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Back to zero? Precarious employment in academia amongst ‘older’ early career researchers, a life-course approach

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ABSTRACT

Despite the diversity of entry points into academia, little research exists examining the experiences and impact of precarious employment at different life stages. Drawing on interviews with 19 academics employed casually or on fixed-term contracts in Australian universities, this paper illustrates how precarious employment is experienced at different life and career stages. Using Foucauldian understandings of power and discourse alongside a life-course sociological approach, we explore how parenthood, relationships and life decisions are shaped by precarious employment in the academy. Discourses around academic ‘pipelines’ and ‘early careers’ obscure the experiences of those entering academia as a second-career; and those in long-term precarious employment. These employment structures have deep personal, professional and financial impacts. By identifying the intersection between precarious employment and life stages, we argue that an understanding of the effects of precarious employment requires further, urgent attention to support the diverse needs of academics.

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Introduction

Progression from doctorate to professoriate is sometimes described as a *pipeline*, suggesting a smooth professional journey. The pipeline metaphor, however, is inadequate and misleading: obscuring the multiple entry and exit points of academic careers, those who never secure permanent work or progress to the professoriate, and how careers are experienced across individuals’ life-course. The so-called ‘Early Career Researcher’ (ECR) phase, used to describe both teaching and research academics, is particularly misunderstood and under theorised. Drawing on research literature on academic careers and individual life courses, this paper addresses the diverse impacts of precarity for ECRs across life stages and challenges us to rethink what ‘career planning’ might entail, particularly for those embarking on a second career. Age and ageism within the growing number of workers in insecure employment has been considered in sectors such as retail and hospitality (e.g. Parry and McCarthy 2017), but less so in academia, which is the focus of this paper.

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In this paper, we examine regimes of truth (Foucault 2012/2014) about academic careers, especially the discourse on becoming an academic through differing stages of life. Our aim is to expose discursive rules that underpin our systems of thought, determining who has the authority to speak, what can be known (and by whom), and whose interests and views are prioritised. Foucault wrote that:

Each society has its regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth; that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who charged with saying what counts as true (Foucault 1980, 131).

Discourses privilege certain perspectives, while creating discursive prohibitions around other points of view in specific times and places. Our analysis of interviews with academics experiencing precarious employment in universities or research institutions across Australia sought to understand regimes of truth about academic careers, bringing together Moen and Sweet's (2004) life-course sociological approach with a Foucauldian focus on discourse. We identify the discursive construction of academic careers that can marginalise those in precarious employment.

In any discussion about university employment, the profound changes that have occurred in work more broadly since the 1980s must be acknowledged. In Australia, government funding dropped from almost 90% of university revenue in the late 1980s, to less than 50% by the mid-2000s (Marginson and Marshman 2013). While Hugo (2005) suggested that the ageing Australian academic workforce would result in mass retirements by 2015, decreases in university funding have left little room for the 40,000 new university positions predicted to replace those who retire (Group of Eight 2010). Long-standing fears about academic workforce sustainability have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, national lockdowns and resultant restructuring of many universities worldwide (Thatcher et al. 2020).

The impact of the pandemic is likely to make the employment of ongoing staff financially riskier for institutions, potentially creating an even greater reliance on project-based 'soft money' and precarious employment structures, particularly for those in the early stages of their career. The pandemic appears to have magnified the changes of the neoliberal university that have been occurring over the past three decades (Smyth 2017), shifting responsibility for financial security and career progression from the institution to the individual. Watermeyer et al. (2021) propose the notion of 'pandemia' to describe the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on academia. They argue that the pandemic has 'emboldened' universities to take further steps towards neoliberal governmentality, including work intensification, job losses, and university transformations under managerialist leadership. The resulting risk of precarity has sparked widespread fear that has 'neutralis[ed] any kind of counteraction or resistance' (656). There is strong evidence that significant restructuring, increased workloads and precarity have resulted in Australian universities during pandemic (e.g. see Bowyer et al. 2022).

