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PRECARITY IN THE NEOLIBERAL UNIVERSITY: SOME NOTES ON THE PLIGHT OF EARLY CAREER ACADEMICS

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Precarity and pensions

Alongside technical discussions of pension schemes, regulatory bodies and valuations, the USS pension strike also drew renewed attention to the casualisation of workers in the university. Sparked through debates over the difficulties faced by early career academics (ECAs) taking industrial action, addressing casualisation in HE quickly became part of a set of more utopian discussions about transforming the university on picket lines, teach-outs and in social media interactions. As a modest contribution to these debates, I want to contextualise casualisation within the protracted history of neoliberalisation in higher education. The aim is to produce an overview of 'how we got here' that gestures to the ways that market logics intersect both the casualisation of HE and the pension cuts at the heart of the USS dispute.

Before beginning this task, however, I think it is worth signposting why thinking through casualisation in the context of the pensions dispute is important to me. I am an ECA currently employed on a fixed-term, part-time teaching fellow contract with almost no paid research time. Because my contract ended in June 2018 I am also currently facing an anxious and unpaid summer before taking up a new position in September. For these reasons making compromises with my own solidarity during the USS strike was a necessary if uncomfortable experience. But it was ultimately one that demonstrated the necessity both of rethinking the nature of solidarity and of giving more space to casualisation struggles which can often feel marginalised.

In their [thoughtful piece](#), Sarah Burton and Vikki Turbine helped to clarify some of my own learning from these experiences by setting themselves against the kinds of solidarity that require 'sameness' without appreciating the ways in which casualisation make this financially and psychologically impossible for early career colleagues. Rather, they call for 'lively and mobile' solidarities, understood as spaces of care 'arrived at through mutual recognition and generosity.' These space must not only recognise the unequal structural positions that we occupy within the university, but that can also foster co-operative communities capable of addressing them.

This poses the question of how to develop this kind of solidarity in the long-term, especially so that casualisation struggles are given the attention and resources they need. Above all, we need to be alert to the fact that mutual recognition depends on fostering mutual understanding. Moving beyond the tendency to naturalise the insecurity of ECAs as 'paying one's dues' requires developing a shared knowledge of the ways that both pension cuts and casualisation are interconnected as overlapping consequences of the marketisation of HE. As such, by attempting to develop these connections, I hope that this USSbrief can contribute to forging solidarities of mutual recognition.

Casualisation in context

Marketisation has slowly eaten away at universities following the neoliberal revolution of the 1980s. In this time, as [Roger Brown](#) has shown, the rapid expansion of the HE sector has been facilitated by market mechanisms, notably through the introduction of £3,000 top-up fees in 2006. Reforms in 2012 have seen fees rise to over £9,000 a year at the same time as government support for university teaching has been almost entirely cut. The result is that HE has become fully exposed to the logic of 'the market', creating intense competition between universities for students and their fees.

The combined pressures of expansion and marketisation have contributed to the casualisation of ECAs in different but overlapping ways. Departments faced with tightened budgets are increasingly incentivised to cut costs by employing PhD students and ECAs as hourly paid staff or on fixed-term teaching contracts to cover undergraduate programmes with growing student numbers. UCU figures published in [The Guardian](#) have shown that by 2016 53% of academics in universities were on insecure contracts. Despite their claims to offer superior terms of employment and superior forms of teaching provision, members of the Russell Group of universities have spearheaded these trends. In some Russell Group universities, the percentage of academics doing front-line teaching and employed on 'atypical' contracts was around 70%. I have collated a selection of examples of these kind of contracts [here](#). [The Academic Precariat](#), an organisation focusing on ECA struggles, will be publishing an archive of precarious HE job adverts in the coming weeks.

At the same time, Roger Brown shows, research funding has slowly been transformed into a quasi-market imbued with the spirit of competition. In part, this has been achieved through the move towards selective research funding tied first

to the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) and now the Research Excellence Framework (REF). These processes have become a way to allocate the 'scarce resources' of funding to competing universities based on research output, now figured as a kind of return on investment.

As universities have looked to chase funding by bolstering their REF submissions, competition has become embedded through the academic labour market. Universities are incentivised to ignore riskier, less proven researchers and increasingly look to 'assets' with publication or funding records that can improve their competitive standing in the REF. There is also a feeling that the problem has been exacerbated by increasing numbers of outstanding EC researchers joining the labour market, more than could ever hope to be permanently employed by 'lean', marketised institutions. This has created barriers to permanent work for ECAs as the bar for becoming a research 'asset' in an unbearably competitive market has grown steadily higher. Accordingly, the boom in insecure teaching contracts is now a way of 'getting by' for large numbers of ECAs in the absence of more secure employment.

