

Precarious Pedagogies? The Impact of Casual and Zero-Hour Contracts in Higher Education

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Abstract: Precarious work is associated with and characterizes the effects of neoliberal policy—the transference of economic risk onto workers, the erosion of workers’ rights, the flexibilization and casualization of work contracts, self-responsibility, financial insecurity, and emotional stress. In the Higher Education (HE) sector, the number of insecure academic jobs, especially zero-hour contracts for hourly paid teaching and short-term contract research, has grown exponentially in recent years in response to the structural and fiscal changes within universities, which reflect these global shifts. This paper presents findings from a pilot study conducted with academics on casual contracts in HE institutions in England and Wales. Qualitative interviews and focus groups were undertaken with teachers (lecturers and tutors) on hourly paid and zero-hour contracts to examine the relationship between their contractual situations and pedagogical practices. The research broadly seeks to contribute to ongoing discussions concerned with the impact of neoliberalism on higher education and specifically highlights the case of contingent lecturers as casualties of the casualization of the academic labor force.

Keywords: higher education, casualization, precarity, hourly paid academics

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Debates on precarity have gained visibility especially since the publication of Guy Standing’s book *The Precariat* (2011) and recent media publicity and union campaigns highlighting the working terms and conditions of academics on variable and zero-hour contracts in the United Kingdom. Despite such developments, however, this group remain largely invisible within the UK Higher Education (HE) sector’s statistics and policies. This paper draws on qualitative interviews with hourly paid academics (lecturers and tutors) working in HE institutions in England and Scotland to attempt to shed light on how their contractual situations affect their everyday lives, career prospects and teaching practices within the context of the changing nature of academic labor in the neoliberal university. The study takes a feminist approach to research and utilizes labor process theory to make sense of casualization within the HE sector and the implications it has for hourly paid academics and their teaching practices. Although not the primary focus of this paper, the findings clearly indicate that there is a need to challenge the current state of the neoliberal university and the contradictory conditions, imperatives and practices under which it operates.

Context: The Casualization of Academic Labor

The experiences of hourly paid teaching staff in UK universities need to be contextualized within the recent decades of profound and continuous change within the HE sector. The Robbins Report (Committee on Higher Education 1963), with its recommendation for the expansion of HE, was followed by a decade of

growth that saw academic staff numbers double. In the 1980s, tenure was abolished, key performance indicators were introduced in the form of the first RAE (Research Assessment Exercise), and financial cutbacks led to a period of contraction. Although contraction was expected to continue, the 1990s brought another wave of expansion. A key event was the abolition of the divide between universities and polytechnics, which accompanied a political will to widen participation in HE (Bryson and Barnes 2000a). Further developments included radical changes to the way HE was funded and the introduction—and more recently the striking increase—of student fees (HEFCE 2013).

The literature on casualized academic labor in tertiary education has grown considerably in recent years, especially since the publication of Judith Gappa and David Leslie's seminal *Invisible Faculty: Improving the Status of Part-Timers in Higher Education* (1993), which discussed how university management and Human Resources could support casual academics to make the best use of their skills and knowledge to develop their teaching, as well as how they could improve their own working conditions. Since then, a growing number of studies have focused specifically on the insecurity of casualized contracts in higher education (for example Husbands 1998; Bryson and Barnes 2000b; Shelton et al. 2001; Husbands and Davies 2010; Austen 2011) and explored how casualized staff are marginalized within academia (Coombe and Clancy 2002) and how this produces a sense of isolation in the individuals affected (Bryson and Blackwell 2006). This literature also points to factors that have led to the creation of a “two-tiered workforce” and the marginalization of staff on casualized contracts, experienced as a lack of integration into departments and institutions (Kimber 2003), lack of support, and especially lack of opportunities for professional development and informal learning (Anderson 2007).

Another relevant body of literature focuses on the management of a flexible academic workforce and on the critical issues arising from it (for example, Junor 2000; Halcomb et al. 2009; Courtney 2013). The issue of choice, and specifically the notion that nonstandard workers have more freedom from institutional control than standard workers, has been explored and challenged in a recent quantitative study in Australia undertaken by Lorene Gottschalk and Steve McEachern (2010). Examining the perceptions and attitudes of hourly paid staff, the researchers found that the majority of their respondents experienced “frustrated careers” and would have preferred to have had a standard contract.

