

Second class academic citizens:

The dehumanising effects of casualisation in higher education

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Key findings of research conducted by Nick Megoran and Olivia Mason of Newcastle University, endorsed by UCU

With a foreword by Chi Onwurah, MP for Newcastle Central

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Cover image: Statue of Revd Dr Martin Luther King Jr, Newcastle University



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Introduction

UCU believes that the casualisation of academic labour is a significant problem in UK higher education, being a fundamental attack on the human dignity of those caught up in it.

Our universities are becoming increasingly dependent upon a growing pool of workers employed to teach and conduct research on precarious and unfavourable contracts.¹ Employers have used this increase, in part, to enable established academics to concentrate on activities aimed at hitting targets and advancing strategic objectives prioritised by managers.

The toll on this casualised workforce is high. As previous UCU research has shown, these precarious contracts have significant negative effects on staff income, wellbeing, and their ability to do their jobs.

This report highlights a further damaging aspect of casualised work: the dehumanisation of those who undertake it. Universities often make bold statements about how they value their staff. These sound increasingly hollow as they choose to rely more and more upon a precarious workforce treated as mere 'human resources' to be used and abused for the furtherance of dubious managerial objectives that have little to do with scholarship and education. This research finds that casualised academic labour is fundamentally dehumanising in that it renders staff invisible and vulnerable, curtails their agency and freedom, and prevents them from rendering a long-term narrative of their career that can provide meaning to their lives. They are treated as second-class academics.

Based on extended qualitative interviews with casualised and non-casualised academic staff, this report is launched on Martin Luther King Day. The core idea in Revd Dr Martin Luther King Jr's life and work was that all people are equally endowed with inherent dignity. For this reason, he argued that the tendency to see workers as mere 'living tools' - to be used and disposed of without regard for their essential humanity - was a great evil and should be resisted.

At the same time, we must recognise that casualisation overlaps with and compounds other forms of oppression: as UCU has highlighted, fixed-term and casual contracts are disproportionately likely to be held by women and BME staff.

UCU regards the current mass casualisation of academic labour as dehumanising, and calls on UK universities to honour Dr King's legacy by ending the culture of precarious employment.



Foreword: Chi Onwurah, MP for Newcastle Central

This report is launched on Martin Luther King Day. Revd Dr King is rightly recognised and honoured for his role in advancing civil rights for African Americans by fighting against racial injustice. Less prominence is given to his truly global vision of human rights, equality and justice for everyone in what he called our 'world house.' The basis for this vision was the idea, at the core of King's thinking, that all human beings are created with equal dignity and worth – and that our economic and political institutions should be changed to reflect this.

That is why I am delighted to write the foreword to this report and to formally launch it at parliament. Anyone who saw the disturbing 2019 Ken Loach film made in Newcastle, *Sorry We Missed You*, will know that precarious employment can be deeply detrimental to human wellbeing. This is an issue not just for people who work in the so-called 'gig economy,' but also increasingly for those who work in higher education. Reliance on precarious, low-paid staff has become a business model, and therefore universities across the UK are in the midst of industrial action over this issue. Only last month I was pleased to show solidarity to university workers in my constituency by standing with them on the picket lines.

This report uses Frederick Douglass and Martin Luther King's beliefs in human value and equality as the basis for an important critique of this shift to the casualisation of the academic workforce. It highlights that poor employment conditions are not only bad news financially and in terms of mental health, but that they can be fundamentally dehumanising.

It is particularly appropriate that academics from Newcastle University have written this report. The North East has a proud tradition of campaigning for social justice and have strong links with the African American freedom struggle. In 1967 Dr King visited Newcastle to receive an honorary degree, Newcastle being the only UK university to so honour him. Over a century earlier the great abolitionist – and former slave – Frederick Douglass, spent time in Newcastle where he was supported by local activists. This legacy has been celebrated in recent commemorations in the city, including a statue to Dr King and a plaque where Douglass stayed. But to truly honour their legacies we must work tirelessly towards building the type of societies they strove for, societies where everyone is treated with equal regard to their essential humanity. That is why I am delighted to support this report, and I hope that the UCU campaign of which it is a part leads to real change in how universities treat their staff.



Message from UCU Vice President Vicky Blake

The impact of casualisation is difficult and painful for many of us to talk about, even for those who have since clawed onto an 'open ended' contract. The financial impact of insecurity twines efficiently together with the social and professional impact: the undermining of confidence, the erosion of illusory 'opportunity'; the daily slog of trying to keep one's head above water, to pay rent, and to maintain relationships. I know this personally, and I hear it daily in my role as vice president of UCU. Speaking out about the very real, very personal impact that casualisation wreaks upon individuals, our families, and our academic communities can feel incredibly dangerous. But to speak out collectively is among our greatest weapons in demanding change. This report draws out much of the pain which is felt and internalised by so many in a sector that echoes and reinforces traditional hierarchies and class divides far more than many senior leaders seem willing (or able) to recognise. Change is long overdue.

As trade unionists we must understand and affirm that workers on casualised contracts deserve to be heard, to be treated with respect, and to enjoy decent working conditions. The structure of 'the academy' makes it easy to forget that. Solidarity with each other must be practical and comprehensive. Fearful workers are more likely to be compliant, less likely to raise concerns: contractual conditions slip even further. Where is it frightening to raise one's head over the parapet, we most need to fortify a culture of meaningful solidarity that can be felt, which is tangible beyond speech and social media posts and into actions.

This report strengthens our fight for secure work and respect for all workers. It comes at an important time: we are fighting for secure work, and decent and fair working conditions and pay for workers in higher education. As a former chair of the UCU Anti-Casualisation Committee I know that many battles have been fought for a long time to bring the impact of casualisation to light. We have fought for better data, because proving the problems are real and widespread was a hurdle in a sector that tends to present itself in line with an assumed decency of practice. We have fought to represent our casualised members in campaigns and importantly, in collective sectoral bargaining.

University teachers, researchers, and support staff deserve the same secure and decent work we wish for all of the students we work together to educate. Casualised workers are stressed, exploited, underpaid, and often pushed to the brink by senior management teams relying on goodwill and a culture of fear. Our love of learning is weaponised in order to keep the bottom line cheap, while senior management and vice chancellors' pay soars. This report matters. It delves deep into the worst effects of the marketised model of higher education upon its most vulnerable workers.

