

Making ends meet

The human cost of casualisation in post-secondary education

Foreword

The role of an academic is one that is still respected, and even sought after, suggested a recent **YouGov poll**. YouGov argued that, instead of wanting to be actors and musicians, people coveted 'an aura of prestige' that still surrounds the quiet, intellectual life enjoyed by authors, librarians and academics.

However, it is not clear how many people are aware of the harsh reality of life in our universities and colleges in Britain today. Romantic notions of secure, stress-free careers bear no resemblance to the life of the 21st century lecturer, tutor, researcher or lab technician.

Millions of students of all ages now enter our education system, most of them paying considerable sums for it. They have a right to expect that they will be given a high-quality education delivered by passionate staff who are respected and properly rewarded for their work.

What many students probably don't realise is that most of them are taught at some point, perhaps even for most of their time in education, by people on insecure casual contracts. These are people who don't know from year-to-year, term-to-term, or even from month-to-month, whether they will have a job or how much they might earn.

Those people worrying about next week's bills are the same people teaching students in some of the world's greatest universities and then going home to fill in the form to secure tax credits.

More than two-fifths (42%) of staff on casual contracts in universities and colleges have struggled to pay household bills. Over a third (35%) reported that they struggled to meet rent or mortgage demands and an alarming one in five (21%) said that they had struggled to pay for food.

Two-fifths of staff (41%) on casual contracts in universities work 30 hours or less a week and nearly a third (30%) earn less than £1,000 a month. The situation is even worse in

the further education sector, where nearly two-thirds (64%) of people polled work 30 hours or less a week and 39% earn less than £1,000 a month.

Around 10% of those quizzed said they could not give an accurate figure on how many hours they worked or how much money they earned each month because it varied too much.

A third (34%) said that they have had problems getting a mortgage because of their contracts. The real extent of the problem is far bigger though as many who answered 'no' to the question reported that this was because they had never even tried and knew there would be no point while they remained on a casual contract.

The exploitative use of casualised contracts breeds insecurity, anxiety, stress and forces people to work long hours for poor pay. This report exposes the true human cost of life on a casual contract and shatters any 'aura of prestige'.

Sally Hunt
General secretary
University and College Union
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Part 1: Who are the respondents?

Sector

There were 2,551 responses to the survey between 26 January and 12 April 2015. Over two-thirds (71%) of respondents (1,787) were from the higher education sector. There were 696 from further education, which included colleges, adult and prison education. Forty-three listed their sector as 'other' and 25 did not respond to the question.

Table 1: Survey respondents by sector

Which sector do you work in?		
Answer options	Response percent	Response count
Further education	21.4%	541
Higher education	70.7%	1787
Adult education	5.1%	129
Prison education	1.0%	26
Other (please specify)	1.7%	43
<i>answered question</i>		2526
<i>skipped question</i>		25

Gender

Just over 60% of the total respondents to the survey were women (62%). There was a slightly higher percentage of woman from further education (68%) who responded to the survey than higher education (60%).

Table 2: Gender

Gender		
Answer options	Response percent	Response count
Female	62.3%	1536
Male	37.2%	918
Transgender/transsexual	0.5%	12
<i>answered question</i>		2466
<i>skipped question</i>		85

Table 2a: Higher education gender

Gender		
Answer options	Response percent	Response count
Female	60.4%	1052
Male	39.2%	682
Transgender/transsexual	0.5%	8
<i>answered question</i>		1742
<i>skipped question</i>		45

Table 2b: Further education gender

Gender		
Answer options	Response percent	Response count
Female	68.3%	458
Male	31.4%	211
Transgender/transsexual	0.3%	2
<i>answered question</i>		671
<i>skipped question</i>		25

Age

Staff on casual contracts tended to be concentrated among younger cohorts in higher education, with more than 50% between the ages of 26 and 40. By contrast, in further education more than 50% of respondents were concentrated between the ages of 45 and 60.