Substantial research has focused on the relationship between academic employment, gender, marital, and parental status (Ivancheva, Lynch, and Keating 2019). Research in the US identifies women who are married with children are 132% more likely than male counterparts to work in insecure employment (Wolfinger, Mason, and Goulden 2009). Female-identifying academics are less likely to receive promotions to high-level academic positions

in Australia (Dobele, Rundle-Thiele, and Kopanidis 2014) and represent less than half of the ongoing academic workforce in the UK (Ivancheva, Lynch, and Keating 2019). Those with caring responsibilities are further disadvantaged, with Klocker and Drozdowski (2012) controversially asking ‘how many papers is a baby worth?’. While research into the impact of gender and caring responsibilities on traditional academic careers is vital, the focus of this paper is on other impacts of individual life-courses, including the intersection between age and precarious employment status, which have not yet been fully considered.

Understanding how people navigate careers in neoliberal times, within and beyond academia, is complex and demands sophisticated methodological approaches. The ‘sociology-derived life-course perspective’ (Patton and Doherty 2020, 300) has emerged as a field that seeks to understand how ‘careers extend beyond occupational concerns and into other aspects of people’s lives, such as family careers and marking progressions through family forms and structures’ (Moen and Sweet 2004, 212). Moen and Sweet’s work is foundational, examining the interplay between careers and lives, and how these unfold over time. They argue current employment structures position individuals as responsible for managing how their life-course impacts on their career, highlighting the relevance of intersections between contextual factors such as age, socio-economic advantage, gender, sexuality, race, institutional and labour market conditions, and workforce policies, to careers and lives.

In this paper, a life-course perspective is used to problematise dominant discourses of academic careers, especially the homogenous grouping of insecurely employed academics. This analysis is designed to uncover power relations and unstated assumptions made by, and about, precariously employed academics. In illuminating impacts of insecure employment for people across their life-course, we hope to give practitioners and institutions a greater understanding of the professional development and mentoring needs of academics in different forms of employment, and at different life stages.

‘Truths’ about academic careers

The global rise of precarious employment in academia has been relatively well-documented (Spina et al. 2020). While casual or fixed-term work was once considered a steppingstone to an academic career (van Anders 2004), there has been substantial growth in the number of academics who are precariously employed for years or decades.

The precarious workforce has proliferated alongside the massification of higher education, increasing demands on teaching staff, while producing an oversupply of workers with degrees. In Australia, annual graduations from higher degree research (HDR) programs have more than doubled in two decades, from 5,738 in 2001 to 11,165 in 2019 (Department of Education and Training 2020). Simultaneously, the number of ongoing positions in universities has been outstripped by contingently employed academics (Ryan, Connell, and Burgess 2017). These changes mean the majority of HDR graduates are more likely to join the precariat than the professoriate, should they remain in academia at all.

Discourses of academic work, including the ubiquitous ‘*publish or perish*’, are underpinned by competition and highlight the use of specific metrics of career success. Despite awareness of current academic employment prospects, some studies report PhD candidates and ECRs (of all ages) feeling confident about the job market if they have established a publishing track record (Bosanquet, Mantai, and Fredericks 2020; Dufty-Jones 2017). This regime of truth, described as the ‘cruel optimism’ of academia, leads precarious academics

to maintain hope for meritocratic employment while pursuing an insecure future (McKenzie 2018).

These discourses about academic careers suggest that precarious work in universities offers a stable entry to the 'pipeline' of an academic career (van Anders 2004, 511). This discursive truth requires problematisation, given broader societal changes to the nature of employment and university structures. Some studies suggest potential employees must become extraordinary academics, referred to as 'superheroes' (Pitt and Mewburn 2016) or 'rockstars' (Smyth 2017), to secure ongoing work. Bexley, Arkoudis, and James (2013) found that younger academics in Australia were more likely to plan to leave academia than older colleagues, although this varies by discipline. Science graduates, for example, are more likely to find employment outside academia (Mewburn et al. 2020). McCarthy and Wienk (2019) showed that PhD students in science were also more likely to consider work outside of academia, while humanities students overwhelmingly identify with an academic career path.