In recognising the dehumanising impact of casualisation, it is time for deeds beyond words.



Executive summary

Martin Luther King Jr was a champion of labour and human rights. He believed that 'the dignity and worth of human personality' is assaulted when people are treated as tools, as means rather than ends. UCU believes that the relatively recent and alarming rise of mass casualised labour in higher education is an example of just such a distortion. Staff are treated not as human beings of equal value to their colleagues, but as second-class academic citizens, mere 'resources' to be deployed to further strategic visions of vice chancellors and governing boards.

Academics are highly-motivated people, drawn into the profession by a sense of wanting to make a difference to the world by research and teaching. This sense of vocation is abused by employers who are increasingly switching to a business model offering casualised and precarious work, promising more rewards than there are.

Casualisation is a significant problem for UK higher education (HE). The latest data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), 2017/18, shows that nearly 33,000 researchers (67%) in the sector remain on fixed-term contracts. 49%, nearly 30,000, teaching 'only' staff are employed on fixed-term contracts, many of those hourly paid (42% of all teaching only staff). Add to this over 6500 academic staff employed on zero-hours contracts and an army of nearly 70,000 'atypical' staff, and it is clear that a significant proportion of teaching in many universities is being carried out by casualised staff.

This situation is not an accident of employment and recruitment cycles, but has become a business model on which universities depend. It contravenes fundamental documents on higher education widely regarded as authoritative in the UK, including the 1997 *UNESCO Recommendation Concerning the Status of Higher Education Teaching Personnel* and the *Magna Charta Universitatum*.

This report concludes that this casualised academic labour is dehumanising in four ways:

1. It renders staff invisible to colleagues and institutions, treating them as second-class academic citizens.
2. It leaves staff vulnerable to a whole range of exploitative and demeaning practices, placing them in degrading patronage networks.
3. It denies agency and curtails the academic freedom that is a hallmark of our profession.
4. It prevents them from rendering a long-term narrative of their careers that can provide meaning to their lives.



The dehumanising effect of casualisation is not a problem of poor practice by certain managers that could be corrected through training or new HR policies. Rather, because casualised staff are used, in part, to ease the workload and further the careers of permanent staff, it is a structural issue in which all academics are implicated.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **The government should insist that universities are honest** about the extent of casualisation, and instruct the Office for Students to demand comprehensive data about universities' reliance on casualised labour in teaching.
2. **Higher education employers should own up to their responsibilities** to ensure that staff are treated in humanity affirming ways by ending the culture of casualisation. Individual universities should engage in negotiations with UCU locally to negotiate the transition of precariously employed staff onto more secure contracts.
3. **Research councils should make it a condition of grant** to employ research staff on open ended contracts and to support greater stability of employment. No employer should be able to sign up to the Research Concordat unless they have committed to working with UCU to address the issue of insecure employment for research staff, with a commitment to moving research staff to more secure forms of employment.
4. **National and international charter mark givers**, such as Magna Charta Universitatum, should pressure universities to step up to their formal commitments and, if they fail to do this, should suspend their accreditation.
5. **UCU believes that there should be no second-class academic citizens**, but that all should be enabled to have equally-humanising conditions of work. It is the responsibility of all of us to work towards this goal. Therefore academics on permanent contracts should show solidarity with colleagues in less favourable employment conditions and fully support local campaigns against casualisation.



Human beings – or human resources?

Casualisation is a massive problem for the UK higher education sector. According to the latest HESA data (2017/18), around 67% of the 49,515 researchers in the sector remain on fixed-term contracts, nearly 30,000 teaching 'only' staff are on fixed-term contracts (the majority of them hourly paid), and a further 68845 academic staff are employed as 'atypical academics' not counted in the main staff record. UCU estimates that this 'reserve army' of academic labour is doing a significant proportion of the teaching in many universities.

This has significant consequences for staff and students. According to the results of UCU's 'Counting the Cost of Casualisation in HE' (2019) part-time and hourly-paid teachers are doing 45% of their work without pay, almost half of participants held down two or more jobs in education, 71% of respondents reported that they believed their mental health had been damaged by working on insecure contracts, and 83% of respondents agreed that their contractual status made it hard to make long-term financial commitments such as buying a house and plan for a family. A significant majority of respondents said that they had insufficient paid time to prepare adequately for their classes, complete their marking, give proper feedback, and undertake their own scholarship. Casualised labour exacerbates existing inequalities: for example, whereas 28% of white male academics are on fixed-term contracts, the figure for Asian female academics is 45%.²

Nor was this a convenient lifestyle choice: 97% of respondents on a fixed-term contract said that they would rather be on a permanent one, while 80% of hourly paid staff said that they would rather be on a contract that guaranteed them hours, even if it meant less flexibility.

Casualised academic labour should not be seen as a rite of passage or as a temporary product of student recruitment cycles; it has become a business model.

Although there are multiple factors behind the increasing shift towards casualised labour within HE, it has been enabled by the contentious notion that workers are primarily to be seen as 'resources.' Indeed, it is usually HR departments that draw up these poisonous contracts. The idea that humans are resources to be managed scientifically has its origins in the work of industrialist pioneer management consultant Frederick Taylor in his 1911 book *The Principles of Scientific Management*, and in mid-century writers like Elton Mayo and Mason Haire who believed that 'Human Resource Management' (HRM) could help employers roll back hard-won labour rights. HRM therefore went mainstream in the US and UK under 1980s Reagan-Thatcher neoliberalism, and has subsequently spread worldwide in business, but also into the public sector, charities and education.

HRM encompasses personnel issues such as recruitment, payroll and sick-leave, but goes beyond this in seeking to align individual working practices to an institution's 'vision' or 'strategic objectives' set by managers in the belief that this will enhance



performance. Critics claim there is no convincing evidential base showing that HRM improves performance, and worry instead that it devalues workers because 'resources' implies they are 'things,' 'commodities,' a means to an end. If workers are considered in this way then it is hardly surprising that abusive and degrading casualised contracts have come to abound and be seen as acceptable. We need other ways to think about workers.

