

Professional Identity Among Limited-Term Contract University EFL Teachers in Japan

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Reference Data:

Fuisting, B. (2017). Professional identity among limited-term contract university EFL teachers in Japan. In P. Clements, A. Krause, & H. Brown (Eds.), *Transformation in language education*. Tokyo: JALT.

Teachers' professional identity is an area of increased interest in educational research. However, limited research has been conducted on the professional identity among higher education teachers in Japan and none on how the implementation of the new employment rules affects professional identity among teachers on limited-term contracts. This paper details the recent changes in employment rules and their impact on limited-term contracts and reports the findings from an investigation into professional identity of EFL teachers on limited-term contracts. This study has 4 major findings: There are conflicts between teachers' own definition of a good teacher and their role as a contracted teacher; there is a disconnect between how valued teachers feel and how committed they are to the teaching profession; there are differences between how Japanese teachers and non-Japanese teachers perceive that their professional identity has changed since becoming full-time contracted teachers; and limited-term teachers desire more job security.

教員の職業アイデンティティは、人気の教育研究分野であるが、日本において高等教育に従事する教員の職業アイデンティティはさほど調査されておらず、まして労働契約法が改正された後の有期雇用教員の職業アイデンティティに関する調査はない。本稿では労働契約法の改正内容と、その内容が有期雇用契約にどのような影響を与えたか、そして有期雇用のEFL教員の職業アイデンティティについて考察する。主に次の4点について考察する: 教員自身の中で定義する良き教員と契約教員としての役割の間での葛藤; 価値ある教員としての評価と教員として専心することの不一致; 嘱託などのフルタイム契約後の日本人教員と外国人教員の職業アイデンティティの違い; 有期雇用教員の雇用保障への強い願いなどである。

Teachers' professional identity has been an area of increased interest in educational research (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011). However, limited research has been conducted on professional identity among higher education teachers in Japan in general (Fraser,

2011; Nagatomo, 2012) and none on how the implementation of the new employment rules set by the Japanese government affect professional identity among teachers on limited-term contracts working in higher education in Japan. This small-scale study was aimed at gaining a better insight into the professional identities of English teachers on limited-term contracts working in higher education in Japan and providing recommendations for ways to better support professionalism among those teachers.

The Japanese Legal Context

On April 1, 2013, the amendments to the Labor Contract Act took effect. The aim was to improve working conditions for contract workers, who at that time made up 25% of the Japanese workforce (Okunuki, 2013) and more than half of college staff, teachers, and researchers ("Employers move," 2013) by making it possible for employees on limited-term contracts to apply to change their employment status to permanent after 5 years (Nakajima, 2013). For research positions the term limit was extended to a maximum of 10 years in 2014 (Brooks, 2015). The major effect of the new labour laws will not be seen until March 2018, when it will be 5 years since the revised laws took effect, but indications are that institutions are limiting their positions to 5 years in order not to be obliged to offer permanent positions. Rivers (2013) reported that all advertised contracts on the most popular university recruitment site had maximum employment periods of 3, 4, or 5 years. Fears are that these new labour conditions will lead to less dedication by teachers to their contracted institutions (Rivers, 2013), to suspension of longer term research projects ("Employers move," 2013), to disruption of long-term personal plans for employees (Okunuki, 2014), and eventually to a two-tier society (Brooks, 2015). This is a growing issue in the Japanese education system and the society as a whole, especially because recent figures released by the internal affairs ministry show that nonregular workers account for 40% of the total workforce in Japan (Osaki, 2015).

Professional Identity in Higher Education

Teacher Professional Identity

Although research into teacher identity has become increasingly popular over the past three decades, a clear definition has not been established (Akkerman & Meijer, 2011). In a study that reviewed research on teacher identity Beijaard, Meijer, and Verloop (2004) identified four features that are essential to teachers' professional identity. They stated that professional identity (a) is not static but an ongoing process; (b) includes both person and context, (c) is made up of several subidentities, and (d) that agency (i.e., active professional development) is part of teacher professional identity (Beijaard et al., 2004).

Scotland (2014) focused on the identities of teachers outside the Western education system and found that there are three key areas of professional identity formation: "institutional and personal environments, individual agency, and discourse communities" (p. 34), and that "teachers' identities may be formed, informed, and transformed by the global educational contact zones in which they work" (p. 34).