The pipeline metaphor intimates an idealised view of academic work as a life-long endeavour, obscuring the experiences of those who leave academia or enter university employment later in life. Age is frequently used as a measure of if a worker is 'on' or 'off' schedule, in terms of regular progression towards a career path (Strike and Taylor 2009). The discourse of 'regular' career progression effectively presents ECRs and the precariat as homogenous groups, inhibiting a deeper understanding of the life-courses and different experiences of individuals.

Older academics in precarious employment are often discursively positioned as a 'problem' for the institution (c.f. Earl, Taylor, and Cannizzo 2018). Stereotypical depictions of precarious workers tend to focus on those under 35 and are frequently associated with ECR status, meaning they are within 5 years of the completion of their doctoral studies. While there is research on precarity for this group (e.g. Browning, Thompson, and Dawson 2017), there is a lack of attention paid to those who enter the academy over 40, as a second career. The experiences of 'second career academics' have generally been researched in the context of ongoing employment (Herman et al. 2020). The changing nature of precarious work, however, has prompted a need to examine the experiences of second career academics in insecure employment. In this paper, we examine how precarious academics from different life-stages are constituted and constitute themselves within the context of the contemporary institution. Given the significant number of precariously employed academics of all ages, this research is vital for establishing more equitable and sustainable employment that meets the needs of both workers and universities.

Research methods

This paper analyses face-to-face and videoconference interviews conducted with 19 precariously employed academics in universities and research institutes throughout Australia. The research was conducted with approval from the University of Newcastle's Human Research Ethics Committee (H-2017-0392). Participants' identities have been protected using pseudonyms and potentially identifying information has been removed. Interviewees were recruited through the authors' networks, including Twitter. Participants were located in Australian research institutions across metropolitan and regional areas. A number also

had prior experience in the US and New Zealand (see Table 1 in Appendix). Participants represented a range of academic disciplines, including social sciences, education, business, health, science, and humanities.

Interviews, lasting between 45 minutes and 2 hours, were audio recorded and transcribed with pseudonyms assigned to people, locations, and institutions. Participants had a broad range of experience levels and previous employment, with many working across different institutions on multiple fixed-term or hourly-paid contracts. The majority had more than 5 years of precarious employment.

A process of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) was used, including inductive and deductive processes, with interviews initially coded for references to age, life-course and career status. Thematic data analysis enabled themes to be identified to ‘captur[ing] something important about the data in relation to the research question and represent[ing] some level of patterned response or meaning with the data set’ (Braun and Clarke 2006, 82). In relation to our research question – what dominant discourses circulate about academic work, and how do these discourses position precariously employed academics at different life-stages? – three themes were identified as being associated with life-courses: commencing an academic career, the dwindling currency of previous careers, and financial insecurity for retirement. As thematic analysis is a method for identifying themes or patterns of meaning (Braun and Clarke 2006), these themes were representative across the data set. To arrive at the themes, the authors each read the data separately and then collectively, to arrive at mutual agreement.

Our interviews uncovered taken-for-granted ‘truths’ about traditional academic career paths, focusing on these three themes. We use a Foucauldian lens to understand how these truths and associated discourses support the replication of power relations and practices. In the following sections of the paper, we explain each of the three themes using the life-course sociological framework, and Foucault to theorise our findings.

Commencing the academic career

A large proportion of the participants entered academia with a belief that education credentials – primarily the PhD – and experience in teaching and/or research would improve their employment opportunities. Instead, participants at various ages and life-stages reported that the PhD was an impediment to finding work outside of academia. Many had not been intentional in seeking an academic career but had been introduced to academic work through short-term contracts during or immediately following their doctoral studies. Chris, a woman in her 40s, said:

I never planned to do research as a career, I never planned to do anything with my PhD other than put it in a little pile and then move on and go [back into school] teaching for the rest of my life...

During her PhD, Chris gradually moved into research work before leaving her school teaching role. Discourses of ‘falling into’ academic work were normalised and shared by our participants; they described the PhD as a personal goal that happened to lead to casual academic work, rather than an intentional entry into the academic pipeline. Interviewees, like Delilah, described opportunities that ‘snowballed’ after the PhD:

Calling it a career, I think, is a bit fancy. Most things - [having worked] as a graphic designer and then as a teacher, like a lecturer – all of these things have always come through word of mouth. I've never had a business card, I've never advertised.

