



Precarious work in higher education

November 2016 update

Key points:

Data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) from 2014/15, the latest available, show that at least 53% of all academics employed in the sector are on some form of insecure contract.

The richest and most prestigious universities are the worst offenders with rates of insecurity in the Russell Group at 58.5%.

Many of these teaching staff are employed as 'workers', paid by the assignment, on

Precarious and insecure work in higher education

Jobs are precarious for two reasons. Firstly because the contracts can be of short duration. Many fixed-term contracts are of one year in duration. A good number are for nine months. Staff employed on these contracts don't know what the next year will bring and need to spend a lot of their time seeking the next contract. A recent survey of research staff conducted by UCU found that around a third of contract researchers estimated they spent 25% of their funded time working towards their next contract, time that could have been spent on the research they were contracted to conduct.

But precariousness is also about income and hours of work. Some teaching staff are paid by the hour but employed on permanent contracts. These staff are often no less precarious because they are only paid for the work they do and many of them have variable-hour or zero-hours contracts. Work can shrink or diminish or even disappear entirely and with it goes their income. The precarious population can't be reduced to one contract form or another. Precariousness is something that comes with a range of different contracts all of which share a common feature. Employers view permanent employment as too costly or risky and use insecure contracts to offload that risk onto staff. Employers use a dizzying array of different contracts to achieve the same end: fixed-term employment contracts; zero-hours employment contracts; variable hours hourly-paid contracts; hourly-paid contracts with set hours and so on. Many also use 'banks'

contract research staff – including those on so-called open-ended contracts whose employment is dependent on short-term funding - and teaching staff on fixed-term or hourly-paid contracts.

Employers like to emphasise the degree of choice and agency available to workers on casual or as they like to call them 'flexible' contracts, but it is obvious that your enjoyment of choice and flexibility will be shaped by which category you are in. A typical academic career trajectory, for example, involves moving from hourly-paid teaching as part of a PhD to hourly-

The Universities of **Warwick**, **Nottingham** and **Sheffield**, for example, all make use of worker contractual arrangements.

Some have experimented with temps agencies like 'Unitemps' to employ hourly paid staff, such as the **University of Leicester**. **Coventry University** has started to employ teaching staff as 'temps' via its own subsidiary company, TheFutureWorks Ltd. These staff are unlikely even to be reported to HESA.

Through these arrangements academics are employed as 'workers' akin to agency workers. They are typically paid by the 'assignment', can be hired and fired at will and do not accumulating employment rights like protection from unfair dismissal, rights to redundancy pay and access to statutory maternity and paternity pay or occupational

week on teaching than they are actually being paid for.² Surveys of hourly paid staff generally show that staff feel they work longer hours than they are paid for.

In addition to donating significant amounts of unpaid labour to their employers, hourly paid lecturing staff can exist on very low incomes and precarious livelihoods. UCU conducted a survey of members in insecure contracts in 2015 and results in higher education revealed significant numbers of them struggling to get by.

40% said that they earned under £1000 per month.

One in seven (14%) earned less than £500 per month, which places them below the Lower Earnings Limit for National Insurance Contributions.

Universities can change things now - There is a better way

It is not necessary to employ people in this way. Instead of driving down staff costs to free up resources to finance their building programmes, universities need to invest more in their staff and engage in proper workforce planning.

UCU is ready to work with universities to deliver more sustainable careers for the people teaching our students and we can help deliver a better deal for staff and students:

A recent agreement between UCU and the **University of Glasgow** has led to a fall in the use of atypical contracts and a rise in the use of better fixed-term employment contracts.

An agreement at the **University of Sussex** has eradicated the use of zero hours contracts in favour of better fixed-term employment contracts for its part-time lecturers.

Universities can no longer afford to put their heads in the sand on this issue. The level of

Appendix 1: UCEA: Disputing the figures – obscuring the problem

UCEA, the national body that represents university employers, has tended to try to dismiss the HESA data or spin its meaning. For example, UCEA has claimed that these staff are not really doing teaching. But this is clearly not the case. HESA's guidance to universities is quite clear that when they report on numbers of atypical academic staff they must be people engaged in academic work. Separately, in their responses to Freedom of information requests over the last few years, universities have revealed a close overlap between the use of atypical academic staff and hourly-paid and casual teachers. For example, in their response to an FOI in 2016, the University of Sheffield said that it employed more than 700 hourly paid teaching staff and 230 hourly paid research staff on contracts that guaranteed no hours of work. This maps closely onto their returns to HESA for atypical academic staff, which in 2014/15 was just over 900.

In addition, as we know, this atypical data in itself only captures a fraction of the hourly paid population. Many more are on fixed-term employment contracts and concealed within the HESA data. As the number of people employed on part-time teaching only contracts grows, it may well be this is showing us a growth in hourly paid lecturing staff within the core staff records. We need to be able to see hourly paid staff more clearly within the HESA records and this is one area where UCEA have showed willingness to work together to improve the data. But the sector may still resist any attempt to improve reporting so for the time being, the hourly-paid lecturing community remains only partially visible.

