

Responses to Casualisation and Precarity among Academic Staff in Contemporary University Reforms: A Global Systematic Synthesis and New Multi-Level Integrative Framework

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Abstract: Globalisation of neoliberalism in higher education has generated a new surge of casualised and precarious academic work. Although there is an increasing literature on the experiences and structural forces of academic precarity, less effort has been applied to synthesising academic, institutional, and collective organisational responses to precarity. This paper is a systematic literature review of 40 scholarly and peer-reviewed articles published between 2010 and 2026 that discuss the response of individuals, departments, institutions, and the broader world/collective to casualisation in a variety of national settings such as the United Kingdom, Australia, Ireland, South Africa, North America, and continental Europe. The synthesis outlines the range of responses between passive individual strategies of coping (emotional labour, identity negotiation, and time self-management) and active collective resistance (unionisation, digital organising, transnational solidarity campaigns, and policy campaigns). Based on these results, the paper proposes a new Multi-Level Integrative Framework (MLIF) that theorises responses to academic precarity in four levels of analysis: Individual, Departmental / Collegial, Institutional and Global/Collective. The model includes intersectional aspects of gender, race, discipline, and geography, as well as passive coping and active resistance along sustainability, equity, and structural impact dimensions. The MLIF has a dual purpose as a diagnostic resource to researchers and a practical resource to institutional leaders and union organisers who aim to tackle the systemic causes of academic casualisation. The paper will end with specific policy recommendations and a research agenda in the future.

Keywords: academic casualisation, precarious work, higher education reform, unionisation, neoliberal university, collective resistance, multi-level framework, systematic synthesis

Introduction

A radical change in labour is gripping the modern university. The academic labour force has been reshaped in the Global North and more in the Global South in ways that reflect the overall trends of flexibilisation and precarisation in the labour market (Standing, 2011). Sessional, casualised,

adjunct, fixed-term contracts have grown massively, crowding out the old model of tenure-track or permanent academic jobs. In Australia, there are over 50 per cent of all hours of undergraduate teaching which are delivered by casual staff (Brown and Goodman, 2010; May, 2014) and in the United Kingdom, a third of all academic staff have been found to work on temporary or zero-

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hours contracts (Muddiman et al., 2020). The same trends have been observed in Ireland (Courtois and O Keefe, 2015), South Africa (Kerr, 2021), North America (Dis-cenna, 2024; Berry and Worthen, 2021), and in continental Europe (Vatansever, 2025). The magnitude of this change has led researchers to label the rise of a precarious academic worker (Burton, 2022): a new group of highly educated employees who work under conditions of unstable security, a lack of career opportunities, and a lack of professional autonomy.

The causes of academic casualisation are well known. The neoliberal reforms of higher education, marked by marketisation, performance-based funding, managerialism and the commodification of knowledge, have provided institutional incentives to offer cheaper and more flexible labour arrangements, to substitute permanent employment (O’Brady, 2025; Woelert, et al., 2026; Rena and Adlerla, 2026). The emergence of academic capitalism has turned universities into quasi-corporations where labour expenses are reduced and academic work is becoming more fragmented, out-sourced, and digitised (Odhav and Rena, 2024; Ivancheva and Courtois, 2024). Austerity politics, dwindling public funding and increased global competition over research rankings and student enrolments have added to these structural pressures.

The social impacts of this change are devastating. Studies have continually indicated that precarious employment in academia is linked with increased anxiety and psychological distress (Loveday, 2018; Chia et al., 2024), social isolation (Willson et al., 2024), poorer teaching quality (Kahn et al., 2024), and destabilization of collegial cultures (Mason, 2021; Solomon and Du Plessis (2023) Precarity combines with underlying structural inequalities to create compounding disadvantage in the case of academics of marginalised backgrounds -

especially women and racialised minorities (Arday, 2022; Smith, 2022; Wånggren, 2018). The time aspects of precarity are also diabolical: academics have been known to work hours without pay, weekends, and semester holidays in an unremitting yet frequently fruitless attempt to gain enough qualifications to secure a regular job (Smithers, Harris, Heffernan, and Gurr, 2025; Cairns, 2024).

However, as the literature on causes and experiences of academic precarity has been expanding significantly in recent years, as the scoping review conducted by Willson, et al., (2026) illustrates, relatively little academic effort has gone into a crucial question: How do academics, departments, institutions, and collective organisations respond to casualisation and precarity? What are the individual coping strategies, collective resistance strategies, and what are the impacts? Where reviews have been done on these questions in the past, they have either been interested in individual levels of analysis (usually the individual), or in a specific national situation, as opposed to providing a multi-level, cross-national synthesis that would incorporate individual, collegial, institutional and global/collective responses into an analytical framework.

The gap is discussed in the current paper by means of a systematic review of 40 peer-reviewed and scholarly publications published in 2010-2026. It contributes to three major issues. First, it offers a multifaceted, cross-national mapping of answers to academic precarity on four levels: individual, departmental/collegial, institutional, and global/collective. Second, it pays specific attention to the untreated aspect of global union strategies -such as collective bargaining, digital organising, strike action, student-staff alliances, and transnational solidarity- as a key structural change tool. Third and most importantly, it introduces a new Multi-Level Integrative Framework



(MLIF) which conceptualises the entire range of responses to academic precarity, including the intersectional aspects and the distinction between passive coping and active resistance on the scales of sustainability, equity and structural impact. The MLIF aims to serve as a guiding principle in future research, as well as a hands-on instrument to institutional leaders, policymakers, and union organisers who want to tackle the systemic causes of academic casualisation.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

The Structural Architecture of Academic Casualisation

The issue of academic casualisation has not been an organic or an unavoidable process, but rather a by-product of institutional and policy decisions that are inherent in the wider neoliberal reorganisation of higher education systems (Odhav and Rena, 2024; Woelert, et al., 2026; Campbell, 2025). The conceptual analysis of the Australian case by Woelert shows that institutional forces such as devolved budgetary management, reliance on competitive grants, and risk-averse labour relations through hiring practices have legitimised the gradual transformation of continuing positions to contingent labour (Woelert, et al., 2026). Likewise, Brown and Goodman (2010) frame Australian academic casualisation as a location of a growing division of labour into classes on the university frontier between a dwindling tenured elite and a growing precarious underclass. O’Brady (2025) builds on this analysis in comparative terms, across two liberal market economies, and illustrates how academic capitalism and job insecurity create stress via structurally homologous processes in different national settings.

