reforms that are seen to undermine autonomy, culture and integrity through managerialism and economic rationalism. Evidently, this aversion extends to the reforms that are presented in the report, as well as to the strategies used by PwC in its
production. Put differently, the literature on the prevailing trends in higher education and the academic workforce indicates that the cultural hurdle is less a technical issue pertaining to reform (i.e. “how can we get academics to be reasonable?”), but the reflection of differing perspectives, priorities and interests within the system, which have been heightened by changing sources of funding and increasing competition from rivals both regionally and – in an increasingly global market – abroad.

So far as this all relates to flexigility, specialisation, and professionalisation, the situations of university workforces can be expected to be increasingly precarious, for the “essential attributes” identified in the report are the same attributes that have been identified in the higher education literature as comprising the ethos of the neoliberal university (Archer 2008; Davies and Petersen 2005; Ward 2012). The changes and corresponding potential for conflict are intimately tied to the respective influences and agendas of its related systems and respective sub-systems. Hence, in the attempt to bend the structure and culture of the academic workforce to their own visions and strategies, the organisational elite are reimagining the academic sub-system.

**Conclusion**

As Forsyth (2014, 2, original emphasis) observed in the first comprehensive history of Australian universities: “Shifts in ideas about universities in Australia have not been achieved in a disinterested or objective manner: every new idea about tertiary education represents someone’s interests”. As shown in the development, dissemination and influence of PwC’s report, the “someone” in this instance is an alliance of the Government through its reforms to the sector, the AHEIA and Universities Australia and, by extension, the organisational elite and other key people consulted by PwC. These key people are explicitly aiming to reduce the boundaries between universities and industry in response to what they see as an increasingly disruptive environment that ostensibly demands new modes of organisation. In relating these changes to both the academic precariat and the derivative
approach to social systems theory, the point of this chapter has been to show how: 1) the roles and situations of academics are set to change in ways that will likely increase precarity, and 2) how these changes reflect the different perspectives, priorities and levels of influence within the university system.

In respect to roles, PwC’s ideal university leaders of the future should have “strong backgrounds in leading change from outside the sector”, while “values of collaboration, agility and innovation” must be “hardwired” into the “employee lifecycle” (PwC 2016, 37). It is recommended that academic roles be redesigned and new ones created to reflect a “consistent, generic set of responsibilities”, while simultaneously having “actual responsibilities changing year to year, depending on demand” – which is to say that the employment and work situations of academics will become less consistent, more proletarianized and managed, and so, presumably, more precarious. Hence, in the Australian Higher Education Workforce of the Future report we see a call for pursuing a certain kind of leadership and sets of priorities to be situated at the top of the university hierarchy, in order to carry out the top-down restructuring of universities and their sub-systems, so as to change the situations, roles and attitudes of existing and potential university staff.

Linking these changes to the three key attributes listed by PwC, the focus on flexigility speaks to the situations and experiences of precarity outlined in Part 1. Along with having trouble developing a stable sense of occupational identity and inclusion, sessional academics are unable to plan far ahead due to employment and work situations that are typically short-term and secured through contingent, informal processes. Hence, they must be flexigile so that they can regularly seek and take on work from a variety of sources. They must also be professionalised (in the sense described by PwC), insofar that they must have or be able to quickly pick up the generic skills required for their jobs (which may regularly change, depending on demand). Finally, they must be specialised in so far that academic credentials and experiences in industry can ostensibly make them more competitive in these processes.
Relating the *Australian Higher Education Workforce of the Future* report to the derivative approach to social systems theory can help to elucidate the conditions and processes that are exerting and normalising these changes. As the emphasis that PwC place on the increasingly globalised environment indicates, these pressures are not limited to Australia. Gill (2014, 18) notes in her analysis of the changing conditions of academics in the U.K. that these shifts, whereby it is no longer enough to just say that “universities are like businesses”, reflect the broader transformations of the current – that is, the neoliberal – capitalist system, with universities emerging “as a cypher or barometer of broader transformations within the economy, and thus a privileged space for ‘reading’ the contours of contemporary capitalism”.

Here, the gradual precariatisation of higher education workforces is a rational response to unavoidable and undeniable external conditions and disruptions. This requires universities to strategically differentiate themselves from one another, as well as increase their capacity for contingent differentiation, by “leveraging their value propositions” as service providers within the market. This means that each university and the sub-systems therein will seek to meet market demands and offer something different from their competitors. For the key people referenced by PwC, these processes can only be impeded by resistance to change, and are facilitated by the embrace of operational conditions that prioritise the needs of the university as a business over those of academe as a vocational profession and academics as human beings.

