
Casualisation and Neurodiversity

A survival guide for members

This guide has been developed with UCU members who are neurodivergent and on some form of casualised contract.

To be read in conjunction with:

Researchers' Survival Guide

https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/4832/UCU-researchers-survival-guide/pdf/ucu_researchers-survival-guide_aug21.pdf
(40 pages)

Hourly paid survival guide

https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/4647/UCU-hourly-paid-survival-guide/pdf/ucu_hourlypaidsurvivalguide_jan20.pdf
(48 pages)

A casualised workplace can never be truly inclusive. An education sector with unstable, insecure employment as a systemic feature will always be hostile to neurodivergent people.

Introduction

The intersection of casualised employment and neurodivergence poses many problems for those who experience it:

- What are the main problems that we face at this intersection?
- What practical coping strategies have we had to develop?
- How can we organise casualised neurodivergent members?
- How can we highlight the particular problems faced by neurodivergent casualised staff?

What members say

- The cruellest thing about the intersection of precarity and neurodivergence is how bad we are with uncertainty – more than the average person.
- Uncertainty and lack of structure is a massive issue, it absolutely destroyed me.
- Academia is the only space where I've never had to suppress how I am/spend ages masking'.
- ADHD is a 'superpower in the classroom' (heightened awareness).
- Unapologetic self-advocacy; remembering not to be grateful for insufficient/insensitive support.
- An education sector without neurodivergent people is unthinkable: our contribution is so vital that structures must be fully inclusive of us and attitudes respectful of us.
- Neurodivergent folk often have a strong sense of justice and form wonderful communities, which is beneficial for organising.

Things you may want to ask your manager/mentor or UCU branch

When you are appointed to your role you should have clear written guidance about your duties, responsibilities and terms and conditions. However, we know that many staff on casualised contracts are not offered a comprehensive induction and their terms and conditions are often not clear and transparent. You may also not be sure what will happen at the end of your contract (if it has an end date) or how you can secure a more secure role.

You may feel comfortable asking your manager but if not you can ask a mentor (if you have one) or seek advice from your local UCU branch (you can find out who to contact at <https://www.ucu.org.uk/contacts> and entering the name of your employer).

Some of the things you may want to ask if you have not been told:

- What is my rate of pay?
- How is my rate of pay determined?
- If you are paid an hourly rate for teaching: does the rate of pay cover all tasks e.g. preparation, student support, marking as well as teaching contact hours? If so, how much time is allocated for each of those additional tasks in the hourly rate?
- Does my rate of pay cover my holiday entitlement?
- What is my holiday entitlement?
- How to I apply to take my holiday entitlement?
- What should I do if I am unable to attend work due to sickness, medical appointments or a family emergency?
- Who should I talk to if I need any adjustments to my work or working environment to ensure I can do my job well?
- Are there things I can do during a fixed-term contract to increase the chances of my contract being renewed or getting a permanent contract?

- What will happen when my contract is coming to an end?
- Do you have a redeployment policy? If so, where can I find it?
- If there is no work for me at the end of my contract, what will happen and will I be entitled to a redundancy payment?
- Where can I find the (employer) policies on things such as grievances, disciplinaries, maternity leave, sick pay and flexible working?
- Do you have a policies on different forms of casualisation? If so, where can I find them?
- Do you have a policy on supporting disabled staff in the workplace? If so, where can I find it?
- Do you have a policy on neurodiversity – if so where can I find it?

Your rights

You have rights as a worker / employee that are set out in the Researcher Survival and Hourly Paid Survival guides. There is also information for PGRs at: <https://www.ucu.org.uk/postgrads>

Disabled people also have rights under the Equality Act – in particular the right not to be discriminated against and the right for any required reasonable adjustments in the workplace to allow you to carry out your job.

Reasonable adjustments are a duty on the employer to remove barriers in the workplace to ensure that disabled and non-disabled staff have equality of opportunity in the workplace.

These rights are outlined in the UCU's Neurodiversity Guidance (https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/12406/Neurodiversity-Guidance/pdf/Neurodiversity_A4_guide_January_22.pdf (52 pages)

and in our guidance on Reasonable Adjustments:

https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/6091/Reasonable-adjustments---removing-barriers-to-disabled-people-at-work-UCU-guidance/pdf/Reasonable_adjustments.pdf (24 pages)

Declaring disability

Declaring a condition is an individual decision, and there is no obligation on anybody to do so. There are many reasons affecting the decision and for staff on a casual contract, it may especially difficult to make such a disclosure.

However, the employer is not obliged to make reasonable adjustments if it does not know (or could not be reasonably expected to know) that a worker is disabled under the terms of the Equality Act.

The decision is up to you but please contact your UCU branch if you would like to discuss this.

For further information on declaring a disability, read our guidance here https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/5445/Disclosing-a-disability-UCUguidance/pdf/Disclosing_a_disability.pdf (12 pages)

Ensuring you get the reasonable adjustments you need

An inclusive workplace is one where the needs of all staff are considered and met. However, it is rarely the case that employers take a proactive approach to adjustments until / unless they are forced to do so by the local trade union branch or individuals asserting their rights.

