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UK academics must stand up to stop universities becoming sweatshops

Steven Jones

Employment practices akin to dubious fashion outlets mean qualified professionals are used as poorly paid casual labour

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When senior academics go on strike, it is not usually because of financial hardship. Pay, while modest, is comfortable. Instead, academics' motivation to strike runs much deeper: universities have been fast-tracked towards a market system that sits uneasily with their public role and employees' values.

Institutional managers say they are powerless to resist structural reform. Highest fees in Europe? Blame the government. Yet more league tables and metrics? Blame the regulator. But casualisation can't be blamed so readily on external forces.

Under casualisation, academic labour previously undertaken by staff on secure contracts is being transferred to people employed on a fixed-term basis. This accentuates hierarchies, tests collegiality, and - at worst - ends promising careers.

The universities minister, Chris Skidmore, has voiced concerns about the practice, reminding universities of the importance of “sustainable” career pathways.

His comments came in response to a report by Newcastle University’s Nick Megoran and Olivia Mason that implied many institutions now have pools of highly qualified staff - disproportionately female; disproportionately BAME - that they dip into when the need arises, but otherwise leave to stagnate. Research shows 97% of academics on fixed-term contracts would rather be on permanent ones, exploding the claim that “flexibility” is some kind of lifestyle choice.

Of course, temporary contracts have long been a feature of higher education, particularly in the sciences, where the journey to having one’s own laboratory is paved with job insecurity. Experience is accumulated, knowledge gained, and - in due course - research grants are sought. Even in non-science disciplines, many of us began our careers on hourly-paid fixed-term contracts.

Before securing my first permanent post, I covered maternity leave at two institutions and delivered adult education courses at another. The work was demanding and poorly paid, but I learnt my craft working with inspirational colleagues and students.

What has changed is that fixed-term appointments are no longer an apprenticeship but part of a business model that accepts staff insecurity as a necessary condition of HR “agility”. This is compounded by the decoupling of teaching from research. Teaching-focused contracts are widespread, usually accompanied by workloads that leave little time for research.

What would end casualisation? On the research side, funders could impose firmer conditions on their grant holders’ employment practices. On the teaching side, universities could be required to publish course-level information specifying the proportion of lectures and seminars delivered by staff on permanent contracts.

But, as securely employed academics, we also need to look at ourselves. Winning a research grant, receiving a sabbatical, or taking on a management role often allows us to “buy out” more mundane aspects of our job. But is it possible to outsource our academic labour without perpetuating others’ job insecurity? Do we oppose casualisation even when it’s advancing our own careers?

During the strikes, resistance to casualisation has united colleagues across pay grades and disciplines. “It is really important that senior academics on established contracts make a stand in support of less fortunate colleagues,” said one of 29 professorial signatories to a letter in the Guardian last week.

Casualisation pushes higher education employment practices closer to those of sportswear barns and fashion outlets, where personnel are exploited as much as legally possible. If universities were to reverse this trend and emerge as exemplary employers, giving early career staff an authentic route into the profession, it would go a long way towards winning back their academics’ trust.

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