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Zero-hour contracts are turning university lecturers off the job

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There have been changes within higher education over the last few decades. Ongoing fee rises and an increasing focus on finances most recently. These changes have inevitably had an effect on working conditions and there is now a tendency towards casual and temporary employment across much of the higher education sector in the UK.

According to the Higher Education Statistics Agency, 128,300 permanent and 70,035 fixed-term academic staff worked at universities in the UK in the 2014 to 2015 academic year. On top of that, there were 75,560 casual academic staff in the same year. Based on these figures, the majority of staff in UK higher education work on a temporary basis.

The way academics are expected to work is also changing. This is a time of increased focus of online technologies – such as email, online education and digital registers for research, teaching and administration purposes. All of which means more time spent online and the blurring of work space and personal space on a daily basis.

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Job insecurity

As part of my recent research, I set out to find out how academics perceive the existing working conditions that are shaped by political and economic conditions. I conducted a small case study in 2016, interviewing academics at various higher education institutions in the UK.



Up all night.

Focus was given to people who were employed “atypically” such as on fixed-term, casual, and zero-hour contracts contracts, or paid on an hourly basis – and I asked people how far they were confronted with job insecurity in their current post.

Most of the participants said they were concerned about the uncertainty surrounding their job and would like more economic security. A female researcher told me that she could not concentrate on her work anymore due to the uncertain nature of her job situation. As she explained, the precarious nature of the job worried her and was constantly in her head:

At the moment it is just the insecurity, the precarious nature ... when it gets to next year, what if I don't get anything, it is that worry. Constantly in your head, that worry.

On all the time

Academics also reported receiving and responding to emails out of working hours – including evenings and weekends – both at home and while to and from work. An interviewee I spoke to checked his emails regularly in the morning from home before heading to the office. Another one looked at emails regularly on his mobile phone, while another responded to student emails occasionally at one o'clock in the morning.

While some felt such an email communication pattern was necessary, others found it annoying that emails interfered with their private life.

Many interviewees also mentioned a division among staff, especially between casual and permanent staff – and said that this also affected “solidarity” and “politics” within their department.

An hourly paid lecturer explained how she was not invited to any meetings or any other department related business:

I tip in and out. You have to imagine ... I run in on Tuesday, coming away from my other job, I park the car where I don't have to pay parking fees, run to university, go in, get the register, run to my class, do my class, run home.

I don't have time to talk to people. I don't talk to people, I am just running.

She also said she didn't feel affiliated to the department physically as she did not have her own desk, and explained how she wasn't politically involved in the department because of the hourly paid contract.

The sad thing is, these experiences are not one-offs, as recent **freedom of information requests** by the University and College Union found. They revealed that more than half of the 145 UK universities that responded, and two-thirds of further education colleges, use zero-hours contracts – which do not guarantee work and can deny holiday and sick pay.

Sometimes referred to as “academic capitalism”, the “corporate university” and “Uber.edu”, it's clear the marketisation of universities is having a direct impact on people's jobs. The question is how long will it be before it also starts to impact the standards of teaching?

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