

Short-term, short-changed? Considering the implications of academic casualisation for knowledge, pedagogy and the student experience

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Short-termism – a temporal perspective

- Timescape: ‘a cluster of temporal features, each implicated in all the others, but not necessarily of equal importance in each instance’ (Adam 2004)
- The Five Cs of industrial modernity:
 - the creation of time to human design’ or ‘clock time’
 - the commodification of time (or ‘time is money’)
 - the compression of time (speeded up time)
 - the control of time (to ensure efficiency and productivity)
 - the colonization of time (the way particular temporal rationalities dominate and colonise other time) (Adam 2003)

'Time is everything, man [sic] is nothing; he is at the most the incarnation of time. Quality no longer matters. Quantity alone decides everything: hour for hour, day for day••••'" (Marx, cited by Lukacs 1971).

'In this environment where time is transformed into abstract, exactly measurable, physical space, an environment at once the cause and effect of the scientifically and mechanically fragmented and specialised production of the object of labour, the subjects of labour must likewise be rationally fragmented.' (Lukacs 1971, p90)

'The temporal regimes of output-driven management are ruthlessly applied to organizations, ruling out the biological, the social, the intercultural, the long-term evolutionary, the implicit conditions that make us want to work. Short-term views rule: monthly, weekly, daily output schemes have replaced what we might call a natural rhythm determined by work motivation, pleasure in getting things done, and the expectation of rest after a hard day's work.' (Sabelis 2008)

'Under the dominance of project time, academic work is increasingly short-term, fast, fragmented and sporadic. It allows barely enough time to stop and reflect on what has been done or look for new visions, both of which are essential for creative and responsible work.'

(Ylijoki, p 105)

This study

Aim:

To explore the perceptions and experiences of 'casual' academic staff in the UK in regards to the perceived impact (if any) of their employment status on their teaching and pedagogical interactions with students.

Method:

Email interviews with 20 UK based academics on insecure contracts (fixed-term, hourly-paid, zero-hours), recruited through academic networks.

Short-termism, teaching and knowledge

‘I was also not told I was convening an additional module until I arrived back this week – there was no forewarning or handover or time to prepare and many colleagues in my position have experienced similar issues.’ (Olivia)

‘There have been difficult periods, particularly at the junction between my three contracts. My contracts typically run out at the end of August, the new contracts would then start in September. But in all instances when I was in the process of getting a new contract, all the key stages happened at the very last minute, with one particularly stressful period where I had to have an interview on the last day of my then current contract, and receiving a formal job offer from the University a few days after. Needless to say, I waited until the new contract arrived and was signed by all parties before I started to prepare my Semester 1 lectures, which included a Honours-level course new to me. My lectures in that course were therefore not as good as I would have liked them to be. In the following years I have managed to improve my preparation for this course, although I’ve always felt that it took a hit from the start and that it would have been better if this ridiculous situation had not taken place.’ (Louis)

The time it takes to sort out each contract (this semester I've had two new contracts to sort out) and the assumption from HR that we have access to scanners and printers, etc. It is a lot of extra time taken every semester, each time a contract is started, ended or adjusted, and it is very stressful and leads to all sorts of complications and confusions in departments. [...] I only found out about one lecture 25 minutes before it was due to start on the other side of campus today - thankfully I was well prepared.' (Olivia)

I was expected to teach in line with a very rigid, detailed plan made by the module co-ordinator which was sent between 9pm and 12 am the day before the seminar each week. Sometimes, this dropped into my inbox as late as 2am on the day of the seminar. This made it incredibly difficult to use the tiny amount of autonomy I had, which was usually the freedom to create a short powerpoint to guide students through discussion points and tasks. To do this, I often tried to stay awake until I received the plan, and had I not received it by around midnight, wake up incredibly early in the morning to write it before heading out to teach the 9am seminar. Moreover, only receiving the lesson plan the night before each week meant that I could not refer to what content would be covered at a later date, making it impossible to answer students' questions of: 'When are we going over the assignment?', 'Will we be covering something about X?' This was incredibly embarrassing; it is unprofessional to tell students why you do not know this information, and avoiding telling them meant that you looked like an incompetent teacher. (Julia)

'things like trigger warnings are really hard to give at the beginning of courses when we haven't been given the time to look at modules we're teaching until maybe a week or so before the course is due to start (I received my course guide half an hour before starting my first seminar at the second HEI institution I worked at).'

(Bianca)

'I try to integrate study skills into my sessions but have little awareness of what they have already received or really need as there is next to no interaction with the rest of the course team in one of the departments where I work.'

(Olivia)

‘I feel that each year I’m teaching something different and it takes so much time to prepare something of good quality that I know what I do isn’t always my best and it would be better if I had the chance to hone it. I feel exhausted by everything being new all of the time’ (.Jennifer)

‘Rarely having the opportunity to teach the same thing twice means that the course cannot develop in a reflexive manner. This also means it is always very time consuming to prepare. Because the causal contracts I have worked under and still do pay so little it also means I have had to take on additional work has led to 70+ hour working weeks, which also means that teaching preparation suffers. My degrees of agency and autonomy are obviously limited by what for the most part consists of replacing other people’s teaching, which can lead to a bad fit between the given material, and my teaching style and expertise’ (Jack)

'I also experienced teaching on a model about sociological theory when it was the usual Durkheim and his white-man gang and I wasn't in a position to change that as I arrived only a couple of weeks before term started. I decolonise and genderised where I could but I didn't know that when I left it wouldn't go back to before so you almost think why bother. In that sense, there is no space for you or the curriculum to develop or to have real changes. Similarly, I've also been in the situation where I'm reliant on readings that I would not have chosen nor am I confident with because that was how they were set up in the past. (Jennifer)