Although most studies of academic precarization have been conducted in the US and Australia, where this phenomenon has been happening for longer and is perhaps most acute, there is a similar trend in European countries. In Portugal, a “hidden” career path has been identified, which is populated by what Rui Santiago and Teresa Carvalho (2008) refer to as “invited” or “guest assistant” academics who experience greater job insecurity and less favorable terms than academics on the tenure track and who have little chance of tenure eligibility. Jon Bernat Zubiri-Rey (2012) claims that the proliferation of insecure contracts in France has fragmented the academic workforce, whilst Begoña Marugán Pintos and Jesús Cruces Aguilera (2013) make the same point in relation to changes in the Spanish HE system. María José Díaz Santiago (2013), moreover, explores the process of precarization of academic staff in Spain and the phenomenon of “self-exploitation,” which refers to the tendency of academics on precarious contracts to make themselves available at all times of the day and evening, accept fragmented timetables that impact on their life-work balance, and undertake informal and unpaid tasks not covered by their contracts.

In order to provide some context for the cohort we are studying in this piece of research, we requested statistical data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) by e-mail on the number of staff on hourly paid and zero-hour contracts within the HE sector. HESA (2014a) uses three staff population categories in their statistical data: permanent, fixed term and atypical. Hourly paid lecturers who have a

defined contract end and start date fall into the category of “fixed term,” whilst those on zero-hour contracts appear not to fall into any category at all. HESA (2014b) state that “staff with a default (or unknown) contract start date, a default (or unknown) contract end date and a contract full-time equivalent (FTE) of zero are also not counted in this population.” It is no surprise, therefore, that published data taken from HESA show that 43% of teaching staff are on fixed-term contracts, whereas the University College Union (UCU) estimated in July 2013 that 47% of “teaching-only contracts” are in fact zero-hour contracts.

Moreover, although HESA’s website refers generally to “part-time, term-time only contracts,” in response to an e-mail request asking for clarity on whether hourly paid staff fall into this group, the agency were unable to comment. One could therefore deduce that lecturers on hourly and zero-hour contracts belong to an invisible group within the national statistics and that until they are made visible, issues affecting this group will remain unaddressed in policy and practice. We also asked HESA for the gender, ethnicity, age and disability breakdown of staff on hourly paid and zero-hour contracts, but there was no data available on this.

Our research is framed within the wider context of who is and who is not included in the academy, and we follow Malcolm James and Sivamohan Valluvan’s (2014) claim that the market dimensions of HE have an impact on who is employed in HE. The authors have identified a dangerous “mutual embrace” between racism and neoliberalism in higher education; they state that “when humans and humanities become mere products in the marketplace, racism provides a logic that sells” and argue that one cannot be undone without undoing the other. The relatively unexplored debate around racism and higher education in the UK was recently (March 10, 2014) the subject of a talk at University College London, in which the question “Why isn’t my professor black?” was asked. It brought attention to institutional racism and oppressive cultural practices within HE more widely and highlighted the increasing disenfranchising effect this has on certain groups of people, most obviously black academics.

Statistics show that whilst women now make up 44% of all academics within HE, black academics (black Caribbean, black African and black “other”) make up only 0.4%. Moreover, there are only 85 black academics out of a total of 18,510 professors in the UK (or 1.6%), and of these 85 only 17 are women (Grove 2014). Little research has been published on the experiences of Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) staff in HE and even less on women BME staff in HE (exceptions are Mirza 2006 and 2009). Indeed, BME women academics have been referred to as “space invaders” who through their very physical presence disrupt the normalized white male spaces of the academy (Puwar 2004).

Data show that conditions of employment of BME staff are less favorable than those of non-BME staff; notably, BME staff in HE report experiences of isolation, racial discrimination and invisibility (Wright, Thompson and Channer 2007; Mirza 2009), as well as heavy workloads, lack of support in relation to professional and career development, and over-scrutiny compared with their white colleagues (Wright, Thompson and Channer 2007). Moreover, on average, BME staff receive lower levels of pay and are less likely to benefit from a permanent or open-ended contract of employment than their white counterparts (Institute of Employment Studies 2005).