It is in respect to these conditions of change and normalisation that, despite their increasingly differentiated and complex internal environments, it is possible to frame contemporary universities via the theme of neoliberalism. Furthermore, it is in respect to the manner in which these changes are being pursued, along with the effects that they might have on the situations, experiences and attitudes of future higher education workforces, that we can develop a better understanding of the burgeoning academic precariat, the changing functions and roles of academics and, by extension, the changing character and position of academe within the university system.
Conclusion

The university system and the academic precariat

This study has sought to describe and account for the challenges that an increasing number of emerging academics are facing in securing a stable, long-term career in academe. It has highlighted how reforms of the higher education sector in accordance with the global socio-economic trend of neoliberalism have disrupted what was previously a relatively straightforward pathway into an academic career via the PhD. Instead, for an increasing number of graduates, the PhD has become a pathway into precarity.

There are those that might argue that neoliberalism is not the cause of this situation. One alternative way to view the rise of the academic precariat is in economic terms of supply and demand, whereby there are too many credentialed and aspiring academics relative to the dwindling number of secure academic positions. While such a market-based explanation may seem correct if one focusses only on the ability of universities to absorb the “over-production” of PhD recipients, this overlooks the trends of precariatisation, whereby casualisation, workforce segmentation, and proletarianisation have been strategically pursued by universities ostensibly in response to the changing environment. As Nelson (2011, 98) puts it, the issue is not so much that universities have “overproduced PhDs”, but rather that they have deliberately “underproduced appropriate, nonexploitative jobs” in the pursuit of flexibility and efficiency. As Bousquet (2002) similarly points out, the tendency of universities to take advantage of easily disposable aspiring academics does not so much reflect the behaviour of an impartial market, but rather of strategic administrators.

Reducing the issue to economics also overlooks the cultural and social factors that attract people to academe to begin with, for these can influence their perspectives, goals, and relations and situations within the university system. For instance, at the micro level, the decision to pursue an academic career can
be made while one is still in the position of student, rather than staff. Teaching in a university can feel like an honour, though finding and performing such work often depends on networks and learning-on-the-job, rather than on transparent and meritocratic processes. These benefactor/employer and beneficiary/employee conditions, which are discussed here in terms of informal and formal job-markets, are apparent in Australia in the variability and lack of reliable data on the size and situations of sessional academics, which cannot be penetrated with the postulation of a singular market. Moreover, sessional teachers tend to work based on limited-term contracts that span semesters, often – though not always – in areas they care deeply for. In short, those who undertake academic work do so for reasons that cannot be explained by financial incentives alone and do so according to conditions that are not reducible to impartial attempts to improve organisational operations. These operations can involve teaching and reviewing the work of students, undertaking research and contributing to specialised fields of knowledge, engaging with academic communities and networks across institutions, and navigating organisational structures that are constantly changing and which present ongoing tensions in terms of priorities, rationales and situations.

At the same time, universities are trying to adapt to changing public funding conditions within an unpredictable environment, and as emphasis is placed on the responsivity and flexibility of the organisation, the attainability of aspirations popularly associated with academe – such as developing a career and professional identity, having autonomy and honing intellectual vocations – are reduced. These tensions can be formulated in respect to conflict and competition between groups over resources and control of labour, as well as in terms of the prevailing roles and sometimes contradictory rationales of differentiated systems.

However, as even a cursory look at the tensions playing out in our universities will show, sociocultural systems are not entirely self-steering, and there are always different interests and motivations vying for influence. Hence, when
it comes to attempts to explain the issues faced by the academic precariat, multiple approaches and answers emerge. I drew on neo-Marxian, neo-Weberian, and Luhmannian sociology, because I wanted to address the material and hierarchical conditions of employment and status and how this relates to different values and rationales in a complex system. The result is a multidimensional approach that is attuned to the situations and experiences of the burgeoning academic precariat along with the broader systemic conditions that underpin such phenomena. On the Marxian front, it is an economically oriented and internally contradictory social structure that facilitates exploitation. According to a more Weberian angle, one cannot underestimate the role that values, norms and status have on the actions, bifurcation and reproduction of ideals and groups – for many in this precariat can find better pay and security elsewhere, but instead limit their horizon of possibilities (in the job market, at least) to the academic system. Finally, Luhmann (1988) insists that social systems and environmental conditions are not necessarily under the “control” of any individual group or organisation, and that structures and meaning are part of a broader system of complex and unwieldy social systems that can be elucidated through theory.