A number of participants discursively constructed their own labour as being located outside of 'an academic career'. As Delilah noted, calling her work a career would be 'a bit fancy'. Rachel (30s), who had well over ten years of research experience in multiple universities and institutes, laughed when asked about her academic career, noting sarcastically, 'what's that? I don't think I've ever had one of those!'

In terms of life-course, decisions to accept work alongside doctoral studies were attributed to a perception of academic work as flexible, and able to suit personal circumstances. For example, Chris described her choice to complete a PhD as a function of her life-course, providing greater flexibility to care for young children than her previous career. Her decision to take on research contracts similarly reflected this discourse of flexibility, allowing work to be balanced with parenting responsibilities. Sydney undertook her studies while on maternity leave. She described that 'a couple of small projects' came her way, and that 'it just made sense' to consider a PhD and academic work after she graduated from her masters degree. During her PhD she supported herself with a scholarship and short-term contract employment. Alongside life-stage, the issue of flexibility appears to be gendered with many of our female participants reporting that flexible academic work aligned with caring responsibilities (Ivancheva, Lynch, and Keating 2019). Male participants in our research were much less likely to engage in the discourse of flexibility, or to raise the issue of balancing caring responsibilities.

Patton and Doherty (2020) argue that career decisions 'need to consider all family members; however institutions (e.g. employers) tend to engage with family members as individuals, not as a cohesive unit' (299). Our interviews indicated that family structures and individual life-stages were highly relevant in decisions to engage in casual or short-term academic work. We identified a pervasive discourse, produced by ongoing and precarious academics alike, that constituted short-term academic work as flexible and fitting with participants' lives beyond work. Such discourses around employment in academia worked to 'construct certain possibilities for thoughts' (Ball 1990, 18), creating truths about how academic careers might emerge in ways that would work alongside the desires of supporting families across different phases of the life-course. This set of truth claims, however, did not fit with the embodied experiences of our participants as they sought more secure employment in universities. In the following sections we identify how dominant discourses of academic work, including this discourse of flexibility shaped expectations for academic careers, contributed to difficulty finding other work, and the ways in which older casual academics began to resist this discourse.

The dwindling currency of a PhD, or a previous career

Our participants – including both highly experienced academics who had not been offered ongoing work and second-career academics – indicated that prior experience did not advantage them in building a career either inside or outside of academia. Delilah, who was in her late 50s, felt that her previous career and doctoral qualifications had diminished possibilities

outside of academia. She described that she, ‘qualified herself out’ of her previous career. Unable to secure permanent work in academia, a number of participants looked for work outside of academia and found that having a PhD was a barrier to employment in government or industry. Amelia (40s) said:

The irony for me is, while I’ve always said I never did any of this for a career, it surely, probably damaged any career that I could have had. Because having a PhD, I think it actually is a negative. People see it and they kind of go, ‘What is that?’ My husband keeps telling me, ‘This is ridiculous.’ You know? For the money that you get... Now that I’m trying to build a career, I’m thinking about my post-PhD life. I’ve got children that are getting older and life gets more expensive and I just ... yeah, that lack of stability has been very emotionally taxing this semester.

Amelia’s response exemplifies a recurring motif across interviews, that obtaining a PhD only proved beneficial when first looking for academic work. Many participants felt that in pursuing a PhD, they had been sold a lie about its value, particularly for those who were in their 40s or 50s. Rather, what mattered was social capital available in the form of networks with tenured academics who could provide access to contracts (Heffernan 2021). Delilah, who had had a significant professional experience prior to moving into academia, noted that it was most important to ‘meet people who have some influence and who are interested in sort of working in partnership – then you get further work.’