It is here that Martin Luther King provides a powerful alternative way to think about workers. King was a champion of labour rights, murdered as he addressed a rally of striking sanitation workers in Memphis. King's opposition to what he often identified as the three evils of racism, poverty and war was premised on the African American tradition of theological anthropology, namely that all human beings are created with equal human dignity. For example, Frederick Douglass (1818-1895), the former slave who became a leader of the anti-slavery movement insisted in his 1850 essay 'The nature of slavery' that because the slave is fully human, 'The first work of slavery is to mar and deface those characteristics of its victims which distinguish men from things, and persons from property... it reduces man to a mere machine.' King built squarely on Douglass and subsequent African-American theologians, insisting that 'man is not a thing. He must be dealt with not as an 'animated tool,' but as a person sacred in himself. To do otherwise is to depersonalise the potential person and desecrate what he is.' King also put this in secular terms, referring to 'the dignity and worth of human personality' in his 'Letter From Birmingham Jail,' and in his Nobel Prize-winning speech when he insisted that humans are not 'mere flotsam and jetsam on the river of life.'

Of course, no comparison can be drawn between the conditions of 1960s African-Americans and workers in modern British universities. But King's insistence that we ask whether people are treated as proper human beings with intrinsic dignity is important: as this report shows, asking this question about academic labour raises significant concerns about the dehumanising effects of casualised labour in the current business models being favoured by HE providers.



This report: methods

This report explores how academics experience work as either humanising or dehumanising. Focusing on a range of institutions in the North East of England, we interviewed HR staff and looked at HR policies, but the primary source of data was visual timeline interviews with academics. Visual timeline interviews are a method developed to explore career trajectories retrospectively. Interviewees were asked to tell the story of their working life by drawing a timeline, using visual metaphors as far as possible. They were requested to draw particular attention to how they came to be academics, and to subsequent high and low points, and then identify moments or periods on the timelines when they felt treated in humanity-affirming or dehumanising ways, and to reflect on these. Finally, they were asked how universities could ensure they are treated in humanity-affirming rather than dehumanising ways. Each interview lasted between one and half, and four hours. We conducted 17 visual timeline interviews with academics, as part of a comparative project comprising interviews with 55 people working in higher education, secondary education, and charities.

This research was published in a wider report by Newcastle University and the William Leech Research Fund in July 2019, *Human Resources? Recognising the Personhood of Workers in the Charity and Public Sectors*. It found that academics were highly self-motivated, generally being driven by an enthusiasm for their subject, a desire to advance the common good through discoveries and research, and a commitment to education as a public good. Several academics had taken significant salary cuts by moving into HE from the private sector. Therefore many of the assumptions in HRM about the need to 'manage' and motivate workers do not apply to HE. Instead, the report identified eight 'habits of highly humane workplaces' – that is, characteristics of workplaces that respondents marked as humanising if present or dehumanising if absent. These were: the ability to make a difference; being trusted with freedom and autonomy; insulation from the harmful effects of audit cultures; being listened to; the quality of human relationships; 'the magic power of human sympathy' (employer empathy at high and low points of life); communities of care; and contractual affirmation.

It is the stark differences reported by staff in permanent and casualised employment in HE under this last heading, 'contractual affirmation,' that forms the basis of this report. 'Contractual affirmation' is the validation of self as having worth in the eyes of others experienced at the awarding of jobs, promotions, and career awards.

For example, Craig had applied for more than 80 lectureships in different countries over a two-year period working on a casualised contract. He relayed that this led to a growing 'sense of panic and discouragement,' asking 'what has the system done to me?' after a decade of preparation by undergraduate, masters and doctoral study. He described this as very dehumanising. In contrast, finally being awarded a permanent lectureship was humanising, – 'being offered the job, being given start-up research money, and being told that I would be eased in gently with the workload.' Following the offer of a job itself, promotion was marked by many people as humanising. Andrea described her promotion



to senior lecturer as a 'restoration of balance.' She felt she had been looked down on by some colleagues who thought she could teach but not do research, and so had 'crap' administrative roles dumped on her. Suddenly, she said, those colleagues didn't treat her with the same disrespect. Every academic we interviewed on a permanent contract pointed to such moments of contractual affirmation as amongst the most humanity-affirming of their working lives. In contrast, staff on casualised contracts lacked such affirmation and reported finding their working conditions dehumanising.

In particular, this report identifies four ways in which academics working on casualised and precarious contracts are dehumanised: they are rendered invisible and vulnerable, they have their freedom and agency curtailed, and they are prevented from rendering a long-term narrative of their careers that can provide meaning for their lives. These will be considered in turn.



Finding 1: Invisibility

The first dehumanising aspect of casualised labour is the invisibility of those subject to it. Temporary staff are amongst the most marginal and invisible, and institutions can all too readily mistreat them by failing to recognise their equal personhood.

As a PhD student Sunita embarked upon her life as an academic with a sense of exhilaration. Having a strong sense of vocation, she described academia as ‘the best job in the world.’ However, she continued, ‘the bubble burst’ as soon as moved into a temporary research assistance job created to help free a senior academic up for managerial duties. She described her life and that of her colleagues as being in ‘the sweatshop of academia.’ This was not simply about lack of long-term security and choice in research topics; it was that she was suddenly rendered less visible to the mechanisms of departmental administration. Two incidents in particular stood out for her. The first was that she was not allowed to have a name plaque on her office door, because she was not permanent – even though she was working as hard as permanent staff members, at the same intellectual level, and indeed collaborating with them. The second was that the departmental administrators would not book conference travel for her and other research associates, telling them it was ‘because you are not academics.’