Professional Identity in Higher Education in Japan

A limited number of academic studies on teachers' professional identity in higher education in Japan have been published. Fraser (2011) interviewed 10 full-time teachers and four part-time teachers to discover more about their professional development but did not address the topic of employment status in any detail. He found that although teacher identity among university educators in Japan shares professional qualities with other groups, there is a lack of "professional guidance and commitment to sustained engagement in activities to develop professionally" (p. 234).

Simon-Maeda (2004) and Nagatomo (2012) both discussed career paths and promotion opportunities but mainly from a gender perspective. Simon-Maeda (2004) concluded that TESOL professionals need to be more aware of "how ideologies of marginalization and discrimination work and how to confront them using professional practices" (p. 430), and Nagatomo (2012) concluded that "the professional lives of the female teachers are intricately bound to societal expectations of women in Japan" (p. 186).

Stewart (2005) investigated the strategic positioning of different categories of EFL teachers in Japan, including those on limited-term contracts, but the data is somewhat outdated due to the new labour laws introduced after the research was conducted. She found, among other things, that

- (a) teachers tend to position themselves by stating what they are as well as what they are not,

- (b) job satisfaction and job security is linked to how firm a teacher's identity is, and
- (c) the amount of control over one's own circumstances is directly related to job satisfaction and thus to teacher identity.

These four studies give indications of professional identity among EFL teachers in Japan but do not provide a definitive picture of university EFL teachers' professional identity, especially not the subgroup of teachers on limited-term contracts. Therefore, there seems to be a gap in the literature, which this study was aimed at addressing.

Methodology

A questionnaire was administered to a larger group of participants and a group discussion was held with a subset of the questionnaire group. This research method was chosen because it allowed for both the collection of more general views via the questionnaire and then, through the focus group, gaining a deeper understanding "through the eyes and hearts of the target audience" (Krueger & Casey, 2003, p. 8). According to Liamputtong (2011), focus groups can "uncover aspects of understanding that often remain hidden in the more conventional in-depth interviewing method" (p. 4). The group can also assist with exploring and clarifying each member's point of view (Liamputtong, 2011).

Research Instruments

An open-ended, structured, 9-item questionnaire based on Evans's (2014) questions on professionalism was used (see Appendix A). The participants were given a choice of using a paper or electronic version. For the focus group Moorehouse's (2014) focus group guide was adapted to the local setting and the topic of the research (see Appendix B).

Participants

Purposeful sampling was used for this study in order to get rich information about the subject matter from a limited number of participants (Patton, 2002). This can be done by selecting participants that have in-depth knowledge or experience with the phenomenon being studied (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). For the purpose of this study, only participants who were employed as English teachers in higher education on limited-term contracts were selected. Thirty teachers were identified and asked to complete a 9-item questionnaire on professional identity. Nineteen out of 30 teachers, from five different institutions, completed the questionnaire. Background information on questionnaire participants can be found in Appendix C.

For a more in-depth perspective the questionnaire was followed up with a focus group consisting of some of the teachers who had replied to the questionnaire. The focus group was led by the researcher and was conducted in the beginning of October 2015. Purposeful sampling was also used for this stage of the research. Five teachers from three different institutions took part in the focus group part of the study. A summary of the focus group participants can be found in Appendix D.

Data Analysis

The answers from the questionnaire were imported into NVivo. The 68-minute focus group was digitally recorded and then transcribed in NVivo. Because this study looked at what teachers said rather than how they said it, punctuation marks were added to the transcript for readability. A member check was conducted with three participants from the focus group to ensure that the transcription had captured the participants' perspectives (Neuman, 2014). The data from both the questionnaire and the focus group were then analysed using a 6-step thematic analysis developed by Braun and Clarke (2006).

Results

During the analysis of the questionnaire answers, four main themes and 17 categories and codes were created (see Appendix E for details). Subsequently, the focus group data were coded to highlight the reasoning behind the themes. The four major themes were as follows:

- (a) the conflicts between teachers' own definition of a good teacher and their role as a contracted teacher,
- (b) the disconnect between how valued teachers feel and how committed they are to the teaching profession,
- (c) the differences between how Japanese teachers and non-Japanese teachers perceive that their professional identity has changed since becoming a full-time contracted teacher, and
- (d) the issue of job security.