The importance of networks for securing work in universities has been highlighted in research literature, with most networks established during the PhD (e.g. Heffernan 2021; Spina et al. 2020). Numerous factors can enhance or diminish networks built by academics in precarious employment, including changing institutions or losing contact with PhD supervisors. Participants could identify causes of the disintegration of their network, such as following the death of a PhD supervisor, maternity or health related leave, the closure of a faculty or department, or retirements. For example:

... after my PhD supervisor died, I thought well that’s the end of my brilliant career. (Delilah, late 50s)

So how do we build up the research networks if we don’t know anyone? It’s hard to build up networks... It’s just hard. All the people we work with retire. (Penny, 40s)

Charles, reflected on his experience of work disappearing following the death and retirement of his doctoral supervisors. He said:

It still makes me angry that I used to tutor in social statistics. Absolutely loved it. Then I had work over in a business faculty... and I loved it. Then it all stopped and that was where it became a real problem with finding any work at all.

Charles was not alone. Other participants who had been working precariously in academia for more than 5 years experienced similar challenges. For second-career academics like Amelia, Charles and Delilah, prior life or work experience did not appear to provide any advantage in building an academic career. For others, like Penny, Rachel and Laura, extensive research experience did not lead to secure employment.

Here, we return to the dominant truths that circulate around academic work. For example, when many of our participants were offered academic work early in their research careers, it was suggested that teaching and research opportunities would not only provide

flexible work but would lead to more stable, flexible work in the future. These truths are put to work, becoming a taken-for-granted knowledge, dispersed across the academy. As Foucault explains, power is not simply a mechanism wielded by those in a position of authority, but rather ‘it comes from everywhere’ (1978, 93). In this understanding of power as relational, the dominant discourse of academic work, for example, is produced and reproduced by academics in ongoing and precarious positions alike during hallway conversations, faculty meetings and over coffee. The reproduction of these discourses by those already working in academia appears to provide some authority for ‘what counts as true’ (Foucault 1980, 131). This ‘politics of truth’ was silent on the ongoing nature of insecure work for an increasing number of academics, and on the likelihood of securing a tenured position after the age of 40. Dominant discourses not only shape what may or may not be said (and thought); they are ‘practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak’ (Foucault 1972, 49). The idea that academic work can be understood with a metaphor of a pipeline from PhD to the professoriate is at odds with the everyday realities of many people working in universities, including older and second-career academics. We note that Covid, and associated university responses, have amplified these issues (e.g. see Watermeyer et al. 2021).

As we have argued elsewhere (see Smithers et al. 2021), tenured academics can play an important role in improving the working conditions of precarious academics and in providing honest assessments of academic work, expectations and career prospects. There is an increasing number of tenured academics who have stood in solidarity with those in precarious work, through critiques of the neoliberal university and collective action (see for example, Connell 2019; Gill 2016; Smyth 2017). Despite these instances of solidarity, dominant discursive practices in universities continue to constitute insecure academic positions as a flexible form of employment that is likely to lead to more secure work. While this pathway is possible for some contract academics, those who are over 40 face additional challenges, as explored in the following section.

An insecure career; an insecure retirement

The pipeline metaphor is damaging for those who find themselves in the precariat long-term. The constitution of ‘early career’ in this pathway is especially injurious for those embarking on a second career. At over five years post-PhD, and no longer constituted as early career, participants began to feel invisible or devalued, despite significant professional or academic experience. Participants with many years of precarious employment experience had lost hope of finding ongoing work:

They always hire me on a [the lowest professional salary scale for each contract]. I suppose that was the lowest they could give... So irrespective of 30 years of experience in research [I have not been able to find permanent, well-paid work]... (Penny, 40s)

I think once they saw how old I was [I didn’t get the job], I don’t know. I really put it down to age... (Jill, 50s)

You have to pretty much accept that, that’s the end of your career, you know. And the closer to 60 I get, because I’m 58 this year... I have to think, well perhaps it’s true, maybe it really is close to the end of my useful working life, I just have to accept it. (Charles, 50s)

Traditional transitions into retirement have changed little in terms of how and when individuals can expect to retire (Moen, Sweet, and Swisher 2005). Yet the reality for precarious academics is that employment prospects will likely diminish before they are ready to retire. Many participants talked about the detrimental effect that their PhD and years or decades in insecure employment had on their retirement savings. Forced early retirements were likely, as people like Jill, Delilah and Charles found themselves less able to secure work. It was apparent that academics who are insecurely employed no longer have a ‘taken-for-granted script’ (Moen, Sweet, and Swisher 2005, 238) which enables them to be active in deciding when to work or transition into retirement.

