

Tomorrow's academics

Creating viable and attractive career paths

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INTRODUCTION

Over the last decade there have been a number of reports which have addressed higher education workforce issues, including the recruitment and retention of academic staff,¹ as well as specific issues relating to researchers² and teaching-focussed academics.³ While these reports have often been commissioned by government departments and funding bodies, staffing-related issues have not been integrated into policy-making on the quality of teaching and research. Instead, higher education policy has been dominated by what Duna Sabri has termed *'the absence of the academic'*⁴, with the voice of 'providers' elided with that of academics or staff.⁵

Few of the recent policy initiatives in teaching and research (for example the development of the REF or the NSS) have addressed longer term questions around the renewal of the academic workforce and the attractiveness of the profession. The UCU believes that the failure to address these questions is problematic because the 'staffing dimension' is crucial to both the quality of students' education and to the success of the UK's knowledge base.

This paper seeks to sketch out a positive agenda for academic careers in higher education. It is based on existing UCU education committee policy on teaching⁶ and research as well as recent UCU bargaining advice on professional development,⁸ teaching-focussed jobs⁹ and research careers in higher education.¹⁰ It also reflects the union's core belief in the importance of the 'academic team' and the crucial role played by academic-related and professional staff.¹¹

RENEWAL OF THE WORKFORCE

One of the looming issues in UK higher education is the future supply of academic staff.

PhD students

Currently the main source of research-focused academics are PhD students. In this area there are some worrying trends. Firstly, there has been a significant drop in the

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number of UK-domiciled students on taught postgraduate courses, with overall numbers falling by 17% between 2009-10 and 2012-13.¹² This is a cause for concern and could lead to academic recruitment difficulties over the next five to ten years. And, of course, the drop in postgraduate numbers has occurred before the introduction of £9000 undergraduate tuition fees in England.

Taught postgraduate courses are a stepping stone on to PhD programmes. Compared to the figures for taught postgraduate courses, the picture is more positive. For example, between 2003–04 and 2011–12 there was a 25% increase in postgraduate research students (although the growth in the number of UK-domicile PhD starters was much lower than for starters from an EU or international domicile). However, in 2012-13 the number of postgraduate research students started to fall (-0.5%) and since 2010-11 there has been a reduction in the number of research council PhD studentships.¹³ UK HEIs are expecting reduced demand for PhD study as a result of the impact of undergraduate loans (in England) and diminished funding for taught postgraduate programmes.¹⁴

In the largest postgraduate 'market' in the UK, the Westminster government is planning to bring in some form of postgraduate loan system for taught degrees as a potential solution to this problem. UCU has a number of reservations about these plans. Firstly, while the repayment terms are likely to be more generous than commercial loans and schemes such as Professional and Career Development Loans (PCDL), encouraging people to accrue more debt is not the best way to attract the brightest into further study. For example, we are concerned that the fear of incurring additional debt will become an impediment for individuals wishing to continue their studies after undergraduate studies, particularly as the PG loans will be charged concurrently with undergraduate loans. Secondly, we believe that postgraduate loans may gradually replace existing forms of maintenance support and we suspect that a number of HEIs are already reducing their funding for postgraduate bursaries and scholarships.

If we really want to expand the number of UK postgraduate students, government must consider even more radical ideas such as restoring proper grants or writing off part of a student's undergraduate debt when they complete a postgraduate course – as currently happens for access courses students.

International academic staff

The second main source of academics is international researchers. In recent years the academic workforce in UK higher education has become more international in character, particularly for research posts. Recent analysis from the Engineering Professors' Council suggests about 30% of academic staff in UK universities are non-UK nationals.¹⁵ In many STEM subjects, the figures tend to be higher.

The current visa and immigration regime, in particular the cap on skilled workers outside the EU, is making the UK a less attractive place for international academic staff. We are concerned that talented international researchers will go elsewhere. Longer term, the possibility of the UK's exit from the European Union may also lead to increased difficulties in recruiting and retaining international academics.

We need to make sure that the UK is a welcoming place for both international students and staff in higher education. For that reason, UCU supports an end to the government's points-based immigration system and calls for the removal of:

if we are to ensure the future supply of academic staff, we need to make sure that academic careers are more attractive for people to enter and remain in the profession.