Conflict Between Definition of a Good Teacher and Role as a Contracted Teacher

Most of the participants somewhat shared an outlook on what constitutes a good teacher. Three categories were found among the 19 answers: a caring person, motivating

students, and attentive to student needs. Nine teachers mentioned that a good teacher is someone who cares about students and their work. Teacher 1 (all questionnaire responses are referred to by Teacher 1-19) stated,

I think a good teacher is someone who cares. Someone who cares first and foremost about their students and the progress they are making, not only in a particular subject, but also as human beings. But at the same time someone who cares about the quality of their work.

Similarly, nine teachers stated that a good teacher is someone who attends to students' needs. Teacher 3 answered, "I think a good teacher is someone who has the ability to connect with students and teaches to their true needs not what he thinks those needs should be." Finally, seven teachers said that good teachers motivates their students. Teacher 19 claimed, "A good teacher is someone who can motivate and encourage students to want to learn more about the subject."

However, a large majority of the participants had conflict between their definition of a good teacher and their role as a limited-term contact teacher. Only two of the 19 stated that their definition aligned with their role, but seven mentioned both positive alignments and conflicts, and a further nine mentioned only conflicts between their definition of a good teacher and their role as a contract teacher. The most common conflict was the loss of focus on teaching, students, or both. Teacher 6 stated,

The fact that I'm in a limited contract makes me focus more on my research activity than on my teaching, as we must compile our research works in order to apply for a more secured position. This could in part ruin my teaching philosophy to some extent.

Teacher 7 was more illustrative in his description of the conflict: "A limited-term contract is always hanging over your head like an invisible noose." In the focus group this theme was also brought up, especially the conflict between focusing on teaching or research. Steve (all names for the focus group participants are pseudonyms), stated that

The role of a contract teacher is to be in the classroom and teach. . . . So personally I look at my role as a teacher whereas a tenured position as more academic, researcher, and of course coordinator and administrative person.

But he was immediately challenged by Maria, who countered,

But that is the official, you know, description of a contract teacher. Unless you do research you will never get a tenured job and will. . . . And you are not likely to get a good contract or likely to continue to get contracts. So, like officially yes, we are

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supposed to be teachers but you know how the hiring process works.

Steve ended up conceding to Maria’s point of view, “That’s right but that’s the catch 22 in it all.” And Ben also confirmed this conflict by summing it up as, “There is this thing that now when you are working you are not a researcher but if you are applying for the job ‘Where is your research?’ That is the big issue.”

The conflict between the different roles a contract teacher must fulfil does support Beijaard et al.’s (2004) notion that professional identity is made up of several subidentities. The findings also echo Nagatomo’s (2012) notion that English teachers in Japan experience tensions between the dual identities of being a researcher in their academic field and their daily duties as a teacher.

Disconnect Between How Valued Teachers Feel and How Committed They Are

In the questionnaire, 17 out of the 19 participants answered the question about the disconnect (see Table 1).

Table 1. To What Extent Do You Feel a Valued Member of the Teaching Community? (n = 17)

Level	Very valued	Valued	Somewhat valued	Not at all valued
Classroom	11	5	1	
English department	7	5	4	1
Whole school		2	7	8
National	1	1	4	11

It is striking that almost all the participants felt very valued or valued at the classroom level, but only two felt so at the whole school and national level. In contrast, 13 of those participants stated in their answers to a different question that they felt committed and connected to the teaching profession in general in Japan.

This disconnect was also evident during the focus group discussions. When Ben discussed if he felt valued by his peers he said,

I think in my case yes 100%. Like I have been asked to help develop all the curriculum, I have been asked to do lots of things to contribute. And, yeah so I think that’s

fine. And that is from the tenured teachers, and then I get asked from my contract teachers as well what I am doing in the classroom.

However, when discussing if he felt valued within the education system, Ben gave a very different point of view:

I always kind of felt like, well, if you went behind closed doors of these old guys in the Ministry of Education I am sure they are saying like “Wow, [if] they could be replaced by robots that would be great.”

