

Gillian Keegan

Department for Education

Michelle Donelan

Department for Science, Innovation and Technology

Via e-mail

31 January 2024

Dear Secretary of State,

I'm writing to you on behalf of university staff working in universities to draw your attention to the way that the vast majority of research staff are employed by institutions across the UK.

We have today published a [report](#) which highlights that around two-thirds of research staff are employed on fixed-term contracts, some less than a year in length.

The UK is world leading in the field of research but our competitive edge on the international stage is being ruined by the widespread use of gig-economy style contracts.

University researchers do invaluable work. But at many institutions, they are subject to precarious working conditions. UCU sent freedom of information requests to universities across the UK and used Higher Education Statistics Agency data to look at research staff employment conditions. The results are a damning indictment of the sector's broken employment practices.

Key findings include:

- Around two in three research staff are employed on fixed term contracts, including 80% of research staff at the University of Manchester, 96% at King's College London and 96% at London School of Economics
- Nearly a third of universities (30%) were unable to say whether research staff were redeployed at the end of their contract.
- Only one employer offered enhanced paid notice periods to research only staff on fixed-term contracts

Critically, the worst practices are not confined to the least financially secure institutions. Five Russell Group universities had high numbers of staff on fixed term contracts, showing that highly regarded institutions are actively choosing to

employ staff under gig economy conditions. At Oxford for example, a staggering 88% of research staff are employed on a fixed-term contract.

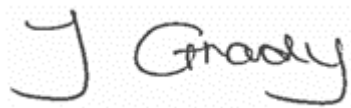
Worryingly, nearly a third of respondents were not able to tell us how successful they had been in maintaining their research staff in employment.

The sector must do more and as the custodians of Britain's education and innovation systems, I am calling on you to demand that universities work with us to develop a more sustainable model for the employment of research staff. The government should be doing all it can to enhance our education and innovation sectors rather than allowing these reputations to be tarnished in this way.

Employers must commit to reducing the use of fixed term contracts and move their research staff to genuinely secure contracts. Systems must also be put in place that support continuity of employment and minimise the risk of redundancy at the end of funded research projects.

I hope you will study our report in detail and exert your influence upon universities to do likewise. Now is the time for this government to support staff and push universities to commit to improvements in the working lives of researchers so that the UK does not lose its world leading status in research and does not miss the opportunity to enable this vital work to flourish.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jo Grady". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly informal style.

Dr Jo Grady

General Secretary