



Precarious academic work in Oxford

Testimonies from Oxford Brookes and Oxford University UCU members

A REPORT BY UNIVERSITY AND COLLEGE UNION

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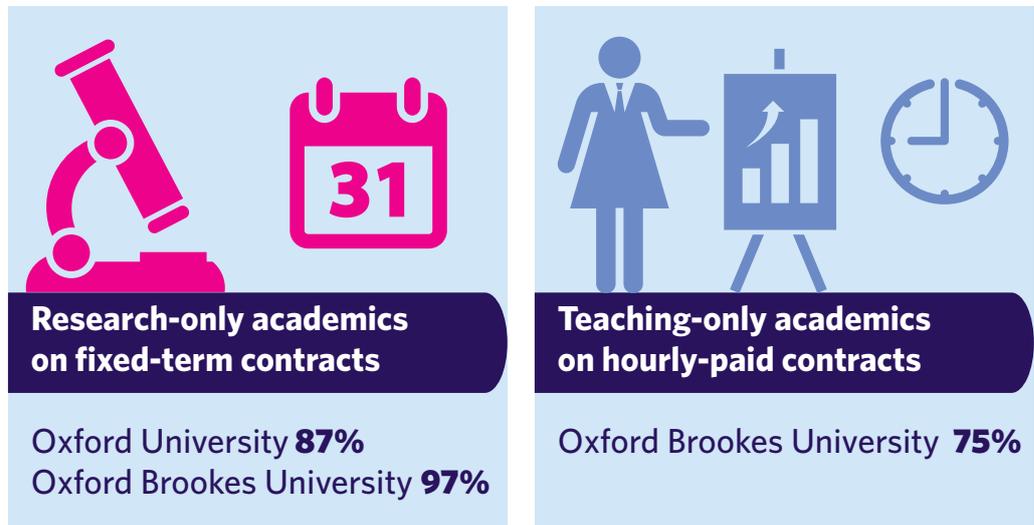


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Introduction: precarity in Oxford and beyond



Equality and casualisation at Oxford University



Equality and casualisation at Oxford Brookes University



All data from HESA staff record 2019/20



There is nothing inevitable about the levels of casualisation in the higher education sector, nor has it come about by accident; it is the result of universities' reliance on a particular business model. After adjusting for inflation, the sector has seen its total income rise by around 15% over the last six years, while casualisation continues to grow.

For all these reasons, Oxford Brookes UCU and Oxford University UCU joined forces to collect testimonies from their casualised members. Collecting and sharing these stories means giving voice to those who too often feel unable to question their terms of employment, for fear of having their hours cut or not having their fixed-term contract renewed. For our casualised colleagues, our branches and your fellow workers are reaching out to tell you that you are not alone and that there are ways we can take collective action to improve our conditions: contact your reps and your branch, get involved, and don't hesitate to ask for information about your contract and rights. For our colleagues in more stable roles, this is a call to show your solidarity: talk to your students and precarious colleagues about joining the union, and support anti-casualisation initiatives organized locally and nationally. 'What can I do?', includes more practical suggestions on how all UCU members can challenge casualisation.



1. Read our stories

Respondents highlighted a number of interrelated issues, but some central themes emerged: lack of career progression; lack of employment rights; low and/or unstable income and its consequences; mental health issues; casualisation's exacerbation of existing equalities issues; and, for migrant staff and students, concerns around visa requirements and immigration status.

1.1 NO FUTURE: CASUALISATION AND CAREER PROGRESSION

Being on fixed-term contracts for several years...has made me feel very vulnerable. I have found it difficult to turn down tasks or advocate for my rights since I am always worried this could jeopardize my chances of having my contract renewed or being offered a permanent position. I have felt at times that this situation has been taken advantage of and tasks have been offloaded onto me.

Each time my contract is extended there is no expectation that the work will continue beyond the end of its fixed term. This is demoralizing, disrespectful, and dishonest after more than a decade of loyal and dedicated service to this University."

