Casual Lecturers in UK Universities: A View from/off the Edge of Europe

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Many readers of this dossier work or have worked as teaching assistants and adjunct lecturers, enduring low wages, long hours to prepare for and teach tutorials and lectures, voluminous marking, and short marking windows, optimistic this work experience would help secure permanent employment. For many it has. However, in the UK, as in North America and elsewhere, many are caught in these apprenticeships and precarious posts as their use increases. Two developments fuel this expansion. First, at the turn of the millennium the British government increased the higher education participation target to 50% for those between 17 and 30. Casual lecturers (contingent faculty) provide a cost-effective means to meet this demand. [1] Second, promotion criteria and the Research Excellence Framework (REF) pressure permanent staff to buy out their teaching with external research grants. [2] Casual staff are employed as cover, often with little oversight or support, and with limited autonomy to influence curricula. This benefits neither casual lecturers nor their students. However, there has been cause for some optimism. European employment directives and trade union campaigns have improved employment rights, job security, and working conditions. Further, government policy to professionalize teaching in higher education will help casual lecturers achieve a higher education teaching qualification or formal recognition, which can help them to improve their job security and to compete for the few permanent posts that become available. Unfortunately, Brexit's populist chant of "sovereignty," producing the palpable risk that employment rights will be surrendered for financial efficiencies, threatens these improvements to casual lecturers' job security, employment conditions, and advancement.

UK employment law and education legislation shape the use and employment conditions of casual lecturers. The Education Reform Act 1988 dismantled tenure. It protects academic freedom for all academic staff, but incorporates reasons for dismissal similar to other sectors (ss. 202-208). In practice, though, casual lecturers have limited scope to exercise their academic freedom, since many are employed to teach specific content and afforded little time for curriculum development. Staff are now hired on permanent (full-time or fractional), fixed-term (full-time or fractional), or zero-hours (hourly) contracts, with casual lecturers – Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs), Visiting Lecturers (VLs), and teaching relief and infill (adjuncts) – employed on the latter two contract types. The University and College Union (UCU – UK wide) and the Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS – Scotland only) are challenging increased casualization. They have had some success convincing universities to commit to replacing zero-hours contracts, where feasible, with fractional contracts that provide stable workloads. More significant are the rights and security resulting from EU employment directives. Fixed-term employees have rights to the same pay and conditions as permanent staff, and after two years gain the same rights against redundancy (permanent layoff) and unfair dismissal. After four years their jobs become permanent. [3] Zero-hours staff have rights to statutory annual leave, non-exclusive employment, and to refuse work without jeopardy. However, employers need not offer zero-hours employees any work, making it unwise for zero-hours staff to defend their rights strenuously.

The use of GTAs in humanities disciplines functions well as a form of apprenticeship. However, GTA workloads, based on workload models structured for permanent staff, allocate insufficient time new lecturers need to prepare classes, mark assessments, and develop materials such as online lecture notes and film clips. Increasingly, GTA job descriptions specify opportunities for professional development, mentoring by senior staff, and participation in curriculum development, but workloads provide few or no hours for such activities.

Subsequently, GTAs frequently work well beyond their contracted hours.

VLs appear, at first glance, uncontroversial. They provide expertise where the extent of the need to teach this knowledge does not justify a permanent post. In film they are more common in practice modules (production courses) than academic modules, with professional practitioners teaching around their production schedules. Such use of VLs supports the employability agenda in UK higher education policy by providing direct links to industry. [4] Further, the industry skills body Creative Skillset stipulates the use of industry VLs in the film, arts, and media degrees it accredits. However, employability serves a larger policy to exploit and expand higher education's contribution to the economy. Academic and practical studies of film have coexisted within the arts and humanities fruitfully since the medium was introduced into universities (Grieveson and Wasson). Now, many UK universities, particularly those with joint academic and practical film degrees, situate film within the "creative industries," which motivates a curricular shift toward media policy and vocational training as instrumental means to support graduate employment. [5] Curricular tensions result between the industrial focus of the creative industries and the humanities focus of film studies, with accreditation tipping the balance toward industry. This is not to argue that film education should shun graduate employment and industry, but that curricula should result from lecturers' scholarship, not external, economically-directed policy and the interests of industry.

Teaching relief and infill staff have the most insecure and unpredictable employment, and constitute the category of casual lecturers growing most rapidly. Relief and infill staff share GTA's problems with workload models, limited professional development, and exclusion from program meetings, and frequently become disconnected from the daily routines of universities. Zero-hours lecturers in particular are paid less than others performing similar roles. Unlike GTAs who also study, and VLs who typically have other employment, relief and infill staff often need to string together numerous casual contracts to achieve a living wage.

In 2008, researchers at the University of Wollongong produced *The Red Report, Recognition – Enhancement – Development: The Contribution of Sessional Teachers to Higher Education* to evaluate the effects of casual employment on teaching quality. Although a study of casual lecturers in Australia, this report reflects the situation in the UK. They conclude that the disenfranchisement of casual staff, their limited managerial and administrative support, and their lack of paid professional development prove detrimental to students' education and retention. The report proposes that cost should be secondary to teaching quality, and advocates professionalizing casual lecturers and improving their employment and administrative support. Most UK universities now include such activities in casual lecturers' job descriptions. Permanent lecturers should liaise with university management to help ensure these activities are offered and casual staff are paid for them.

