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Hourly paid teachers in UK universities: Findings from an exploratory survey

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The Higher Education sector in the UK has seen some unprecedented changes in recent years. One of the most striking changes has been the widespread use of casualised contracts in UK universities. In 2012-13, almost 34 per cent of academics worked part-time, nearly 36 per cent had fixed-term contracts, 25 per cent of all full-time contracts were fixed-term, and almost 56 per cent of all part-time contracts were fixed-term (HESA, 2014). A recent Freedom of Information Request by UCU revealed that 75 (53 per cent) of institutions that responded use zero hours contracts for teaching, research and/or academic related staff (UCU, 2013). Jenny Chen and Ana Lopes from UWE have conducted an exploratory study of the impact of casualised contracts in UK universities.

Background

The initial aims of this study were to learn more about the pay rates of hourly paid teachers, their workload, particularly the time spent in preparation and marking, and their career prospects. In addition, we aimed to investigate whether pay, workload and perceived job insecurity may influence turnover (i.e. intention to quit or leave the job), behavioural disengagement (i.e. giving up, or reducing efforts to achieve work goals) and burnout (i.e. perceived levels of emotional exhaustion and psychological fatigue at work) for these teachers.

A questionnaire was developed to explore the experiences of hourly paid teachers in UK universities. All constructs were measured by using multi-item scales from previous studies, particularly in the areas of work stress and well-being.¹

¹ Specifically, Carver, Scheier and Weintraub's (1989) four items were applied to measure behavioural disengagement. Example items are "I often give up the attempt to get what I want" and "I often reduce the amount of effort I'm putting into the job". Burnout was measured with six high-loading items from the scale used by Maslach's Burnout Inventory (Maslach and Jackson, 1981). Example items are "I feel used up at the end of a work day" and "I feel burned out from my work." Turnover intention was assessed through Meyer, Allen and Smith's (1993) widely used three items. Example items include "I frequently think of quitting my job" and "I often seriously think about making a real effort to enter a new and different occupation." The response scale for all these measures was a five-point Likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree". Job insecurity was measured by the scale developed by Caplan *et al.* (1980), including the following four items: 'How certain are you about what your future career picture looks like in your organisation?', 'How certain are you of the opportunities for promotion and advancement which will exist in the next few years?', 'How certain are you about your job security?' and 'How certain are you about what your responsibilities will be six months from now?' The items were rated on a 4-point scale (1=very certain, 4=very uncertain).



An on-line survey was distributed to hourly paid teachers via trade union representatives in three universities; to hourly paid teachers via university websites, and to hourly paid teachers attending a union event held in Bristol. Overall, we collected 271 usable responses. Of these 156 (58.2 per cent) were male and 112 (41.8 per cent) female. The average age of the respondents was 42.6. In terms of educational qualifications, 57 (21.3 per cent) had a first degree, 109 (40.8 per cent) had a master's degree and 84 (31.5 per cent) had a doctoral degree; 73 (27.4 per cent) reported that they were union members.

Hourly pay rate

We first analysed the data by examining hourly pay rates and their impact on behavioural disengagement, turnover intention and burnout. The average hourly pay rate was £37.58, ranging from a minimum of £7 to a maximum of £68. Nearly half the participants reported that their hourly pay was between £41 and £50, while only one per cent of the respondents indicated that their hourly pay was over £50 (see Figure 1). This underlines the disparity of hourly payment between different Higher Education institutions.

In addition, we found that the hourly pay rate was similar for men and women, but it was related to the respondent's age, with older respondents more likely to report receiving higher hourly pay. However, our data did not show any significant relationships between hourly pay rate and behavioural disengagement, turnover intention and burnout.

