



This article is more than **6 months** old

Thousands of UK academics 'treated as second-class citizens'

Report claims higher education institutions have created pool of low-paid staff for teaching and research

Richard Adams *Education editor*

Mon 20 Jan 2020 06.05 GMT

Thousands of academic staff at British universities are being treated as second-class citizens on precarious contracts, says a report highlighting the “alarming rise of mass casualised labour” in higher education.

The report by the University and College Union claims institutions have created a pool of low-paid staff to teach undergraduates, conduct research and work in libraries, despite having advanced postgraduate or other academic qualifications.

It calls on the Office for Students, the higher education regulator in England, to require each university to publish figures showing their use of casual teaching staff, and for research councils to insist their grant-holders employ staff on improved contracts.

Chi Onwurah, the Labour MP for Newcastle Central, who is supporting the report, said it showed that precarious employment was not just an issue for “gig economy” workers.

“Reliance on precarious, low-paid staff has become a business model and therefore universities across the UK are in the midst of industrial action over this issue,” Onwurah said.

One academic told the authors how she had been plunged into a six-month teaching contract without an interview or training, and told to simply read out notes the previous lecturer had left, leaving students unhappy.

Others reported supervisors unfairly demanding credit for research, despite having little involvement, and of being bullied or having to endure “abrasive and demeaning” managers. Staff on short-term contracts said they felt unable to defend themselves against the demands of managers or permanent colleagues.

Jo Grady, the UCU general secretary, said students would be shocked by the levels of dehumanisation of staff at universities where they were studying.

“We need to have an honest conversation about casualisation that draws out the real extent of the problem and how we can secure improvements for staff. The Office for Students should demand that universities disclose the extent of teaching - measured in classroom hours - that is being done by casualised staff,” Grady said.

The report explores data showing that 67,000 research staff were on fixed-term contracts, making up two-thirds of the total research staff employed at universities, alongside 30,000 contracted teaching staff, many paid by the hour. A further 69,000 academic staff were on “atypical contracts” and so are not counted in the main staff record, while an estimated 6,500 were on zero-hours contracts.

But a spokesperson for the Universities and Colleges Employers’ Association (UCEA) said its members had been reducing the number of zero-hours contracts and “atypical contracts”, while expanding the number of open-ended staff contracts.

“UCEA has over recent years worked with UCU and the other higher education trade unions to better understand employment across the HE sector,” he said.

“Our own analysis demonstrates both continued growth in the higher education workforce and that this growth is strongest in open-ended contracts, which increased by 21.9% whilst atypical contracts declined by 16.1% during the same period between 2011-12 and 2017-18.

“The employment arrangements within autonomous universities are of course for institutional-level discussions and not for UCEA. Universities always want to ensure their colleagues, whatever contract they are on, feel that they are appropriately rewarded and supported to give of their best for students.”

The findings come in the middle of long-running industrial action over pensions and pay between UCU’s members and university employers, with further strikes across British higher education on the cards later this year.

Topics

- Higher education
- Academics
- Lecturers' pay
- Gig economy
- Students
- Trade unions
- Office for Students