Theoretical and Methodological Frameworks

The motivation for this study has been largely informed by our own experiences of working on hourly paid contracts in UK universities for several years. The increasing frustration we have felt about our perceived inequitable treatment and lack of support within the academy, and the paralysis we have experienced

around initiating change have brought home to us how important it is to find ways of connecting with other casualized academics in similar positions, to share our stories, and collectively attempt to improve our everyday working lives. We also feel that due to our position as women researchers—one of whom came to the UK as an international student and the other possesses a mixed-heritage background—issues relating to ethnicity, race and gender have had a greater or lesser impact on our experiences of being employed within the academy.

The politics of our positionality, moreover, has influenced our research approach, which we see as a piece of engaged feminist research with an emancipatory agenda. We feel an ethical imperative to produce research which is as useful to the participants as it is to us. Our respondents are our “colleagues,” both literally and figuratively speaking, and power relations and issues around sensitive subjects to some extent cease to exist as we are all participants in this research with shared knowledge of what it means to be hourly paid academics. The credibility of the research lies in its service to those affected by the phenomenon under study (Bhavnani 1993), in this case the “casualties” of the casualization of higher education.

Our theoretical framework is labor process theory. Evolving from Harry Braverman’s (1974) seminal industrial sociology monograph *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, labor process theory is primarily concerned with “the degradation of work under the impact of new forms of capitalist production and management” (Thompson and Smith 2010, 12). This theoretical perspective allows us to examine the work and experiences of hourly paid academics within the framework of processes of change in higher education, including marketization, casualization and managerialism.

The Research Process

The issues discussed above have had significant implications for the casualized academic workforce: decreasing morale and salaries, less autonomy, work intensification, and increasing job insecurity (Bryson and Barnes 2010). However, not only are there few statistics available on casualized labor but few qualitative studies exist which give insight into the perceptions and experiences of casualized staff themselves (exceptions are Brown and Gold 2007 and Street et al. 2012). Our project explores casual academics’ own perceptions of their contractual situations and the impact these perceptions have had on their teaching practices and work/life balance. The interview questions were informed by both the extant literature and the need to fill in the gaps in our understanding of the experience of hourly paid academic staff. Questions focused specifically on the following topics: working terms and conditions; official and expected duties; employee relations; voice and agency; career histories and aspirations; relations with students; and perceptions of the impact that contracts have on teaching practices.

The sampling was purposive insofar as we sought participants who were working on hourly paid contracts at the time of interview or had done so within the past year for at least one term or semester. Participants were initially recruited in two ways: We put out a call for participants at a union event in London that focused on anti-casualization and circulated the same call on UCU’s anti-casualization e-mail network. This reached hourly paid academics who were willing to take part in the study in universities across England. We thought it likely that the participants we engaged through this call were “politicized” academics and/or union members, which could skew our findings. We therefore complemented this initial mode of recruitment by using our own professional networks and snowballing techniques to also recruit respondents who were not connected to the union or its activities.

The data were gathered in twelve individual semi-structured interviews, one focus group interview with four academics on zero-hour contracts, and one impromptu group interview conducted with three hourly paid lecturers at a conference (nineteen participants in total). Apart from the focus-group lecturers who worked at the University of Edinburgh, the respondents worked as lecturers or tutors on hourly paid contracts in HE institutions in England, the majority in the south of England and three in the north of England. Each interview lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. All the interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed, and were conducted face to face apart from one individual interview via Skype. Ethical approval was received from the University of the West of England's Research Ethics Committee. Participants were provided with an information sheet and asked to sign a consent form.

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data set, as it was a flexible method that enabled us to account for the data in a rich and detailed manner. We did not attempt to thematically describe our entire data set but, following Boyatzis (1998), chose to provide an analysis of the particular themes we identified. Following the identification of themes, data were coded and analyzed using NVivo software.

We did not actively seek to recruit participants from any particular type of institution (for example Russell Group, Red Brick and post-1992 institutions), subject area or established identity categories, whilst simultaneously aiming to get a balanced and representative sample. Although we achieved this aim in terms of type of university, subject and gender, we did not appear to achieve it in terms of ethnicity and class. Our cohort contained few people from black, ethnic minority and working-class backgrounds, nor indeed single people or single parents, and a few more women than men were interviewed. This may be a failing of our sampling technique or "network bias" and can be seen as a limitation of our study. It raises questions about why the cohort was predominantly white and female, and to what extent this may have reflected a) the macro-picture; b) union membership and/or our own networks being largely white; c) white women being more willing to talk about their experiences as hourly paid workers; d) chance; e) another reason or combination of reasons. Clearly, more research needs to be done into why this is the case, as well as critical analysis of the intersecting gendered, raced and classed dimensions of hourly paid work within HE.

