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Academic Casualization in the UK

Steven Parfitt
Loughborough University

Abstract

The casualization of academic work is a deepening problem at UK universities. From the late 1990s, the number of academics working on non-permanent, non-full-time contracts has skyrocketed, even as student fees have increased at an exponential rate. This casualization has generated resistance on the lower rungs of the academic ladder. On the one hand, the union for the higher education sector, the UCU, has tried without much success to stem the tide of casualization. On the other, casual academic staff have tried to organise on their own to resist casualization at a local level.

In the United Kingdom, temporary or part-time academic jobs were once labelled "atypical" because they were outside the usual experience of most academics over the course of their careers. Today, the typology "typical" and "atypical" remains, but does not represent the widespread changes that have taken place in labor practices. At most British universities, a majority of teaching staff work under so-called atypical contracts while the corporate leaders of these institutions chip away at the number of typical ones. These changes have not occurred without resistance. Search the *Guardian* and the *Times Higher Education Supplement* and you find a whole genre of reports and columns, most of them anonymized, on the erosion of labor standards in academia. Recent years have seen a succession of more or less informal, and ephemeral, networks and organizations of casual academic workers, demanding greater job security and better wages and conditions. These demands have also been bound up with wider political debates over the growth of casual, zero-hour, and other precarious contracts. This historical conjuncture, pregnant as it is with so many possibilities and so many dangers, is the subject of this article.

I begin with my own experience of casual academic labor. This experience illustrates much of what follows, but it also has a deeper meaning, that of breaking a silence that is often maintained among academics separated from their colleagues only by the shabby terms and conditions of a casual contract. Those of us who teach on a casual basis are often inclined to see our condition as a judgement on their knowledge and abilities, and to think that their full-time colleagues also view them as the basement dwellers of the academic labor force. This is not so, but there is a burning need for casual academic workers to be honest to themselves, their colleagues and their students—honest about their own worth, about their own abilities, and about the contracts that do justice to neither.

I have taught at three universities in the UK—Loughborough, Nottingham and Derby—during and after my PhD at the University of Nottingham. I

International Labor and Working-Class History
No. 93, Spring 2018, pp. 221–227
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doi:10.1017/S0147547917000369

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547917000369 Published online by Cambridge University Press

previously taught at the University of Auckland, in New Zealand, on wages and conditions much better than those in Britain. In the past three years, I have cobbled together a large number of teaching hours on casual contracts, up to fifteen seminar groups per semester, as well as lectures and other responsibilities. In the past academic year, I marked about 1,200 essays and exam scripts. For this work, I have never crossed the threshold for UK income tax and earned just under £10,000 a year.

That is what casualization has meant for me. Most casual teachers I know have not shouldered quite so much work, but many suffer from the opposite problem of insufficient work, and the absence of opportunities to teach and build up the experience needed to get a full-time job. In the past year, I have worked with many colleagues in the University of Nottingham to form an informal organization of casual teachers, to formulate and present demands to improve the conditions for casual staff before university management. We have been partly successful, bringing a set of minimum standards for casual teachers before the university and encouraging the local branch of the higher education union, the University of College Union, to back them. From the growth and nature of casual contracts at UK universities, to the growing resistance against those contracts and the future prospects for rolling them back, these personal experiences tie in directly with the general picture that appears below.

Casualization in UK Universities

Neoliberalism might be an overused phrase, but it is well suited as an explanation for the rise of casual labor in British academia. The place to start is with the "business" of the higher education "sector." Higher education is one of the UK's largest industries, especially after the destruction of much of the country's manufacturing base from the 1980s onwards. There are around 130 universities in the UK, 108 of them in England. They run the gamut from the two most famous medieval universities, Cambridge and Oxford, through well-established ones such as Nottingham, Birmingham, and the colleges that used to make up the University of London, to finally what are known as the "post-92" universities, most of them former polytechnics, teaching colleges, and so on, which won the right to name themselves as universities in 1992. All these institutions have catered to a rapidly expanding number of students. Between 1992 and 2016 the student population almost doubled, growing from 984,000 to 1.87 million.[1]