Apparently minor issues, like having one’s name on a door or being able to access travel booking facilities, were thus experienced as intensely dehumanising, in effect setting up casualised staff as second-class academic citizens. The very names of roles announced this from the start. Whereas once universities employed ‘temporary lecturers’, now they routinely label roles as ‘teaching fellows’ or ‘teaching assistants.’ Susannah, who had worked on a series of such contracts described them as dehumanising, visibly marking certain academics out as less intellectual, less academic than their peers on permanent contracts as lecturers. They are described as teaching assistants, she explained, but this may be a total misnomer as often they are not ‘assisting’ at all but are autonomously doing work of the same type, value and quality as any other lecturer. The naming of roles is important, she insisted, and even having ‘teaching’ in the title is dehumanising: ‘teachers belong in schools, lecturers in universities,’ she said. Following her PhD another academic, Simone, worked on consecutive teaching contracts, which began as a ten-month one and which was later extended by another year. This meant that she was pigeon-holed as a ‘teacher,’ and the years of research and writing which had enabled her to be qualified for the positions were effectively discounted. At that institution, she recounted, ‘Everyone was a research hero; no one was interested in what I was doing.’ Temporary contracts made Simone visible as not as a rounded academic, but only for one aspect of that work: her teaching. People didn’t bother to ask her what she was writing about, thinking about, working on. She had been rendered invisible as a thinking, intelligent academic. ‘I left that institution,’ she said, ‘with the idea that I was a great teacher but a terrible researcher.’

The unregulated and fragmentary nature of casualised academic labour meant that staff on these contracts could have strikingly different experiences of humanising or dehumanising treatment over time: not only as they moved between institutions, but as they changed



contracts within them. Thus Amelia had worked a number of temporary or part-time jobs over half a decade, sometimes in two or three different universities at once. In one of these she was given slightly better conditions than the others: 'I had a desk to myself', she said, and colleagues who invited her to tea-breaks - 'I felt like a real person.' This last phrase is striking, and she repeated it more than once in the interview: 'I was a real person, an office all to myself, with my name on the door': seeing her name written with the title 'Dr' in front moved her, as it made her feel like 'an academic.' This is telling - telling that her extended experience of casualised labour was dehumanising. She gave an example of one place where she was given a six-month contract to fill in teaching for someone who had got a grant. She was given this without interview, training or vetting. This felt dehumanising - she wasn't considered a 'real' academic, so the usual processes could be skipped as they would be wasted on someone only there for a short time. Upon starting, she was simply told to read out verbatim notes the lecturer had left. It was not, she reported, a great module and students were unhappy, but 'No one wanted to give me anything in terms of training or emotional support.' Because I was just seen as a stop-gap, she continued, she was barely visible to the system - 'you never met HR.'

It is worth contrasting the experience of staff on permanent and temporary contracts. In our interviews, one of the most commonly-cited humanising experiences of academic work was the care of a community. Having relatively recently been awarded her first permanent contract, Amanda drew attention to this, that 'everyone is supportive' personally and professionally, whether this was in giving her freedom to design a new course, or personal care at time of family illness. She marked as particularly humanising what she described as 'coming into a permanent community' - 'to be asked how you are doing.' This contrasted with her previous experience of years and years 'bouncing around on temporary jobs' which were all marked by 'a lack of pastoral care.' Amanda tellingly described humanisation as occurring 'when I feel recognised and supported by colleagues.' In contrast, that recognition is denied to temporary staff who can be less visible to the formal institutional mechanisms and processes, and less visible to their colleagues as building supportive relationships inevitably takes time. Therefore temporary staff miss out on the quality of workplace relations that permanent staff repeatedly marked as humanising.

But it is not simply that casualised staff can be invisible to impersonal systems of HR or have dehumanising job descriptions; it is that casualised staff are often omitted from the rites of passage that are characteristic of being human. People don't spend time getting to know temporary staff, inviting them out for a coffee to ask about their work, asking them home to dinner with their families, or meeting up socially. 'People rarely see you, they don't think about you, and they don't care about you, because you're only ever temporary,' as Amelia put it, starkly. This invisibility continued from start to finish. 'No one ever says farewell' - those in the most vulnerable temporary roles, such as the hourly paid, 'are never introduced to anybody so why should you be given a farewell?'

Casualised staff are amongst the marginal elements of the academic workforce, and the very nature of these employment conditions often creates an invisibility that is dehumanising in a myriad of ways.



Finding 2: Vulnerability

This invisibility enabled a second dehumanising aspect of casualised academic labour, vulnerability. Casualised staff are routinely subject to pressures to accept unfair and exploitative work practices, but because of their vulnerable position, and because these demands often come from the very managers whose patronage they need for the promise of future work, they are not in a position to refuse.

For example, the majority of interviewees on casualised contracts reported having to work much more than they were paid for – often because inadequate time is allocated for teaching preparation. A common form of this is giving people contracts of only nine or ten months of the academic year, and expecting teaching preparation time to occur outside these. ‘They had 10 months funding but made me work 11 months, one month over the summer unpaid,’ complained Amelia. The job she was offered started in September, but she was expected to have teaching materials ready by early in the month so was in effect expected to do unpaid preparatory work over summer. ‘This has become a standard practice,’ she added: ‘I had no one to turn to talk about it, and just felt grateful that I’d got the job.’

The expectation of performing unpaid preparation time was not just placed on staff at the start of the academic year, but for many people continued throughout it. For example, Kyle spoke from his extensive experience of casualised labour at a number of so-called Russell Group universities. These jobs varied in their nature, from hourly-paid teaching at one place to a 0.5 FTE contract over 10 months at another with no real continuing professional development. The rationale given for not employing him on a full-time contract in this latter position was that the teaching material already exists so zero preparation time is needed. But, for example, he recounted that he was given lecture slide shows containing 30 photographs and no notes: it would have been absolutely impossible to simply turn up, with no preparation, and deliver a coherent lecture that he would have felt professionally satisfied with.

FURTHER EXPLOITATIVE PRACTICES

The vulnerability of casualised staff further left them open to a whole range of exploitative practices that, whilst they may not have technically been illegal, were certainly experienced by academics as dehumanising. Amelia described one university she worked for on a temporary contract as regarding her as ‘a cash cow.’ Although employed to do the teaching of someone bought out on a grant, managers wanted her to work on other people’s grant bids, take local field trips, and the like.