Participants in their 40s and older, and who had been in the precariat for some time, expressed concerns about financial security more frequently than concern about career progression. As Amelia identifies:

I just think to myself, ‘You know what, I’m 45 I want to retire one day.’ I just want 15 years or more. I don’t care at this point in time what it is, provided I like the people I work with and it’s consistent and I’m not expected to work every weekend. I’m getting too old for this.

In attempts to ‘play the game’ by exceeding job expectations (Spina et al. 2020), participants found that rather than being in employment that was flexible and supported the personal circumstances of their life-stage, the opposite was true. Most participants in this study said they did not aspire to be a person ‘at the top’, after having spent a significant amount of time in the precariat. Rather, they hoped for consistency and to one day be able to retire. For example, Rachel said:

If you can afford to retire one day, that’s quite an achievement in itself. I think the idea of having a career path is, sadly, not there for a lot of people anymore. (Rachel, late 30s).

This statement was in line with the views of many participants who were more focussed on securing work than seeking promotion or tenure. For these academics, financial security and the ability to plan for retirement was paramount.

The dislocation of typical labour trajectories and entitlements meant that those who saw themselves as unencumbered from financial responsibilities – including having children – felt they were in a better position to self-fund life in the academic precariat. This sentiment is echoed by Ashley, who noted that the challenges of long-term insecure employment are exacerbated by a wide range of intersecting factors, including caring responsibilities, gender, health, and life stage:

Contract work really only benefits those who have certain sets of privileges, so they might not have a family, they can move around and it’s not a problem, they might not have any health issues that require access to a particular kind of health service, they may not have issues relating to their gender or sexuality, and so they can live anywhere and they’re not going to be discriminated against, same with ethnicity or race or religion. Disability issues, chronic illnesses. I do think contract work only really benefits someone who doesn’t have a lot of that in place. And the rest of us, we have to try and manage all of those things while staying employed.

Emma, who was in her 40s, characterised herself as ‘lucky’ that she didn’t have dependents. Amy, also in her 40s, identified lack of security as a significant challenge that was exacerbated by her personal circumstances:

I think recently my biggest challenge has been struggling with the lack of stability, long term stability that I've got two young children... I've got two other research contracts that both end in January. I don't know what February is gonna bring.

Precarious academic employment is thus at odds with a broad range of intersecting factors related to an individual's life-course. Comparing her experiences with that of a colleague who appeared to be content in precarious work, Riley said:

But I also think that's a reflection of who he is and where he is in his life; he's a young man, he lives at home with his parents, he doesn't have a mortgage to pay, he doesn't have children to – that he has to nurture and grow and cater and provide for, so perhaps if he was ten years further in his life and he was married with a mortgage and children, that the decision for him would have been very, very different.

For most, ongoing insecure academic work left participants in a constant state of personal and financial stress, as they attempted to navigate a context where secure work seemed increasingly unlikely despite extensive professional, research and educational experiences. Participants repeatedly pointed to a work structure that dominated their lives, leaving them with little time, energy, or money to pursue personal needs, interests, or goals. After more than a decade of insecure work, Emma found a non-academic job at a university to support her financial, emotional, and physical health. While she hoped to continue to publish in her own time, the stress of living in the precariat influenced her decision, saying:

I don't want to go through the pain of applying and applying. Not even applying – going around talking to people, 'do you have [any work for me]?' 'do you have anything?' 'do you have anything?'

Standing (2011) characterises those in the precariat as supplicants, who are reduced to asking for favours, including being offered temporary work. This was certainly the case for the participants, who, as their networks diminished, found themselves increasingly asking for work, rather than being offered work. This is remarkably different to descriptions of how work was offered early in their move to academia: where they were offered opportunities constituted as a pathway to an academic vocation which would offer flexibility to suit various stages of their life-course.

