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## Introduction

UCU believes that the casualisation of academic labour is a significant problem in UK higher education, being a fundamental attack on the human dignity of those caught up in it.

Our universities are becoming increasingly dependent upon a growing pool of workers employed to teach and conduct research on precarious and unfavourable contracts.<sup>1</sup> Employers have used this increase, in part, to enable established academics to concentrate on activities aimed at hitting targets and advancing st[...]



## Foreword: Chi Onwurah, MP for Newcastle Central

This report is launched on Martin Luther King Day. Revd Dr King is rightly recognised and honoured for his role in advancing civil rights for African Americans by fighting against racial injustice. Less prominence is given to his truly global vision of human rights, equality and justice for everyone in what he called our ‘world house.’ The basis for this vision was the idea, at the core of King’s thinking, that all human beings are created with equal dignity and worth – and that our economic and political institutions should be changed to reflect this.

That is why I am delighted to write the foreword to this report and to formally launch it at parliament. Anyone who saw the disturbing 2019 Ken Loach film made in Newcastle, *Sorry We Missed You*, will know that precarious employment can be deeply detrimental to human wellbeing. This is an issue not just for people who work in the so-called ‘gig economy,’ but also increasingly for those who work in higher education. Reliance on precarious, low-paid staff has become a business model, and therefore universities across the UK are in the midst of industrial action over this issue. Only last month I was pleased to show solidarity to university workers in my constituency by standing with them on the picket lines.

This report uses Frederick Douglass and Martin Luther King’s beliefs in human value and equality as the basis for an important critique of this shift to the casualisation of the academic workforce. It highlights that poor employment conditions are not only bad news financially and in terms of mental health, but that they can be fundamentally dehumanising.

It is particularly appropriate that academics from Newcastle University have written this report. The North East has a proud tradition of campaigning for social justice and have strong links with the African American freedom struggle. In 1967 Dr King visited Newcastle to receive an honorary degree, Newcastle being the only UK university to so honour him. Over a century on, we have this report.



## Message from UCU Vice President Vicky Blake

The impact of casualisation is difficult and painful for many of us to talk about, even for those who have since clawed onto an 'open ended' contract. The financial impact of insecurity twines efficiently together with the social and professional impact: the undermining of confidence, the erosion of illusory 'opportunity'; the daily slog of trying to keep one's head above water, to pay rent, and to maintain relationships. I know this personally, and I hear it daily in my role as vice president of UCU. Speaking out about the very real, very personal impact that casualisation wreaks upon individuals, our families, and our academic communities can feel incredibly dangerous. But to speak out collectively is among our greatest weapons in demanding change. This report draws out much of the pain which is felt and internalised by so many in a sector that echoes and reinforces traditional hierarchies and class divides far more than many senior leaders seem willing (or able) to recognise. Change is long overdue.

As trade unionists we must understand and affirm that workers on casualised contracts deserve to be heard, to be treated with respect, and to enjoy decent working conditions. The structure of 'the academy' makes it easy to forget that. Solidarity with each other must be practical and comprehensive. Fearful workers are more likely to be compliant, less likely to raise concerns: contractual conditions slip even further. Where is it frightening to raise one's head over the parapet, we most need to fortify a culture of meaningful solidarity that can be felt, which is tangible beyond speech and social media posts and into actions.

This report strengthens our fight for secure work and respect for all workers. It comes at an important time: we are fighting for secure work, and decent and fair working conditions and pay for workers in higher education. As a former chair of the UCU Anti-Casualisation Committee I know that many battles have been fought for a long time to bring the impact of casualisation to light. We have fought for better data, because proving the problems are real and widespread was a hurdle in a sector that tends to present itself in line with an assumed decency of practice. We have fought to represent our casualised members in campaigns and importantly, in collective sectoral bargaining.

University teachers, researchers, and support staff deserve the same secure and decent work we wish for all of the students we work together to educate. Casualised workers are stressed, exploited, underpaid, and often pushed to the brink by senior management teams relying on goodwill and a culture of fear. Our love of learning is weaponised in order to keep the bottom line cheap, while senior management and vice chancellors' pay soars. This report matters. It delves deep into the worst effects of the marketised model of higher education upon its most vulnerable workers.

In recognising the dehumanising impact of casualisation, it is time for deeds beyond words.