- international students from the net migration figures
- Home Office 'quotas' which affect institutions ability to choose staff according to their academic and research priorities and restricting their academic freedom
- the monitoring of attendance of non EEA students which impacts on the workload of academic staff, the relationship between staff and students and is potentially discriminatory and unlawful under the Equality Act.¹⁶

Finally, in a number of key subject areas the need to renew the workforce is particularly urgent. Certain subjects, for example, Nursing, Social work and Education clearly have higher numbers aged 50+ than other disciplines.¹⁷

However, if we are to ensure the future supply of academic staff, we need to make sure that academic careers are more attractive for people to enter and remain in the profession. In recent years one of the key developments has been the increasing differentiation and diversity of academic roles, careers and contracts in higher education. For example, there has been a growth in 'teaching only' and 'research only' academic posts, but also the increasing blurring of boundaries between academic and professional roles, particularly in areas such as learning support and research management.¹⁸ We need to make sure that an agenda on academic careers is an inclusive one, encompassing the full range of academic and 'para-academic' roles.

THE CHANGING NATURE OF PROFESSIONAL STAFF ROLES

Academic related staff (largely pre-92 sector) has seen similar levels of change in their roles with increased specialisation in some areas and more generic, lower level roles in others. Indeed the term 'academic related' is rarely used by employer's instead preferring 'professional staff' or other similar titles. The disappearance of 'academic related' signifies more than a name change. This group of staff are now less homogenous than previous generations and the de-coupling of these roles from academic roles has accelerated this change, particularly in relation to university statutes.

UCU has recently been involved in a number of negotiations where the employer has intended to 'modernise' their statutes. These proposals have included the removal of academic related staff from statutes and therefore they no longer have parity of terms and conditions or professional status with their academic colleagues. UCU has been negotiating to retain these links in order to continue to recognise the professional nature of these often highly trained and highly skilled roles.

The changing nature of academic related roles does bring new and exciting opportunities, for example, new and often very specialised and technical roles in compliance, commercial contracts and risk management. However, this increased specialisation usually means that staff are recruited from outside the university and outside the sector. This can mean a lack of career development for existing staff as well as a lack of cohesion and professional support within the academic related staff group.

Alongside this increased specialisation, other academic related staff are experiencing 'grade drift'.¹⁹ Grade drift may happen slowly over time or as a result of a restructuring exercise. The responsibility and accountability of non-managerial academic-related roles is stripped away or transferred to managers. This leaves a more generic and lower level role which can be moved to a lower grade.

Precariousness remains the number one obstacle to a sustainable career in university research. Sixty seven percent of research only staff are still on fixed term contracts, while large numbers of research staff on open-ended contracts face chronic insecurity as their funding ends.

The gap this creates between the more generic and more specialised academic related roles results in even less opportunity for internal career progression. UCU argues that one way in which to counter grade grift is to ensure there is a commitment to a meaningful continuing professional development provision for academic related staff. Investing in genuine opportunities for development that go beyond the usual time management and effectiveness in meeting training will serve both the staff and the university. Where there is a sense of commitment to professional development and opportunities to progress staff are likely to feel more motivated in their current work. Furthermore, the employer will be able to build and retain in house skills and knowledge that allow succession planning, save on recruitment costs and increase employee engagement.

BUILDING SUSTAINABLE RESEARCH CAREERS

Over the last decade, the sector has focused greater attention on the position of research staff, particularly early career researchers and PhD students.

A multitude of initiatives designed to address the issues faced by research staff, including the Research Concordat, the researcher development work undertaken by Vitae and the so-called Roberts funding, have been introduced. Many of these developments have been positive, but they have mainly led to an improved set of transferable skills for the wider job market. These initiatives have been less successful in ensuring the reproduction of university research itself as a stable and efficient career path.

The sector remains concerned about the significant drop off rate from PhD study to an academic post. For example, three and a half years after completion over 60% of PhDs are working outside the sector²⁰ and the Royal Society estimates that only 3.5% of science PhDs stay in academia for the rest of their careers.²¹ Particular concerns have been raised about the future job prospects of PhD candidates and early career researchers in the humanities and social sciences.²²

Precariousness remains the number one obstacle to a sustainable career in university research. Sixty seven percent of research only staff are still on fixed term contracts, while large numbers of research staff on open-ended contracts face chronic insecurity as their funding ends. It is, therefore, no surprise that the 2015 CROS report found that:

*'Research staff who have had multiple, short-term contracts over a long period with their institution tend to feel less valued and have less positive feelings about their employer, job and career.'*²³

In our policy paper *'Seeing the Bigger Picture: the future of UK research and development'*, UCU argues that the short-termist policy pursued at the level of research councils and institutional workforce planning has resulted in a systemic problem in the university research base. The failure to tackle job insecurity is perpetuating the 'churn' of research staff out of the sector, generating significant waste through lost or interrupted intellectual work and reducing the attractiveness of a university research career.