How to pay for this rapid expansion of student numbers? Until the late 1990s, students paid no fees for tuition, and some could rely on grants from local or central government to pay living costs, as well. In 1998, Tony Blair's Labour government allowed universities to charge an annual fee of up to £1,000 a year, and raised that level to £3,000 in 2004. The Conservative/Liberal Democrat Coalition upped it further to £9,000 (and this, after the Liberal Democrats campaigned on an end to tuition fees). Public spending on undergraduate study declined as fees went up.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547917000369 Published online by Cambridge University Press

While Scottish students pay no tuition fees, many students from the rest of the UK as well as the European Union pay for their education with an accumulation of debt. For those from outside the UK or the EU, a British education carries an even heftier price tag, and universities have done their best to attract as many of these lucrative international students as possible, who now account for about fifteen to twenty percent of the total student population.[2] Some universities have even opened campuses in Asia, the region that supplies the greatest number of non-UK and -EU students.[3] Higher education has become one of Britain's key export industries.[4]

It has become an even larger employer as well, for the rise in student numbers has created great demand for more teachers. In 1999, British universities employed 131,136 people. In 2016, that number stood at around 270,000.

So far so good—student and teacher numbers have both doubled in a comparable period. But universities have not recruited twice the number of permanent, full-time staff to teach twice the number of students. The collection of statistics on the academic labor force leaves a lot to be desired. Everyone is meant to fall into one of three categories—full time, part time, and "atypical," a label that covers workers on various kinds of casual contracts, including those on what are known in the UK as "zero-hours contracts," where employers do not guarantee working hours from week to week. In 1999, only fifteen percent of the 130,000 academics were listed as part time, and none were listed as atypical. The remaining eighty-five percent worked on full time contracts. In 2016, only 15,000 of the 140,000 teaching staff added after 1999 were hired on full-time contracts, and the proportion of full-time teachers fell from eighty-five to less than fifty percent. Part-time employment has nearly quadrupled from 18,000 in 1999 to 66,000 in 2016; casual, atypical workers went from none in 1999 to around 75,000 in 2016.[5]

Recent studies suggest that more than half of all teachers in higher education are on some kind of precarious contract, whether this be fixed-term, fractional (that is, paid a certain proportion of a full-time salary), paid by the hour, or some other temporary arrangement.[6] Casualization is in some respects proceeding quickest at the elite universities. Institutions that are part of the Russell Group, a lobbying organization that represents twenty-four of the most research-intensive UK universities, employ up to sixty or seventy percent of their teaching staff on precarious contracts.[7]

One incident sums up the unease felt by the managers of British universities when casualization is brought to the attention of the public. In November 2016, the *Guardian* compared labor practices in UK higher education to those at Sports Direct, a large distribution company notorious for its super-exploitation of workers at its warehouses, and singled out my alma mater, the University of Nottingham. The newspaper featured interviews with me and another member of the casual staff who remained anonymous and had worked for the local council as a rubbish collector to supplement his meagre earnings from his university position.[8] Nottingham put out a press release that labelled us as "two individuals who said they had worked at the University of

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547917000369 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Nottingham" and insisted that the *Guardian* had unfairly singled out Nottingham as a bad employer. The press release also tried to bury the scale of casualization with accounting tricks. For example, the university counted casual teachers who work fewer hours, but all of which are directly teaching-related, as fractions of full-time lecturers, who have large amounts of time set aside for research and administrative work. By doing this, it made it look as though casual teachers were a small proportion of the total teaching hours of the university and disguised the large proportion of teaching undertaken by academics on casual contracts.[9]

This is, in brief, the course that casualization has taken in British universities. A great expansion of higher education has been achieved through the creation of an entirely new layer of throwaway academics, a layer that grows as ever more students take on massive debt in the hope of getting a secure, well paid and intellectually-stimulating job in the future. None of this should come as a shock to academics in the United States as well as in in other parts of the world, where this process is also taking place if in its own unique way. And like their counterparts elsewhere in the world, resistance to casualization in academia has also grown in recent years.

