IT AIN'T NECESSARILY SO

There's nothing necessary about the casualisation of staff pay and conditions argues **SEAN WALLIS**

Shocking, but true: Higher and Further Education institutions employ a higher proportion of 'casual' staff than any other sector of the UK economy. Except catering.

So-called 'casual contracts' blight lives and careers, are a source of stress and illness, lead to lower rates of pay and divide staff from each other.

Casualisation is the number one challenge for UCU. A warning to all members: equality works both ways. Either the vulnerable are made more secure, or the secure will become more vulnerable.

There are two main types of casual working in education. Across the HE/FE divide, numerous teaching staff are required to 'bid' for work, sometimes annually. Part-time salary is calculated relative to student contact time. This workload calculation is crucial. If work is underestimated, staff are induced into working for free.

The second type is specific to Higher Education where over 40,000 research staff are employed on a fixed-term basis. University research is funded competitively, where scientists write research proposals seeking funds to employ staff. Universities simply pass the risk of failure onto individual employees. There were few legal restrictions on issuing and ending fixed term contracts, but this is changing.

The personal consequences are massive. Staff live and work under a Damoclean sword of funding failure. Unless they win further funding they can expect to be made redundant. Few other staff are placed in this position – especially not long-term.

Casualisation financially benefits employers in four ways.

Part timers' pay may be underestimated. In one case, UCU found staff underpaid by a third, £10,000 a year.

Casual staff are often not promoted. HE Research staff may be dissuaded from applying, for fear they will become 'too expensive'. Teaching contracts might offer no promotion route.

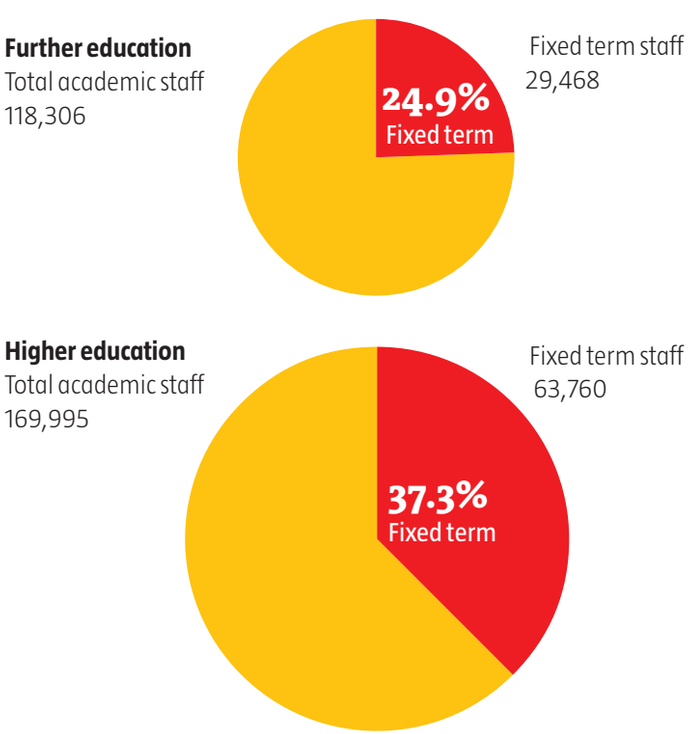
Easy dismissal. This is the conventional explanation for casualisation: sacking staff quickly saves on salary. This is obviously true in the short-term. However, this is often outweighed by the cost of losing highly skilled staff.

Dividing the workforce. Casual staff are rarely given management responsibility. As a result, more secure colleagues are required to manage them. Problems with the employer become problems with the manager, however sympathetic. A workforce divided finds unity more difficult to achieve in disputes over pay or cuts.

Although education per se does not depend on casual contracts – see primary and secondary – casual employment in our sector has a long history.

Many businesses face a high level of income volatility. But this does not usually translate into hiring and firing. Even supermarkets do not hire checkout staff daily, once enough shoppers arrive! Instead, both income and salaries are pooled together, and companies invest in staff, buildings and stock to provide a

Fixed term employment affects thousands of UCU members . . .



Source: LLUK, HESA 2006/07. Excludes atypical contract staff such as hourly-paid. FE data for England only.

predicted level of service.