I was on fixed term contracts between 2015-2020. The longest was 2 years, but others were just 1 year and 6 month contracts. Because I had no guarantee of further employment, 6 months before the end of each contract I started looking for other jobs, which distracted me from my actual work.

It's clear that there's very little interest from institutions in nurturing and offering a clear path of development for precarious staff. So I'm leaving academia in the new year...I don't want to leave, not really, but it's a still relief to have done so

Since coming to Oxford in 2018 I have been employed on 3 fixed-term contracts, the longest being 18 months. I haven't changed job or roles, but still have not been afforded the security of a longer term contract. The impact of this is multifaceted, and has consequences not only for my personal life, but also how I plan my career and the science I am able to do...Short fixed-term contracts are bad for science, and bad for scientists.

One myth is that [casualised teaching contracts] are for bright PhD students getting their foot on the career ladder... . In reality there are many colleagues on these contracts who have been doing their jobs for years – and are relied on to take the work as they will do a good job without needing any support. The framing of these jobs as career development opportunities for which young researchers ought to be grateful therefore ignores the contributions of experienced lecturers and their need for secure and dignified contracts...



I am sick and tired of being referred to as a 'flexible friend' and the implication that flexibility is somehow beneficial for me in ways that are never quite stated (my feeling is that it is the only way my FT colleagues can sleep at night, and that they rightly do not want to think too hard about it).

1.2 'BAD PRACTICE ABOUNDS': CASUALISATION IS BAD FOR WORKERS' RIGHTS

I was once offered an extension to a fixed-term contract that took it to 47.5 months, two weeks short of the 48 months that would have given me employment rights. Bad practice abounds.

I am a...PhD student...and I am paid to teach undergraduates by my college...via a "development scholarship", which means that I am legally not employed by the college.... I do not have basic workers' rights such as paid holiday or holiday pay, sick pay, ability to have a workplace pension... I also have no protection if the college decides to stop my "scholarship" for any reason...

I have been on fixed-term contracts, on and off, for fourteen years.... The problem now is that I want to switch to flexible retirement. If universities were normal employers with permanent contracts, this would be simple - reduce my workload to, say, 20%, and the employer finds a way to rearrange my other work. Thanks to the excessive casualisation in universities, on the contrary, with only a few months left, I still do not know whether I will have a part-time role at the university.

My contract as a fixed term researcher is not like an academic one, I am considered 'professional services', so my pay grade and vacation time are lower.

I have known many excellent associates who, having done a fantastic job teaching on my modules, quit teaching in Higher Education because they could not make ends meet. I myself was bullied by a full-time module leader while working as an associate, but received excellent advice and support from my union representative. While I eventually weathered the storm, I worried throughout the summer that the module leader's opinion of me would affect whether I would receive any teaching in the September semester.

1.3 LOW AND UNSTABLE INCOME AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

I have been on two-fixed term research contracts. I am lucky that I have been full-time during them but it still prevents me from planning for the future - when buying a house, I need to consider lenders who would accept my situation; I have to continuously look at job opportunities; I can't plan on starting a family because I don't know where or what my next job would be. I often feel stuck and anxious, like my life hasn't fully started yet, even though I'm in my 30s.



Casualised academic contracts have left me massively in debt at times, and at times living below the breadline. Job insecurity has left me unable to decide for myself whether or not to start a family - the decision has been taken for me as I don't have the money or security.

No pay over the summer is very stressful especially as Associate Lecturers are low paid anyway. Lack of money led me to working as an Admissions tutor over one summer - a post which did not make full use of my skills and qualifications. The timing of losing this post, which was for maternity cover, led to me having to claim benefits for several months until the next academic year started and I could resume work.

1.4 CASUALISATION AND MENTAL HEALTH

I have been in precarious contracts for 4 years...I have been relatively lucky, as I have always been full time, and with contracts of at least 1 year, but the uncertainty and lack of progression had a great impact on my life and my well-being. I am currently suffering from anxiety and depression...and my condition is exacerbated by the constant pressures and insecurity in my work. I feel devalued, and treated like a second class colleague.