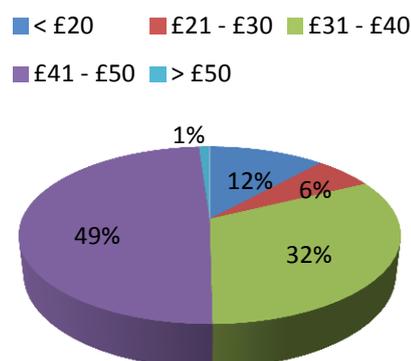


Figure 1: Hourly pay rate among hourly paid teachers

Gap between paid time and actual time spent on marking and preparation

We also examined the gap between paid time and actual time spent on marking and preparation. A total of 40 per cent of hourly paid academics reported there was no paid time allowed within the hourly rate for marking and preparation, and 38 per cent of respondents reported that they had at most 30 minutes and only seven per cent of respondents suggested that they had more than 60 minutes for marking and preparation (see Figure 2).

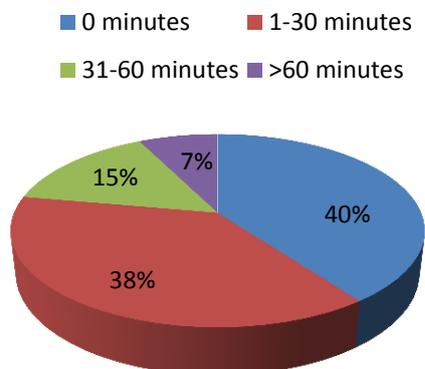


Figure 2: Paid time allowed for marking and preparation

However, when examining the actual time spent in marking and preparation, only six per cent of respondents reported that they did not spend time in marking and preparation, while 61 per cent of respondents suggested that they had to spend over 30 minutes in marking and preparation (see Figure 3). This result was consistent with the findings of Lopes and Dewan (2015) that hourly paid teachers felt their efforts were neither recognised nor remunerated.

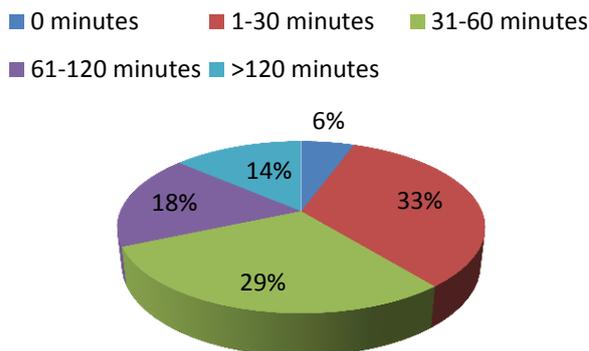


Figure 3: Actual time spent for marking and preparation

These findings are also illustrated by survey respondents' comments, such as:

“ I love my job but feel like the return on the hours I actually put in is ridiculous. The hourly rate is high but depending on what I am teaching the hours I put in reduce it to below minimum wage. Though this is not ways the case, it is very variable. It is frustrating to put in as many hours as some staff on contracted positions and receive vastly less pay. The job security is non-existent and that is a huge concern”.

People are impressed when you say you're a "lecturer", but it's a complete farce when you need to kill yourself just to earn the average wage. We are completely and totally UNDERPAID for what we do.”

Consistent with the survey findings, these quotes reinforce that the vast majority of academics on hourly paid teaching contracts performed unpaid duties. Furthermore, they felt that there was very little recognition and support for them.

To further explore the impact of unpaid time spent on marking and preparation, we analysed the data using hierarchical regression to test the relationships between extra unpaid time and burnout and behavioural disengagement. The finding suggests that the more extra unpaid time respondents spent on marking and preparation, the more likely they were to report psychological strain and reduce the amount of effort they put into work or give up on aspirations to meet work goals.