Similarly, Bruno recounted a gradual change in the attitude of people working around him as he remained longer and longer on temporary research contracts. As a child, he said, he had developed a fascination with his subject which he was able to carry to university and eventually a PhD. He experienced strong affirmation by getting a single-authored article published relatively early in his career, as a result of which ‘I felt like I belonged to academia,’ he recounted – external recognition which made him feel, ‘Oh



my gosh, I'm worth it.' The PhD viva was 'another 'I'm worth it' moment.' Similarly, winning post-docs after the PhD made him feel like a high-flier, as he developed and honed certain technical skills that were much in demand in his discipline. However, he described a slow change over time as he moved, not to a permanent post, but between post-docs and other temporary research positions. As he put it:

Progressively in my school people have realised I had a certain expertise and they are using this expertise and taking advantage of me. Instead of helping me become an independent academic, they say 'we should take advantage of him as much as we can.' This is not intentional, but people say, 'You already work here, you do not have your own PhD students, so you can help me out, I've already talked to your line manager.' If they ask my line manager first, what can I say? This is not a plot, this is the attitude, I would have it myself if I was under pressure, and someone had technical skills, I wouldn't think how this would help him get a permanent job, etc. Academics are so pressured that they take advantage of post-docs who have a particular expertise.

This exploitation was a product of his vulnerability, a vulnerability that meant he could not easily challenge it. Bruno found this dehumanising, but recognised it was not about particular unethical individuals, but a structural result of a system increasingly reliant on casualised labour.

Another academic, Keira, spoke of her relief at getting a permanent contract after years of casualised work because it represented 'freedom to step away from compromised standards and people who break the rules.' She gave the example of a supervisor insisting she add not only the supervisor himself as an author on one of her publications, but also his partner who had only a perfunctory involvement in the article (reading it once and giving brief comments, but no active involvement in the research). This was an unfair request, but one she felt powerless to resist as the continuation of temporary work and the promise of permanent work in the future seemingly depended upon this person.

At times, such practices could cross the line into what Rebecca described as downright 'corruption.' She had been working on a temporary contract in a particular department, and was then recruited internally to another one when a grant became available. However, she recounted, the manager formally registered her as a member of professional services support staff recruited by an agency. This was blatantly untrue on both fronts, but it meant she was not given access to academic rights such as a mentor, nor were pension contributions required so money was saved for the department. 'If I'd been treated properly I'd have had an extra year of pension,' she complained.

DEPENDENCE ON PATRONAGE

Keira worked on a series of temporary contracts for the same manager, funded by his research grants, for over half a decade until she finally got a permanent job. She described this as a largely negative period for her, as she did not regard her supervisor as a good manager. She found his attitude abrasive and demeaning, describing the experience of being managed by him as entailing 'the systematic destruction of my



self-esteem and dismissal of my personal ambitions.’ But she felt powerless to walk away, resist or complain, because she was dependent upon him for her ongoing work, which she needed to keep in the university system but also to maintain the income she needed to support her family.

This reliance on the patronage of others was not always experienced as immediately negative, as it was for Keira here. Amelia, based on her extended years of work on temporary contracts, could point to moments when friendly professional service/support staff (whom she had got to know) assisted by letting her use someone’s office when they were on maternity leave. But this still meant that she was dependent upon someone else’s generosity. Similarly, Kyle spoke of how different managers deal differently with temporary teaching contracts. The HR department of a university, he recounted, may say that temporary staff cannot have access to research funds because they are not on a research contract. Some managers will allow it, but will report it differently to faculty, because they say that if HR learn of it they will act to prevent it. So, explained Kyle, this leads to a contradiction: precarious staff become grateful to managers who are generous with workloading and resources – which feels humanising – but this only exists because of structural issues which are inherently dehumanising. These managers, however sympathetic they are, are ultimately not willing to rock the boat or push back against constraints imposed on them. When these managers say, ‘the system says ‘no,’ but we’ll try and do it anyway’ this is dehumanising, he concluded, as it leaves casualised staff feeling at the mercy of the whims or personalities of managers.

NO-ONE TO TURN TO

As we have seen, the proliferation of casualised work in HE creates a condition in which a vulnerable and oftentimes exploited workforce is subject to multiple forms of dehumanisation. A final function of this vulnerability is that staff feel alone and isolated, unable to seek assistance. Thus, for example, at the end of the interview with Amelia, we asked her, ‘Did you ask for help? Could anyone have helped?’ Her reply was:

It's hard to know, at the start of a career or in a new university, where to go for help, or even if a problem is a genuine problem or simply a temporary wobble. The personal side of problem-dealing, in my experience, is often weighted with feelings of not wanting to make a fuss or trying to be seen as competent. Both are the result of insecurity in the workplace, created by an inadequate or absent support structure, but also created by a reasonable sense of knowing that I don't yet know the culture or the environment. That was especially the case early on in my career and whenever I started at a new university. Having worked in different universities I know now that a genuine problem may not be seen as a problem in every workplace. It depends on other people's views and sympathies. Despite having greater confidence in asking for help now, that variable has tended to make me wary of admitting to having problems in the first place. Youth, inexperience and insecurity can contribute to mild exploitation. Then that becomes normal.

The present culture of casualised academic labour inculcates a culture of dehumanising vulnerability. This vulnerability is rarely made visible or discussed. Staff are under great



pressure to accept a whole range of exploitative practices, and often find themselves isolated and without the ability to seek help. Even the efforts of more sympathetic junior managers to create better conditions perpetuate a dehumanising culture of dependency on patrons and an expectation that staff should be grateful for having a job at all.



Finding 3: Lack of agency

Akin to the vulnerability of casualised staff, in their accounts of dehumanisation, was, thirdly, their lack of agency.

Academic university work in liberal democracies is set apart from most other spheres in that its governing principle is 'academic freedom,' frequently enshrined in founding charters. This does not simply mean the right to voice an unpopular opinion if it follows from one's research and reasoning. It also means the right to choose what topics to research, irrespective of pressure from managers and governments, pressure which will often be experienced in terms of pressure to follow funding streams. According to the authoritative 1997 *UNESCO Recommendation Concerning the Status of Higher-Education Teaching Personnel*, this 'academic freedom and institutional autonomy' also applies to teaching.³ Teaching staff 'should be given the essential role in the choice and adaptation of teaching material.' Further, 'Higher-education teaching personnel have a right to carry out research work without any interference, or any suppression, in accordance with their professional responsibility and subject.' In interviews with academic staff on permanent contracts, it formed the lynchpin of what made for the most humanising workplaces: when they were given the ability to choose research topics and teaching subjects, when trusted to organise their own time, and when able to choose the networks and communities in which they located themselves. In stark contrast, workplace accounts provided by casualised staff revealed that they frequently experienced the curtailment of freedom, the denial of agency, and the absence of trust as dehumanising. This can be seen in the examples of Oscar, Amelia and Keira.