[Insecurity] makes marriage hard, as coordinating contracts is too hard, leading to one of us having to compromise our career for our marriage. One's eye is constantly on the job market, which means one is never able to relax, or settle into a post. It's a rollercoaster of anxiety and overwork.

I have been on fixed-term contracts all my academic life. The feeling of insecurity and stress is immense; especially when one is trying to survive in an expensive city like Oxford.

But being on casual contracts has another type of effect on my mental health. It is the feeling of being disposable, that my employer does not care about me at all. No matter how hard I work, no matter how many extra hours I put in, all the 'good citizenship' responsibilities that I take on for no pay or reward, I know that the moment my contract is up, I will be kicked out of the door, and nobody will care.

I have been on short-term contracts for the last eight years. These have often been 1-year extensions on existing contracts. I have four children, and it is fair to say that job insecurity is something that occupies my family's collective consciousness. The feeling of being ultimately dispensable---at least the impression of dispensability that short-term contracts generate---is affecting my mental health. In my current workplace, there are very visible (and actually quite arbitrary) boundaries between me and my colleagues with secure contracts... Sadly only a very small number of colleagues express their solidarity. I have recently decided to be more open about this with my students, and it has been nice to see that many of them do sympathise.



I feel undervalued and demotivated; only the enthusiasm of my students (who are paying high fees, and would probably be horrified to know the reality of the situation for many staff) keeps me going.

Working for around six years as an Associate Lecturer and so, essentially, on a zero hour contract, has affected my mental health in particular by increasing the oscillation between states of continuous anxiety (because of the professional uncertainty) to others connected with depression and melancholy due to the lack of confidence and perspectives.

I am a recent PhD graduate with five different casual teaching contracts. Casualised contracts mean that I have had to move back in with my parents aged 30 because I cannot afford rent and have no means of securing a housing contract since my contracts are so short-term and much of my work is just word-of-mouth [and] hourly paid. Although I make less than £15,000 a year, I have 12-20 contact hours per week in term time, have spent ~30 hours on admissions (which is listed as a necessary and therefore unpaid duty in my 2-hour a week stipendiary contract) alongside a (casualised!) 7 hour a week admin contract, so I am frequently exhausted and suffering from both mental burnout and (clinical) physical fatigue. I suffer from muscle weakness, insomnia, palpitations and migraines from the stress.

1.5 'WILL I HAVE TO LEAVE THE COUNTRY?': CASUALISED ACADEMICS ARE ALSO IMMIGRANTS

I am a European citizen and not knowing whether I'll have a permanent position here or not obviously has several consequences on my life plans. As a family, it doesn't make sense to buy a house if in a year we'll be forced to move elsewhere. Similarly, it makes no sense for me to pay into a private pension fund as I don't know how long I'll be working in the UK still.

I am a European immigrant, and I am concerned that when I will have to apply for indefinite leave to remain, not having a job or a salary that meets the current requirements for a visa will force me to leave.

"[Casualisation] made me think very hard about having children. For years I thought that I shouldn't, because I will not be able to afford it. I decided to have a child in the end, but I know that I might have to leave this city, or this country even if I won't get my contract renewed. This is a horrible feeling, the sense that you cannot provide a stable upbringing for your child."

1.6 CASUALISATION IS AN EQUALITIES ISSUE

Casualisation has left me exhausted, ill, angry, and feeling lesser than my colleagues. It has exacerbated class, gender, and disability injustices that I face as an LGBT woman from working class parents with a physical disability and autism.



I moved from a faculty post into a college, and then back into a faculty. Meanwhile I taught for another faculty, for a decade. I wasn't issued a contract for the sessional classes. When I fell pregnant, mid-job move, the sessional classes would have shown continuity of employment by the university. But because they never issued me with a contract, they didn't, and my maternity pay was withheld. The federalised structure [of Oxford University] meant my career didn't count.



2. Colleagues on permanent contracts share their views on how casualisation affects their workplace

We also asked staff on more secure contracts to share their stories on how casualisation has impacted their careers and their departments. They described how loss of expertise and excessive turnover increase their workloads and are detrimental to the development of a strong research culture.