The study also had other limitations, which could be addressed in subsequent research on this topic. For example, our focus was on hourly paid teaching staff and not on other casualized groups such as researchers on short-term contracts. How would their experiences compare? Also, we did not speak with permanent lecturers, union officials, university management, Human Resources managers, or union officials to get their perspectives on the issue of casualization within the academy.

Findings: The Experiences and Perceptions of Employees on Casual Contracts

Throughout higher education institutions in England and Scotland, the employment status of our participants as members of staff is not well defined. The variety of official job titles in use reflects this: hourly paid lecturer, graduate tutor, teaching assistant, teaching fellow, associate lecturer, and visiting lecturer, to name just a few. This diversity results in a lack of clarity about rights and terms of employment, which in turn fosters a sense of insecurity among this staff population. We found that in general there was little qualitative difference between the experiences of lecturers on hourly paid or zero-hour contracts, and we therefore do not make a terminological or categorical distinction between these groups and refer to them all as hourly paid staff or academics.

We identified four key themes relating to rights, terms and conditions amongst the hourly paid staff we interviewed. These were precarity, exploitation, lack of support, and lack of career progression. Most

respondents in our study had more than one job—apart from lecturing, jobs mentioned were administrator, computer consultant and self-employed psychotherapist. They generally knew only a short time before a particular semester or term was to begin whether they would have any teaching hours. This job insecurity appears to have considerable practical and emotional consequences, which we will explore in the rest of this section. In practical terms, participants talked in particular about the following: not being able to plan for the immediate or long-term future; not being able to access employee protection or benefits such as sick, holiday or parental leave or pay; and finding it difficult to secure tenancy agreements and to claim employment or housing benefit because of their ever-changing employment status.

All research participants said that they were underpaid for the wide range of academic and administrative tasks they undertook. Hourly rates varied considerably between higher education institutions. The lowest hourly rate reported in our study was £14 per hour. This rate typically included one hour of contact time with students, which could involve delivering a lecture, seminar, workshop or tutorial, as well as several or all of the following pre- and post-delivery duties: preparing lectures and seminars (which could involve extensive work, especially for new modules); marking coursework; reading essay drafts and giving written or verbal feedback; dealing with student enquiries outside teaching time (that is, e-mail and virtual learning communication and personal tutorials); participating in meetings; student record keeping; report writing; selecting coursework for external examiners; and a range of other administrative duties.

Respondents highlighted the time spent and effort involved in preparing classes, and the discrepancy between contractual hours and actual hours worked was a highly contentious issue. The findings support evidence on zero-hour contracts recently published by the Scottish Affairs Committee (2014), which claimed that university lecturers in Scotland on zero-hour contracts earned less than the minimum wage. One of our respondents explained this situation from her point of view:

The fact [is] that you only get paid for the hours that you are in class, although you supposedly get a bit for preparation time. For example, I was asked to give a couple of lectures last year, and you get paid three hours for the one-hour lecture, but in reality, I mean, one lecture was completely outwith my experience—I probably spent 90 hours writing the lecture. The other lecture was within, and it still took me, like, about 30 hours to write, and so it's just, I mean it doesn't even count really, it's like a penny an hour!

If working conditions are so deficient, then, why do academics on hourly paid contracts allow this “self-exploitation,” as one respondent termed it? The findings indicate that respondents see themselves as being in an untenable position—their relatively low status as casualized academics engenders a sense of vulnerability and powerlessness, which impinges on their ability to challenge the injustices of their own work situations. They feel they are “dispensable” and do not want to “rock the boat,” as they are afraid that they will not be offered any more work, contracts will not be renewed, and/or they will receive poor references. As one respondent stated, “Basically, you keep quiet and then it works, but you feel forced into doing that.” Another participant, who felt taken for granted but kept “going back” because she needed the work, exclaimed in frustration:

They keep calling me back—the devil will do it, she'll take it on! Despite the fact that they told me they didn't want me anymore, they keep calling me back. And I said, “Look, make your mind up!” Either a place wants me or they don't.

The pressure of having to take any work on offer was palpable—“the consequence of having no stable employment here is that you say ‘yes’ to everything because you don't ever know where the next work is coming from”—as was going to work even when ill, illustrated by the following quote from a tutor on a zero-hour contract:

I was quite unwell last year and because of the way our contracts are worded I wasn't sure if I could take sick leave.... If you take time off sick, you're not going to have a job to come back to.