FREEDOM TO CHOOSE: OSCAR

Oscar's work as an academic reflects this. Freedom was the key theme in his career narrative. As a young man his first job was inputting data in a county council office. Although he had no contact with members of the public, and although his office was a windowless basement, he was forced to adhere to a strict dress code and had no freedom whatsoever in the task. He loathed this sense of being controlled, and so pursued an academic career, including a PhD that took him to many interesting places. Following the PhD, however, he moved between a series of temporary jobs in a period he describes as his 'precarious years.' These 'anxious years' were negative and unstable. At one point he had jobs in three different universities three different cities, spending hours each week travelling between them, as well as doing some public-sector work using his academic skills. He found this whole period dehumanising because of a lack of freedom: freedom to commit to a certain place, freedom to choose what to do, and freedom to mould and shape the work he was doing on somebody else's bequest: 'I was a tool at somebody's disposal,' he reflected.

FREEDOM TO TEACH: AMELIA

Amelia was asked to teach on a module that she regarded as being of dubious quality. The entire module was being taught by 'Teaching Fellows' with no background in the relevant scholarship: 'it was a fraud' to the students, she concluded, and told her managers that it would lack integrity if she ran it, so said she couldn't. However, she was forced to



lead the module: 'I wasn't allowed to refuse things,' she recounted, meaning that the sense of value, worth and satisfaction she got from teaching was lost. 'I felt completely powerless,' she summarised – a feeling she marked as extremely dehumanising.

FREEDOM TO SET RESEARCH GOALS: KEIRA

We have seen earlier that Keira has experienced years of working on temporary contracts before getting a permanent job, and that the vulnerability of this position was dehumanising. But it was also dehumanising because it denied her the academic freedom and agency that academics rate so highly. Her essential point was that her manager was the grant-holder whose money enabled her to remain at the university, but he directed all her energies towards his own research goals, without consideration of her career hopes. Following her PhD she did a series of temporary jobs, including demonstrating and lecturing, before spending many years working on temporary contracts for this one manager. Under him, she complained, 'My teaching wasn't valued, and my individual research goals weren't valued. My supervisor was following grants in big fields, and I had no freedom to pursue my own topic.'

Annual reviews were particularly dehumanising, she recounted. Her reviewer – the manager who held the grants – said at each one that she needed to publish more articles and win more grants, in order to get a permanent job. These, however, were the very things she wasn't being given the freedom to do, as all her time was spent facilitating his career, and this left her very 'despondent at this time.' 'There wasn't a single annual review that I didn't leave in tears,' she recounted. She described her state using psychologist Martin Seligman's famous term 'learned helplessness', a condition he observed in laboratory rats and dogs if they are punished indiscriminately and thus end up docile and dulled.⁴ It was a striking and disturbing evocation of dehumanisation in HE. The structure of hierarchy in research that empowers permanent staff with grants to employ casualised staff to help with their research is conducive to the university doing well, she reflected, 'but not conducive to me being a person.'

Happily, for her, Keira eventually got a job as a lecturer, and she viewed this primarily through the lens of freedom. It 'gave me a sense of purpose,' she said – 'freedom to research for its own sake, and the pleasure of it... freedom to step away from compromised standards and people who break the rules,' giving her a 'renewed sense of self-worth.' Her annual reviews, with a different person, are now positive and supportive, because they operate on the basis of a 'flat hierarchy,' conversing with a colleague in the same enterprise, rather than 'talking to the person who controls my funding.'

Such accounts of freedom and a lack thereof go against principles at the heart of modern universities. The Magna Charta Universitatum defines the university as 'an autonomous institution at the heart of societ[ry]', and freedom, autonomy and trust are its distinguishing principles.⁵ The more that academics are enabled to exercise this freedom in their teaching and research, the more they experience the workplace as humanity-affirming. In contrast, the culture of casualised contracts is severely curtailing this freedom for many academics, who thereby experience work as increasingly dehumanising.



Finding 4: Inability to project into the future

In his 1998 book on the effects of new capitalist labour on the workforce, *The Corrosion of Character*, Richard Sennett argues that new forms of casualised work are deeply damaging as they prevent people rendering a long-term narrative of their lives that can provide meaning. Our interviews showed that casualised work was dehumanising in precisely this way, in that it denied academics the ability to think about their work and life over the long term.

Madeleine described her extended period of working on a succession of casualised contracts as dehumanising, because rather than being able to think of her career in terms of years and decades, she was instead going from semester to semester hoping to stay in work. She emphasised that as time went by, rather than enjoying the excitement of building a career, it becomes more and more depleting as ‘You start to look unemployable if you have been an RA for six or seven years.’ She explained that the holy grail of a full-time job drove them on:

During this time we were told that if we worked hard enough, got enough publications, got grants, then we might one day get a full-time academic job. But as someone in this position said to me: that’s a ‘just so’ story. At the same time, I had three young kids, and my husband was often away or working late – I couldn’t do all the networking in the evenings, and more nursery places would have helped. I had three babies, no grants, few papers, and was exhausted.

Although these were described as ‘temporary contracts,’ Susannah said, ‘they became my permanent career, there was nothing temporary about it.’

Whereas Keira experienced her series of temporary contracts as keeping her at a static position, rather than being able to move forwards, for Amelia the vagaries of the casualised contract market were experienced variously as backwards movement as well as being forwards or static. When offered her first position, a nine-month ‘teaching fellow’ post, she described it as her ‘dream job’ to start with, with ‘an office all to myself, with my name on the door,’ authority over a new module, mentoring, and being able to go ‘drinking with colleagues’ in a supportive culture: ‘my sense of prestige went up.’ However, the following year she was offered a position in the same department as a ‘teaching assistant’ – lower status, but at least with the relief of being delivered from unemployment, even though she had to go through the demeaning process of ‘begging for extra teaching.’ The following year she was again offered a ‘teaching fellowship,’ but not even shortlisted for a full-time job in the department: this made her feel that ‘I was a useful pair of hands, right at the bottom.’ With lengths, types and even names of position changing from year to year dependent upon the vagaries of funding sources and HR policy, the possibility of being able to plot a life course was a hopeless, yet still painfully-tantalising, fantasy.