The literature indicates that casualisation functions via several mechanisms which

are interlocking. On the macro level, institutions are motivated to keep the workforce flexible in models of government funding that focus on competitive research income and the number of students (Elliott, Kuchirko, and Diallo, 2026; Rena and Aderla, 2026). The meso level entails casual employees responding to changes in enrolment and teaching workload without incurring the long-term salary expenses (Cairns, 2026). At the micro level, individual scholars are enrolled into a system of projectification where jobs depend on individual projects over a period, as opposed to continuing institutional processes (Cairns, 2026). The emergence of educational technology has further introduced another layer, which allows outsourcing and fragmenting the teaching labour in digital form (Odhav and Rena, 2024; Ivancheva and Courtois, 2024).

Notably, casualisation is not exerted evenly. Arday (2022) offers strong evidence that racialised academics in the UK are in a compounding disadvantage, with precarious employment compounded by institutional racism to create the conditions where Black and minority ethnic staff must work harder to demonstrate competence and have more to lose when faced with challenging institutional norms. Wånggren (2018), Smith, (2022) show that gender also mediates the experience of precarity, and women casual academics disproportionately experience the load of caring labour, emotional work, and disruption during the pandemic. Such intersectional dimensions are a necessary part of any sufficient explanation of reactions to precarity because the resources and limitations to act as a resistance are greatly influenced by social position.

Experiences and Consequences of Precarity

A constellation of interlinked harms is revealed in the literature on academic precarity in an experiential form. The powerful

reading by Loveday (2018) of the so-called neurotic academic reveals how being casually employed leads to the creation of a widespread anxiety that becomes internalised as a form of self-rule, and results in the creation of subjects who work harder to gain permanency. In their qualitative synthesis of evidence based on a set of studies, Solomon and Du Plessis (2023) single out the recurrent themes of insecurity, disrupted identity, lowered well-being, and a loss of professional belonging. Chia et al. (2024) build on this discussion by separating precarity of work (contractual insecurity), precarity at work (poor working conditions) and precarity from work (spill-over effects on health and personal life) as an effective way to understand the role of precarity in mental health in the context of academic precarity.

Its effects are not only limited to individual well-being but also the very operations of the university. As Kahn, et al. (2024) show, precarity generates an illusion of certainty in teaching in higher education because institutions must rely on temporary workers who are not provided with security, resources, or institutional knowledge to provide high-quality pedagogy on a long-term basis. The concealed effects on student support practices are recorded by the studies that indicate that precarious employment limits the ability to meaningfully mentor and provide pastoral care to students (McCulloch, and Leonard, 2024; Rena and Aderla, 2026). Smithers et al. (2023) show the paradox of the temporal experience of casual academics who work on the weekends, but are still formally defined as part-time employees, whereas Cairns (2024) tells about the use of researchers as factotums, i.e. having a broad range of institutional tasks to perform, which are not directly mentioned in their job descriptions, but are not rewarded.

The dehumanising aspects of casualisation is a common theme in the literature. Mason (2021) states that precarity comes with a fundamental lack of recognition and respect, whereas autoethnographic accounts (Murphy, 2021; Nititham, 2022) are the vivid first-person accounts of the lived experience of academic precarity. Burton (2022) synthesises these narratives into a sociological perspective of the so-called academic precariat as a special social formation, whereas Read (2023) appeals to the heterotopian theory to examine how precarious academics occupy the university as a place of possibility and exclusion. One of the most insightful accounts on the systemic marginalisation of long-term casualised researchers in UK higher education is given by Menard (2025), who illustrates how institutional structures reproduce, instead of addressing precarity, even among long-time experienced staff.

Theoretical Resources: Individual Coping to Group Resistance

Current theoretical schools of thought to explain reactions to precarity are more likely to fall into two extremes. On the one hand, psychological and sociological research has focused on personal coping mechanisms, relying on the notions of emotional labour, identity work, resilience, and agency with constraint (Loveday, 2018; Solomon and Du Plessis, 2023). Willson et al. (2024) examine information behaviour in terms of casualisation, where the ability to act in a collective sense is hindered by isolation and individualisation. Conversely, collective responses have been considered in the study of industrial relations, with unionisation, collective bargaining, and labour organising being the factors of structural change (Odhav and Rena, 2024; Berry and Worthen, 2021; Ivancheva, 2020). Brown and Goodman (2010) clearly present the concept of academic casualisation

as a type of class issue that should be solved collectively, not individually.

What has been wanting, though, is a system which brings these levels of analysis together in a unified whole. The complexity of answers to academic precarity as a multi-level phenomenon, including both the most intimate and the most global, requires an integrative methodology capable of reflecting the interactions between individual actions, professional solidarity, institutional practices, and global movements (Rena and Aderla, 2026). In their account of the relationship between academic sponsorship and ethics of care, Burke et al. (2025) point to this kind of integration, demonstrating that relationships at the departmental level mediate the associations between the vulnerability of a person and the institutional framework. On the same note, Muddiman et al. (2020) report on the spectrum of resistance in UK universities with acts of resistance at both the micro-level (everyday resistance) and organised collective action. Smithers, et al. (2025) offer a valuable institutional-level case-study of policy reform of decasualisation in Australia that shows that top-down structural change can be both possible and constrained. It is this integrative aspiration which the current paper aims to promote with the help of the creation of the Multi-Level Integrative Framework.