Casual lecturers need such advocacy and collegiality from permanent staff, even though it seldom realises the kinds of action *The Red Report* proposes. Unfortunately, to control staffing costs university administrations often restrict the activities of casual lecturers to teaching, preparation, and marking, despite the improvements to students' education achievable through professional development for casual staff. However, recent higher education policy introduces financial incentives for universities to professionalize teaching. The UK government is establishing the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) to distinguish between universities on the quality of teaching. The TEF balances the REF, rightly questioning whether institutions' reputations should depend so significantly on staff research. [6] However, the TEF's central purpose is to allow English universities with good teaching ratings to increase tuition fees. [7] UK-wide recruitment competition and league tables (rankings) will likely compel Universities in Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales to participate in the TEF. Lecturers and students have little faith the TEF will assess teaching quality, however. Its measure of quality will be largely quantitative, drawing on data from the National Student Survey (NSS) and the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), including retention rates, NSS rankings, the number of graduates in graduate-level employment six months after graduation, and graduates' salaries. [8] Teaching itself will not be assessed. The TEF spearheads an unwelcome escalation in market competition in higher education. However, for university administrations, its implications for revenue justifies comprehensive investment in staff support and professional development to improve TEF metrics.

Casual lecturers can harness this investment by universities to better their chances to improve their employment contracts, and therefore improve pay, job security, and employment conditions, and to compete for the few permanent posts advertised. The proportion of each university's salaried staff (permanent and fixed-term) with

either higher education teaching qualifications or formal recognition will constitute an important HESA metric for the TEF. Fellowship of the Higher Education Academy (HEA) is the most common means to meet this criterion, and is becoming if not a job requirement, at least a performance target. Application for fellowship promotes engagement with pedagogical research. Undertaking pedagogical research alongside subject-specialist research, and cognisant of disciplinary methods, should improve the quality of teaching and student feedback, as *The Red Report* concludes. Although zero-hours lecturers are not included in HESA's teaching qualification and recognition metric, they are included in the NSS, and indirectly in other metrics. Consequently, some universities are encouraging and supporting zero-hours lecturers to achieve HEA fellowship. How this professionalization will map onto casual lecturers in film and media remains to be seen. Industry VLs who teach to supplement irregular employment have less incentive to achieve teaching recognition than humanities lecturers building academic careers.

The vote on June 23, 2016 for the UK to leave the EU jeopardizes the few advances for casual lecturers outlined above. Whether the UK will retain progressive employment rights resulting from EU membership is uncertain. Further, Universities UK argues that the TEF should be delayed because of the vote (Havergal, "Delay TEF"). This could delay the professionalization of casual lecturers. Additionally, any reduction of EU research income alters the economics on which UK universities operate, potentially affecting the number of casual staff employed and the ratio between permanent, fixed-term and zero-hours lecturers. Zero-hours contracts offer universities the cheapest and most flexible form of employment, and lecturers employed on these contracts the least job security, financial remuneration, and workplace autonomy. The fewer with meaningful academic freedom, the fewer can shape our disciplines. The use and treatment of casual lecturers is, however, a symptom of a greater concern. The Education Reform Act 1988 specifies that universities "provide education, promote learning and engage in research efficiently and economically" (s. 202(2)(b)). At issue is the university sector that a sovereign Britain wishes to forge: one that prioritizes education and learning, or one that privileges the economic efficiency of delivery. Casual lecturers' livelihoods, their job prospects, and the quality of students' education will bear the brunt of this decision.

Notes

[1] I use UK terminology and provide North American equivalents in brackets.

[2] The REF is a UK-wide assessment of research produced by academics employed by UK universities. Its rankings determine the basic research grant each university receives from its national funding council.

[3] There are exceptions to this right, such as "objective justification", or where employers and unions agree to suspend this right. An objective justification could be, for instance, the teaching provision was to end, not the employer's wish to replace the employee.

[4] Employability identifies the requirement for universities to help students become inquisitive, knowledgeable, critical, and creative citizens capable of contributing to society through their employment. However, employability is typically measured via graduate employment, despite these being very different.

[5] The "creative industries" is an unfortunate term coined by the UK Department for Culture, Media & Sport (DCMS) to distinguish culture's contribution to the nation's wealth, rather than its intrinsic value to society.

[6] A "mock TEF" assessment conducted by the *Times Higher Education* indicates TEF results will differ significantly from rankings dependent on research. See Havergal, "Mock TEF Results Revealed."

[7] The Higher Education and Research Bill 2016-17 provides the means to increase fees.

[8] Creative Skillset contends the TEF needs greater cognizance of the "'portfolio careers', [composed of] several part-time positions along with freelance work," that characterize work in the creative industries.

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