The lack of adequate pay for preparation/module construction means I cannot afford to spend adequate time on reading or preparation. This is especially problematic in my employment at my second HEI role (post-92). I am delivering a pre-existing module and cannot afford to spend time reforming content to reflect my own teaching strengths and interests. This is particularly frustrating for me as the content of the pre-existing module is very white and male. I include diversity where I can but this is difficult when I am essentially delivering a module and material that someone else has written, with no time to significantly modify it'. (Jane)

‘I’d love the opportunities to think of highly engaging and innovative approaches or sources to have in class every week, but sometimes (not always) there just isn’t time to do this, and I don’t feel students get the best of my teaching. (Bianca)

‘I don’t have much autonomy or agency in what I teach, because I feel obliged to agree to what I’m allocated. Teaching material is developed by permanent members of staff. In terms of session design, the trajectory of each teaching session has been planned by our module leaders to ensure continuity across sections. I’m not terribly motivated to creatively interpret this work or add new examples, because I know I don’t have time to effectively master each element.’ (Kathleen)

‘The separation of teaching and research means that students will not necessarily be receiving the best, most up to date academic content. There will be less time to plan, evaluate and develop courses to ensure they are the best they can be.’ (Olivia)

Short-termism and pedagogical relationships

‘My days are usually very busy with juggling multiple research projects, so I am not always approachable to discuss with students. In addition, I often work in the library or at home in order to minimise distractions, so my availability is limited.’
(Anton)

‘However, I am convinced that my insecure situation influences my reactions subconsciously in a manner that I am even not aware of. In fact, I am really stressed about this situation, last time I felt devastated when we were talking about a possible mortgage and I was told that with this kind of contract, I am not interesting for companies offering mortgages. (Nadia)

‘One issue is that the time taken to organise my new teaching contract means that I have not yet been added to the university / departmental systems and so am unable to see who my students / supervisees are or contact them or indeed see where and when I am teaching.’ (Olivia)

‘At the second HEI, I was never assigned a space nor time for my office hour, and had to hold it every week in Costa Coffee on campus – which, in the run up to Christmas, was busy, noisy and the opposite of private. I repeatedly asked but was ignored. It was difficult for students and almost impossible for me to retain a professional atmosphere and environment under these conditions, which was not helped by my casual status within the dept through a total lack of communication on their part.’ (Bianca)

‘However, I felt pressure to, as every other module tutor (that were permanent full-time members of staff) offered this to students; I did not want to be seen by students as not providing them with opportunities to discuss their concerns. In the students’ eyes, I was no different from their other tutors. I was still responsible for teaching them a module, marking their work and supporting them academically. The only difference was my contract’. (Julia)

‘Students don’t necessarily know why I can’t offer them office hours or a space and time to feedback on their work. This often ends up taking place quickly at the end of the seminar.[...] The seminars are 2 hours long and I often finish 15 minutes early so as to leave time for students to approach me with questions. This occasionally results in a short queue of people waiting and so is not a private space. It also may put students off as it feels like the end of the seminar and that everyone is keen to leave’ (Sally)

'I do not have an office and am not paid to hold office hours (so I don't). Face-to-face interactions with students outside the classroom are therefore non-existent. I have had no complaints thus far about my availability but it certainly does not make me feel like a 'real' member of staff, and I worry that the students might also get this perception of me.' (Jane)

'If anything I probably meet with my students more and are more involved with them than permanent staff as I am under more pressure to do my job well, impress and make sure that there are no difficulties with students that would have an effect on my future employment.' (Jack)

'I know from the teaching evaluations I've seen that students like continuity and developing relationships with colleagues and that this can't happen in a casualised workforce. (Jennifer)

‘Students don't have personal tutors all the way through their degrees because their tutors leave when on temporary contracts. This has affected some of my personal tutees ability to seek help for mental health problems and to talk about difficult family experiences. One of my new students asked me in October if I was going to be there for the whole year because she'd had three tutors so far, and I couldn't give her a definite answer.’ (Zoe)

I had one class that sought reassurance from me, repeatedly, that I would not leave mid-way through the semester. This was due to them having experienced four different tutors in one module in a short space of time in the previous year, which they felt had negatively impacted their progress. (Julie)

We're in a situation where the long-term growth of students can't be a part of the teachers' experience of their work, and the students lose out on having a lasting connection to their instructors if there is no certainty about continuity. I feel like I'm in a classroom to get through some curriculum, but attempts to engage students becomes more about reversing poor retention metrics than supporting fellow humans on a longer intellectual and personal journey through their education
(Kathleen)

I have received no to very little guidance from either institution about teaching students who have disabilities, are neurodiverse, etc. I am rarely notified if a student has a learning disability that I should be aware of. (Jane)

With short-term, single-course teaching, it's less likely you're able to spot and 'report' a struggling student (not just academically, but health-wise or needs-wise) to other members of the department, in that joined-up way which can help catch problems before they become too large. You're simply not in the department long enough / don't come into contact with other members of the department enough to be able to check in and discuss students like that, unless serendipitously. It's all much more fragmented. Equally, as a fractional or non-established, you can miss out on diversity/mental health training (where it's offered). (Serena)

I had a student who told me, a couple of weeks into class, that he had a severe visual impairment, and was finding it hard to read sources that I was handing out for class work. I felt awful, and embarrassed. (Bianca)

‘There will be less time for training on equality, diversity and widening participation issues for casual staff, less time for learning about and planning inclusive practices, less supervision and support from other academics and therefore opportunities for development and ability to ask questions about the best ways to support individual students, less time to learn about and engage with support services, less time means that it can be hard for example partaking in inclusive practices such as putting lecture slides up well in advance and of course less time for one to one academic support and pastoral care.’ (Olivia)