The framework is theoretically inspired by various traditions. Based on labour process theory, it assumes a focus on structural power relations and the conflictual character of the employment relationship (Brown and Goodman, 2010). It adopts the focus on the relational, gendered, and embodied aspects of academic work, which are found in feminist care ethics (Burke et al., 2025; Wånggren, 2018). Based on social movement theory, it utilises the notions of collective mobilisation, strategic repertoires, and opportunity structures (Berry and Worthen, 2021). Based on critical higher education, it

derives the analysis of neoliberal governmentality and the marketised university as a particular institutional setting (Burton, 2022; Discenna, 2024). The synthesis of these traditions makes possible a framework which is analytically rigorous and practically geared towards transformation.

Methodology

Systematic Literature Synthesis

The paper will follow a systematic literature synthesis method, occasionally called a meta-synthesis or integrative review, to critically analyse and synthesise the findings of 40 academic sources that discuss responses to casualisation and precarity among academic staff. In contrast to a standard systematic review, which emphasises the extraction of empirical data and quality assessment, a systematic literature synthesis attempts to generate a higher-level meaning transcending the aggregate of its components, creating new theoretical understanding through the critical comparison, contrast, and synthesis of current research (Noblit and Hare, 1988). This method is quite suitable for the current investigations, as the sources involved are heterogeneous, including qualitative research, quantitative studies, theoretical essays, autoethnographies, scoping reviews, and policy examinations, and the goal of creating a new integrative framework.

A logic of systematic identification, screening, and selection, inspired by PRISMA, was followed in developing the synthesis, modified to the integrative objective of the study. The first corpus was compiled by conducting systematic searches of the large academic databases (Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, and Google Scholar) with combinations of key terms such as academic casualisation, precarious academic employment, contingent faculty, sessional staff, higher education reform, academic

unions, collective bargaining in universities, and variants. Only English-language publications published between 2010 and 2026 were searched to include the latest cohort of scholarship addressing the accelerated neoliberal reforms and the even greater precarity following the pandemic. Snowball sampling and citation tracking were used to locate more sources that were relevant.

The 40 sources to be included in the final synthesis were chosen based on five criteria: (1) substantive coverage of casualisation, precarity, or contingent employment in higher education; (2) coverage of responses, strategies, or outcomes (not just a description of conditions); (3) publication in peer-reviewed journals, edited book or volume, or recognised scholarly outlet; (4) geographical diversity to facilitate cross-national Sources that only focused on student precarity, precarity in non-academic university jobs, or university systems not within the confines of the analysis were not included.

The selected corpus includes contributions from the United Kingdom (Loveday, 2018; Muddiman et al., 2020; Arday, 2022; Burton, 2022; Menard, 2025; McDonald, 2017; Cairns, 2024, 2026; Read, 2023), Australia (Brown & Goodman, 2010; May, 2014; Smithers et al., 2025; Woelert, et al., 2025; Murphy, 2021), Ireland (Courtois & O’Keefe, 2015; Ivancheva & Courtois, 2024), South Africa (Kerr, 2021), North America (Discenna, 2024; Berry & Worthen, 2021; Always the Bridesmaid, 2026), Europe (Vatansever, 2025; Ivancheva, 2020), and cross-national studies (Solomon & Du Plessis, 2023; O’Brady, 2025; Willson, et al., 2026; Kahn et al., 2024). The qualitative case studies, autoethnographies, scoping and systematic reviews, conceptual analyses, mixed-methods studies, and policy analyses all fall within the methodological range.

The extraction of data was based on iterative close reading of each source, and systematic coding aligned around four main categories of analysis based on the levels of the emerging framework: (1) individual responses and coping strategies; (2) departmental and collegial responses; (3) institutional policies and reforms; and (4) global and collective strategies including union organising. Under each category, sub-codes were used to describe the nature of the response (passive/reactive vs. active/transformative), which allowed the realisation of the enabling conditions and barriers, reported outcomes, and intersectional dimensions. Synthesis was done in a reflexive way, whereby data, codes, and the emerging framework were moved back and forth until there was analytical coherence and congruence with the source material. Subsequently, this abductive process of development created the Multi-Level Integrative Framework, as opposed to imposing it a priori upon the data.

There are several methodological considerations that are worth noting. First, the synthesis resorts to the sources that use various epistemological and methodological orientations, including positivist survey research up to interpretivist autoethnography. Instead of trying to deal with this diversity as a weakness, the synthesis approach tries to adopt methodological pluralism as an asset, allowing triangulation of various approaches to knowing about academic precarity and response. Second, the incorporation of autoethnographic and reflexive sources (Murphy, 2021) and inclusion of traditional empirical research is a sign of a conscious effort to prioritize the voices and lived experiences of precarious academics themselves, which is in line with the participatory and emancipatory approach of critical Third, the choice to incorporate policy reviews and conceptual articles with empirical research allows the framework to

address both descriptive and normative aspects of precarity responses, to go beyond reporting and towards assessing and prescribing. Lastly, reflexive memoing and discussion with peers and prior revision of the emerging framework against the evidence base improved the quality of the synthesis.