Yuka agreed and said, “If the Ministry of Education really appreciates the teachers, I am not quite sure it would actually create this contract position because I don’t think it is benefitting anybody much.” Although the focus group participants stated that they mostly felt appreciated by their students and departmental colleagues, the sentiment they had from the institution as a whole, especially the administration, was dramatically different. One teacher illustrated this by stating,

The ADMIN!?! The ONLY thing they care about is that you are physically present and doing the class. That is the feeling that I got at ALL my universities, right, because if you are not physically present and not doing that class, then it is a big hassle.

There was also a heightened feeling of not being appreciated within the institution as a whole due to the feeling that some institutions and the administrative staff in particular discourage contracted teachers from taking part in research projects. One teacher claimed, “There is almost a suppression of research.” A second teacher added, “In fact there is a suppression of research!” A third teacher stated, “With my department I can’t do research using students.” This issue seems specific to contract teachers because one teacher said, “I was even told there, if were you a tenured professor you can do it [research] but you are not allowed because you are a contract [teacher].” This sense of lack of institutional backing for contracted teachers seems to support Fraser’s (2011) findings related to the lack of guidance and commitment to professional development in the Japanese higher education sector.

Differences in Changes of Professional Identity

Although previous research has identified that teachers’ professional identity is not static (Beijaard et al., 2004), the initial indication from the questionnaire answers seemed to indicate that the change in form of employment from part-time to full-time contract did not institute a major shift in professional identity. Seven out of 19 participants stated that their professional identity had not changed since becoming a full-time contracted

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teacher. However, looking into those answers in more detail showed that there was a distinction between Japanese teachers of English and non-Japanese teachers of English. Five out of seven Japanese teachers stated that there had been no change in their professional identity, but only two out of 12 non-Japanese teachers said so. Also, the non-Japanese teachers experienced this change as predominantly positive; all reported that there was either a positive or a mixed change (see Tables 2 and 3).

Table 2. Has Your Professional Identity Changed Since You Became a Full-time Contracted Teacher? (N = 19)

Teacher nationality	Not changed	Changed
Japanese	5	2
Non-Japanese	2	10

Table 3. How Has Your Professional Identity Changed Since You Became a Full-time Contracted Teacher? (n = 12)

Teacher nationality	Positive change	Mixed	Negative change
Japanese	1		1
Non-Japanese	6	4	

Teacher 1, a non-Japanese teacher, and Teacher 18, a Japanese teacher, both transitioned from being high school teachers but described the change quite differently. Teacher 1 stated, “I think that my teaching identity has become stronger. It feels as though you are being taken more seriously. I put more effort into planning and administration now than my previous part-time positions.”

But teacher 18 said,

I was a secondary school teacher before becoming a full-time contracted teacher at a university, so my identity has been changed a lot. At the secondary school, I had to take guidance. I now identify myself not as an educator, but an instructor.

Overall the questionnaire answers seemed to indicate that Japanese teachers of English were already more secure in their professional identity as teachers and that the change in employment status did not affect that. This is illustrated by Teacher 6’s comment: “I had part-time contracts with my previous working places. But there is no big difference

in terms of professional identity. Whether I’m full-time or not doesn’t affect my self-image as a teacher.” In the focus group this sentiment was echoed. The three non-Japanese teachers all indicated that being a contract teacher earned them more respect and appreciation. Maria illustrated this by saying, “Actually, when I was just doing part-time, I didn’t have a full-time job, I just really, really felt like a second-class citizen, which is something I don’t feel now.” On the other hand, Yuka, a Japanese teacher, stated, “I don’t think being a contract teacher makes any changes.” One reason for this might be the fact that foreigners living in a country that is not their country of birth may feel less rooted and thus moving into a full-time contract, though limited, gives them a greater sense of belonging and building a long-term career. The fourth and final theme is also connected to the sense of belonging and job security.

The Issue of Job Security

When asked about their future work plans, 12 teachers responded that they aim to get either a tenured or “unlimited” position. Only two teachers responded that part-time teaching was a future option. All participants expressed a desire to continue teaching in some form, but one teacher reported that in order to be rehired in the current job the teacher was being forced to be unemployed for 6 months. This is a way to circumvent the legal requirements to offer permanent positions because the employment period is reset if teachers leave the institution for a minimum period of 6 months.

The impact of term limits was also discussed in the focus group. The overall feeling was that limited-term contracts were detrimental to their professional identity. Even when asked about positive aspects, the group only mentioned that limited-term contracts might help bring in teachers with new ideas and provide the teachers with a new environment and chance to step up their teaching before they reverted to listing negative aspects. Ben noted,

It is such a disruption to your personal life that how can you do your job, especially that last year when you are so worried about how am I gonna get the next job. Then, I get the next job and I am getting older, can I get another one after that?