Resisting Casualization

The industrial relations landscape of British academia differs from its American counterpart in a crucial respect. While in the United States, graduate students and contingent faculty must search for whichever unrelated union might help them to organize, casual teaching staff in the UK are at least nominally covered by the University and College Union (UCU), an organization open to all academic workers, and which comprises more than 100,000 members. Membership dues are absent or very low for PhD students and the UK equivalents of contingent faculty. For the equivalent of less than two dollars a month (or as of July 2017, in the case of PhD students or those without a teaching contract, for free), casual staff gain access to the considerable resources of the largest higher education union in the world, which has secured recognition with every university in the country. Nor do casual teachers have to win a ballot for union recognition as they must in the United States. Recruitment can take place individual by individual, and there is no need to secure the loyalty of a majority of causal teachers before the organizing work or negotiations can begin. This, and the existence of a large union that already covers all academic workers, are advantages that casual teachers enjoy in the UK that American ones do not.

This is not an unmixed blessing. In my experience, many casual teachers remain suspicious of the UCU and its commitment to defending their interests; in some cases, they regard the UCU as an instrument for the protection of full time members both from university management and from the academic precariat fast growing below them. There are some grounds for both beliefs. In recent years, the UCU has spent most of its resources waging defensive battles to

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547917000369 Published online by Cambridge University Press

protect the pensions, and the pay and conditions, of its full-time members. Relatively little has been devoted to the issue of casualization and particularly to the organizing of the casual teachers who, after all, are in many cases the future full-time members that the union seeks to recruit.

The situation would be much worse if not for the UCU's anti-casualization committee, which has made up for its relative lack of resources with hard work. Many individual UCU officials do their best to bring the demands of casualized academics to the attention of university management. The recent decision to drop membership dues for PhD students should encourage more to join, and encourage the union to spend more time on casualization issues.

But most of the energy has come from outside the union and its structures. Some of this energy has been channeled into a growing literature of grievance, expressed in numerous blogs and in particular through the Higher Education pages of the *Guardian* and the *Times Higher Education* supplement. In these publications, especially the *Guardian*, academics have repeatedly railed against the commodification of education and the growth of precarious contracts in academia—usually anonymously. These posts and columns and reports have done much to promote discussion of the issue amongst academics, although their impact is limited by the fact that people are (understandably) reluctant to put their names to many articles and that few people outside the academy ever find their way to them.

Some of this energy has been channeled into the construction of networks and informal organizations that bring casual teachers together. Since the conditions of causal academic workers differ according to the region, university, or even faculty, department, or individual course that they work on, the activities of casual academic workers have remained fragmented and localized in character. In London, academic workers at the School of African and Oriental Studies (SOAS), King's College London, and other institutions have formed what we might think of as "pop-up unions" or loose bodies to oppose the exploitation of academics on fractional contracts or to win wage rises for casual academic teachers. Casual teachers, students, and others at Warwick have experimented with the occupation of university buildings as a means to raise and resolve their demands. I have worked with colleagues at the University of Nottingham to build up a network of casual teachers to formulate demands and bring them before the university.

Across the UK, movements of casual teachers have sprung up to challenge the casualization of academic life. Sometimes they were instigated by or worked with the UCU; at other times they emerged and remained more or less independent of any outside organization. What they share is that they remained localized, and episodic. The structure of British postgraduate study plays a role here, too. British PhD programs remain relatively short, almost all between three and four years, meaning that the turnover of casual staff is much greater than in the US or at many other universities. Most "pop-up unions" must, out of necessity, rely on the enthusiasm of a small number of activists to move forward. If the activists move on, the pop-up organization very quickly, pops

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547917000369 Published online by Cambridge University Press

back down. Until this changes, the gains made through these informal movements will remain as short-lived as most of the organizations themselves.

Future Prospects

The energy behind the resistance to casualization at British universities might not yet have resulted in much in the way of gains, but that energy continues to grow. For all the shortcomings of the UCU and the structural problems that retard the progress of more informal organizations, the issue of casualization is more widely discussed than ever before, and more are willing to do something about it. The tasks that we in Britain now face are to try to join up local manifestations of discontent into something larger and national in character, and to bridge the gap between the UCU and the casual workers who remain skeptical of or uninterested in it. We need, in other words, to combine the resources of an existing union with the desires and struggles of precarious academics, and to bring full-timers together with casuals for their mutual benefit.