Findings: Patterns of Responses to Academic Precarity

The synthesis shows a diverse and rich landscape of responses to academic casualisation and precarity, which work on a variety of levels and have different national, disciplinary, and positional contexts. In this section, the findings are displayed in four levels of analysis: individual, departmental/collegial, institutional, and global/collective. Table 1 presents a comparative picture of the levels of precarity and the types of responses in countries and regions that can be found in the 40 sources.

Table 1: Comparative Overview of Precarity Levels and Response Types across Countries/Regions

Country/Region	Precarity Level	Dominant Individual Responses	Institutional Responses	Collective/Union Strategies	Key Sources
Australia	Very High (>50% casual teaching)	Overwork, temporal self-management, identity negotiation	Decasualisation policies (Universities Accord)	NTEU campaigns, collective bargaining, strike action	Brown & Goodman (2010); May (2014); Smiths et al. (2023); Smiths (2025); Woelert, et al., (2026)
United Kingdom	High (~33% temporary contracts)	Anxiety management, emotional labour, everyday resistance	Limited; some conversion schemes	UCU strikes, Four Fights campaign, digital organising	Loveday (2018); Muddiman et al. (2020); Arday (2022); Menard (2025)
Ireland	High	Coping through identity work, peer support	Minimal formal Response	IFUT advocacy, policy lobbying	Courtois & O’Keefe (2015); Ivancheva & Courtois (2024)
South Africa	Moderate–High (rising)	Dignity-seeking, informal networks	Emerging awareness	NEHAWU advocacy, emerging campus organising	Kerr (2021)
North America	Very High (~70% contingent in US)	Career pivoting, adjunct stacking, advocacy	Tenure-track conversion (rare)	Adjunct unions, SEIU campaigns, coalition building	Discenna (2024); Berry & Worthen (2021); Always Bridesmaid (2026)
Europe (Continental)	Moderate–High (varies by country)	Exit from academia, critical scholarship	Variable: some policy reform	Transnational networking, EU-level advocacy	Vatansever (2025); Ivancheva (2020)



Source: Authors' construct

Personal Responses: Coping, Identity Work and Emotional Labour

The individual is the response that is most well-documented in the literature. Casualised academics in various national settings employ various strategies to address the material, psychological and existential insecurities of precarious work. Loveday (2018) offers a historical explanation of the workings of anxiety not only as a psychological symptom but as a ruling technology in the neoliberal university and generates self-disciplinary subjects who internalise institutional requirements of unrelenting productivity. The analysis can be supported by the qualitative evidence synthesis by Solomon and Du Plessis (2023), which reveals recurrent patterns of hyper-vigilance, self-doubt, and dissent repression among precarious academics in a variety of country settings.

One such strategy of great importance to individuals is temporal self-management. Smithers et al. (2023) record the time paradox of insecurely employed academics who work on weekends and on so-called breaks, yet their labour is not reflected in institutional accounting systems. Cairns (2024, 2026) builds upon this observation and demonstrates how projectification turns academic professional lives into a series of time-bound interactions, where one must reinvent oneself all the time and maintain portfolios. The time precarity that these authors are talking about is not a simple, inconvenient, practical issue but a reorganisation of the connection between academic identity and time (Read, 2023).

Another vital individual response is identity work. Burton (2022) explains that precarious academics can work out their professional identity without the institutional labels of permanence contracts, office,

department membership, etc., the traditional anchors of academic selfhood. Especially rich sources of evidence of this process are autoethnographic accounts: Murphy (2021) records the lived experience of negotiating casualised employment at an Australian university, and the authors of autoethnographic poetry (Murphy, 2021) and positional reflections (Nititham, 2022) describe the emotional and existential aspects of academic precarity with visceral immediacy. These testimonies show that personal reactions can be frequently defined by a strong sense of ambivalence, a certain interconnectedness of adherence to academic activity and an awareness of the exploitative nature of these circumstances (Cairns, 2024).

Intersectional aspects of personal reactions are essential. Arday (2022) shows that racialised academics experience extra emotional labour, having to deal not only with racism but also with precarity, usually with very limited access to the informal networks and sponsorship prospects that enable white peers to advance their careers. Wånggren (2018) demonstrates the challenges of feminist scholars in precarious jobs to negotiate the contradictions of teaching politically committed work in a marketised environment, and Smith et al. (2020s) demonstrate that casual academic women were disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, having to balance increased care and job insecurity. Willson et al. (2024) bring another dimension, recording the information behaviour of casualised academics as influenced by isolation and individualisation, which restricts their knowledge of the available supports and shared opportunities.

Another personal reaction that is recorded in several sources is the exit strategy-voluntary or involuntary- of the academic

profession. This is conceptualised by Vatansever (2025) as the development of a random-track career model, where the traditional concept of an academic career ladder has been superseded by a set of contingent, discontinuous and unpredictable interactions. The career departure choice, which the contingent faculty experiences, is portrayed in the literature (Bridesmaid, 2026) as a survival mechanism at the individual level, as well as the intellectual capital loss, which, in the long term, harms the potential of higher education institutions. Discenna (2024) understands this exodus as a systemic aspect of the modern academic profession, and not an individual failure, and states that the normalisation of precarity has fundamentally changed the social contract between universities and their academic employees. These dynamics of exit emphasise individual coping as a limitation to structural precarity.

Departmental and Collegial Responses: Sponsorship, Care, and Informal Networks

The departmental level is a highly important and under-theorised point of reaction to academic precarity. The most developed analysis of this level can be found in Burke et al. (2025), who discuss the topics of academic sponsorship and the ethics of care in higher education. They show how informal support on the part of senior colleagues, such as mentoring, co-authorship opportunities, teaching assignments and contract extension advocacy, can be a crucial mediator of the precarity experience. They also, however, expose the contested terrain of such sponsorship, which functions within and, in some cases, supports the hierarchies of gender, race, and seniority.