Table 3a: Age of respondents in higher education

Your age		
Answer options	Response percent	Response count
Under 25	2.3%	39
25-29	17.1%	293
30-34	19.3%	332
35-39	15.0%	258
40-44	11.6%	200
45-49	8.8%	151
50-54	10.0%	172
55-60	8.4%	144
60-64	4.6%	79
65 and over	2.9%	49
<i>answered question</i>		1717
<i>skipped question</i>		70

Table 3b: Age of respondents in further education

Your age		
Answer options	Response percent	Response count
Under 25	1.8%	12
25-29	7.1%	47
30-34	9.4%	62
35-39	7.7%	51
40-44	11.3%	75
45-49	16.4%	109
50-54	20.2%	134
55-60	16.4%	109
60-64	7.5%	50
65 and over	2.1%	14
<i>answered question</i>		663
<i>skipped question</i>		33

Zero-hours contracts

Almost a quarter (24%) of respondents described themselves as on zero-hours contracts (Table 4).

Tables 5a and 5b show that the proportion of people employed on zero-hours contracts was higher in further education (35%) than in higher education (20%). In higher education there were more respondents on fixed-term contracts, probably reflecting the fact that almost a quarter of higher education respondents were researchers (see table 5a).

Table 4: Breakdown of types of contracts

What contract form best describes your main job (you can tick more than one box)		
Answer options	Response percent	Response count
Zero-hours	24.2%	612
Variable hours contract with guaranteed minimum hours	6.6%	166
Hourly paid	32.4%	822
Fixed term contract	45.3%	1149
Open-ended contract but with an end date	5.2%	132
Permanent part-time (fractional)	5.3%	135
Agency worker	2.6%	67
Other (please specify)	6.4%	161
<i>answered question</i>		2534
<i>skipped question</i>		17

Table 4a: Higher education breakdown of types of contracts

What contract form best describes your main job (you can tick more than one box)		
Answer options	Response percent	Response count
Zero-hours	20.3%	363
Variable hours contract with guaranteed minimum hours	4.9%	88
Hourly paid	29.4%	524
Fixed term contract	54.6%	974
Open-ended contract but with an end date	6.1%	109
Permanent part-time (fractional)	3.8%	68
Agency worker	0.8%	14
Other (please specify)	6.5%	116
<i>answered question</i>		1785
<i>skipped question</i>		2

Table 4b: Further education breakdown of types of contracts

What contract form best describes your main job (you can tick more than one box)		
Answer options	Response percent	Response count
Zero-hours	32.4%	225
Variable hours contract with guaranteed minimum hours	10.8%	75
Hourly paid	39.6%	275
Fixed term contract	22.8%	158
Open-ended contract but with an end date	3.2%	22
Permanent part-time (fractional)	8.6%	60
Agency worker	6.9%	48
Other (please specify)	6.1%	42
<i>answered question</i>		694
<i>skipped question</i>		2

Table 5a: Job titles in higher education

What job function best describes your employment?		
Answer options	Response percent	Response count
Lecturer	32.5%	578
Associate tutor	15.8%	282
Instructor or trainer	1.0%	17
Postgraduate who teaches	12.1%	216
Researcher	22.0%	392
Assessor	0.2%	3
Academic-related or professional support	6.1%	109
Other (please specify)	10.3%	183
<i>answered question</i>		1780
<i>skipped question</i>		7

Table 5b: Job titles in further education

What job function best describes your employment?		
Answer options	Response percent	Response count
Lecturer	66.3%	459
Associate tutor	8.4%	58
Instructor or trainer	2.5%	17
Postgraduate who teaches	2.5%	17
Researcher	2.5%	17
Assessor	1.6%	11
Academic-related or professional support	4.8%	33
Other (please specify)	11.6%	80
<i>answered question</i>		692
<i>skipped question</i>		4

Part 2: Working hours and pay

Working hours

More than one in 10 people (11%) could not say how many hours they worked in a week because their hours were simply too irregular to say. Almost half (47%) of workers reported that they worked 30 hours or less per week.

Casualised staff in further education tended to work fewer hours on average, although all respondents reported problems caused by the uncertainty about their working hours.

Many reported that they often worked long hours because they were worried about where the next work was coming from or because they knew they would not be paid over the holidays. Others reported that their hours were being cut down to enable newer, cheaper casualised staff to be taken on (see testimonies below table 6b).