At this juncture, it is worth also pointing out that the latest [REF guidelines](#) may, perversely, provide disincentives for HE institutions to offer temporary ECAs permanent contracts. Under current rules universities can make submissions from staff who are no longer employed by the university but who were when the research was published. For an ECA who has, no doubt, done hours of unpaid work to develop publications, this may cause problems. If universities can 'bank' an ECA's publications in their submissions before a fixed-term contract is complete then there is little incentive to keep ECAs in their posts. Although [Martin Eve](#) has suggested that universities, under these rules, are now incentivised to keep high-performing staff, it is not at all clear whether this is actually the reality. In an environment where short term contracts are endemic and university funding for permanent positions is much less certain, it is entirely unclear whether universities would be willing to make this extra investment once publications (as 'bankable assets') have been extracted from ECAs.

Nevertheless, casualisation is an issue that goes beyond the challenges of the REF exercise. Recently, the intensification of a market model of research funding in the humanities and social sciences has brought both a greater emphasis on interdisciplinarity and a move toward a STEM model of external grant-seeking based around large-scale collaborative projects. [Sophie Jones and Catherine Oakley](#) suggest this has created new challenges for ECAs. As the number of permanent jobs has decreased, the traditional route from post-doctoral researcher

to permanent lecturer has been replaced by a new landscape of alternative short-term, part-time 'post-docs' that are attached to large research projects and where ECAs are recruited as 'research assistants' (RAs).

Not only has this new 'arrangement' of post-doctoral research created increasingly precarious conditions, but it has also made it difficult for ECAs to move into a permanent post. After all, it can be difficult to generate the necessary publications if your research autonomy is restricted by your position in a large project, or if moving from post to post creates a backlog of unfinished publications. Furthermore, interdisciplinarity can be especially challenging for ECAs searching for permanent work given that 'the majority of permanent jobs [...] still correspond with disciplinary categorisations'. In this sense, an otherwise welcome move towards greater collaboration has been subordinated to a research market which, at its very worst, takes ECAs for their 'use value' without investing in their needs or respecting their autonomy.

At the same time, a layer of precarious teaching fellows (already noted by [Rosalind Gill](#) in 2009) is also now being slowly integrated into this landscape. It appears that a growing number of insecure teaching contracts are now created as a byproduct of permanent lecturers receiving 'teaching buyout' from external funders in order to pursue research projects. Because 'buyout' usually only covers the teaching load of a researcher for the fixed amount of time that a research project is active, the result is usually a fixed-term, part-time teaching fellowship designed essentially to provide cover. The effect is a system in which ECAs are constructed as a teaching asset for the university, while the risky business of their unproven research is externalised as a liability.

As ECAs take up these posts they are subject to a set of challenges similar to—but ultimately different from—those of colleagues on RA contracts. For example, the 'outsourcing' of teaching to less experienced ECAs who are as yet unable to compete in the research market means giving a heavy teaching load to individuals who require longer preparation times. This leaves ECAs with little time (and certainly almost no paid time) to develop a publications profile which would allow them to move into a permanent lectureship. This problem might also be exacerbated by institutional arrangements that exclude teaching focused staff from existing support offered to research-active colleagues. While understanding the scale of this problem requires more research, one can already begin to see that these kinds of challenges faced by teaching fellows may make it even more difficult for them to find permanent positions.

Assets and liabilities

The logic of cuts to USS pensions (see for example [USSbriefs16](#)) is one of reducing the liabilities attached to academics while increasing assets (buildings) and incomes (fees, research grants), and a similar logic has been at work in the casualisation of HE. For ECAs, the HE sector has transformed into an unduly burdensome labour market where risks are transferred from the university to the individual.

Crucially, the move in the humanities and social sciences towards large-scale collaborative models of research has also created new hierarchies of insecurity for ECAs. While Jones and Oakley have put forward an excellent set of recommendations that, if implemented, will help to alleviate some of the difficulties experienced by post-doctoral researchers, more work is required to better understand the broader ecology of problems experienced by ECAs in this landscape, especially those on teaching-only contracts.

Nevertheless, reforming the university also entails a struggle to transform the culture of the institution. Above all, what is vitally needed is to wrest the ideal of collaboration from the clutches of the market. Perhaps the first step on this journey is to turn to the kinds of solidarity advocated by Burton and Turbine. Research collaboration, indeed collaboration all across the university, would then be rooted in 'spaces of care' through which we might begin to embed an investment in all of our futures within the institution.

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