STRUCTURING ‘JUST-SO STORIES’ AND THE DRUGS PYRAMID

Academics on temporary contracts, as we have seen, yearned to gain permanent contracts and so be able to render a long-term narrative of their lives as meaningful. Yet the very



structures of contemporary academia make this hard: those on permanent contracts increasingly rely upon the labour of those on temporary contracts to do things like their marking and teaching and basic research activities whilst they devote themselves to higher-profile activities that advance their careers. This makes it increasingly hard for staff on temporary contracts to move to permanent ones.

Roger Burrows has reckoned that individual academics may be subject to up to 100 different numerical measures at any one time.⁶ In an academy increasingly driven by metrics, permanent jobs are given to people who can advance the institution's attempt to correlate its activities to audit, metrics and league-table exercises. Key to these are publications in so-called 'top-rated' journals, and grants. Yet many grants are only awarded to permanent staff, and the time necessary for research, writing and publication is severely constrained on contracts frequently shorter than 12 months long or less than 100% of the time.

Further, we have seen an increasing switch from 'temporary lectureships' (which give an equal amount of research time to temporary staff as to permanent ones) to 'teaching fellowships' and the like, where far less research time is given to temporary staff than to the permanent staff they may be filling in for and whom they are working alongside. This means that permanent staff generally have greater time in their workloads for research than those on temporary or zero-hours teaching contracts – further reinforcing both the impression that casualised staff are second-class academic citizens, and making it harder for them to get out of casualised contracts by research and publishing. Some of these temporary teaching positions have limited time for 'scholarship' defined as pedagogical research, regardless of whether the academic's expertise is in pedagogy or not. 12-month teaching-only contracts frequently result in over-work during term time to compensate for Easter and Summer when there is less teaching, and this makes it harder for people to research, write and publish. Furthermore, being able to present and participate at conference is also an important element of academic life, and helps in securing the dream lectureships: but many temporary contracts do not allow the holders to access the same amounts of conference travel funds as do their colleagues on permanent contracts. All of this makes researching, presenting and writing the publications necessary to qualify people for permanent positions even harder.

Another structural obstacle to casualised academic staff gaining permanent contracts was the time spent on applying for jobs and fellowships, a cycle that sometimes began almost as soon as one contract commenced. Amanda spoke of making 'more than a hundred applications, and getting 15 interviews' whilst being on temporary contracts. Likewise, Keira told us that, after a series of zero-hour or fractional contracts, 'of course I had no time for writing, and was experiencing exhaustion.' With temporary contracts sometimes only given a month or a fortnight before they were due to begin, a vast amount of time was taken up with making constant job applications. Keira recounted how the annual review process underlined the impediments to her progressing to a permanent contract:



The PDR form for teaching fellows from [my faculty] is the same basic academic one, it includes REF, Impact, Grants etc, all activities not in my contract but expected of me to 'get a job.' But it is hard to 'get a job' because I have no chance to get grants, and I have not published enough to do that. Many teaching fellows work evenings and weekends, and have no work-life balance. To 'get a job' is the goal, and this means work that is sustainable employment, that is permanent and not precarious.

The exploitative nature of such contracts had a cumulative component as well as a short-term one. Top universities pride themselves on being able to offer sabbaticals to academic staff, to enable them to catch up on new developments in the field, refocus on research, and return to teaching renewed and with a more up-to-date command of the cutting-edges of the discipline. Yet sabbaticals are effectively denied to casualised staff. Amelia, for example, had worked six years on temporary contracts in a single institution, and eight altogether. Yet she had never been given a sabbatical in that time whereas her colleagues, teaching similar material at the same level to the same students, would have been eligible for two. These structural inequalities between permanent and temporary staff further entrench the inability of temporary staff to get what they regard as proper jobs.

This structural impediment to getting out of the cycle of dehumanising, temporary work was described eloquently by Bruno in a pyramid he drew as part of his interview. He pictured it as consisting of temporary staff on the bottom, and permanent staff on the top:

I've read somewhere that the academic pyramid is similar to the drug dealing pyramid. At the bottom there are drug sellers on the street, at the top, the big narcos. The sellers take the risks - they may get shot, go to prison, get arrested, but they take the risk to climb the ladder. Those at the top have risks too, but they need the others at the bottom to do their work. It is a cycle. If I get to the top of the academic pyramid, I will take advantage of post-docs too, there is no way out: I will help them, of course, give advice, assist in developing skills to establish their career, but it is structural.

DENIAL OF NARRATIVE

Previous UCU research has shown that 97% of respondents on a fixed-term contract said that they would rather be on a permanent one. Temporary contracts prevent people from making long-term plans about family life, and these have specific equality and diversity impacts: for example, on women who are not entitled to maternity leave because they have worked a series of temporary contracts rather than a single permanent one. Research in this report shows that this is not just about job and income security and the ability to plan for families and mortgages. It is also a fundamental question of treating people in humanity-affirming ways. The capacity to envisage a future and tell a long-term narrative of work, career, research plans and vocation, provides meaning and order to our lives. Casualised academic labour is thus dehumanising in this regard.



For example, contrast the visual timeline interviews of William and Kyle. William is an emeritus professor who was inspired as a child to pursue a career in science. Beginning his first academic job in the 1960s, he drew an impressive visual timeline. A particularly satisfying aspect of this for him was pioneering new teaching in his institution. Not only did this train large numbers of graduate students who had impacts on both academia and industry, but had a nationwide impact on the discipline as other UK universities adopted his approach. A further highlight was devising and developing a new drug for cancer treatment that took 28 years from the inception of the idea to formal licensing for public use. Of course, there were difficult periods of that story, too, but on the whole he could reflect that he had always 'enjoyed being an academic.' As he gazed at his completed timeline after an interview of over two hours, he said that this was the first time he had ever told his life story in such a complete way before, and found it moving and satisfying.