The informal collegial networks are another theme that recurs in the literature. Several sources explain how informal scholars establish peer support networks, which can be

more spontaneous, facilitated by departments, to exchange information, moral support, and devise collective tactics that help negotiate institutional apparatuses (Solomon & Du Plessis, 2023). The ambivalent nature of casual staff who are at once needed and side-lined by departmental cultures is the so-called precarious inclusion (Lahiri-Roy and Whitburn, 2023) of collaborative research on casualisation and teaching leadership. The story of negotiating tensions between casual employees and permanent employees (Campbell, 2025) offers additional support to the tense nature of collegial relationships in the conditions of structural inequality.

Disciplinary cultures also influence departmental responses. McDonald (2017) records the patterns of casualisation in UK Classics departments by specific discipline, and demonstrates how vulnerable, small disciplines can experience unique pressures and evolve unique coping strategies. The same accounting scholars involved in research on dignity and inclusion also illustrate the mediation of professional norms and disciplinary identities in the experience of casualisation. These results indicate that the best interventions should be contextually sensitive both in terms of discipline and institutions.

The synthesis, however, also displays the vulnerability and lack of uniformity in the departmental responses. Collegial support tends to be based on the goodwill of individual permanent staff members instead of being institutionalised in forms and thus becomes susceptible to staff turnover, work demands, and institutional priorities. The so-called contested terrain, as described by Burke et al. (2025), echoes a more fundamental structural antagonism: in the same way that departments are locations of solidarity, they are locations of exploitation, so too are the possibilities of resistance formed through the same hierarchies that generate

precarity. According to Solomon and Du Plessis (2023), informal scholars often report feeling unacknowledged by the departmental governance system, not consulted during the process, and not having access to physical and symbolic resources of the institution, such as office space, email addresses, access to libraries, etc., that identify them as a part of the institution. It means that these micro-exclusions can be resolved by individual consideration of care as well as systematic departmental reform that acknowledges that casual staff can be full members of the academic community.

Institutional Responses: Policy Reform, Decasualisation and Leadership

The reactions of institutions to academic casualisation differ radically between countries and within individual universities and may involve active reform or active non-reform. The largest institutional change recorded in the literature is the Australian agenda of decasualisation that Smithers analyses (2025). Following continuous union agitation, government scrutiny (the Universities Accord) and rising popular consciousness, several Australian universities have engaged in formal decasualisation initiatives designed to transform casual jobs into continuing employment. The analysis by Smithers brings out the potential and the limitations of such institutional responses: conversion schemes have provided new permanent jobs but have also been criticised as limited, as they fail to combat the structural incentives which gave rise to casualisation in the first place.

Institutional responses have been fewer in the UK context. Menard (2025) reports the marginalisation of long-term casualised researchers on a systemic level, compelling that UK universities have neglected to establish sufficient institutional mechanisms to deal with the precarity of academic careers accumulated over time. Although

conversion pathways or teaching-focused contracts have been implemented in some institutions, these have tended to be ad hoc and under-resourced (Muddiman et al., 2020). This is also revealed in the analysis of marketised university systems (2023), which gives us a wider comparative viewpoint on how institutional response is limited by the funding model, regulatory frameworks, and competitive pressures that are defining contemporary higher education.

Institutional responses that are documented in the literature, even though they appear to deal with the issue of casualisation, can inadvertently support precarity. Ivancheva and Courtois (2024) examine the application of educational technology by institutions to outsource and disaggregate teaching labour to generate new modes of digital casualisation despite the nominal response to traditional modes of casualisation. Kahn et al. (2024) also believe that institutional discourses of teaching quality and student experience can conceal the factuality of precarious teaching conditions and generate so-called illusions of certainty that act in the management of the institutional reputation, but not in the well-being of the staff. These findings imply that it is important to differentiate between real institutional change and performative reactions that maintain structural conditions intact.

Another perspective on institutional reactions to casualisation is the South African situation. Kerr (2021) claims that the South African universities are not quick to realise that casualisation is a systemic problem, in part because the prevailing policy discourse has concentrated on transformation in the context of racial equity and access as opposed to employment terms. This parallel pipeline of casualisation works in parallel to but sometimes at the expense of equity objectives, with racialised academics being disproportionately represented among



casual workers. Another institutional dynamic, which is demonstrated by another study of the North American context, is the contingent faculty system that has been reported by the authors Berry and Worthen (2021) and in the research of academic job market experiences (Elliott, Kuchirko, and Diallo, 2026) contingent employment is not a deviation but rather a feature of the work of the university. In this respect, institutional reform has the difficulty of not only changing certain policies but also the very nature of the business of higher education.

Global and Collective Responses: Union Strategies, Digital Organising, and Transnational Solidarity

The most important (and arguably the most disputed) level of the response to academic precarity is the global/collective one. A rich and dynamic collection of collective tactics, including conventional union bargaining and novel digital organising and transnational solidarity networks, is recorded in the literature. Berry and Worthen (2021) offer the most detailed study of the contingent faculty movement in the United States, which chronicles how precarity can be harnessed by grassroots organising, coalition building with students and community organisations, and the strategicity of media and public advocacy by adjunct academics. Their idea of power, despite precarity, helps to grasp the main paradox of organising among workers whose precarity in employment acts as both an incentive and a limitation to organising.

The University and College Union (UCU) have led the collective action in response to casualisation in the UK. Muddiman et al. (2020) capture the involvement of precarious academics in formal (including the UCU and its Four Fights campaign against casualisation, workload, pay inequality, and pension cuts) and informal (refusing to work unpaid, mobilising to challenge

management decisions jointly, and using social media to spread awareness about precarious working conditions) resistance. Formal union structures and grassroots activism are one of the central themes, and some of the sources reveal tensions between formal union structures and the more radical demands of the casualised members (Burton, 2022; Ivancheva, 2020).