One participant would have been entitled to claim for office hours retrospectively but chose not to "put her head above the parapet." She was coming to the end of her four-year term of continuous service, after which she would be eligible for a permanent hourly paid contract, and feared negative repercussions:

I'm hoping that I'm still going to get work there, so now I'm in a dilemma—do I claim for all those extra hours that I worked, or if I do, does that mean that I am seen as a troublemaker and definitely not someone that they want to employ, because I actually stand up for my rights? So I haven't claimed, and that is kind of a typical example of how your status shapes the kind of strategies you can use, and how you're so limited in what you can do about your situation.

The notion of an efficient and flexible labor market which ensures the maximization of profit relies on this "hire and fire" approach to employees. The interviewees' articulations revealed a sense of impotence vis-à-vis their situations and an awareness that if the duties required of them were not performed—even if these duties were not stipulated in contracts—they could easily be substituted by other hourly paid academics. As one lecturer pointed out, "There are people lined up, begging to teach the hours you have, and you are absolutely replaceable for the department."

Therefore, rather than acting collectively to challenge a situation which does not serve them, in a bid for their own survival casual lecturers appear to perpetuate their plight by unwittingly participating in a system that effectively undermines other casual lecturers, and a vicious cycle ensues. One participant clarified how this system operated:

There is always going to be someone who is more than willing to take on the post because they are so desperate and they haven't had that experience [of being an hourly paid lecturer] and are not jaded.... So I think that in that respect it's a self-perpetuating system, and it will go on indefinitely if it's not addressed.

Exploitation also meets with limited resistance from hourly paid academics because they live in perpetual hope that things will eventually improve. Uncertainty is the norm and having "hung in there" for years, it is hard to let go of the idea that the long wait for that two-year fixed term or permanent job may not have been totally in vain. Drawing on research with casualized academics, Bryson and Barnes (2000b) point to this gap between hope and certainty—they found that the majority of their interviewees expected or hoped that their contract would be renewed, although few had any real guarantees. One of our participants describes the common experience amongst hourly paid academics of constantly feeling that the goal is simultaneously within and out of reach:

I feel I'm at a crossroad. I'm beginning to have publications under my belt, so there's a part of me that thinks, you know, just hang in there, another couple of years, and you might be able to get a job. But then there's another part of me that thinks maybe that's it, maybe I just will never make a career of it ever, that I won't be able to.

Alongside the practical implications discussed above, the emotional impact of job insecurity and exploitation on respondents is also significant. Articulations around stress, decreasing self-confidence, and a growing negative attitude towards finding a permanent job were common. Some respondents talked about being close to a "breaking point" in terms of leaving hourly paid teaching. Here are some of the statements they made:

I've reached the stage where I'm thinking I don't even know if I can do this anymore, I really don't.

I certainly don't think I'll be staying here, I can't be putting myself through this.... I feel really really bad about this place.

There's part of me that feels I just can't get in, can't get into a permanent position basically.... I do feel completely devastated that for the last 10 years of my life I've tried to get somewhere in academia and I haven't.

It's a way of life that is not good for you, I couldn't keep it up forever, or for more than a couple of years.... I'm still hoping that it will work out, but not under *any* conditions.

An important issue relating to who works as an hourly paid teacher was raised by one respondent who pointed out that "these kinds of contracts do get rid of a lot of people because people suffer from stress and mental health issues and can't pay their rent, and they just kind of disappear." It highlights the fact that people who do not have support from a partner, family or friends may be in a financially disadvantaged position compared with those who do, and may consequently be less likely to withstand the pressures of living under precarious conditions. It is also important to note that whilst lecturers on hourly contracts are invisible in the statistics and policy discourse, those who have left academia because of untenable circumstances are even more difficult to locate and account for in policy.