In contrast, Kyle, as we have seen elsewhere in this report, has spent years on casualised contracts. At the end of our interview, I asked him 'What could universities do to treat you in more humanity-affirming ways?' His answer is striking:

Not have 'teaching fellows.' They hardly existed 10 years ago. When I was a PhD student we had these discussions about career pathways. We expected to complete our PhDs, to spend time as research assistants or post-docs, etc, and then get lectureships... Teaching fellowships are incompatible with a job market that expects research outputs. What I need to do to get a job [research and publish] is incompatible with the job description [I have now] - that's the bit that doesn't treat me like a human.

The mass-casualisation of the academic workforce is a business model that prevents large numbers of people from being able to gain permanent employment, whilst still holding out that prospect as the ideal. This is dehumanising. As Oscar put it clearly: 'Fixed-term contracts don't value a future - no one is investing in your future. There is not a commitment to your future from those people who are relying on you to build their future.'



Recommendations: What can be done?

At the centre of Martin Luther King's life, worldview and political activism was what he called the dignity of 'somebodyness' – that every human being must be treated not as an 'animated tool' but as a person sacred in themselves. King repeatedly warned of the dangers that occur when we 'thingify' people – that is, we treat them as a means to an end and when our 'only concern is performance not wellbeing.' UCU believes that the relatively recent and alarming rise of mass casualised labour in higher education is an example of just such a distortion. Staff are treated not as human beings of equal value to their colleagues, but as second-class academic citizens, 'resources' to be deployed to further strategic visions of vice chancellors and governing boards. Casualisation renders academic workers invisible and vulnerable, denies them agency, and prevents them from forming a coherent narrative of future work that can render life meaningful. In short, it treats academics primarily as things not people. It is dehumanising, and UCU believes it should be ended.

The government should insist that universities are honest about the extent of casualisation. Responses to Freedom of Information requests made to universities for this report were patchy – some institutions refused to provide information, and many simply did not keep the relevant data. The Office for Students should demand that universities disclose the amounts of teaching – measured in classroom hours – that are being done by temporary, open-ended, externally-contracted and hourly-paid staff as a proportion of total classroom hours. This should include lectures, seminars, lab demonstrations and support, tutorial and mentoring and project and dissertation meetings, summer schools, field-work assistance, marking and assessment, workshops, and all other types of formal instruction and scheduled academic interaction with students, whether individually, in formal teaching settings, or on-line.

Research councils should make it a condition of grant to employ research staff on open-ended contracts and to support greater stability of employment. No employer should be able to sign up to the Research Concordat unless they have committed to working with UCU to address the issue of insecure employment for research staff, with a commitment to moving research staff to more secure forms of employment.

Higher education employers should own up to their responsibilities to ensure that staff are treated in humanity affirming ways by acting to end the culture of casualisation. Many institutions have slogans such as 'investing in people' but these sound increasingly hollow as reliance on dehumanising, casual labour grows. The 1997 *UNESCO Recommendation Concerning the Status of Higher-Education Teaching Personnel* is held by some UK institutions as the authoritative statement on academic freedom. Yet it states that 'Higher education teaching personnel should enjoy a just and open system of career development including fair procedures for appointment, tenure where applicable, promotion, dismissal and other related matters' (IX.A.43.a). Yet casualisation explicitly curtails this possibility of career development, and the mushrooming of casualised labour is making it increasingly difficult for UK universities to claim that they are living



up to their international obligations. Employers should work to end the culture of casualisation. However too many institutions are in denial about the problem, dismissing it as a product of short-term employment cycles. The national employers' body, the Universities and Colleges Employers' Association, has failed to take the issue seriously, refusing to recognise the scale of the problem or to engage with UCU on the issue.

Given this failure, national and international charter mark givers should look carefully at whether individual universities are living up to their standards. For example, many UK universities are signatories of the Magna Charta Universitatum which states as its second fundamental principle that 'teaching and research in universities must be inseparable.' The proliferation of dehumanising casualised teaching-only jobs with minimal opportunity for staff to develop their research interests brazenly flouts this principle. As the guardian of the Charta, the Observatory Magna Charta Universitatum should work with universities to end the culture of casualisation that separates teaching and research, or suspend or remove their accreditation if they fail to make progress.

More effectively, given the consistent failure of employers to act on or even recognise the issue nationally, UCU branches have begun to put pressure on employers locally to address the problems of casualisation as they occur in specific institutions. Some significant successes show that it is possible to improve conditions for casualised staff.

All employers should therefore commit to work with UCU to address the issue of casualisation at their institution with a view to improving the security of employment for their academic and related staff.

Finally, all permanent academic staff should show solidarity with casualised colleagues by supporting these local actions and, where appropriate, revitalising oftentimes moribund statutory governance mechanisms in their institutions. The growth of insecure and precarious working practices has become an intentional business model that will trickle up and eventually erode the security and quality of academic life more widely. But more profoundly in a fragmented labour force, because permanent staff are directly implicated in the dehumanising conditions of temporary work, they have a moral responsibility to demonstrate solidarity. The humanising conditions that many permanent staff enjoy exist in part because temporary staff are doing the labour they previously did, to enable them to have time and space to apply for grants, conduct research, and write it up. UCU believes that there should be no second-class academic citizens, but that all academics should be enabled to have equally humanising conditions of work, and it is the responsibility of all of us to work towards this goal.



NOTES

¹ There has been a 33% increase in teaching focussed staff since 2011-12 and 21% increase in research staff. Teaching and Research staff (lecturers and professors) by comparison have grown by only 7%.

²UCU, 'Job insecurities in universities: the scale of the problem,' October 2019.
https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/10502/Job-security-in-universities---the-scale-of-the-problem/pdf/ucu_casualisation-in-he_graphic_oct19.pdf?utm_source=Lyriss&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=&utm_term=&utm_content=

³UNESCO, 1997. The UNESCO Recommendation Concerning the Status of Higher-Education teaching Personnel. Paris.

⁴Seligman, Martin. 1972. Learned helplessness. *Annual Review of Medicine*, 23, 407-412.

⁵Observatory Magna Charta Universitatum, 1998. Magna Charta Universitatum, Bologna.