The Australian setting offers valuable data on the correlation between union action and institutional reform. The decasualisation policies discussed by Smithers (2025) are the direct result of the long-term campaigns of the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU), collective bargaining, and even government advocacy. Brown and Goodman (2010) give Australian academic unionism an historical background by demonstrating how the analysis in terms of classes has guided union policy, but May (2014) reports the problems of organising casual workers in a very divided and individualised labour market. The Australian example proves that collective action may lead to tangible institutional change, but also that this change is partial, contested, and susceptible to reversal.

Digital organising has become a radical aspect of collective response. Ivancheva (2020) critically evaluates the contribution of trade unions to the response to the casualisation, digitalisation, and outsourcing of academic labour, and argues that unions need to realign their approaches to tackle the unique issues of platform-mediated and digitally fragmented work. New modes of solidarity and mutual support of precarious academics have been made possible by social media platforms, which have helped spread information on the working conditions quickly, organise collective actions across institutional borders and establish transnational networks of precarious academic workers. The literature of the hashtag campaigns, such as the one called Casual

Academic and similar, shows the possibility and drawbacks of organising digitally to create collective identity and political pressure (Willson et al., 2024).

The highest level of collective response is transnational solidarity. Discenna (2024) contends that precarity in the academic profession needs to be framed as a worldwide issue that needs worldwide solutions, whereas O’Brady (2025) shows the structural similarities between academic capitalism across liberal market economies. Transnational efforts, like the International Labour Organisation on non-standard employment, the Education International network of academic unions, and policy advocacy at the European level via regimes like the Bologna Process and European Charter for Researchers, are all efforts to manage academic precarity on the transnational level. Nonetheless, the literature also shows that there are major obstacles to transnational

solidarity, such as disparities in national labour law systems, the degree of union density, as well as the difficulty of organisational action in diverse institutional and political environments (Vatansever, 2025).

The interrelationship between union strategies and other response levels is two-way and complicated. Institutional reform conditions can be provided by collective action, as the Australian experience shows, although institutional resistance can also limit and subvert collective demands. Likewise, a single instance of resistance (e.g., refusing to work without payment or publicly recording precarious conditions) may lead to collective consciousness and mobilisation, and a collective win may give individual academics the strength to strike for better terms. These interplays between levels are a core aspect of the Multi-Level Integrative Framework that is created in the next section.

Table 2: Global Union Strategies Against Academic Precarity: Typology, Examples, Outcomes, and Limitations

Strategy Type	Examples	Documented Outcomes	Limitations	Key Sources
Collective Bargaining	NTEU enterprise agreements (AU); SEIU adjunct campaigns (US)	Casual conversion clauses; pay parity provisions; workload caps	Implementation gaps; management resistance; limited coverage of the most precarious	Brown & Goodman (2010); Berry & Worthen (2021); Smithers, et al., (2023)
Strike Action	UCU Four Fights (UK); Australian university strikes	Public awareness; negotiation leverage; solidarity building	Financial cost to precarious workers; risk of contract non-renewal	Muddiman et al. (2020); Burton (2022)
Digital Organising	#CasualAcademic; social media campaigns; online petitions	Rapid mobilisation; transnational visibility; collective identity formation	Platform dependency; slacktivism risk; digital divide among older/less connected	Ivancheva (2020); Willson et al. (2024)
Policy Advocacy	Universities Accord (AU); EU Charter for Researchers; ILO frameworks	Legislative reform; institutional policy change; benchmarking	Slow implementation; political vulnerability; weak enforcement mechanisms	Smithers, et al., (2025); Discenna (2024); Vatansever (2025)



Student–Staff Alliances	Joint campaigns on teaching quality; solidarity in strikes	Broadened support base; reframing as education quality issue	Power asymme- tries; student turnover; competing priori- ties	Berry & Worthen (2021/22); Kahn et al. (2024)
Transnational Solidarity	Education International; cross-border research networks; comparative advo- cacy	Knowledge shar- ing; benchmarking; normative pressure on governments	Coordination challenges; legal fragmentation; resource inequality between unions	O’Brady (2025); Ivancheva (2020); Vatansever (2025)

Source: Authors’ construct

Discussion

A New Multi-Level Integrative Framework

The results of the systematic synthesis indicate that reactions to academic casualisation and precarity are spread across a variety of interacting scales- between the intensely personal and the transnational- and that extant scholarship has been inclined to

focus on these scales independently of one another, instead of as interconnected elements of a single system. Based on the trends pointed out during the synthesis, the following section introduces the Multi-Level Integrative Framework (MLIF): a new analytical instrument of academic precarity responses. The framework is graphically presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1: The Multi-Level Integrative Framework (MLIF) for Responses to Academic Precarity

Level 4: Global / Collective	Union strategies • Digital organising • Transnational solidarity • Policy advocacy • Student–staff alliances
↑↓ Interaction: Collective action shapes institutional reform; institutional resistance constrains collective demands	
Level 3: Institutional	Decasualisation policies • Conversion schemes • Workload regulation • Leadership responses • EdTech governance
↑↓ Interaction: Institutional culture enables/constrains departmental agency; policy reform opens spaces for collegial support	
Level 2: Departmental / Collegial	Academic sponsorship • Peer networks • Mentoring • Teaching load sharing • Informal advocacy
↑↓ Interaction: Collegial support mediates individual vulnerability; individual acts feed collective consciousness	
Level 1: Individual	Emotional labour • Identity work • Temporal self-management • Everyday resistance • Exit/voice
Cross-Cutting Dimensions	
Intersectionality (Gender • Race • Discipline • Geography) Response Spectrum (Passive Coping ↔ Active Resistance) Impact Axes (Sustainability • Equity • Structural Change)	

Source: Authors’ construct

Structure and Logic of the Framework

The MLIF is organised into four nested levels of analysis, each of which is a different, yet related, place of response to academic precarity. The structure of the framework indicates the synthesis that the response at any one level is not adequate to deal with the structural causes of casualisation, but instead, sustainable change would involve concerted effort at all four levels. Figure 1 is a bidirectional arrow because the critical interactions between levels are: individual acts of resistance (refusing unpaid labour) can contribute to collective consciousness and mobilisation; collegial support networks can cushion individual vulnerability and also provide spaces of institutional advocacy; institutional reforms can open or close spaces of collective action; and global/collective strategies can create normative, political pressure towards institutional change.

