

Wage theft? The unpaid work of precarious academics between extractivism and collegiality

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Research Domains

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Abstract

Drawing on 40 biographical interviews with academics with experience of long-term precarity in Ireland, the paper challenges the discourses of passion, hope labour, self-exploitation and complicity as explanations for precarious academics' unpaid work. Instead, it characterises much of this unpaid work as wage theft. The paper proposes a systematic categorisation and typology of wage theft in academia with a focus on precarious academics - from deliberately inadequate piecework rates and misclassification of work to nonpayment of due wages. In addition, the paper argues that rather than being produced or embraced by self-exploiting neoliberal subjects, unpaid labour is extracted by institutions, line managers and departmental colleagues through various mechanisms that include misrepresentation of tasks and emotional manipulation. Finally, the implications for our understanding of collegiality, and how it may be weaponised within hierarchical structures, are presented.

Full paper

Analyses of the indignities and injustices of academic precarity often invite the questions: Why do precarious academics endure these exploitative working conditions? Why do they routinely perform work that is severely underpaid or even unpaid? Is it because they find the work intrinsically rewarding, because they have internalised a culture of overwork, or because they see it as the only path to securing a better position in the future?

My co-researcher and I conducted 40 biographical interviews with academics with experience of long-term precarity in Ireland in 2020 and 2021. Our qualitative data revealed multiple occurrences of workplace abuse, including instances where employers failed to pay academics for work they had performed, compelled them to take on additional work unpaid, manipulated contracts in such ways that artificially created unpaid periods during the working day or term, and other strategies to extract unpaid labour. Our participants had also endured various forms of harassment and retaliation for attempting to obtain

their due wages and/or resist the imposition of unpaid work. These cases told a different story from the cliched pursuit of knowledge, or 'hope labour' supposedly volunteered by keen early career researchers eager to please colleagues and/or build up their CVs.

We found that the concept of wage theft as it was deployed in recent studies of the hospitality, care and delivery sectors (e.g. Cole et al., 2024; McDonald et al., 2018) was useful to analyse these practices. Wage theft is understood as both informal and formal. It may not be illegal, and exist due to regulatory gaps and/or unchallenged exploitative practices turned implicit workplace norms. The concept of wage theft helps keep the focus on institutions and employers and how they drive and benefit from unpaid labour, rather than on the workers' supposed responsibility in their own exploitation. It is particularly useful when examining academia, a sector where unpaid labour and overwork are largely normalised.

Drawing on this scholarship, and building on existing critical analyses of the discourse of 'passion' in academia (Busso and Rivetti, 2014; Hall and Bowles, 2016), the paper challenges the discourses of passion, hope labour, self-exploitation and complicity as explanations for precarious academics' unpaid work. Instead, it characterises much of this unpaid work as wage theft.

To do so, the paper proceeds in three steps. Firstly, drawing on recent scholarship on wage theft, as well as the case successfully brought by NTEU against Australian universities, it discusses the potential of the concept of wage theft in the context of academic work.

Secondly, the paper presents a typology of forms of wage theft as they emerged from the interview data. The main categories are: (1) Failure to pay, (2) Embedding unpaid work in contracts, (3) Mis-categorising work and (4) Unjustified pay stagnation, deductions and cuts. Each category comprises sub-categories, and each sub-category is illustrated by examples experienced by our respondents.

Thirdly, the paper addresses the issue of what is often perceived as a porous boundary between exploitation and self-exploitation by focussing on mechanisms of coercion (exploitative contracts; threats, false promises, misrepresentations and other forms of emotional manipulation) and resistance.

Finally, the paper links the findings to the theme of the conference. Some of our participants were compelled to undertake unpaid labour by colleagues who misrepresented the work as a worthwhile opportunity; or who used the notion of collegiality to blackmail them into sharing their own excessive workload. For some, collegiality also meant being treated (and overworked) like a fulltime permanent colleague but while on a fraction of fulltime pay. The pervasiveness of precarity in academia and excessive workloads risk further dividing academic communities along hierarchical lines.