## Executive summary

Martin Luther King Jr was a champion of labour and human rights. He believed that 'the dignity and worth of human personality' is assaulted when people are treated as tools, as means rather than ends. UCU believes that the relatively recent and alarming rise of mass casualised labour in higher education is an example of just such a distortion. Staff are treated not as human beings of equal value to their colleagues, but as second-class academic citizens, mere 'resources' to be deployed to further strategic visions of vice chancellors and governing boards.

Academics are highly-motivated people, drawn into the profession by a sense of wanting to make a difference to the world by research and teaching. This sense of vocation is abused by employers who are increasingly switching to a business model offering casualised and precarious work, promising more rewards than there are.

Casualisation is a significant problem for UK higher education (HE). The latest data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), 2017/18, shows that nearly 33,000 researchers (67%) in the sector remain on fixed-term contracts. 49%, nearly 30,000, teaching 'only' staff are employed on fixed-term contracts, many of those hourly paid (42% of all teaching only staff). Add to this over 6500 academic staff employed on zero-hours contracts and an army of nearly 70,000 'atypical' staff, and it is clear that a significant proportion of teaching in many universities is being carried out by casualised staff.

This situation is a direct result of the increasing reliance on casualised staff in higher education, which undermines the dignity and worth of human personality.



The dehumanising effect of casualisation is not a problem of poor practice by certain



## Human beings – or human resources?

Casualisation is a massive problem for the UK higher education sector. According to the latest HESA data (2017/18), around 67% of the 49,515 researchers in the sector remain on fixed-term contracts, nearly 30,000 teaching 'only' staff are on fixed-term contracts (the majority of them hourly paid), and a further 68845 academic staff are employed as 'atypical academics' not counted in the main staff record. UCU estimates that this 'reserve army' of academic labour is doing a significant proportion of the teaching in many universities.

This has significant consequences for staff and students. According to the results of UCU's 'Counting the Cost of Casualisation in HE' (2019) part-time and hourly-paid teachers are doing 45% of their work without pay, almost half of participants held down two or more jobs in education, 71% of respondents reported that they believed their mental health had been damaged by working on insecure contracts, and 83% of respondents agreed that their contractual status made it asphyxiate by/YWadchYHdR[bjv/YW





performance. Critics claim there is no convincing evidential base showing that HRM improves performance, and worry instead that it devalues workers because 'resources' implies they are 'things,' 'commodities,' a means to an end. If workers are considered in this way then it is hardly surprising that abusive and degrading casualised contracts have come to abound and be seen as acceptable. We need other ways to think about workers.

It is here that Martin Luther King provides a powerful alternative way to think about workers. King was a champion of labour rights, murdered as he addressed a rally of striking sanitation workers in Memphis. King's opposition to what he often identified as the three evils of racism, poverty and war was premised on the African American tradition of theological anthropology, namely that all human beings are created with equal human dignity. For example, Frederick Douglass (1818-1895), the former slave who became a leader of the anti-slavery movement insisted in his 1850 essay 'The nature of slavery' that because the slave is fully human, 'The first work of slavery is to mar and deface those characteristics of its victims which distinguish men from things, and persons from property... it reduces man to a mere machine.' King built squarely on Douglass and subsequent African-American theologians, insisting that 'man is not a thing. He must be dealt with not as an 'animated tool,' but as a person sacred in himself. To do otherwise is to depersonalise the potential person and desecrate what he is.' King also put this in secular terms, referring to 'the dignity and worth of human personality' in his 'Letter From Birmingham Jail,' and in his Nobel Prize-winning speech when he insisted that humans are not 'mere flotsam and jetsam on the river of life.'

Of course, no comparison can be drawn between the conditions of 1960s African-Americans and workers in modern British universities. But King's insistence that we ask whether people are treated as proper human beings with intrinsic dignity is important: as this report shows, asking this question about academic labour raises significant concerns about the dehumanising effects of casualised labour in the current business models being favoured by HE providers.