'Seeing the Bigger Picture' argues that this can and should be tackled at all levels and in particular by the Research Councils creating more long-term funding streams and commitments and building in incentives for universities to invest in the long term. This

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is the agenda that the union is pursuing at the level of policy making in the higher education sector. Separately, the union has set out a path for local branches to pursue the same agenda industrially with our research-intensive universities.²⁴

Equality and diversity in academic careers

Another challenge is to make the research workforce more diverse, giving equal opportunity to all available talent. For example, there is a need to ensure equality and diversity in research careers, particularly in STEM subjects. A report by the Campaign for Science and Engineering (CaSE) – Improving diversity in STEM – shows that women, disabled people and those from ethnic-minorities or socially-disadvantaged groups are consistently underrepresented, particularly at senior levels, in science and engineering. The report proposes a series of ‘quick’ wins such as mandatory unconscious bias training for all research council panels and ‘big’ wins such as making diversity a central plank in the development of all government policy making on STEM.²⁵

BETTER CAREER PATHWAYS FOR TEACHING-FOCUSED STAFF

In recent years there has also been a renewed focus on teaching-focussed careers in higher education. This reflects the increasing specialisation and segmentation of the academic role.

Recent analysis of the HESA data, for example, suggests that ‘teaching only’ contracts are on the increase.²⁶ A survey of UCU members in 2014 revealed that *irrespective* of contract type, significant numbers of members are engaged either exclusively or mostly in teaching-related activities. While 57% of the sample described their role profile as teaching and research, less than one-third said their workload reflected this.²⁷ The UCU survey also confirmed the findings (for example, Annette Cashmore’s 2013 research for the Higher Education Academy) that teaching-focused roles are still perceived as second-class options occupied by those who have deemed to have ‘failed’ at research.²⁸

UCU has been pushing for proper recognition for teaching in the academic career structure, most recently with our guidance to branches on teaching focussed jobs. This guidance is based on two strategic imperatives:

Parity of esteem: to ensure that the emergence of a teaching-focussed career pathway is not used to create ‘teaching on the cheap’, i.e. where teaching-focussed jobs are in use, there is a properly remunerated career pathway with comparable opportunities for promotion based on secure jobs.

An improved teaching role: adequate time for scholarly activity that supports high quality higher education teaching and enables fuller academic development, including the allowing for the possibility of moving between career pathways, as well as creating more attractive jobs.²⁹

To move things forward in this area, we advocate the following policy proposals.

Career progression and promotion

On paper, most HEIs now allow promotions on the basis of ‘teaching excellence’. But the numbers going through this route remain small, especially at the professorial level. We need to see concrete evidence of good teaching being rewarded through

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promotions. For example, this could be part of any forthcoming plans for quality assessment and/or the so-called Teaching Excellence Framework.

Better conditions for casual teaching staff

UCU represents many thousands of fixed-term, sessional and hourly-paid teaching staff, and the vast majority are experienced practitioners, experts carrying out their duties to the best of their ability. However, there is little doubt that the conditions under which teachers work have a direct impact upon the students they teach. Key pressures upon quality arising from casualisation include:

Inadequate time for marking assessment Because of their low pay and heavy workloads, casualised staff are under constant pressure to cut corners to reduce the amount of unpaid labour they undertake. A recent study of the workload of hourly paid teachers at three UK universities, noted that the vast majority of academics on hourly paid teaching contracts felt they had inadequate paid time allowed to prepare or mark students' work.³⁰

Lack of expert feedback Hounsell notes that casualisation '*has reduced students' access to mainstream academics with well-honed expertise in giving feedback*'.³¹

Poor morale and high turnover of staff Research is a major source of job satisfaction for many academics, while job insecurity is a major source of stress. Those trapped in casual teaching roles with low pay and little hope of career progression will either gain less satisfaction from their jobs than other academics (leading in all likelihood to increased turnover in this group) or will be recruited from those with little or no research background, leading to a greater unevenness in the knowledge and skills of staff found in the different institutions.³²

In a recent review of efforts over the last decade to support and develop part-time teaching staff and to improve their situation, Colin Bryson concluded: '*Most initiatives have quietly disappeared. Direct sector-wide approaches appear to be extremely unlikely in the present climate, as there are no prospects of major funding targeted to such an area.*' We are concerned by these developments, particularly as the issue appears to be higher up the agenda in Australia, which, as in the UK, relies heavily on sessional staff doing large amounts of undergraduate teaching.

