

## **Casualisation: a disease that must be eradicated**

Address to the Irish Federation of University Teachers, Annual Delegate Conference 2015.

Dear Delegates:

Thank you for the invitation to address you today. We are delighted to speak on casualisation in Irish higher education.

The higher education sector in Ireland has undergone many attacks in recent years. These attacks have changed the nature of work in our universities and colleges in a manner best described as malignant.

Casualisation of academic work is but one manifestation yet we believe it constitutes the most significant threat to higher education today. This phenomenon affects not only those immediately engaged in precarious work; it has serious implications for students and permanent staff too. Casualisation is a disease, as President Rose Malone described it in her address to you last year, and it is a disease that jeopardizes the very mission of higher education. As such, it must be eradicated with urgency.

The extent of casualisation has been documented in other countries. In the UK, higher education is the sector most likely to use zero-hour contracts. In Australia, 60% of contact hours are delivered by 'adjuncts'. In the US, 70% of academic staff are adjuncts. In these countries and others, such issues have been highlighted and efforts made to organise precarious workers.

In Ireland, there has been relative silence on the subject yet casualisation and its effects are widely apparent here. There has been a sharp decline in the number of permanent positions advertised. New types of contracts have emerged: 9-month, or 12-week contracts are now common where 12-month positions were once the norm. Hourly paid work has also proliferated and core modules are now taught on this basis.

While these are changes that most of us would have noticed in our workplaces, the extent of casualisation in Ireland is not known precisely. Unlike other countries, no comprehensive figures are available. But we have reasons to believe the phenomenon is just as widespread and no less disastrous than elsewhere.

We [names] launched an online questionnaire last year in order to document the extent and effect of casualisation as well as to reach out to our precarious colleagues. The questionnaire was addressed explicitly to those identifying as precarious workers and it received 270 responses. The format we chose allowed us to collect very detailed and personal accounts of the lived experience of precarity. From our research we wish to share eight conclusions.

To begin,

## **1) Casualised academic work takes many forms.**

Casualised academic work takes many forms and is difficult to map.

We are all perhaps most familiar with one or multi-year contracts as traditionally these posts were springboards into permanent academic posts. The most insidious types of casualised work come in the form of shorter term contracts, hourly paid work and JobBridge internships.

Conditions vary within departments and institutions and across them. Often institutions do not have standardised rates of pay for new, temporary contracts and so in some cases there are large discrepancies between the salaries for equivalent work.

Much work is hourly paid or paid per course while preparation, corrections and student consultation may not be paid at all depending on department or institution. Hourly rates of pay for both lecturers and graduate workers ('teaching assistants' or 'tutors') vary greatly across institutions as well.

## **2) Poverty and lack of protection**

Poverty and the increasingly permanent nature of precarity have emerged as the most discernable features of casualised work.

Our research indicates 66% of casual workers earn significantly less than the average industrial wage at less than 25,000 per year.

Of those workers 46% report salaries below €10,000 per year, below the poverty threshold in Ireland.

The percentage rises for hourly paid workers. Nearly 4 out of 5 of those doing hourly paid work earn less than 10,000 a year and are officially living in poverty. These are fully qualified lecturers with years of experience. They could be teaching as many as 4 full modules, an entire teaching load for most full-time staff.

A number of respondents report juggling hourly paid work between several institutions and often float in and out of employment, drawing social welfare or relying on the support of others. Graduate workers also report living in poverty as many of them receive in effect negative wages from the universities where they work once fees are deducted.

Hourly paid workers have little recourse under the law, as a recent Labour Court decision has shown, and are denied basic rights and entitlements. Unfair dismissals are moot because universities can simply choose not to offer any subsequent work the following term. Women who are pregnant are particularly vulnerable.

Furthermore, hourly paid work offers no paid leave, no sick pay, no maternity pay, and payment is typically below minimum wage. A fair day's wage for a fair day's work it is not! Hourly paid work, short-term contracts and programmes that require

free labour like JobBridge contradict the victories unions have fought hard to win.

### **3) Hamster wheel of precarity**

Casual work has become so systemic and endemic that many are now trapped in a hamster wheel of precarity. Precarity is now a permanent position in and of itself.

Many of our respondents had worked over 10 years in higher education and continue to do so on a casual basis. Thus, time spent in the sector does not result in an improvement of conditions – in fact for many, conditions deteriorate over time and workers remain trapped in precarious, low-paid employment.

As permanent staff are under increasing pressure, the teaching burden of departments is gradually passed onto casual staff. Casual workers rarely have the opportunity to teach the same course year after year; instead they are forced to prepare new material, often for free, while having little time to strengthen their expertise in modules related to their research interests.