Table 6: Hours worked per week

How many hours per week do you normally work including all your jobs? (please tick one answer):		
Answer options	Response percent	Response count
Less than 10	10.0%	236
6 to 15	14.3%	339
16 to 30	22.8%	540
30 to 48	30.8%	729
More than 48	11.0%	260
My working hours are too irregular to say	11.2%	265
<i>answered question</i>		2369
<i>skipped question</i>		182

Table 6a: Higher education hours worked per week

How many hours per week do you normally work including all your jobs? (please tick one answer):		
Answer options	Response percent	Response count
Less than 10	10.4%	174
6 to 15	12.3%	205
16 to 30	18.1%	303
30 to 48	35.2%	589
More than 48	12.5%	209
My working hours are too irregular to say	11.4%	191
<i>answered question</i>		1671
<i>skipped question</i>		116

Table 6b: Further education hours worked per week

How many hours per week do you normally work including all your jobs? (please tick one answer):		
Answer options	Response percent	Response count
Less than 10	9.0%	58
6 to 15	19.7%	127
16 to 30	34.8%	224
30 to 48	19.7%	127
More than 48	7.0%	45
My working hours are too irregular to say	9.8%	63
<i>answered question</i>		644
<i>skipped question</i>		52

'I especially dread the summer and Easter periods as I have no idea how I will pay the rent. I plan to leave the area as soon as my son has completed his GCSEs in the hope I can find a proper job either abroad or in another part of the UK.' (HE lecturer)

'The main issue is that flexibility only goes one way. With those contracts you end up working long hours for a couple of months, then nothing and then back to crazy hours. If you get sick or need days off, you're really stuck. Ultimately, even if you earn enough, you cannot really plan anything for the future as you mainly think about securing your next job.' (FE lecturer)

'I used to get 10 to 15 hours work a week but in the last few years I have not had more than 7.5 hours on a regular basis. These last two semesters I have only had 5 hours. Also I do not find out until a week before the semester starts as to whether I have managed to get a class or not. I see agency staff and newer members of staff being given hours and wonder why the longer serving members are not offered hours first. Even though I know it is because their hourly rate is less than mine.' (FE lecturer)

Pay

Asked to estimate their usual monthly pay, 10% of respondents said it this was not possible because it varied too much. One in seven (14%) earned less than £500 per month, which places them below the Lower Earnings Limit for National Insurance Contributions. Pay in further education is lower overall.

Table 7: Monthly pay

What is your usual gross monthly pay (i.e. how much you are paid before tax is deducted and not including benefits)?		
Answer options	Response percent	Response count
Less than £500	14.0%	331
£500-£999	18.9%	447
£1000 – £1,499	18.5%	438
£1,500 – £1,999	12.2%	288
£2000 – £2,499	12.7%	301
£2,500 – £2,999	6.6%	156
More than £3000	6.9%	164
It varies too much to say	9.8%	231
Don't know	0.5%	12
<i>answered question</i>		2368
<i>skipped question</i>		183

Table 7a: Higher education monthly pay

What is your usual gross monthly pay (i.e. how much you are paid before tax is deducted and not including benefits)?		
Answer options	Response percent	Response count
Less than £500	14.3%	238
£500-£999	16.1%	269
£1000 – £1,499	14.7%	246
£1,500 – £1,999	12.1%	202
£2000 – £2,499	15.3%	255
£2,500 – £2,999	8.7%	145
More than £3000	9.0%	151
It varies too much to say	9.2%	154
Don't know	0.5%	9
<i>answered question</i>		1669
<i>skipped question</i>		118

Table 7b: Further education monthly pay

What is your usual gross monthly pay (i.e. how much you are paid before tax is deducted and not including benefits)?		
Answer options	Response percent	Response count
Less than £500	13.3%	86
£500-£999	25.7%	166
£1000 - £1,499	28.2%	182
£1,500 - £1,999	12.5%	81
£2000 - £2,499	6.3%	41
£2,500 - £2,999	1.4%	9
More than £3000	1.7%	11
It varies too much to say	10.5%	68
Don't know	0.3%	2
<i>answered question</i>		646
<i>skipped question</i>		50

