

Serial number 0324
Title Exploring the impacts of the casualisation of academic staff on the teaching and learning of undergraduate students
Submitter Prof. Carole Leathwood, Dr. Barbara Read

Exploring the impacts of the casualisation of academic staff on the teaching and learning of undergraduate students

In recent years, increasing attention has been paid to the growth of casualised employment amongst academic staff. Fixed-term and zero-hours contracts have become commonplace, with the competition for 'permanent' academic posts seemingly greater than ever. Even in the richest countries of the Global North there has been a notable increase in the 'casualization' of labour within academia in the last two decades (Gupta, Habjan et al. 2016). In the UK, an analysis of Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data for 2013-14 by the Universities and Colleges Union (UCU 2016) concludes that 'at least 54% of all academic staff and 49% of academics teaching in our universities are on an insecure contract'. But these figures are likely to be a significant underestimate of the extent of insecure and precarious work in the academy, as hourly paid lecturers and those on zero-hours contracts tend to be omitted from this data. Of those on fixed term contracts (35.5% of all academic staff on employment contracts in 2013-14), the vast majority are in the more junior grades, and it is only at Senior Lecturer level and above that permanent contracts predominate, with many academics never getting beyond a series of fixed term contracts. Casualisation also differentially affects academics according to institution¹ and by factors such as age, 'race'/ethnicity and gender – although these effects are under-researched.

There is also little research on the ways in which such precarity (and/or fears of potential precarity) may impact on academic teaching and the student experience. There is some relevant research in the US, which has focused on the distinction between full-time and part-time academic staff (or 'faculty'), rather than on casualised contracts per se, although this distinction also relates to security of tenure². For example, a survey conducted by the American Association of University Professors (AAUP 2016) found that part-time staff were less likely than full-time staff to experiment with their teaching or to teach potentially challenging content, and were also less likely to take risks or adopt innovative teaching methods. The AAUP report also cites research (Bettinger and Long 2004, Ehrenberg and Zhang 2004) indicating that an increase in both part-time faculty positions and in full-time non tenure-track positions are associated with a decline in graduation rates. In relation to this, Kezar and Maxey (2014) note how frequent and high quality lecturer-student contact has been identified in the research literature as important for student outcomes – including higher grades, a lower incidence of drop-out and the acquisition of a range of skills including critical thinking and problem-solving, and that the positive benefits appear to be particularly important for first generation entrants and students of colour. They argue that the opportunities for such lecturer-student contact are reduced for part-time staff.

1 See <https://www.ucu.org.uk/article/8154/Precarious-contracts-in-HE---institution-snapshot>

2 Almost all part-time staff were in non-tenure track positions, whereas full-time staff were in a mix of tenure-track and non tenure-track positions.

In the UK, a small-scale study by Lopes and Dewan (2014), based on interviews and focus groups with 19 HE teaching staff on hourly paid and zero-hours contracts, examined their experiences of precarity, including exploitation, lack of support and poor career progression, as well as concerns that their contractual status often impacted negatively on their pedagogical practices, despite their attempts to minimise this. Issues raised included feelings of resentment at the additional unpaid hours required to teach well; lack of access to resources, professional development, etc; feeling pressurised to teach subjects outside their areas of expertise and to teach different courses each year; and the negative perceptions they felt some students had of them if they were aware of their casualised status. There is, however, need for more research on the impact of casualisation on the teaching and learning of undergraduate students, a research gap that this paper aims to contribute to addressing.

This paper reports the initial findings of an exploratory piece of research to investigate the experiences of casualised academic staff in a range of university institutions, focusing particularly on the ways in which participants perceive such casualization to affect their university teaching and pedagogical interactions with students. The research is informed by a feminist post-structuralist orientation and an understanding of the increasing development of precarious and casualised labour in higher education as a deliberate strategy of neo-liberalism (see e.g. Butler 2009, Lorey 2015). As such this strategy is open to contestation and change, rather than an inevitable trend.

The research has received ethical approval from the University of the lead researcher, with data collection commencing in September 2017. The method used will be email interviews with a diverse sample of 100 academics on insecure employment contracts (hourly-paid, zero hours, fixed term), recruited via disciplinary/cross-disciplinary networks and snowballing as appropriate. Email interviews have been used successfully by the authors in previous research and have the benefits of enabling busy participants to respond in their own time, and for individual follow-up for clarification or expansion. Research questions will probe participants perceptions of the impacts of their contractual status on the nature and quality of teaching and pedagogical relationships within and outside the classroom, as well as the extent to which responses vary according to institutional context and/or facets of participants' own subjectivity (eg related to self-identifications of gender, ethnicity, class, etc.).

Such a focus is important in order to understand the changing academic conditions in which university teaching and learning is undertaken and the impact on students, in a context where widening participation and e/quality of experience for undergraduate students remains an institutional priority for many universities, and which in the UK, has been sharpened by the introduction of a new audit intended to measure teaching 'quality', the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF)³. In such a policy climate it is imperative that we ensure that academic staff employment practices effectively support the teaching and learning of students, something that this study aims to illuminate in relation to the employment of academic staff on insecure and casualised contracts.

References

- AAUP (2016). "Higher Education at a Crossroads: The economic value of tenure and the security of the profession 2016." *Academe*(March-April 2016): 9-22.
- Bettinger, E. and B. T. Long (2004). Do College Instructors Matter: The effects of adjuncts and graduate assistants on students' interests and success. <http://www.nber.org/papers/w10370>, National Bureau of Economic Research.

³ See <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/lt/tef/>

Butler, J. (2009). "Performativity, Precarity and Sexual Politics." AIBR. Network of Ibero-American Anthropologists 4(3): i-xiii.

Ehrenberg, R. and L. Zhang (2004). Do Tenured and Tenure-Track Faculty Matter? Cambridge, MA, National Bureau of Economic Research.

Gupta, S., J. Habjan and H. Tutek, Eds. (2016). Academic Labour, Unemployment and Global Higher Education. London, Palgrave Macmillan UK.

Kezar, A. and D. Maxey (2014). "Faculty Matter: So why doesn't everyone think so?" Thought & Action 2014(Fall): 29-44.

Lopes, A. and I. A. Dewan (2014). "Precarious Pedagogies? The Impact of Casual and Zero-Hour Contracts in Higher Education." Journal of Feminist Scholarship 7/8(Fall 2014/Spring 2015): 28-42.

Lorey, I. (2015). State of Insecurity: Government of the Precarious. London, Verso.

UCU (2016). Precarious work in higher education: A snapshot of insecure contracts and institutional attitudes: London.