As we have shown, interviewees bore the personal and financial risks associated with precarious work. People across various stages of life described how they were enticed into academic work as a flexible option. The flexibility offered was done so on the basis that it would accommodate the needs of men and women wanting to spend time with young children, and second-career academics exploring a new career interest through study. However, once in the precariat, most found it either difficult or impossible to follow their own research interests and move beyond insecure work.

In addition to feeling that many tenured academic staff were not aware of the severity of the situation, there was a sense that those outside of academia were unaware of how rife casualisation is within academia. For academics who had transitioned from previously secure careers and were of an age where there is a broad expectation of job security, this was especially disheartening.

Yeah, it's funny because one of my classes we were talking about teaching about social classes this semester and I introduced them to the five or six or seven different classes, the way that

they're divided and I showed them the Precariat.... I was saying to them, I'm in the Precariat because I don't know where my income is coming from quarter to quarter, basically, or even less than that. And they were so surprised. (Amy, 40s)

Amy went on to explain that telling her students about her position was intentional. Using her position of authority in tutorials, Amy disrupted the notion that academic careers are inherently stable and elite. In this paper, we have aimed to further challenge the dominant discourses of academia as a pipeline to ongoing progression with high levels of financial reward. Our participants' experiences demonstrate that this is not the case for many academics.

Discussion

Enlisting a precarious workforce has assisted the transformation of universities into structures with burgeoning numbers of workers at the bottom of an employment pyramid. Yet, dominant discourses around the nature of academic careers often render the experiences of insecurely employed academics invisible. Given the increasing proportion of the academic workforce, we have attempted to dismantle the idea of a one-size-fits all career trajectory and the rigid views surrounding insecure work. Precarious work can suit the needs of some academics at different times in their life-course but provides reduced opportunities for many at different life-stages.

Our findings suggest there are few options available to the academic precariat for gaining financial security or developing a career outside of the 'regular' PhD to professoriate pipeline. Taking leave at different phases of the life-course, for instance to care for aging parents or young children, or for ill-health, can lead to financial insecurity, a deterioration of networks, and significant challenges in finding work. While individual biographies featured frequently in decisions to commence academic work, there was little evidence that universities attended to their individual life-course needs once employed.

Rather than being flexible, or a *point d'appui* to a linear academic career, the precariat workforce might be better described as 'a bridge to nowhere' (Alcover 2017, 232). As the data we have presented highlights, academia is unique in that 'entry' or 'early career' positions often include a diversity of age-brackets, including older, 'second-career' workers and long-term insecurely employed academics (Herman et al. 2020). Little attention, however, is paid to individual needs and realities at different life stages in supporting those *within* the academy. The discourses of promotion and ambition that circulate in universities often silence discussions about insecure employment, particularly in terms of issues of age, academic or professional experience, second-career employment and financial precarity. We argue that many who are precariously employed enter the academy immersed in dominant discourses that constitute academic work as appealing and flexible. However, once they are within the institution, they find that the path which is given discursive authority is the pathway towards tenured positions and professorship. Resistance to this dominant discourse is often relegated to 'small-scale, micro-negotiations of power' (Gill 2016, 42) that occur in casual conversations, department meetings and, increasingly, on social media by insecurely employed and ongoing academics alike. We acknowledge that for many academics with ongoing employment, the state of pandemic has increased the risk of speaking out, in a climate of university restructures, downsizing and redundancies.

However, we argue that it is vital to continue to find ways of amplifying resistance to support the needs of precariously employed academics at all stages of their life and career. The Australian National Tertiary Education Union has worked to raise the profile of issues relating to the increasing casualisation within universities over the past decade. Union initiatives, including the 'Charter of Casual Academic Rights' (NTEU undated), and National Week of Action have been designed to draw attention to the significant and growing number of insecurely employed academics. Broader campaigns, such as the Australian Council of Trade Union's *Secure Jobs – Worth Fighting For* were also described as placing universities in a 'starring role' (Evans 2021, 15). Despite these campaigns, universities in Australia have accelerated managerialist policy, with many undertaking significant restructures resulting in almost 60,000 jobs lost by the end of November 2021 (Evans 2021). Collective resistance is vitally important in advocating for a higher education system to make substantial change to appropriately support their employees. For example, while the Charter of Casual Academics' Rights sets out rights such as the right to be remunerated for work within two-weeks and be assigned a designated workstation, these rights were not reflected in the experiences of our research participants. Moreover, none of our participants mentioned the union or their work in advocating for casual and contract academics in their interviews. Rather, they sought advice and solace from those already within the institution. For this reason, we argue that both collective and individual resistance is required to bring about change.