'Some months I may only get paid £150 from my casual contract which makes the fuel to travel too expensive and makes me think about having to give up my lecturing career.'(FE lecturer)

'It's taking a huge toll on my personal life and my health. My career is in tatters at the moment, with the huge number of hours needed to make ends meet impacting on my ability to research and publish. It's vicious circle.' (HE lecturer)

'I have suffered increasingly with stress-related conditions and repetitive strain injuries caused by my work and by financial insecurity since becoming an academic. My employers expect me to conduct my research in my own time, but they then benefit from it in the REF.' (HE lecturer)

Part 3: Making Ends Meet

Paying the bills

Irregular work patterns and the insecurity of casualised contracts meant that staff faced real struggles to make ends meet.

Two-fifths (42%) reported that they struggled to pay their household bills. Over one in three (35%) said that they struggled to keep up with mortgage or rent commitments and one in five (21%) said that they struggled to put food on the table.

The problem was greatest amongst staff working in further education. Over half of respondents (56%) said that they had struggle to pay the bills. Nearly two-fifths (39%) had had problems keeping up with mortgage or rent commitments and three in 10 (29%) had had difficulties putting food on the table.

Table 8: Paying the bills

Do you struggle to pay for any of the following items? (please tick all that apply):		
Answer options	Response percent	Response count
Food	20.5%	450
Rent or mortgage	35.2%	774
Household bills (for example fuel bills, repairs)	41.6%	914
Loans	17.7%	390
None of these	45.1%	992
<i>answered question</i>		2199
<i>skipped question</i>		352

Table 8a: Higher education paying the bills

Do you struggle to pay for any of the following items? (please tick all that apply):		
Answer options	Response percent	Response count
Food	17.0%	263
Rent or mortgage	33.7%	520
Household bills (for example fuel bills, repairs)	35.6%	550
Loans	15.5%	239
None of these	50.2%	774
<i>answered question</i>		1543
<i>skipped question</i>		244

Table 8b: Further education paying the bills

Do you struggle to pay for any of the following items? (please tick all that apply):		
Answer options	Response percent	Response count
Food	28.6%	175
Rent or mortgage	38.5%	235
Household bills (for example fuel bills, repairs)	56.1%	343
Loans	22.6%	138
None of these	33.2%	203
<i>answered question</i>		611
<i>skipped question</i>		85

Mortgages

A third (34%) reported that they have had problems getting a mortgage because of their contracts. The real extent of the problem is far bigger though as many who answered 'no' to the question reported that this was because they had never even tried and knew there would be no point while they remained on a casual contract.

Table 9: Accessing mortgages

Have you ever had problems getting a mortgage because of your contract?		
Answer options	Response percent	Response count
Yes	33.9%	718
No	66.1%	1402
Further comments		982
<i>answered question</i>		2120
<i>skipped question</i>		431

Table 9a: Higher education accessing mortgages

Have you ever had problems getting a mortgage because of your contract?		
Answer options	Response percent	Response count
Yes	32.4%	483
No	67.6%	1006
<i>answered question</i>		1489
<i>skipped question</i>		298

Table 9b: Further education accessing mortgages

Have you ever had problems getting a mortgage because of your contract?		
Answer options	Response percent	Response count
Yes	37.8%	221
No	62.2%	363
<i>answered question</i>		584
<i>skipped question</i>		112

'I'm currently trying to get a mortgage and struggling because of the end date of my contract despite being at the university since 2010 on a series of full time contracts.' (HE lecturer)

'I am unable to save enough to put down a reasonable deposit due to the irregularity of work.' (HE lecturer)

'I have never tried to get a mortgage. You don't try to buy a house if you don't know where you will be living and working in two years' time.' (HE lecturer)

'I have given up trying for a mortgage and am resigned to the fact that I will always be in rented accommodation' (HE lecturer)

'My husband and I have to live with my parents because we cannot get a mortgage. We want to have kids but there is not enough space in our current accommodation. We will delay starting a family probably until we get on the property ladder.' (FE lecturer)

Claiming benefits

We asked respondents if they had had to access or had difficulties accessing a range of benefits. The response rate for these questions was far lower than for others. The results showed that the incidence of resort to Jobseeker's Allowance, Child Tax Credit and Working Tax Credit was higher among staff in further education.