## This report: methods

This report explores how academics experience work as either humanising or dehumanising. Focusing on a range of institutions in the North East of England, we interviewed HR staff and looked at HR policies, but the primary source of data was visual timeline interviews with academics. Visual timeline interviews are a method developed to explore career trajectories retrospectively. Interviewees were asked to tell the story of their working life by drawing a timeline, using visual metaphors as far as possible. They were requested to draw particular attention to how they came to be academics, and to subsequent high and low points, and then identify moments or periods on the timelines when they felt treated in humanity-affirming or dehumanising ways, and to reflect on these. Finally, they were asked how universities could ensure they are treated in humanity-affirming rather than dehumanising ways. Each interview lasted between one and half, and four hours. We conducted 17 visual timeline interviews with academics, as part of a comparative project comprising interviews with 55 people working in higher education, secondary education, and charities.

This research was published in a wider report by Newcastle University and the William Leech Research Fund in July 2019, *Human Resources? Recognising the Personhood of Workers in the Charity and Public Sectors*. It found that academics were highly self-motivated, generally being driven by an enthusiasm for their subject, a desire to advance the common good through discoveries and research, and a commitment to education as a public good. Several academics had taken significant salary cuts by moving into HE from the private sector. Therefore many of the assumptions in HRM about the need to 'manage' and motivate workers do not apply to HE. Instead, the report identified eight 'habits of highly humane workplaces' – that is, characteristics of workplaces that respondents marked as humanising if present or dehumanising if absent. These were: the ability to make a difference; being trusted with freedom and autonomy; insulation from the harmful effects of audit cultures; being listened to; the quality of human relationships; 'the magic power of human sympathy' (employer empathy at high and low points of life); communities of care; and contractual affirmation.

It is the stark differences reported by staff in permanent and casualised employment in HE under this last heading, 'contractual affirmation,' that forms the basis of this report. 'Contractual affirmation' is the validation of self as having worth in the eyes of others experienced at the awarding of jobs, promotions, and career awards.

For example, Craig had applied for more than 80 lectureships in different countries over a two-year period working on a casualised contract. He relayed that this led to a growing 'sense of panic and discouragement,' asking 'what has the system done to me?' after a decade of preparation by undergraduate, masters and doctoral study. He described this as very dehumanising. In contrast, finally being awarded a permanent lectureship was humanising, – 'being offered the job, being given start-up research money, and being told that I would be eased in gently with the workload.' Following the offer of a job itself, promotion was marked by many people as humanising. Andrea described her promotion



to senior lecturer as a 'restoration of balance.' She felt she had been looked down on by some colleagues who thought she could teach but not do research, and so had 'crap' administrative roles dumped on her. Suddenly, she said, those colleagues didn't treat her with the same disrespect. Every academic we interviewed on a permanent contract pointed to such moments of contractual affirmation as amongst the most humanity-affirming of their working lives. In contrast, staff on casualised contracts lacked such affirmation and reported finding their working conditions dehumanising.

In particular, this report identifies four ways in w o s









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self-esteem and dismissal of my personal ambitions.' But she felt powerless to walk away, resist or complain, because she was dependent upon him for her ongoing work, which she needed to keep in the university system but also to maintain the income she needed to support her family.

This reliance on the patronage of others was not always experienced as immediately negative, as it was for Keira here. Amelia, based on her extended years of work on temporary contracts, could point to moments when friendly professional service/support staff (whom she had got to know) assisted by letting her use someone's office when they were on maternity leave. But this still meant that she was dependent upon someone else's generosity. Similarly, Kyle spoke of how different managers deal differently with temporary teaching contracts. The HR department of a university, he recounted, may say that temporary staff cannot have access to research funds because they are not on a research contract. Some managers will allow it, but will report it differently to faculty, because they say that if HR learn of it they will act to prevent it. So, explained Kyle, this leads to a contradiction: precarious staff become grateful to managers who are generous with workloading and resources – which feels humanising – but this only exists because of structural issues which are inherently dehumanising. These managers, however sympathetic they are, are ultimately not willing to rock the boat or push back against constraints imposed on them. When these managers say, 'the system says 'no,' but we'









lead the module: 'I wasn't allowed to refuse things,' she recounted, meaning that the sense of value, worth and satisfaction she got from teaching was lost. 'I felt completely powerless,' she summarised – a feeling she marked as extremely dehumanising.

**FREEDOM TO SET RESEARCH GOALS: KEIRA**

We have seen earlier that Keira has experienced years of working on temporary cng a



## Finding 4: Inability to project into the future

In his 1998 book on the effects of new capitalist labour on the workforce, *The Corrosion of Character*, Richard Sennett argues that new forms of casualised work are deeply damaging as they prevent people rendering a long-term narrative of their lives that can provide meaning. Our interviews showed that casualised work was dehumanising in precisely this way, in that it denied academics the ability to think about their work and life over the long term.