The 2017 General Election has opened up other possibilities. Under Jeremy Corbyn, the Labour Party has begun to shed some of its previous attitudes toward higher education. Labour mobilized millions of young people at election time behind its demand for an end to tuition fees. At the same time, Labour called for an end to zero-hours contracts and suggested further sweeping change to British industrial relations. These policies proved popular at the polls, and there has never been a more propitious time for casual academics in the UK to work together with students to roll back the corporatization of higher education. Universities have proved much more willing to listen to anti-casualization arguments when presented by their students than by their own employees, and students can do things that casual teachers are often reluctant to do, worried as they are about losing their jobs or not having their contracts renewed.

Another potential source of strength, and allies, are the non-academic workers on campus—cleaners, caterers, grounds people, administrators—many of whom also work on casual contracts and for even lower wages. Indeed, in many cases, as in university libraries, non-academic and academic workers are the same individuals. In this new political climate, joint campaigns by casual workers across the university would stand a greater chance of success than action by isolated pockets of academic staff alone. There are examples of such campaigns in the United States and in the UK, but so far the struggles of academic and non-academic workers on campus have remained separate. This must change.

And we in the UK cannot afford to remain isolated from our counterparts in other places. In academia, as in in any other industry, casualization is a process that pays little heed to national borders. There are vital differences between the legal, industrial, and political contexts that casual teachers labor under across nations, but there is still much we can learn from each other. Earlier this year I had the opportunity at the Labour and Working-Class History Association to meet with American and Canadian labor historians resisting casualization

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0147547917000369 Published online by Cambridge University Press

at their own universities, and who are trying to build connections with each other.[10] We need global as well as national connections. We might not have the resources to build an international movement, but we can exchange information and use our successes and failures for mutual benefit. That way, future articles like this one can report more of the former, and less of the latter.

NOTES

1. Office for National Statistics, "How Has the Student Population Changed," 20 September 2016. Available at: http://visual.ons.gov.uk/how-has-the-student-population-changed/ (accessed 12 February 2018).

2. Universities UK, "International Students Now Worth 25 Billion to UK Economy," 6 March 2017. Available at: http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/news/Pages/International-students-now-worth-25-billion-to-UK-economy---new-research.aspx (accessed 12 February 2018).

3. Higher Education Statistics Agency, "Student Enrolments and Qualifications Obtained at Higher Education Providers in the United Kingdom 2015/16," 12 January 2017. Available at: https://www.hesa.ac.uk/news/12-01-2017/sfr242-student-enrolments-and-qualifications (accessed 12 February 2018).

4. Ibid., 2

5. All the statistics in this section are taken from http://www.hesa.ac.uk (accessed 12 February 2018). In particular, cf. "Table 1—All staff (excluding non-academic atypical) at UK HE providers by academic contract marker, activity standard occupational classification, mode of employment and sex 2013/14 to 2015/16"; and "Table 14—Academic Staff at UK HE Institutions by Location of Institution, Mode of Employment, Clinical Status, Principal Source of Salary, Primary Employment Function, Grade (1) and Gender 1998/99," in *Higher Education Statistics for the United Kingdom, 1998–99*. Available at https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/publications/higher-education-1998-99 (accessed 12 February 2018). I should acknowledge here the work of Dr. Lorenzo Costaguta, who compiled these statistics in a paper at the 2017 Labor and Working-Class History Association Conference in Seattle.

6. University and College Union, "Precarious Work in Higher Education: A Snapshot of Insecure Contracts and Institutional Attitudes," April 2016. Available at: https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/7995/Precarious-work-in-higher-education-a-snapshot-of-insecure-contracts-and-institutional-attitudes-Apr-16/pdf/ucu_precariouscontract_hereport_apr16.pdf (accessed 12 February 2018).

7. "Universities Accused of Importing Sports Direct Model for Lecturers Pay," *The Guardian*, 16 November 2016. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2016/nov/16/universities-accused-of-importing-sports-direct-model-for-lecturers-pay (accessed 12 February 2018).

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9. "Union of Nottingham UCU," Response to *The Guardian*, 23 November 2016. Available at: https://uonucu.org/2016/11/23/the-university-of-nottingham-response-to-the-guardian/ (accessed 12 February 2018).

10. Labor and Working-Class Association, "Contingent Faculty Committee." Available at: https://www.lawcha.org/committee-portal/contingent-faculty/ (accessed 12 February 2018).

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