Our respondents adopted a variety of strategies to cope with their difficult situations. These often appeared to involve negotiating the fine lines between (self-)exploitation, undertaking the duties required of them, and doing right by their students. Only two respondents, both men who were partnered, with children, and had alternative sources of income, said they did not do "unpaid overtime" in the form of marking, holding office hours, or providing feedback on student essay drafts, and so on. The ongoing internal struggles about how much the participants were prepared to give of themselves were tangible. We identified a correlation between the length of time teachers had worked on hourly paid contracts and their feeling of commitment to their work. Although all of them said they liked teaching and wanted their students to do well, the longer they had been on hourly paid or zero hours contracts the more likely they were to express frustration and anger about being expected to, effectively, work for free. One participant pointed out that conscientiousness dwindles because "working unpaid makes you cynical, bitter." The following quote illustrates how a teacher's attitude could change from being highly motivated to disillusioned and resentful:

I used to spend hours trying to figure out if a student has in fact plagiarized, to what extent, you know all those kinds of details, and yeah, I've gotten really frustrated because it takes incredible amounts of time, but I feel like as a tutor it's my responsibility to do, you know, to do all parts of my job. And I do think, unfortunately, when you've done that for years, you kind of begin to resent when students do come with queries that take more of your time or things like that ... and I don't like that either because of course the students are my favorite part of my job. So, yeah, it gets frustrating.

A Day in the Life of an HPL: "No Support, No Rewards, Nothing"

Interviewees perceived their rights, terms and conditions to differ greatly from those of permanent or fractional members of staff and yet often felt they were doing similar duties, which were neither recognized nor remunerated. A widespread grievance amongst our participants was not being given access to basic facilities and resources such as office space and pigeon holes: they "hot desked," whilst colleagues on full-

or part-time contracts had offices and/or their own desk space. In addition, displaying visual cues of their status, such as carrying bags, coats, books and paperwork from room to room between teaching time, was irritating and could be seen, moreover, to undermine their professionalism. The following quotes represent these everyday experiences of teachers on hourly paid contracts:

I'm paying for all my own printing, my photocopying, my paper, my electricity, everything I pay for—my pens, my whiteboard markers—they don't cost a lot, but considering we're paid such a small amount of money...

What do I want? Not a pat on the back or anything. Just a printer that works, somewhere that we can go to for advice, more support, a room where we can take students for tutorials.

Yeah, small things, but important, I think. Small things, but it sends a signal, doesn't it? It makes you feel like you don't matter, you know, it really does. It's like, well, I could be here or I could not be here, and nobody would really care. Although if I didn't turn up to teach, I'm sure people would start saying something.

Participants in this study also highlighted fragmented work patterns and their consequences. Hourly paid lecturers and tutors were frequently offered one or two hours of teaching at different universities—which could be in a different cities—and had to carry the costs of transport and accommodation themselves. They talked about the stress and health consequences of this:

London was an easy game because there are lots of universities. So I used to have four briefcases. One was a Monday briefcase, one was a Tuesday briefcase, you know... I actually got really despondent about it, because I did it for a year solid and almost had a nervous breakdown.

I've heard about people ... traveling the length and breadth of the country to try and teach in various places and just exhausting themselves for years at a time. Sounds like a young man's game to me, I'm too old for that sort of thing.

Respondents spoke about feeling isolated and not being part of the teaching teams in which they worked. For the most part, they were not invited to department meetings and were excluded from decision-making processes and planning of the curriculum because, as one respondent pointed out, there was “an expectation that people who are TAs [Teaching Assistants] are not proper bona fide members of staff.” They are therefore part of what Professor X (2011), the pen name of an adjunct lecturer in the US, called the “ivory basement,” following Joan Eveline's (2004) work on the gendered nature of university management and layers of inequities. The ivory basement is that part of the university which is “hidden, ignored and unseen” (Eveline 2004, 4).

In addition to feeling excluded from departmental matters, respondents frequently said that the permanent staff members alongside whom they worked should be more appreciative and supportive of the work they do, as illustrated by the following quotes:

I don't feel like I'm getting rewarded for the amount of time I'm actually putting in—I feel I'm doing slave labor actually. I feel completely and totally exploited. Shall I say how I consider myself? I feel like dirt under somebody's feet being used and disposed of because nobody cares about anything—nobody ever says thank you, nobody gives you the time of day, you're ignored, you know full-time staff just treat you as if you're nothing, yet you're taking on such a responsibility. I mean, I have feedback from the large group [I taught], I was sent a copy and it was excellent, so they know what I'm capable of, what I can do and yet they're not even offering me any sort of permanent contract.

I haven't met my line manager in five years, I'm not even sure who he is. So from that point of view, yeah, we're doing the same work but with nothing like the same kind of facilities or level of support from the institution. So they don't seem to be that interested so long as no one complains.