We need to see major improvements to the professional and working lives of the thousands of sessional staff who teach in our universities and HE colleges. Without these, one of the stated objectives of the Teaching Excellence Framework ('*to build a culture where teaching has equal status with research, with great teachers enjoying the same professional recognition and opportunities for career and pay progression as great researchers*') won't be met. In fact, the current reliance on precarious employment is a serious barrier to achieving this objective and, in turn, leads to negative consequences for the overall quality of the student learning experience.

In 2001, one of the UCU's predecessor unions proposed to parliament that the sector's key agencies produce '*a genuine study of the effects of current casual employment practices on the quality of undergraduate teaching*'.³³ Nearly 15 years later we believe such a report is urgently required as a first step towards increasing the status of teaching in our universities.

We believe that academic freedom should be conceived not just as a defence of the right to express controversial or unpopular opinions, but also positively as the freedom of staff to pursue their own lines of research and teaching, rather than being constrained by the funding or ideological agendas of government or business.

'Professionalising' the teaching workforce

The Teaching Excellence Framework is likely to see a renewed focus on teaching qualifications in higher education. The 2014 UCU survey of higher education members found a majority of respondents in favour of some form of compulsory accredited training for lecturers.³⁴ At the same time, UCU members want accredited courses and teaching qualifications that are useful and practical for them and for their students. Members don't want this to become merely a box-ticking exercise that enables an institution to boost its position in the latest HESA data rankings.

Accredited training courses and HE teaching qualifications, therefore, need:

- to be accessible to all newly appointed members of academic staff, including hourly-paid colleagues
- to be flexible enough to reflect major disciplinary differences
- to encourage effective links between teaching, scholarship and research.

In addition, a progressive agenda on professional development requires:

- overall increases in staff development budgets and identified time and budget for training and development activities
- the preservation of time for research and scholarship
- the protection and revitalisation of the link between academic and related staff and to ensure a common approach for career development.

We call on the Higher Education Academy and institutions to work with academic trade unions on a positive agenda for professional development in teaching and research.

MAKING ACADEMIC CAREERS MORE ATTRACTIVE

Finally, there are broader employment and professional issues that need to be addressed if we are to make academic careers more attractive. These cover the full range of academic and academic related roles.

Workload and workload planning, in particular, are constant concerns for individual academics and for UCU collectively. Workload protection is about the achievement of acceptable working patterns, but it also about defending the quality of teaching, research, scholarship and academic related work, by ensuring that there is time available for all aspects of these roles to be carried out effectively. UCU has developed guidance on workload protection³⁵ and is planning to update the bargaining approach and associated materials.

Another key element is pay in higher education. After many years of pay restraint, academic pay is low relative to that in other highly qualified jobs in the UK. We believe that this will have a negative effect on future entry into the profession.

Traditionally, academic freedom and professional autonomy are some of the main reasons why talented people have been attracted into academia. We believe that academic freedom should be conceived not just as a defence of the right to express controversial or unpopular opinions, but also positively as the freedom of academic and related staff to pursue their own lines of research and teaching, rather than being constrained by the funding or ideological agendas of government or business. Recent research by

As outlined in previous UCU policy statements, we need to move towards more collaborative, collegial forms of peer review and assessment. We will also continue to campaign for new measures to protect and strengthen academic freedom.

Education International found that academics in the UK had comparatively low levels of job satisfaction, compared to many of their counterparts in other European countries.³⁶ One of the reasons for this may be the relatively high levels of performance management in UK higher education (for example, the widespread use of performance indicators such as the REF and the NSS).

As outlined in previous UCU policy statements, we need to move towards more collaborative, collegial forms of peer review and assessment. We will also continue to campaign for new measures to protect and strengthen academic freedom, including extending legal protection of academic freedom to cover staff in all universities and colleges across the UK and to ensure that alleged breaches of academic freedom are investigated and adjudicated by a body similar to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator for students.

CONCLUSION

This paper has sketched out some of the main issues in relation to academic careers, such as the replenishment of the teaching and research workforce, the difficulties facing early career staff and the importance of creating genuine career pathways for all types of academic, para-academic and academic related roles. At the moment, these issues tend to be regarded as separate, industrial relations issues, rather than as key elements in ensuring quality higher education. UCU's task in the coming period is to make sure that policy-makers are aware of these issues when considering changes to undergraduate and postgraduate funding, 'teaching excellence' frameworks and research assessment and funding.

NOTES

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- ⁷UCU (2014) Seeing the bigger picture: the future of UK research and development. UCU: London.
- ⁸UCU (2015) How your employer can support your continuing professional development. UCU: London.
- ⁹UCU (2015) Bargaining for better teaching jobs in higher education. A UCU bargaining guide for branches. UCU: London.
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