Beginning with a brief autobiographical account of my entrance into sessional academic work, Part 1: On Disposable Academics looked at how the academic workforce can be formulated in terms of broad disaggregated and subjectively salient groups. On the one hand are the academics of the “salariat”, who enjoy relatively secure employment and work situations, inclusion and influence in the professional community as “real faculty”, and who often operate as the proxy-employers, supervisors and line-managers of sessional academics. Given this relative level of security and status, and the structural conditions that this entails in terms of autonomy, opportunities and identity, this group represent the citizens or the “tenured core” of the university system (Kimber 2010). In contrast, the burgeoning population of sessional academics depend on contingent cycles of limited-term jobs that are typically secured through informal processes, occasionally across several universities and courses at a time. Their employment situations are
characterised by contingency and uncertainty, while their work situations tend to be characterised by proletarianisation, whereby their academic skills can have no connection to their employment or the work that they undertake. This burgeoning “tenuous periphery” are formulated here as the “academic precariat”. The goal of Part 1 was to draw on Marxian and Weberian approaches to class-analysis, as well as the work of Standing, to conceptualise this latter group in terms of its typical characteristics, while also giving insight into why people choose to enter and remain in academe despite such conditions.

One of the key points of Part 2: The University System was that, while status, advancement and the attainment of relative security have been part of the traditional career path in academe, this has been disrupted in the contemporary system, resulting for many in a sustained state of precarity. This shifts precarity from a temporary stage to something more permanent, leading to a deeper sense of precarity, whereby a person feels (in a psychological sense) that they are standing at the precipice of a ravine with no bridge to future aspirations. This resembles the situation that Ulrich-Beck (1992) refers to as “risk society”, whereby structures of support and protection from environmental disruptions and issues of social structure are not guaranteed as available or effective, and individuals are left to navigate the shifting sands through their own devices and according to the demands of decreasing levels of certainty. Social systems theory offers valuable insights here, in that universities are responding to the uncertainties of the environment by attempting to increase adaptability through the development of new sub-systems and sub-system relations, geared toward accountability and flexibility; translating to more management and casualisation, spanning from sub-systems (academe), to systems of larger and larger scale (across universities, education systems, nations and economies).

As indicated by the structure of this thesis, I did not set out to condemn universities as exploitative machines and then drive this message home by illustrating those who suffer (or, for that matter, benefit) from its operations.
Rather, I set out to show how the characteristics of a system and the situations of its subjects relate to one another via the complex internal environment of the university system, and as a result of the demands placed on this system by the influences and disruptions of the broader environment. This amounts to the contention that the precariatisation occurring in academe is in step with similar processes occurring beyond the university system, as these reflect the prevailing conditions that characterise the current social and economic environment, described here via neoliberalism. Within such an environment, the preservation of the securities enjoyed by workers throughout the twentieth century, as well as of the aspirations associated with certain institutions and professions, are challenged by the call to embrace (and therefore to drive) change – as expressed by influential systems (such as governments) and sub-systems (such as management).

As the analysis of the university context shows, how these changes occur, are experienced and potentially resisted depends on the system in question. It is in this respect that the neo-Marxian and neo-Weberian approaches can complement social systems theory by bringing organisational contexts and subjectively salient situations into the picture. In turn, social systems theory reminds us that situations take place in the context of complex structural conditions that shape possible responses to internal and external disruptions. Some of these conditions are disproportionality exerted by dominant systems over others, based on the roles and rationales of said systems. In this instance, as universities are under pressure to satisfy the funding criteria put in place by governments while adapting to change, the organisational elite have become more influential, and are increasingly employing private sector strategies that pursue more control over increasingly differentiated sub-systems through the proletarianisation and casualisation of workforces. This all contributes to universities that increasingly resemble private-sector businesses, the unbundling of previously multidimensional roles, the bifurcated reduction of securities and opportunities, and the sidelining of professional and vocational ideals that do not adequately figure into desired metrics or which challenge the vision of those in the dominant sub-system.
This is not just a matter of exploiting workers (though this is a part of it), for university “leaders” are also swept up in the neoliberal logic and conditions from which they are ostensibly unable to seriously deviate (although they do have considerable latitude in how they implement neoliberal strategies). Rather, it is to point out that the burgeoning lot of the academic precariat and the emerging state of the university system cannot be fully explained in terms of self-interest. Nor was the intention to lay the blame at the feet of aspiring academics, as if to say that they should just know or do better or that they should quit if they are unhappy, for focussing only on personal troubles is not an appropriate response to that which can be demonstrated to stem from issue of social structure. Less individualised responses are being explored by increasingly connected workers groups. For example, Murdoch University’s termination of its EA was responded to by the NTEU with a campaign that involved eliciting support from both the salariat and the precariat. This contributed to a new EA that was broadly comparable to other Australian universities. While such an outcome is more a matter of resistance than advancement, it reflects the dynamics of a system in which no single group fully dominates future organisational conditions.

One response to the bifurcation of the academic sub-system is collegiality and communication throughout the periphery and the centre, between different roles and institutions and even different sectors and workforces. But generating solutions has not been the goal of this project. Rather, the goal has been to contribute to our understanding of the situations of the academic precariat and, in so doing, give a sense of how class-analysis and social systems theory can elucidate issues that might otherwise be explained away as personal troubles or impartial responses to irresistible conditions. In a very real sense we are all precarious, but that need not mean disposable.


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