Whilst it is the employer's duty to provide reasonable adjustments it is always helpful to think about what would make your working life easier / better.

Reasonable adjustments can cover a range of things including how the workplace is set out, how you travel to work, the duties you undertake, the provision of additional support, the provision of software packages, and where you carry out your work.

Examples of reasonable adjustments that members have secured

- Home working
- Adjusted start and finish times
- Agreement that new tasks, responsibilities or one-off requests will be put in writing
- A request not to have to undertake new content or teach new content at short notice.
- Not being asked to chair meetings
- Time to transition between activities
- Having the parameters and duration of meetings clearly set out in good time
- Provision of quiet space / time during the working day
- Agreement on a comfortable font to be used in communications
- A cap on the number of students being taught
- Focus on small group teaching (rather than large lectures)
- Enhanced spell and grammar check software
- Provision of noise-cancelling headphones
- Being allowed to turn off fluorescent lighting when teaching
- Low lighting for in-person meetings
- Minimisation of travel and avoidance of airports where possible
- Being able to book first class travel

Case study 1: Lecturer in large pre-92 university

I received my diagnosis in my third year as a permanent member of staff. At this point I registered with the university's disability support service. Not all autistic people identify as disabled, but nonetheless I'd strongly recommend getting in touch with the disability support service at your institution. Some institutions, including my own, will offer pre-diagnosis support too, because waiting lists for diagnosis are often years long.

As part of registration with our support service I had a meeting with an adviser, who helped me draw up a plan detailing reasonable adjustments. These included teaching with the lights dimmed or switched off, no sudden changes to workload, and minimising expectations of international travel. The covid pandemic meant a lot of very dramatic changes to the way we all worked, which weren't in line with my agreed support plan but couldn't be helped! However, recently I was able to say that I couldn't take on short notice new teaching when a colleague left – so I do think registering is valuable. I'm lucky to have a very supportive line manager, and I discussed my adjustments with her at my last PDR (performance and development review), and ensured that they were factored into my objectives for the coming year.

The approach I take with reasonable adjustments is that it's not me simply saying "I'm not doing that task" but saying "That task is going to be disproportionately stressful and difficult for me, but there's this other task that I'm going to be brilliant at, so can I do that instead?". This has enabled me to focus on EDI work (which I'm passionate about) and do less admin. Overall, I think asking for reasonable adjustments should be about allowing us to play to our (many) autistic strengths.

Case study 2: Researcher in a large pre-92 university

I had some reasonable adjustments put in place after a disability assessment as a PhD student, and this gave me some ideas of the kinds of things I could ask for as adjustments within the workplace. I also talked to another autistic colleague after I was recruited, and they kindly shared some information about the adjustments they had. This helped me to identify the adjustments that I might find helpful – without this I'm not sure I would have known where to start or had the confidence to ask.

I was recruited at research associate level on a fixed term contract, and this has now been extended a couple of times as I have moved to different projects. My original line manager knew that I was autistic at the point of recruitment, and a key reasonable adjustment, home working, was presumed from the outset. It was also understood by my line manager from the outset that I could choose whether or not to have my camera on during meetings/calls. When some face-to-face meetings were required, I spoke to my line manager and requested low lighting (avoiding bright overhead lights) for those meetings, which was accepted without question. However, I had a somewhat more negative response from this line manager and HR to other requested adjustments such as having meeting agendas in advance and having time off for appointments because I was part-time and was told I needed to be flexible.

When I moved to another department, my new line manager was more understanding of the diverse range of things that autistic people can struggle with. As this department has a reputation for supporting staff, I felt more confident to ask for additional adjustments. I did not need to request agendas for meetings as this is routinely done by members of the department. I spoke to my manager about needing time to transition between different activities, and the need for quiet spaces and low lighting when meetings are held in person, and this was no problem and I have not needed to request this again. I also requested that certain fonts be avoided in documents that we work on as a team, as these can be difficult for me to read – this is not always remembered but has not been a problem when I have reminded people.

These adjustments have made my job feasible for me when I otherwise would not have been able to work in a role like this – they reduce my stress levels and allow me to work effectively and without having to mask my autism so much.

If you have other examples of reasonable adjustments or a story we could share please contact Jane at jthompson@ucu.org.uk – we'd love to include more real-life examples from a variety of employers.

Further ideas

These are some other things you might want to consider but remember that reasonable adjustments will vary from person to person (although some adjustments may help many people). These are just some examples, not an exhaustive list.

Uncertainty about your role and / or terms and conditions – although certainty should be something everyone is entitled to, there is often a lack of clarity for staff on casual contracts about what is expected of them and their terms and conditions e.g. the rate of pay and holiday entitlement. Therefore, if anything is unclear, ask for it to be explained to you in writing (or your preferred format). If in any doubt, contact your local UCU branch to discuss.

Workloads – are heavy workloads making your job difficult and or causing you stress? Are long hours causing mental, physical or sensory overload?

