Casualisation in higher education

THE WIDESPREAD NATURE OF CASUALISATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION
In 2015 over half (53%) of all academics employed in UK higher education were on some form of insecure contract. The situation was even more pronounced in Russell Group institutions where the rate of insecurity rose to 58.5%. When UCU publicised these facts, derived from statistics released from the Higher Education Statistics Agency in our 2016 report ‘Precarious work in higher education’, it received a great deal of media coverage as it jarred with the still common perception of university work being secure and stress free.

WHAT IS CASUALISATION?
The 2016 report identified the three main areas of casualised or precarious work in higher education. The first is PhD students who also do some teaching. These are the people who deliver much of a university’s undergraduate teaching – indeed research by UCU found that three-fifths of academic staff at Russell Group institutions were on insecure contracts. Conditions vary for this group. Some are required to teach in return for bursaries or fee waivers (sometimes expected to do preparation and marking in their own time), others are casually employed as demonstrators or lecturers, and still others are put on minimal fixed term, fractional or zero-hours contracts. For many PhD students, appropriately remunerated and supported teaching is a valuable part of career development. However, the lack of secure contracts and the widespread dependence of universities on this means of delivering education puts the PhD student at risk of exploitation.

In an attempt to act on casualisation and to also ensure that UCU properly represents this significant group of workers at a time in their career when they are very likely to be
in need of trade union support and organisation, UCU introduced free membership from October 2017 for workers engaged in this work at universities.

Another group who are in precarious employment are those substantively employed on a limited-term or precarious contract but who are dependent on that contract for their living. This includes contract research staff including those whose employment is dependent on short-term funding and teaching staff on fixed-term or hourly-paid contracts.

There is a third group of staff who add to those working on atypical contracts, albeit for them this creates little problem. That is those for whom the precarity of the contract is inconsequential given their main employment is as a professional in another sphere – health services, the law, journalism, the arts – and for whom a small number of hours per year as a ‘visiting lecturer’ is subsidiary to their main employment and the status as an academic helps them in their main career. These staff make a major contribution to students’ learning but it is also clear that when employers talk about casualised staff, these are the people they focus on and highlight. Use of casualised and atypical contracts may suit these workers, but for the other groups, those teaching PhD students and those employed on precarious contracts, this method of employment has a substantial and detrimental effect both on their professional life and their home and personal life. However, even within this category there is a risk of exploitation, as many other professions are privatised, outsourced and casualised (journalism is a notable example), or when the professional expertise which is valuable to student learning comes from workers in the voluntary sector or unpaid activists. UCU has several joint membership schemes with unions representing other professions (eg NUJ, Equity, Unison, Royal Society of Physiotherapists).

The key issue here is: who is in control of the flexibility? If workers can be in control of flexible employment in order to meet the other demands of their lives – study, families, professional/personal development, activism – then UCU is keen to support them. In the vast majority of cases however, it is entirely dictated by the university.

Sadly, Scottish institutions are all too well represented in surveys of the use of casualised contracts in higher education. In UCU’s 2016 report ‘Precarious work in higher education’ (using 2013/14 HESA statistics) seven Scottish institutions were included in the 50 UK worst institutions for insecurity for teaching staff. They were, in order of precarity: Queen Margaret University (68.2% of teaching and research or teaching only staff on insecure contracts), Edinburgh University (67.5%), Glasgow Caledonian University (56.1%), Stirling University (55.2%), Strathclyde University (53.8%), St Andrews University (53%), and Abertay University (51.2%).

There has been some progress with universities, notably Glasgow and Edinburgh, working with their local UCU branch to look to end the use of zero-hour contracts. Discussions at different institutions remain in progress and branches continue to put in claims on casualisation to force change.
THE HUMAN COST OF CASUALISATION

In 2015 UCU published a report called ‘Making Ends Meet – the human cost of casualisation in post-secondary education’. The report detailed the stories of some of those employed in higher education in precarious work. It’s easy to forget when you see figures that 53% of all academics are on some kind of atypical contract, that behind that figure are individuals trying to get on with their lives, many with caring responsibilities and dependents. The lack of security can have a real and tangible detrimental effect on them and their families. As the 2015 report indicated, ‘These are people who don’t know from year-to-year, term-to-term, or even from month-to-month, whether they will have a job or how much they might earn. These people worrying about next week’s bills are the same people teaching students in some of the world’s greatest universities and then going home to fill in the form to secure tax credits.’