I don't think half the department know who I am, to be honest. I feel that my individual line managers who I teach modules for do genuinely appreciate my work, but it only goes that far, it doesn't mean they're actually going to do anything about it.

Although participants often said they had good personal relations with their module leaders or line managers, many also said that their line managers did not understand the daily working conditions or circumstances of hourly paid academics and did not acknowledge that hourly paid work was no longer the "rite of passage" to the permanent lectureship it might have been in the past. This perception is in tune with recent literature that highlights the fact that precarious contracts can entrap workers rather than provide a stepping stone into more secure and stable work (Watson 2013).

There was an awareness amongst participants that the teaching experience casualized staff amass is of limited value in terms of career progression, and that undertaking research and publications are the main route to securing long-term and permanent positions. However, little or no time to undertake their own research was available, as all time was taken up with teaching and teaching-related activities, as well as with looking for future employment (that is, teaching hours in different institutions). One participant talked about the consequences of this scenario for casualized lecturers' research, teaching and professional development:

If we're spending all our time teaching without support, then our research skills are going to suffer because we're basically only doing shitty research, if any, in years to come. And in the meantime we're already probably doing shitty teaching.

Moreover, there are no identifiable career-progression paths for hourly paid staff—many participants teach the same modules and are on the same rate for several years (because contracts are renewed every semester, incremental payments are by law not required). The lack of support to develop a research portfolio and publication record was also highlighted. In general, whilst many universities provide small internal grants to encourage early-career academics to undertake research projects, casualized staff are systematically excluded from such schemes. Not surprisingly, therefore, unlike their colleagues on permanent contracts, the hourly paid academics we interviewed lacked access to internal funding for undertaking research, presenting work at conferences, subventions for book publications, and so on.

Impact on Teaching

Most respondents acknowledged the negative impact their contractual situations had on the actual practice and quality of their teaching. Despite their willingness to put a significant amount of unpaid time to ensure a good-quality delivery, the systemic issues discussed above impinged on teaching quality. The quotes below were typical of participants' changing attitudes to teaching:

When I first started out, I was so keen I would do anything, and I used to spend hours not only reading drafts and giving them feedback around content, but actually proofreading their work and editing their work.... I've always felt exploited, but when you're exploited and you feel like you're getting somewhere, you can live with it, right? So now I've basically reduced my hours.

If you count the number of hours I have spent preparing lectures, it's a joke. I put in the time because I feel it's necessary to have a good lecture ... but it probably means I'm getting paid about 10 pence an hour or something!

Interviewees made a conscientious effort to protect students from the potential negative impacts that their contractual situations might have on the quality of teaching. This theme has been highlighted by Street et al. (2012, 13), who describe how casualized academics actually shield students from the realities of their contractual situations and their potential adverse effects even at significant personal cost, for example spending their own money on photocopies and putting in extra hours with no pay. Some of our participants perceived this to be yet another unpaid element of casualized work.

Some of the issues discussed previously, such as lack of access to resources, participation in department meetings, and professional development, can have the effect of excluding casualized staff from access to information about developments in teaching and pedagogy, which may have a direct impact on their approaches to teaching. As one participant pointed out,

It can be frustrating because you could be doing a better job if you were there a little bit more regularly, if you had some input into what people learn, and also there's a lack of overview of the different processes.

Other forms of direct impact included feeling pressured—due to the precarious nature of contracts and the “dependence” on permanent staff to continue to get teaching hours—to teach subjects outside of one's particular area of expertise, which may compromise performance. Moreover, the lack of continuity in teaching, for example having to teach different courses every year, meant that there was no possibility for hourly paid academics to build on their teaching experience. One respondent explained:

There is the issue of continuity because you're forever giving lectures for the first time, which is not great for students. It's like pancakes, the second time is always better. And it's pretty rare that you find yourself in the position in which you can streamline a lecture, you can improve it. Because you're constantly firefighting, which must affect the students' experiences.

Another theme that emerged from our interviews was students' perceptions of hourly paid staff. Although students were not always aware of the different contractual situations of the staff who taught them, some respondents believed that such awareness, when it existed, engendered negative perceptions of them, intensifying their feelings of marginalization within the institution. As one participant pointed out,

Students just see you as temporary staff, they don't respect you. If there's a problem, they'll probably talk behind your back. They're disappointed. I can't explain it to them because a lot of them are probably not that interested.

