

The imperfect 'de-precarisation' of teaching-only contracts in UK higher education

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Research Domains

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Abstract

The paper examines teaching-only contracts in UK higher education from the perspective of precarious work. It argues that attempts to *de-precarise* these jobs by creating more secure career pathways for teaching-only staff have had mixed results. Relative job security does not prevent a sense of subjective precarity. It is based on a mixed method project conducted at a UK university and employs the concept of subjective precarity to make sense of participants' reported experiences and sense of disrupted careers and professional identities.

Full paper

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Other a third of academic staff are on teaching-only contracts in the UK according to HESA. Their numbers have increased steadily overtime. The steady growth in the numbers of teaching-only staff has been linked to changes in the funding environment, in particular RAE/REF and project-based research funding leading to an increased specialization of roles (Wolf and Jenkins, 2020). Existing research indicates that there is a lack of clear career pathways for teaching-only staff (Bennett et al, 2018). Teaching-only staff are more likely to be on temporary contracts (Jenkins and Wolf, 2023). While not all staff on these contracts are research-active, those who are typically conduct research "in their own time" with little institutional support or recognition. The rise of teaching-only contracts is largely employer-led and connected to processes of precarisation of the academic workforce. They enable

higher education institutions to cover their teaching needs while reducing costs. Often, those who are paid for teaching only are on casual contracts, including zero-hour contracts – or no contract at all.

We conducted an institutional case study in a UK-based institution. Our research consisted of 4 strands: (a) collecting statistical data (b) individual interviews with a range of participants including middle managers (N=10) (c) an online questionnaire for teaching-only staff (N=133) (d) focus groups with teaching-only staff (N=15 in 3 groups).

We draw on the concept of subjective precarity as used by French sociologist of work Daniele Linhardt in her studies of sectors where workers may not be under immediate threat of losing their jobs but still experience forms of precarity, such as not feeling in control of their work, that their skills are valued, that they are not able to do good work. 'Disruptive' management methods make workers whose contracts are relatively secure experience feelings of anxiety and alienation similar to those on precarious contracts (Linhardt).

Our respondents reported experiencing forms of subjective precarity, connected to (a) the loss and denial of their identities as researchers (b) their ambiguous status vis a vis colleagues on teaching and research contracts (c) excessive workloads due to the concentration of teaching-related tasks (d) limited avenues and support for meaningful career progression.

Institutional endeavours to address the employment precarity of teaching-only staff by offering permanent contracts, delineating career pathways for those renamed as 'education specialists' do not appear to adequately address the disconnection between this ascribed identity and the careers that individuals had imagined and worked towards. While less precarious, these new pathways and prospects leave staff in an in-between situation and without a clear academic identity.