The report found that two-fifths (42%) of staff on casual contracts had struggled to pay household bills, over a third (35%) said that they had struggled to meet rent or mortgage payments and a third (34%) of respondents said that they had had problems trying to get a mortgage because of the type of contract they were on. Perhaps most shockingly, over a fifth (21%) had struggled to pay for food. This is a world away from the public perception that still exists about working in higher education, of a stress free, well recompensed and quiet academic life.

Two-fifths of staff (41%) employed on casual contracts in universities worked only for thirty hours or less a week and nearly a third (30%) earned less than £1,000 a month. Around 10% of the people surveyed were unable to answer questions on the number of hours they worked or their monthly income but it varied too much to allow them to give an accurate answer.

CASE STUDY

UCU constantly works with the media to expose the use of zero-hours and other atypical casualised contracts in higher education. As an example, in May 2014 we worked along with the Sunday Herald to expose the issue and highlight the human cost to those employed in our universities. In the article a graduate tutor from Glasgow University outlined his experience of work and again demonstrated the human cost of the prevalence of these contracts:

There is a constant uncertainty about how much you’ll be paid

[The tutor]...33, from Glasgow, has four different zero-hours contracts involving teaching and work to widen participation in higher education. He said it is a "constant major headache" having to juggle the roles, but that it is the norm for many people trying to enter the academic job market.

He said: "It is not just the different competing timetables which can be a problem, it is also just the constant uncertainty of how much you are going to get paid and when."
“During terms you are quite busy as that’s when all the teaching happens. Then there is nothing for the whole summer and ... you just have to survive as best you can.”

[He]... said his wages did include a calculation for holiday pay, but other vital benefits, such as sick pay, were not available.

“If you are treated like a normal employee and you are given a salary you can reliably count on what’s in your bank account at the end of each month, you can use this to get things like mortgages and you can have a normal life,” he says.

“Most of the people who work in the university who are on these kind of contracts are trying to enter the academic job market, so they are people who are doing PhDs or people who have just finished doing PhDs.

“These are people who have been in higher education for a long time, who have often accrued lots of debt in the process, and who are often trying to support families or get married ... But they are being treated like this is a Saturday job.”

He added: "There is nobody who teaches at the university who would choose to be on a zero-hours contract. It is basically the university doing things on the cheap."

**UCU’S WORK AGAINST CASUALISATION**

UCU branches work to end the use of atypical contracts at individual institutions but UCU has also been making the case against the use of casual contracts on a political level and in national bargaining. The Scottish Affairs Committee in the UK parliament investigated the use of zero-hours contracts and produced a report which included a section detailing their use and prevalence in higher education. The evidence gathering sessions the committee held heard from UCU members detailing their experience and the committee also called the directors of HR from Glasgow and Edinburgh universities to London to give evidence where both committed to work with the union to address the problem. That, and hard work by the branches locally, has led to the improvements in both institutions although we still need to make progress there and elsewhere and branches are continuing to push institutions.

Casualisation was also a major part of UCU’s 2018/19 pay claim arguing that with widespread casualisation affecting all staff terms and conditions now the norm, the sector’s reliance on casualised labour represents a scandalous failure. The claim sought commitments from employers that outlined a blueprint for addressing casualisation in universities. Specifically, that individual institutions commit to action plans including: time-limited negotiations with relevant trade unions; committing to ending the use of zero-hour contracts; ending the use of worker contracts for teaching staff in favour of employee contracts; transferring hourly-paid staff onto fractional employment contracts; and a commitment to moving more research staff onto open-ended contracts and to work with unions on action plans to create greater employment security for researchers.
AREAS FOR DISCUSSION AND QUESTIONS

- Discuss the level of casualisation in your institution.

- How can your UCU, branches and individual members best counter the use of casualised contracts?

- What is the impact of casual and atypical contracts on members locally? Is there also an impact on students, the institution and the sector’s reputation?

- Who are UCU’s allies in campaigning against casual contracts? How can we best forge alliances?

NEXT STEPS

UCU branches have shown they can make an impact on the contracts used and the way their university employs staff. We have had successes in a number of institutions but there remains much, much more to be done. Branches are currently putting in local claims on casualisation, some branches have committees for members on casualised contracts and the issue remains part of the 2018/19 pay claim which sets out the steps required to address the issue head on.

For more information on organising against casualisation and the steps individual members and branches can take contact your branch or the UCU Scotland office on 0141 225 8160 or scotland@ucu.org.uk