Around 9% of further education staff on casual contracts reported that they had had to access Working Tax Credit or Child Tax credit in the last 12 months, compared with around 6% in higher education.

Similarly, a higher proportion of further education staff (8%) accessed Jobseeker's Allowance, compared to higher education (4%). Overall 28% of respondents working in further education have received a benefit in the past 12 months, as have 19% of those working in higher education.

Table 10a: Higher education – claiming benefits

In the last 12 months, have you had to claim or access any of the following: (please tick all that apply)			
Answer options	Response percent	Response count	% of full survey (1787)
Jobseeker's Allowance	19.0%	65	3.6%
Child Tax Credit	35.7%	122	6.8%
Working Tax Credit	31.6%	108	6.0%
Statutory Sick Pay	12.3%	42	2.4%
Statutory Maternity Pay	7.0%	24	1.3%
Other (please specify)	31.3%	107	
<i>answered question</i>		342	
<i>skipped question</i>		1445	

Table 10b: Further education - claiming benefits

In the last 12 months, have you had to claim or access any of the following: (please tick all that apply)			
Answer options	Response percent	Response count	% of full survey (696)
Jobseeker's Allowance	29.3%	58	8.3%
Child Tax Credit	33.8%	67	9.2%
Working Tax Credit	30.8%	61	8.7%
Statutory Sick Pay	17.2%	34	4.8%
Statutory Maternity Pay	1.5%	3	0.4%
Other (please specify)	22.2%	44	6.2%
<i>answered question</i>		198	
<i>skipped question</i>		498	

A higher proportion of respondents told us that they had experienced difficulties accessing these and other benefits. Significantly, around 9% in further education and 5% in higher education told us that they had experienced difficulties accessing Working Tax Credits. One in 10 respondents in further education (9%) and 6% in higher education reported difficulties in accessing Jobseeker's Allowance.

Table 11a: Higher education – difficulties accessing benefits

Have you ever experienced difficulties in accessing any of the following:			
Answer options	Response percent	Response count	% of full survey (1787)
Holiday pay	40.8%	158	8.8%
Sick pay	44.4%	172	9.6%
Maternity Pay	16.5%	64	3.6%
Jobseeker's Allowance	30.2%	117	6.5%
Working Tax Credit	22.2%	86	4.8%
<i>answered question</i>		387	
<i>skipped question</i>		1400	

Table 11b: Further education – difficulties accessing benefits

Have you ever experienced difficulties in accessing any of the following:			
Answer options	Response percent	Response count	% of full survey (696)
Holiday pay	50.2%	106	15.0%
Sick pay	42.2%	89	12.8%
Maternity Pay	4.7%	10	1.4%
Jobseeker's allowance	29.4%	62	8.9%
Working Tax Credit	29.4%	62	8.9%
<i>answered question</i>		211	
<i>skipped question</i>		485	

Conclusion

Staff starting their careers today are more likely to have a casual contract than a permanent one and the personal impact of this lack of security is profound and long-lasting.

It means that people often don't know how they will make ends meet from one month to the next. And it means that the big life decisions like buying a house or having children must be indefinitely postponed.

The use of zero-hours and other forms of casualised contracts in education is one of the great scandals of our time. Without a proper contract staff cannot plan their lives on a month-to-month or even a week-to-week basis.

As one college lecturer so clearly articulated in the report: 'The main issue is that flexibility only goes one way. With those contracts you end up working long hours for a couple of months, then nothing, then back to crazy hours. If you get sick or need days off, you're really stuck. Ultimately, even if you earn enough, you cannot really plan anything for the future as you mainly think about securing your next job.'

It is a myth that zero-hours contracts and other forms of casual contracts offer a fair and sensible deal for workers and employers. Employers and ministers must stop trying to defend these practices as flexible. The flexibility is not a two-way street and people who want security and a proper contract should be able to find one.

For more on UCU's work to stamp out casualisation in further and higher education visit www.ucu.org.uk/stampout