2.1 LOSS OF EXPERTISE

I was shocked to learn last week that a very talented and promising young colleague is leaving academia. They were on a temporary contract, with new courses to teach, and lots of lecturing, and had published a couple of articles in addition, and I thought all was going well, but they said that they just couldn't see how they would manage to write a monograph, without which they wouldn't have a chance of a permanent post, and they couldn't face the extreme pressure of more precarity. This colleague's particular expertise is a real loss.

2.2 EXCESSIVE TURNOVER AND WORKLOADS

One exceptionally talented AL [associate lecturer] is about to leave our department disillusioned with how he is being treated. Module leaders are stressed out having to induct new ALs who are unfamiliar with our systems or the particular modules.

2.3 CASUALISATION PREVENTS THE DEVELOPMENT OF A STRONG RESEARCH CULTURE

I have been working as Research Lead for a few years now and I have appointed several fixed term contract researchers within my school. The difficulty with this is that we select exceptionally talented researchers, we ask them to be part of our work, team, and research groups and centre, to then see them leave because they cannot secure a contract at Brookes. This is a real problem because it forces us to recruit again, but also because often by the time they leave, these researchers have developed brilliant projects that they take with them, often research funding applications that could stay with Brookes and bring funding to us. It is a trend that is totally detrimental to the development of a strong research culture.



3. What can I do?

Every UCU member can play their part in challenging casualisation. For example:

- Include casually employed colleagues in staff groups – both formal and informal (eg review groups, committees, tea club, Friday lunch club, runners club etc.)
- Challenge management narratives on job cuts if they do not include fixed-term contracts ending and hours removed from variable hours staff.
- Recruit colleagues on casualised contracts to UCU (or point them to their appropriate recognised sister union, if it is not UCU). Talk to them about UCU and listen (and report back) any reservations they have about joining.
- If you have colleagues whose fixed-term contracts are due to expire, bring this up at staff meetings and raise at your local branch meetings.

For further actions you can take in your workplace, see *Fighting casualisation – what can I do?*, a guide developed by UCU members on casualised contracts and the *UCU anti-casualisation committee*.

At Oxford Brookes, the UCU branch negotiated a policy to allow some teaching staff on precarious contracts to be converted onto fractional contracts and many members have benefited from that. Details of the policy are available [here](#) and we are trying to implement it as widely as possible. However, the policy and the way it is implemented need to improve so the branch is also currently trying to renegotiate the policy to ensure more members have a path out of precarity.

Know your rights! As casualised staff it is very important that you know your rights so that you can exercise them and challenge bad practice.

- You should have a contract with a full statement of your terms and conditions when you start your job.
- Under Regulation 3 of the Fixed Term Employees (Prevention of Less Favourable Treatment) Regulations 2002, fixed-term employees have the right to be treated equally when compared to permanent members of staff, unless your employer can ‘objectively justify’ not doing so.
- If you have four years of continuous service and are on at least your second contract with the same employer, you have the right to request that your position be made permanent.



- If your employment ceases at the end of a FTC then it counts in law as a dismissal, or 'redundancy'. If you have been employed for two years or more then you are entitled to redundancy pay.
- Postgraduates who are employed to teach are entitled to a contract of employment. Your pay should be linked to your institution's pay scale following an evaluation of your role. You should have the same access to work facilities as other members of staff and to a grievance procedure if you need to make a formal complaint. Your employer has a legal responsibility for your health, welfare and safety.

For further information see <https://www.ucu.org.uk/stampout> or get in touch with your branch.

Get involved in your local branch and fight against casualisation in Oxford! This document is just the first outcome of a joint campaign launched by Oxford Brookes and Oxford UCU to fight casualisation. There are several ways to get involved and your local branch is looking forward to hearing your feedback and ideas for future initiatives.

Updates and calls for action will be published regularly on the Oxford Brookes UCU website and the Oxford UCU blog, as well as on our Twitter accounts ([@BrookesUCU](#); [@OxfordAntiCas](#)). Don't hesitate to contact us via email to ask questions, join our campaigns, and propose actions: ucu.brookes@gmail.com / oxfordanticas@gmail.com.