Madeleine described her extended period of working on a succession of casualised contracts as dehumanising, because rather than being able to think of her career in terms of years and decades, she was instead going from semester to semester hoping to stay in work. She emphasised that as time went by, rather than enjoying the excitement of building a career, it becomes more and more depleting as ‘You start to look unemployable if you have been an RA for six months’.

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structures of contemporary academia make this hard: those on permanent contracts increasingly rely upon the labour of those on temporary contracts to do things like their marking and teaching and basic research activities whilst they devote themselves to higher-profile activities that advance their careers. This makes it increasingly hard for staff on temporary contracts to move to permanent ones.

Roger Burrows has reckoned that individual academics may be subject to up to 100 different numerical measures at any one time.<sup>6</sup> In an academy increasingly driven by metrics, permanent jobs are given to people who can advance the institution's attempt to correlate its activities to audit, metrics and league-table exercises. Key to these are publications in so-called 'top-rated' journals, and grants. Yet many grants are only awarded to permanent staff, and the



*The PDR form for teaching fellows from [my faculty] is the same basic academic one, it includes REF, Impact, Grants etc, all activities not in my contract but expected of me to 'get a job.' But it is hard to 'get a job' because I have no chance to get grants, and I have not published enough to do that. Many teaching fellows work evenings and weekends, and have no work-life balance. To 'get a job' is the goal, and this means work that is sustainable employment, that is permanent and not precarious.*

The exploitative nature of such contracts had a cumulative component as well as a short-term one. Top universities pride themselves on being able to offer sabbaticals to academic staff, to enable them to catch up on new developments in the field, refocus on research, and return to teaching renewed and with a more up-to-date command of the cutting-edges of the discipline. Yet sabbaticals are effectively denied to casualised staff. Amelia, for example, had worked six years on temporary contracts in a single institution, and eight altogether. Yet she had never been given a sabbatical in that time whereas her colleagues, teaching similar material at the same level to the same students, would have been eligible for two. These structural inequalities between permanent and temporary staff further entrench the inability of temporary staff to get what they regard as proper jobs.

This structural impediment to getting out of the cycle of dehumanising, temporary work was described eloquently by Bruno in a pyramid he drew by unequal power relations [Pinar, 2000].



For example, contrast the visual timeline interviews of William and Kyle. William is an emeritus professor who was inspired as a child to pursue a career in science. Beginning his first academic job in the 1960s, he drew an impressive visual timeline. A particularly satisfying aspect of this for him was pioneering new teaching in his institution. Not only did this train large numbers of graduate students who had impacts on both academia and industry, but had a nationwide impact on the discipline as other UK universities adopted his approach. A further highlight was devising and developing a new drug for cancer treatment that took 28 years from the inception of the idea to formal licensing for public use. Of course, there were difficult periods in between.



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up to their international obligations. Employers should work to end the culture of casualisation. However too many institutions are in denial about the problem, dismissing it as a product of short-term employment cycles. The national employers' body, the Universities and Colleges Employers' Association, has failed to take the issue seriously, refusing to take any action to address the problem.



## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> There has been a 33% increase in teaching focussed staff since 2011-12 and 21% increase in research staff. Teaching and Research staff (lecturers and professors) by comparison have grown by only 7%.

<sup>2</sup> UCU, 'Job insecurities in universities: the scale of the problem,' October 2019.  
[https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/10502/Job-security-in-universities---the-scale-of-the-problem/pdf/ucu\\_casualisation-in-the\\_graphic\\_oct19.pdf?utm\\_source=Lyriss&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=&utm\\_term=&utm\\_content=](https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/10502/Job-security-in-universities---the-scale-of-the-problem/pdf/ucu_casualisation-in-the_graphic_oct19.pdf?utm_source=Lyriss&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=&utm_term=&utm_content=)

<sup>3</sup> UNESCO, 1997. The UNESCO Recommendation Concerning the Status of Higher-Education teaching Personnel. Paris.

<sup>4</sup> Seligman, Martin. 1972. Learned helplessness. *Annual Review of Medicine*, 23, 407