My background is as a researcher. It does seem a scandal that the senior management of enlightened do not plan to avoid the redundancy of research staff, despite the scientific benefits of doing so. It is usually left to individual heads of departments and research groups, with more meagre resources, to step in.

Research is a long-term endeavour. Success depends on the knowledge and experience of research staff. A series of short-term projects continually employing new staff is unable to nurture such excellence. Exploitation and dissemination also takes a sustained effort. Two years ago, I carried out an international state-of-art survey in my own field. I found that eighty percent of 'rival' projects had not been followed up. Research was being laboriously reinvented.

RESEARCH IS COLLECTIVE and competitive. It develops through competing research programmes, consisting of individual projects and experiments. Research involves teams working together, often with complementary skills. Loss of staff causes promising programmes to fold. At best, they stall at funding hurdles.

Universities invest long-term in research infrastructure, but scientists in the lab are offered only short-term security.

Locally there is a great deal of good practice. Many research groups keep staff in employment over long periods of time – by forward planning. Research heads recognise the scientific arguments I outlined.

However, this is insufficient.

A history of second class citizenship will take more than a few tribunal victories to overcome.

There is often a great deal of variation in one university. Some research groups hire and fire regularly. Others (often in similar disciplines) keep staff on. I cannot refute the hypothesis that variation is due to individual managers and the failure of institutions to police them.

In research, inequality and job insecurity creates a second problem. This is a pattern of patronage, where individual researchers are dependent on particular Principal Investigators.

A researcher hides the results of her experiments from her PI because he has a reputation for claiming his staff's work as his own.

A PI is offered a professorship in another university. Research staff under his management are told to move to a different town, or be dismissed.

A PI takes a temporary secondment, but then decides to remain absent. The research staff left behind are unsupervised and eventually made redundant.

These examples are extreme, but not uncommon. Again, there are many cases of extremely supportive PIs (many, union members). However there is something very seriously wrong with the policy of a university if decent treatment of staff depends on individual managers.

The issues in part-time teaching parallel those in research, with an extra twist: the sheer variety of contracts constructed by employers.

The best type are permanent part-time contracts of employment, with fixed hours, holidays, etc., no worse than a fraction of a full time post.

Worse are variable contracts which state that the employer may vary the hours of work (and salary) offering only a set minimum in the future. The worst of these are the infamous, On the Waterfront, 'zero-hours' contracts.

FINALLY, THERE ARE CONTRACTS that claim to not offer employment. Variously described as agency contracts, 'as and when' or self-employed, these offer no protection against redundancy.

Just as casualisation damages university research, insecure contracts undermine education values. As a recent pre-tribunal hearing (K Carl vs University of Sheffield 2007) noted, 'self-employment' is sub-contracting. There is no obligation on a particular teacher to turn up for work. The teacher could arrange for others to take her classes, and others still to mark work.

Hiring lecturers by the hour does not require the same lecturer for each hour! (The tribunal panel in this case said this was so unlikely that the 'self-employed' clause must be a fiction, and the teacher was really a regular employee.)

Both research and teaching staff should benefit from recent changes in the law, but legal rights do not necessarily change practice. A history of second-class citizenship will take more than a few tribunal victories to overcome.

Casualisation is a problem for the whole of UCU: secure and insecure alike. It is not a 'special interest' issue, to be left to our hard-working Fixed Term and Hourly Paid Committee. A union that does not defend its weakest members will be divided and easier to beat. Our employers realise the damage to staff and education that casual employment brings. But they also believe that maintaining divisions between staff and holding down pay are in their interest.

Casualisation lowers expectations. Often, those suffering do not believe that anything will change. Part-time staff may find they have little time to participate in the union when every hour is accounted for. Research staff often say they didn't join UCU when they started because they believed they would not be around for long, and that their security depended on personal success, not union support.

This does not mean that casual staff are necessarily on the side-lines. Last year's ESOL campaigns were often led by 'casual' FE lecturers. The difference: they were already organised in large numbers within the union.

Casualised staff are not offered the opportunity by employers to participate as equals. But they are no less committed to the ideals of education and research: arguably more so,

as they continue to put their heart and soul into their profession, despite being treated lamentably by their employers.

As we face an uncertain future, we need to recruit wider to UCU and involve all our members in resistance to cuts. All staff, casual and permanent, belong in their union. We have a responsibility to welcome them, and campaign for security for all.

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