Steve added,

It is stressful, especially when you have a family and you are the only income earner in the family. It is very stressful. And even if you are not the only income earner in the family it is still stressful, but it is just “Wow, if I don’t get a job my kids don’t have health insurance. How am I gonna keep them in school?”

Another teacher concluded,

You know, I don't want to teach any classes any more. (laugh) I just prepare for getting the next job so then students may have lost some interest in learning English or they might lower [their] motivation.

When asked how limited-term teachers could be better supported Maria said, "I think one thing schools could do is offer the possibility of renewal of contracts based on some sort of evaluation, like a more comprehensive one." Similarly, Steve stated,

How could contract teachers be better supported by the government? By abolishing contract teaching! By abolishing or changing the laws enough so that schools feel like they aren't at financial risk but can get rid of people and they can keep the good people that they want to keep and it seems like everyone benefits out of that except for maybe the bottom line.

The desire for more job security might seem like an obvious one. However, if one considers the findings of Stewart (2005) that job security is linked to how firm a teacher's identity is, together with Scotland's (2014) claim that the global context where teachers work can transform their professional identity, this could mean that the Japanese context and its lack of job security will mean that teachers working in this context will have an increasingly weakened sense of professional identity.

Conclusions

This is a small study with only 19 participants and therefore the findings and conclusions in this study are limited in their generalizability. Further studies including those with more participants and multiple focus groups would be recommended. Also, the fact that the researcher himself is a contracted teacher, which could have led to increased trust from the participants, might also have affected the responses given and the analysis. With that in mind, this study has four major findings:

1. There are conflicts between teachers' own definitions of a good teacher and their role as a contracted teacher.
2. There is a disconnect between how valued teachers feel and how committed they are to the teaching profession.
3. There seem to be differences between how Japanese teachers and non-Japanese teachers perceive their professional identity has changed since becoming full-time contracted teachers.
4. Limited-term teachers desire more job security.

The findings from the questionnaire and the focus group confirm some of the general features of teachers' professional identity as listed by Beijaard et al., as well as some of the claims of other researchers regarding professional identity in Japan and the university context (Fraser, 2011; Nagatomo, 2012; Stewart, 2005). This study has uncovered the exasperated sense of conflict between teachers' idea of a good teacher and their role as a limited-term contract teacher. Instead of focusing on students' needs and motivating them to learn, teachers are required to engage in research and professional development in order to either continue in the same role at a different institution or move up to a position with more long-term job security. This conflict is made worse because institutional support for such professional development seems lacking and in some cases is actively discouraged. The lack of support is also illustrated by the fact that limited-term teachers do not feel valued within their institutions or the Japanese education system, even though they see themselves as committed to the teaching profession in Japan.

These issues have no easy solutions and are likely to be amplified when the full impact of the recent labour law changes to term limits will take effect. Raising awareness of the issue to the Ministry of Education is one solution. Another is to try to influence teaching institutions to create more positions that offer longer-term job security than the current limited-term contracts but carry less financial risk for the institutions than tenured professorships. Hopefully this study can shed some light on this evolving and complex area and inspire more discussion and further research.

Bio Data

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Appendix A

Questionnaire on the Professional Identity of Limited Contract Teachers Working in Higher Education in Japan

Part 1: Background

1. Nationality:
2. Age:
3. Gender:
4. Years of teaching:
5. Years teaching in Japanese higher education:
6. Years teaching in Japanese higher education as a limited contract teacher:
7. How many different limited contracts have you had (including your current one):
8. Educational background (please include all degrees, as well as certificates and/or other relevant qualifications):
9. Are you currently undertaking any organized professional development activities? If so, what kind?

Part 2: Questions

1. What is your own definition of a good teacher?
2. How does your definition align and/or conflict with your role as a limited term contract teacher at your school?
3. What do you think influenced your own definition of a good teacher?
4. What do you believe to be important in your work?