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Job insecurity

The survey found that the average tenure of hourly-paid teaching in any institution was 4.6 years. As shown in Figure 4, within four key areas related to uncertainty on job loss – future career picture, opportunities for promotion and advancement, job security and clarity on job responsibility over the next six months – the uncertainty levels were all very high. More than half of the respondents indicated that they were very uncertain in each of the first three areas, with only 11.9 per cent, 8.1 per cent and 10.4 per cent saying they were either certain or very certain. The figures for clarity on job responsibility over the next six months were not as high: 45.2 per cent were very uncertain and 27.0 per cent were certain or very certain. The findings emphasise uncertainty over career prospects, but also endemic job insecurity for hourly paid teaching staff in UK universities.

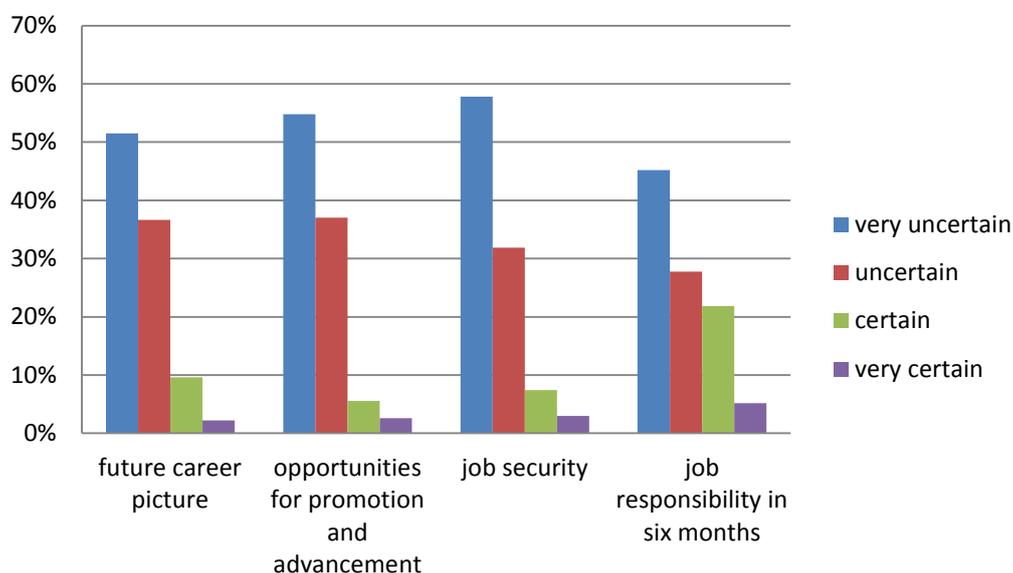


Figure 4: Job insecurity among hourly paid teachers

To further explore the impact of uncertain career prospects, we test the relationships between job insecurity and turnover intention and burnout. The findings provided evidence to confirm that, in our sample of hourly paid teaching staff, job insecurity was positively related to turnover intention and burnout, as Sverke, Hellgren and Naswall (2002) reported in a meta-analysis of job insecurity.

Other findings

The regression analysis suggested that the type of university (i.e. Russell Group and Post-92) was not related to burnout or intention to quit, which suggested that as long as the job contract was insecure, no matter where hourly paid teachers were employed, they were more likely to report intention to quit and burnout.

In addition, we explored the relationship between the length of time a person had worked on hourly paid teaching contracts (tenure) and burnout. The findings showed a positive relationship between tenure and burnout, indicating the longer respondents had been on hourly paid contracts, the more likely they were to report burnout in the workplace.

The longer respondents had been on hourly paid contracts, the more likely they were to report burnout in the workplace

Summary

There has been an expansion of casualised contractual relationships in Higher Education in the UK (UCU, 2013). It is not hard to understand the potential benefits of these contracts for universities - operational, financial and administrative flexibility. However, based on our study, it is clear that such benefits come with a high price in terms of the well-being and work engagement of hourly paid teaching staff. One of the implications of this study is that universities who depend on casualised contracts should be aware of the potential negative impact on staff well-being, turnover and work engagement. There should be ways to support the career prospects of hourly paid academics and efforts should be made to ensure that higher education is not based upon unpaid labour.

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