The unique aspect of the MLIF is that it includes three cross-cutting dimensions which act on all four levels. To begin with, intersectionality: based on the research of Arday (2022), Wångren (2018), and Smith (2022), the framework acknowledges the fact that reactions to precarity, both in the resources at their disposal and the impediments they face, are deeply influenced by social position, and that gender, race, discipline, and geography mediate responses to precarity. Second, the response spectrum: the framework differentiates between

passive coping (strategies based on individual survival in the structures that exist) and active resistance (strategies based on change of said structures), acknowledging that the majority of responses lie on a continuum between these poles and that individual actors can move between these two poles over time. Third impact axes: the framework assesses responses based on three criteria: sustainability (whether the response can bring lasting change or just short-term relief), equity (whether the response is beneficial to all precarious academics or only those who already have privileges), and structural change (whether the response tackles long-term causes or only short-term symptoms).

Evaluating Response Strategies: Individual versus Collective

The framework allows for comparing the effectiveness of various response strategies in a systematic manner. Figure 2 specifies a radar diagram of individual and collective/union strategies in relation to five dimensions: sustainability, equity, structural impact, accessibility, and scalability. The comparison shows that there is one distinct pattern: individual strategies are more advantageous in terms of accessibility (they are accessible to all precarious academics, irrespective of whether they are unionised or not, irrespective of the institutional environment), but collective strategies are more successful in terms of sustainability, equity, structural impact, and scalability.

Figure 2: Comparative Effectiveness of Individual versus Collective Response Strategies across Key Dimensions

Dimension	Individual Strategies (1–5 scale)	Collective/Union Strategies (1–5 scale)	Assessment
Sustainability	★★ (2/5)	★★★★ (4/5)	Individual coping offers temporary relief; collective bargaining produces durable gains



Equity	★★ (2/5)	★★★★ (4/5)	Individual strategies favour the privileged; unions can advance universal protections
Structural Impact	★ (1/5)	★★★★★ (5/5)	Individual adaptation leaves structures intact; collective action targets systemic change
Accessibility	★★★★★ (5/5)	★★★ (3/5)	Coping available to all; union access varies by context, density, and membership
Scalability	★★ (2/5)	★★★★ (4/5)	Individual strategies are non-transferable; collective gains set precedents

Source: Authors' construct

This discussion is not meant to underestimate the significance of individual responses—which are frequently the only means at disposal of the most isolated and vulnerable precarious academics—but to emphasise that to achieve sustainable, equitable change, the scaling of individual agency into collective power is necessary. The idea of power despite precarity by Berry and Worthen (2021) is educative in this context: it proves that even employees in the most precarious jobs can develop collective power through tactical organising, but that this must be carefully invested in infrastructure, solidarity, and the development of leadership skills. The MLIF emulates this by not setting individual and collective responses in opposition to each other, but as complementary parts of a multi-level system of response.

The framework sheds more light on the significance of the intermediate layers, such as the departmental and institutional, between the experience of an individual and the action of a collective. The analysis of academic sponsorship by Burke et al. (2025) shows how care departmental cultures can establish the relational conditions of collective consciousness, and the analysis of decasualisation by Smithers, et al. (2025) shows how institutional policy reform can enable the structural platform on which both collegial and collective strategies develop. The MLIF, therefore, opposes the atomised individualism of a lot of psychological studies of precarity as well as structural determinism of certain approaches to political economy, insisting on the irreducible interaction between agency, relationships, institutions, and collective action.

Historical Trajectory: Major Union Campaigns and Policy Milestones

Figure 3: Timeline of Major Union Campaigns and Policy Milestones in Addressing Academic Casualisation

Period	Region	Event/Campaign	Significance
2010–2014	Australia	Early NTEU campaigns on casual conversion rights	Established collective bargaining as key mechanism; May (2014)
2010–2015	Ireland	Emerging awareness of casualisation crisis	Courtois & O'Keefe (2015)

2018–2020	UK	UCU strikes and Four Fights campaign begins	documented neoliberal cage Casualisation becomes national political issue; Mudiman et al. (2020)
2019–2021	Global	COVID-19 pandemic exposes precarity	Disproportionate impact on casual staff; Smith et al. (2020s)
2020–2022	North America	SEIU adjunct organising wave	New union locals; Berry & Worthen (2021)
2020–2023	Global	Digital organising surge post-pandemic	#CasualAcademic; Ivancheva (2020)
2023–2025	Australia	Universities Accord and decasualisation policies	First major government-backed reform; Smithers, et al., (2025)
2024–2026	Europe	Transnational precarity research networks	Comparative advocacy; Vatansever (2025)

Source: Authors' construct

Figure 3 shows the historical development trend of union campaigns and policy milestones, with an increasing trend in collective mobilisation taking place since 2018. The overlap of the Four Fights campaign of the UCU in the UK, the adjunct organising wave of the SEIU in North America, the long-running advocacy of the NTEU in Australia, and the formation of transnational research networks in Europe give reason to think that academic precarity is gradually coming to be seen as a global problem that needs global action. The COVID-19 pandemic became the stimulus, and the artificial nature of the casualised employment conditions was revealed, creating a new push towards change (Smith et al., 2020s). The Australian Universities Accord is the most sophisticated institutional reaction to date, which provides a possible model and warning example to other national settings.