Expectations about academic careers are deeply entrenched in popular culture publications, and in the experiences of many ongoing academics. There is an emerging view that doctoral supervisors should prepare PhD students for a career outside of academia through professional development and career counselling (Dufty-Jones 2017). Not all academics, however, are adequately equipped to offer this support as they are almost inevitably subject to the same regimes of truth that we have identified that dictate how to 'be' an academic, often informed by their own experiences of entering academia.

Research suggests the longer one spends in precarity following doctoral completion, the more difficult it becomes to find secure employment (Bosanquet, Mantai, and Fredericks 2020; Wolfinger, Mason, and Goulden 2009). Even in the small sample of participants in this project, we came across a wide range of academics in terms of their life-course. This paper describes a reality that is problematic for many, particularly for older workers. Despite extensive experience in non-academic settings, second-career academics may be rendered less visible as their networks deteriorate, leading to significant financial consequences. In Charles' words, at the end of every contract 'you're back to zero'. For second-career academics who are constituted as ECRs despite extensive work histories, there is a very real risk of appearing too old to be supported in an academic career pipeline, or even to sustain insecure work – despite extensive qualifications and experience. Moen and Sweet's (2004, 212) characterisation of traditional careers is that they are constituted as orderly, and generally upwards occupational mobility over time; this represents a sharp contrast to the trajectory of our participants.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have considered how age and life-course are worthy of further attention in understanding academic employment. Modern, neoliberal university structures rely on

insecure employment structures, with individuals bearing the costs of downturns, supply, and demand fluctuations (Snyder 2016). Financial risks have moved almost entirely onto workers, as highlighted and worsened by the pandemic. We ask: what are the costs, to academia and to society, of the career patterns we identified in this paper?

We identified a number of truth claims that play out in academic employment. First, that academic work is flexible and part of a life-long vocation with a relatively clear career trajectory. Second, the view that those employed on insecure contracts post PhD will generally move through the pipeline towards permanency and promotion. Yet, large numbers of academics endure long-term precarity and narrowing employment options within and beyond universities. There exists a discursive silence around prior experiences of the precariat, including second-career academics, who find themselves at the bottom of the pyramid, with little option but to continue on, because the regime of truth *outside universities* is that PhDs are unhelpful. Finally, once in academic work, a ‘career’ involves moving from ECR status through to the professoriate. Instead, short-term academic contracts tended to create personal and financial pressures, and a narrowing of employment options.

In writing this paper, we are not suggesting wholesale institutional change. Acknowledging the current context, and following Foucault, we are reminded that power relations are imbued within academia, and that change does not always need to be top-down. The large number of people across various stages of life in the academic precariat warrant a reimagining of what an academic career looks like. As such, we argue that challenging the dominant discourse that all PhD graduates want to be academics; or that all those in academia strive towards that professoriate would be a place to start, but not finish.

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Appendix

Table 1. Research participants listed by age and length of time in research.

Name	Age (approx)	Country	Length of time in research
Amelia	40s	Australia and New Zealand	10+
Amy	40s	Australia and United States	10+
Ashley	20s	Australia	6-10
Billie	30s	Australia and United States	6-10
Blake	20s	Australia	0-5
Charles	50s	Australia	10+
Chris	40s	Australia	6-10
Delilah	50s	Australia	10+
Elaine	30s	Australia and United States	10+
Emma	40s	Australia	10+
Jill	50s	Australia	6-10
Jordan	30s	Australia	0-5
Kathy	30s	Australia and United States	6-10
Laura	30s	Australia	10+
Penny	40s	Australia and New Zealand	10+
Rachel	30s	Australia	10+
Riley	30s	Australia	0-5
Sam	30s	Australia	6-10
Sydney	50s	Australia	0-5