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5. To what extent do you feel committed and connected to the teaching profession in general in Japan? Please explain
6. To what extent do you feel a valued member of the teaching community at the classroom level? Within the English department? Whole school level? And national level?
 - Classroom:
 - English department:
 - Whole school level:
 - National level:
7. Has your professional identity changed since you became a full-time contracted teacher? If so, how? Why? If not, why not?
8. What is your plan for the future in terms of work?
9. Do you have anything you would like to add?

Appendix B

Professional Identity Focus Group Questions

For this focus group I plan to explore three factors that according to Burke and Stets (2009) affect professional identity construction, person factors, role factors, and social factors, as well as the issue of limited contracts.

Part 1: Person factors

Authenticity

1. Why do people become contract teachers?
Have those reasons changed? How about your own reasons?
2. Can contract teachers be themselves at their work place?
Why? Why not? What does this result in?

Part 2: Role

Value

3. Do you feel valued by your peers?
If so, in what way? If not, why not?
Does this affect your sense of professionalism? How?

4. Is the role of a contract teacher different from a part-time teacher and a tenured teacher?
If so how? If not, how are they the same?
Does your role change if you work part-time at a different institution?
5. Do you feel valued by the education system, i.e., Ministry of Education, in Japan?
Why? Why not?

Part 3: Social

School community

6. Do you feel a full participant of the school community?
Why? Why not?
Do you participate in any school events?
7. On a professional level who do you feel more connected to?
For example, other contract teachers vs tenured and part time teachers?
University staff? Japanese English teachers & foreign English teachers?

Part 4: Limited contracts

8. What are your views on limited contracts within the education profession?
Do you think the situation will change in the near future?
What positive effects do contract have?
What negative effects do contract teachers have?
9. How could contract teachers be better supported in their role?
By schools? By contract teachers themselves? By the government?
10. Do you have anything you would like to add to the topic of professional identity?

Appendix C

Questionnaire Participants

Table C1. Gender and Nationality of Questionnaire Participants (N = 19)

Nationality	Male	Female
Japanese	3	4
Non-Japanese	10	2

Table C2. Attributes of Questionnaire Participants

Age	Years teaching (total)	Years in higher ed in Japan	Years as limited contract teacher	No. of contracts	Highest degree (inc. incomplete)
30s	12	6	5	2	Master's
40s	20	5	5	1	Master's
30s	12	5	4	1	Doctorate
30s	10	10	2	1	Master's
30s	12	8	5	1	Doctorate
30s	8	3	3	1	Doctorate
40s	16	8	4	1	Doctorate
30s	12	9	7	2	Doctorate
50s	14	1	1	1	Doctorate
30s	10	8	8	2	Master's
50s	19	7	4	2	Master's
30s	12	8	4	1	Doctorate
30s	10	3	3	2	Doctorate
50s	25	10	7	2	Master's
50s	20	15	6	2	Master's
30s	7	7	3	1	Doctorate
40s	10	10	7	2	Doctorate
40s	11	11	4	2	Master's
30s	9	2	1	1	Master's
40.9	13.1	7.2	4.4	1.5	(averages)

Appendix D

Focus Group Participants

Table D1. Gender and Nationality of Focus Group Participants (n = 5)

Nationality	Male	Female
Japanese	1	1
Non-Japanese	2	1

Table D2. Attributes of Focus Group Participants

Age	Years teaching (total)	Years in higher edu. in Japan	Years as limited contract teacher	No. of contracts	Highest degree (inc. incomplete)
30s	12	6	5	2	Master's
40s	20	5	5	1	Master's
30s	12	5	4	1	Doctorate
30s	10	10	2	1	Master's
30s	12	8	5	1	Doctorate
38.0	13.2	6.8	4.2	1.2	(average)

Appendix E

Coding Scheme

Themes	Categories & codes	Sources/References
Own definition of a good teacher	Caring person	9
	Students' needs	9
	Motivate students	9
	Conflicts between good teacher & contract role	17
Conflicts between good teacher & contract role	Lose focus on teaching or students	7
	Less motivated	4
	Cannot influence teaching environment	4
	Heavy teaching load	2
Commitment to teaching community in Japan	Feel committed	13
	Committed to teaching but not profession in general	4
Change in professional identity since becoming contracted	No or little change	7
	Yes, positive change	7
	Yes, mixed change	4
	Yes, negative change	1
Plans for future work	Tenured position	7
	Permanent or unlimited position	5
	Continue teaching	4
	Continue researching	2