

# **#Adjunct and #AltAc Empowerment: Using Twitter to Foster Online Learner Community in a Shifting Higher Education**

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Higher Education is changing. Quickly. Gone are the days when engaging in doctoral studies automatically leads to full-time academic positions. An increased supply of professionals with doctoral degrees means universities have the upper hand with selection, increasingly meaning they will not hire academic positions full-time at all and instead rely on adjunct, contingent, or part-time faculty instead. Why pay benefits or have troublesome long-term contracts when it is less expensive to buy when needed and let go when unnecessary?

Higher Education seems increasingly commodified, with costs and benefits heavily weighing on decisions about everything that happens within the institutions. While this is already a reality in corporate structures, it is somewhat new in academia.

What does this all mean for those who have committed many years of their lives to engage in doctoral work, hoping for a permanent academic appointment that will increasingly become a fleeting dream for many (McArdle, 2014; Schuman, 2013)?

While these issues may have a particularly US-slant, the need for empowerment for those who are over-educated and under-employed will only heighten, and spread, as budgets get slashed and education funding gets questioned. It is a cost, like any other one, so we need to make sure we are getting a positive return. Thus it begins.

It is common that those who become marginalized in higher education systems can feel alone, leading to a powerlessness and desperation. While it is beyond the scope of this work to refashion higher education, there is a more proximate option for helping those struggling in this

area. Misery loves company, so why not network with one another for the support, ideas, and sharing of resources by those who need it for those who need it?

Twitter is increasingly used in courses and by academic institutions, and its growth as related to learner support is only increasing (Hargittai & Litt, 2012; Kassens-Noor, 2012; Ovadia, 2009; Palmer, 2013; Rinaldo, Tapp, & Laverie, 2011). How can this educational use expand to help those who teach as well, or at least those who want to teach in a full-time, regular capacity? That is the refuge of the higher education based hash tag, the # placed before words to make them easier to locate and follow (Twitter, n.d.). It is in the following of these tags that informal communities develop, around which new and unexpected academic identities may be known.

Using some of the tags common to those involved in higher education, such as #adjunct (for adjunct or contingent faculty), #AdjunctChat (for those who are adjuncts and meet to discuss set topics each week), #AltAc (for alternative academic work), #PostAC (those who have left full-time higher education teaching and research), #ECRchat (for early career researchers), #ScholarSunday (for those whose scholarship should be shared with others), and #PhDChat (for those on the road to a PhD), is a first step in locating and identifying others who face similar challenges related to academic experiences. Those involved in higher education can form support and community using freely-available searchable tags on Twitter, all while helping to refashion what it means to have a shifting identity in non full-time work related to higher education (Bethman & Longstreet, 2013).

## References

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