Another participant summed up several of the key issues discussed in this paper: the differentials in pay, career-progression opportunities, and terms and conditions that created resentment and a sense of injustice:

There seems to be a huge discrepancy [between contractual hours and hours actually worked], so one concern I have is: Am I working under a completely different set of conditions to somebody else on a permanent contract? What are the differentials in the conditions in which we work? Is there equity? There certainly is not in terms of pay and progression, but also other aspects too. That raises big question marks in my mind. And if I'm completely honest about it, it creates a massive sense of anxiety, sometimes resentment, and just a really big sense of injustice.

Discussion

This paper has sought to make visible a group that is hidden within the national statistics in the UK and to draw attention to the negative emotional, personal, professional and pedagogical implications of hourly paid contracts. Supporting the broader literature around casualization in HE and drawing on a feminist approach to research, it contributes to a deeper understanding of the issue of academic casualization and the impact hourly paid contracts have for staff themselves, the students they teach, and the functioning of universities more widely. Our findings provide a qualitative insight into everyday working lives of a relatively small number of hourly paid lecturers, in particular their experiences of job insecurity; exploitation; lack of support, resources and opportunities for career progression; and feelings of exclusion. They also reveal how the casualization of the academic workforce has an impact on the overall pedagogical quality of higher education and how this process may directly affect students. Despite their feelings of isolation, marginalization, frustration and inadequacy, however, the participants we interviewed managed to buffer these feelings by retaining a sense of hope for the future and responsibility towards their students.

The participants' experiences are framed by an increasingly corporate business model of education, which seeks to maximize profit and relies on worker insecurity and exploitation to achieve this aim. As the neoliberal machine becomes more powerful and market logic expands within universities, we must ask ourselves how university management and Human Resources managers within universities can develop the potential of this "flexible" workforce if its members are tucked away in the "ivory basement." Lack of collective action will simply exacerbate existing problems and entrench inequalities and exploitation further. It is therefore imperative that casualized lecturers and tutors work together with permanent staff and management to "untie" the hands that are purportedly bound by the economically driven requirements for flexibility and which prevent any real transformation from occurring within higher education.

From our own experiences and research it seems clear that universities would benefit from supporting hourly paid academics, providing resources and including them in academic teams, as they are a source of new ideas and innovation that would strengthen university curricula and academic programs. Yet the nature of hourly paid contracts does not allow for continuity and integration within department teams and programs, nor does it involve sufficient support, training and access to facilities; by all accounts, moreover, there seems little attempt on the part of universities to rectify this situation.

The growing unrest amongst hourly paid academics within universities UK-wide has gathered momentum recently, and hourly paid teaching staff themselves are mobilizing and raising a collective voice within and outside the University College Union (UCU). The campaign against casualization in further and higher education has gained strength and become a priority within the UCU since its launch in 2008. At the University of Edinburgh, a concerted campaign led by staff on casualized contracts resulted in management agreeing to stop issuing zero-hour contracts in 2013. At around the same time, a social-media campaign by union and independent activists persuaded the University of Birmingham and University of Essex to remove adverts for unpaid research assistants and "honorary junior fellowships" (Forkert and Lopes 2014). At the university at which one of us works, a Non-Permanent Staff Network has been set up, through which hourly paid academic staff have collectively taken issues relating to payment delays and contract ambiguities to the Human Resources department and university management. A network such as this is a vehicle for change in that it provides the opportunity for casualized staff to become visible within the university, express their concerns, and challenge unfair conditions and treatment.

Since January 2014, casualized teaching staff at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), part of the University of London, have been running an effective campaign, "Fractionals for Fair Play," that has

led to real achievements in improving working conditions and has raised awareness of the problems faced by contingent hourly paid staff. The campaign is increasingly being seen as an inspiration for casualized academics in universities across the UK. One of its achievements has been the ability to mobilize student support. Many of those working on casual contracts are PhD students and some are undergraduate students. This is significant, because our findings reveal that hourly paid academics often hide their contractual situation (and its personal and professional implications) from the students they teach. As we have shown, this may be because they feel a duty to “shield” students from the politics of the organization, especially in a context of high student fees; or, such silence may emerge from the hourly paid academics’ perception that students do not take them as seriously, and treat them with the same respect, as they would permanent academics. Students, however, have a great stake in the improvement of working conditions of hourly paid staff. They also have immense leverage, and their involvement in anti-casualization campaigns would put pressure on university managements to finally begin to act more swiftly.

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