This work offers no scope to develop a research profile. Precarious workers are often excluded from applying to research funding. Professional memberships and conferences are out of pocket with no institutional support. Thus dissemination of research and networking, essential CV-building exercises, are in fact hampered by employment status. This creates a situation whereby temporary workers are caught in a cyclical process, trapped in precarity, with diminishing exit points into secure academic work.

### **4) Reclassification of work**

Casualisation reclassifies our academic work. It devalues scholarly research. Casual academic workers are no longer expected to do research as paid work. Universities teach research and demand increased research productivity from staff. Yet, for casual workers, research is increasingly defined by institutions as extraneous unpaid work conducted outside the confines of contracts.

In effect, these workers are engaged in research and intellectual work full-time, but the institution only sees fit to pay them for classroom activities. Any publications produced through this free labour are often solicited for inclusion in the university's yearly productivity reports.

This reveals a deep contempt for the very nature of academic work. Teaching and research inform each other as we all know. Their compartmentalisation undermines knowledge work as a whole and feeds into the assumption that our work as academics is seasonal. Despite what is suggested in some quarters, we know our work does not end when students leave campus for the summer.

The increasing segmentation of academic labour marginalises these workers in their departments, where many do not have an office and are invisible in spite of their vital contribution. This poses a serious threat to collegiality as well as our ability to protect

our sector collectively.

### **5) Increased workload for permanent staff**

A small number of permanent staff responded to our questionnaire and an overall theme of workplace discontent and dissatisfaction emerged. The reforms within higher education mean that the work of permanent staff is increasing. This is very much connected to casualisation – as permanent positions are no longer replaced and part-time posts are used to cover full-time work. Permanent staff are having to pick up the slack in research, teaching, administration, and student support. Attempts to make academic jobs seasonal neglect the year-round cycle of academic work and shifts work onto the shoulders of those in more secure posts.

### **6) Learning Conditions**

The quality of education students receive is under threat as our working conditions are students' learning conditions.

Fees are increasing alongside staff-student ratios. Proper consultation and feedback is often now unpaid work in many universities. Precarious academics are discouraged from teaching to their fullest potential and providing students the full range of supports they need throughout their education.

### **7) Equality**

Casualisation is also a threat to equality in the workplace.

The issue of gender inequality within academic employment has come to our attention most recently because of the investigation at NUI Galway. Casualisation exacerbates gender inequality as women are concentrated in some of the worst forms of precarious academic work, particularly hourly paid and pro-rata work, and many are caught there for longer than their male counterparts.

If we are to adequately address gender inequality in the academic workplace casualisation must be tackled.

### **8) The University as a public good**

Casualisation undermines the university as a public good.

Academic freedom cannot be guaranteed for casual workers. Casual workers, due to lack of security, have no protection should they wish to explore contentious or critical research. Teaching staff on temporary contracts are often prohibited from continuing work started on previous contracts so as to prevent any claims to permanency under the law.

How can the foundational principles of higher education, like academic freedom and intellectual integrity remain intact under a system that denies a large portion of its workers the protection offered to permanent staff regarding their work?

Academic freedom comes with tenure and its denial to a large number of scholars chisels away at the very foundation of the university as a public good. As public monies are withdrawn from the staffing of permanent positions how can we ensure that free and independent thinking survive? These values are at the core of the university and the erosion of tenure threatens our ability to protect and nurture them.

### **Call to action**

What is to be done?

Though we have painted a grim picture there are ways to resist and revoke this casualisation that affects all those connected to the university. Ending casualisation requires a concerted effort. We call on you today to prioritise the fight against casualisation in your workplaces. We propose the following 5 first steps to commence this fight:

- 1) Document the extent of casualisation. Data is difficult to get and university management is not forthcoming on revealing the number of workers not employed on a permanent basis. You can start by documenting the permanent/non-permanent staff ratio, and sending that information to us or your branch chair.
- 2) Abolish the use of hourly paid work for regular teaching.
- 3) Resist the erosion of academic work into seasonal employment. One year contracts should be a minimum starting point.
- 4) Fight the use of JobBridge. Work must pay.
- 5) Make the union a more hospitable place for casual workers. Make it easier for casual workers to join IFUT- including more flexible memberships. Organise separate meetings to allow casual staff to discuss their grievances free from the fear of recrimination.

Casualisation attacks the core of what the university stands for with its threats to academic freedom, equality and education. It is antithetical to the very idea of a university itself. To conclude, we will leave you with a poignant quote from Toni Morrison.

“If the university does not take seriously and rigorously its role as a guardian of wider civic freedoms, as interrogator of more and more complex ethical problems, as a servant and preserver of deeper democratic practices, then some other regime or menage of regimes will do it for us, in spite of us, without us.”

Thank you.