Many staff on casual contracts work in excess of the hours that they are paid for; that does not make it acceptable. Asking for your workload to be achievable in your working hours (at a pace that is comfortable for you) is perfectly reasonable. It is reasonable to ask your manager to prioritise tasks for you and to re-assign duties that you are unable to complete in your working hours.

The sensory environment – is the sensory environment distressing for you? Is the lighting, noise level, ventilation, suitability of furniture, decoration etc. uncomfortable for you to work in? If possible, identify the elements that are causing you distress so that you can ask for changes to be made. For example, asking for lighting to be adjusted, for screens or room dividers to enhance sound proofing or for a standing desk.

Lack of provision for breaks and quiet spaces – think about how you would like to manage breaks and what sort of quiet space you need so that you can ask for something that best suits your needs.

Changes to working practices – especially detrimental changes or changes without warning. Ask that changes are not made at short notice.

Inappropriate communication styles – this may be about type size and font, background to text, layout, use of jargon, unclear instructions or information

being provided in only one format. Try and identify what is a barrier for you so that you can ask the employer to remove that barrier to allow you to do your job.

Unpredictability of working arrangements – think about things like hot-desking, being asked to travel at different times of the day, not having a guaranteed parking space, and short notice changes to times and content of work duties. Many of these issues are far more common for staff on casual contracts but if any of these acts as a barrier for you, then you can ask the employer to remove those barriers e.g. by asking for your own workstation.

Confusing workplace design – ask for changes if there is inadequate signage, illogical layouts or jargonistic labelling of work areas.

Computer use – is your computer comfortable for you to use? Does it eliminate screen glare and are on-screen fonts and layouts easy for you to read? If not, make this one of your adjustment requests.

Unsuitable work processes – are processes set up in a way that's difficult for you to access? Do you have the necessary support you need to help you organise your work? If not, highlight this in your request and, if possible, set out an alternative that would suit you better. If processes genuinely cannot be changed, you could ask for a mentor or assistant to help.

Flexible working – are you able to work at a time, at a pace and in locations that suit you? If you are able, suggest to your employer how and where you would like to carry out your duties as part of your adjustment request.

You may be able to get some of the changes you would like agreed and implemented informally with your manager but it is always a good idea to get any agreement in writing.

If that is not possible, or you would prefer to take a more formal approach, you can work with your manager / mentor / trade union rep. to put your requests in writing as a formal demand for reasonable adjustments under the Equality Act.

Once you have any adjustments agreed, ask that they are confirmed in writing and, if you feel comfortable in doing so, ask for them to be incorporated into an 'adjustments passport'

see https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/10225/Reasonable-adjustment-passport/pdf/ucu_adjustment_passport_apr19.pdf (28 pages)

This would mean new managers (within or outside the organisation) could be made aware of any adjustments without you having to go through the whole process every time you change managers / departments / employers. For staff on casual contracts, the need to go through this process with each new job can be utterly exhausting.

There are other matters that may be acting as a barrier in the workplace that you should contact your UCU branch to discuss, including:

- Not being paid in a timely way
- Being asked to do more work than you are being paid for
- Discriminatory policies and procedures
- No policy to support neurodiversity in the workplace
- Inappropriate recruitment and promotion practices
- Rigid and/or inflexible working practices
- Hostile workplace culture

If you are unable to contact your branch for any reason, contact your regional / national UCU office (you can find out who to contact at: <https://www.ucu.org.uk/contacts>)

Access to work

Any reasonable adjustments have to be paid for by the employer. However, they may be able to get financial assistance from the Government under 'Access to Work' funding. The funding can pay for things like specialist equipment (including software), travel when you cannot use public transport and a communicator at a job interview. It's only available in England, Scotland and Wales. You can find out more from: www.gov.uk/access-to-work/overview

Benefits advice

UCU is unable to offer direct advice on disability benefits but Disability Rights UK have a lot of useful information on their website at:

<https://www.disabilityrightsuk.org/>

Networking / organising

These are some ideas for networking and organising in the workplace. Obviously, not everyone will be comfortable with doing all / any of these. But a good starting point is to talk to your local UCU branch about the issues and how you would like them addressed.

- Find out if there are any networks that you can join – e.g. UCU Anti-casualisation group, PGR group, Disabled members / staff group.
- Set up your own networks – ask the branch to help in doing so. Use these networks to discuss issues and with the local UCU branch to identify priorities for change.
- Talk to colleagues about the union, casualisation and neurodiversity.
- Find allies and share information, e.g. what can I do documents (<https://www.ucu.org.uk?mediaid=11773>)
- Find out and apply for appropriate training.
- Find out if your branch has an anti-casualisation representative, an Equalities officer, a Disability rep or even a Neurodiversity champion. If so, make contact to see how you can work together.
- Consider getting more involved in the union – either locally, regionally or nationally. The voices of casualised members and those who are neurodivergent need to be heard.

For further information about fighting casualisation see:

<https://www.ucu.org.uk/stampout>

For further information about Disability rights see:

UCU - Equality advice and guidance

<https://www.ucu.org.uk/article/1940/Equality-advice-and-guidance>