The MLIF offers a means of learning the reasons behind certain campaigns succeeding and others failing. The Australian case indicates that successful structural change

must be based on alignment at all four levels: individual awareness and dissatisfaction (Level 1), departmental cultures of solidarity and sponsorship (Level 2), institutional willingness to be an agent of reform (Level 3), and long-term collective pressure by organising unions and advocating policies (Level 4). If one or more levels are inaccurate or missing, then the ability to transform is reduced. The case of the UK, on the contrary, gives an example of a situation when the powerful collective action on Level 4 has been in part foiled by institutional resistance on Level 3, demonstrating the significance of multi-level coordination.

Conclusion and Policy Implications

The paper has provided a methodical review of 40 academic materials that explore the reaction to casualisation and precarity towards the academic staff in the current university restructuring. The synthesis has shown a multi-layered, multi-level terrain of response, between individual response in terms of emotional labour, identity

negotiation and time management of the self, between departmental response in terms of sponsorship and collegiality, to institutional response in terms of reform initiatives and global collective action in terms of union organising, digital mobilisation and solidarity across borders. The main theoretical contribution of the paper is the Multi-Level Integrative Framework (MLIF), a new analytical framework of responses to academic precarity based on four levels (nested) and with the inclusion of intersectional dimensions and the distinction between passive coping and active resistance along the sustainability, equity, and structural impact axis.

The implications of the findings are important to policy and practice. On the institutional level, the synthesis shows that meaningful responses to casualisation cannot be achieved without more than piecemeal conversion schemes or performance commitments to staff welfare. Universities need to respond to the institutional factors - devolved budgets, competitive funding schemes, managerial prerogatives - that create and perpetuate casualisation (Woelert, et al., 2026). A qualified model is provided by the Australian experience of decasualisation (Smithers, et al., 2025): institutional reform can be achieved when supported by a sustained pressure of unions, government action, and publicity, but it still must be implemented by constant vigilance of reproduction of precarity by a new set of mechanisms, like digital outsourcing (Ivancheva and Courtois, 2024) or teaching-only

To the organisers of unions and collective movements, the synthesis brings out various strategic imperatives. To start with, the organisation of strategies should be adjusted to the vulnerability of precarious workers being at risk of retaliation and not having their contract renewed in case of collective action (Berry and Worthen,

2021). Digital organising platforms can provide valuable complementary means of developing solidarity and collective identity, especially to geographically scattered and institutionally isolated casual academics (Ivancheva, 2020). Second, intersectional inequalities in the precarious workforce must be considered an effective union strategy: generic calls on decasualisation might not target certain injustices of racialised, gendered, disciplinary minorities (Arday, 2022; Wånggren, 2018). Third, transnational solidarity and comparative advocacy are the strategic frontiers that are essential but little developed, structural similarities of academic precarity within national settings (O’Brady, 2025) provide a possibility of cross-border education, benchmarking, and coordinated action.

To the departmental heads and top academicians, the synthesis will underscore the relevance of collegial practices of care and sponsorship. The analysis by Burke et al. (2025) shows that individual scholars in comparatively stable roles can be influential in mediating precarity experienced by their casualised colleagues- in terms of mentoring, advocacy, co-authorship, and the establishment of inclusive departmental cultures. Nevertheless, these practices should be undertaken with a critical perspective towards the power relations and the possibility of reproducing the existing inequalities that it entails. The MLIF offers a model by which departmental interventions can be placed in the larger context of institutional and collective action, which can be used to make sure that collegial care is not used to replace structural reform.

There are several key constraints to the current study to consider. The synthesis is constructed on a specified corpus of 40 sources, and although they were systematically chosen as relevant, of good quality, and diverse, they are not the limit of the literature. Synthesis is interpretive in nature, and one

can interpret the evidence in other ways. Although the framework is based on the existing empirical literature, it needs further empirical validation and development, especially in those areas where the existing corpus is insufficient, which include the Global South, East Asia, and the Middle East. The use of English-language materials is another shortcoming that can mask key trends in the non-Anglophone scholarly labour movements.

There are several priority directions that future research should follow. To improve the analytical usefulness of the MLIF, first, empirical studies that explicitly test and refine it within a variety of national and institutional settings can be used. Second, longitudinal studies that follow the course of decasualisation projects, especially in Australia since the Universities Accord, would offer useful insights into the sustainability and fairness of institutional change in the long term. Third, the comparative analysis of union strategies in countries where labour law systems, union density and political environment are different would contribute to the knowledge of the circumstances in which collective action is most effective. Fourth, the intersectional aspects of the framework would be reinforced by making research focus on the perspectives and experiences of the most marginalised precarious academics, such as racialised, disabled, and early-career scholars. Lastly, the nascent trend of digital casualisation via educational technology platforms needs to be given continued scholarly focus as a novel aspect of scholarly precarity and opposition.

The present paper states in a nutshell that the solution to the crisis of academic casualisation should be based on a shift towards a multi-level approach to the issue involving individuals, departments, institutions, and international collective movements. The Multi-Level Integrative Framework

provides a diagnostic instrument to researchers interested in learning more about the intricate terrain of reactions to academic precarity, as well as a practical reference point to those institutional leaders, policy-makers, union organisers, and precarious academics who are striving to achieve a better, more equitable, and sustainable academic profession.

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