

Extreme casualisation at Oxford University highlights gig-economy conditions across sector

Simon Whelan
1 December 2024

The University of Oxford is employing lecturers and researchers on insecure, precarious and poorly paid fixed-term and open-ended contracts, with many paid by-the-hour, a freedom of information request has revealed.

Wages for part-time teaching are often based on contact hours with students, i.e. in lectures and tutorials. But when preparation, grading and student consultation are considered, remuneration is frequently less than the minimum wage.

The low pay and super-exploitation experienced by workers at Deliveroo and Just Eat have become so prevalent in academia that delivery workers could legitimately protest their “Oxford-style” casualisation and exploitation. University lecturers, are sometimes employed for just a single hour a day, and are sometimes afforded even fewer protections than delivery App drivers.

A Freedom of Information (FOI) request by the University and College Union (UCU) shared with the *Observer* revealed approximately 61 percent of core tutorial teaching at 24 Oxford University colleges is conducted by casualised academic workers.

Oxford’s Christ Church college, with an income of £42.6 million in 2022-23, advertised a part-time stipendiary lectureship in Modern European History paying just £15,244 to £16,983, the *Observer* reported. The one-year contract covered an associate professor’s tutorial teaching, student support and organising and grading assessments. Oxford would not clarify how many actual hours of work the job entailed in total.

A humanities tutor at Oxford described their tutorial system as “incredibly labour intensive and also incredibly exploitative”. Contracted remuneration claimed to include preparation hours, but this fell “woefully short”. He told the *Observer*, “I’m aware of tutors who have tried to

invoice for more to cover the preparation and marking but have been met with not only a refusal but also the threat that their hours might be removed,” the tutor explained. Another Oxford academic calculated they were paid for just 15 percent of the work they did!

Such working conditions are not confined to Oxford. The casualisation of academic labour has continued unabated since the 1990s, and is central to the marketisation and privatisation of the sector, encouraged by successive Conservative and Labour governments. Such conditions are widespread in academia globally.

This year, two Oxford academics, Rebecca Abrams and Alice Jolly, successfully sued the university for employing them on “sham contracts” effectively making them “gig economy workers”. Both workers, each respected authors, taught Oxford’s prestigious creative writing course for 15 years, but were employed on fixed-term “personal services” contracts, which denied them crucial workplace rights.

At their employment tribunal hearing, the judge ruled the two were engaged on fixed-term contracts of employment and should therefore be classed as employees. Their lawyers, Leigh Day, said a hearing should be held to assess the implications of the ruling because the pair sued Oxford in a case which drew upon the

landmark tribunal decision which ruled Uber taxi-drivers are employees not self-employed, granting them a right to paid holidays and a pension.

Abrams welcomed the judgment, saying she hoped it would prompt “an urgently needed reboot” in the way universities treat employees. “With nearly 70 percent of its teaching staff on precarious contracts,” Abrams said, “Oxford is one of the worst offenders, but this is an issue that extends across UK higher education. Casualisation is

a race to the bottom—bad for teachers, bad for students, and bad for universities.”

Ryan Bradshaw, a solicitor at Leigh Day, said in response to the ruling, “This is the gig economy at Oxford University. It’s pure precarity and it means the imbalance of power relationship between employer and employee is huge and can lead to all kinds of abuses.

“These are people who would ordinarily be perceived as white-collar, privileged workers—they’re highly educated, really respected authors and writers, and they’re being forced to accept terms and conditions that undermine their legal rights.” She added that universities have become centres of the gig economy because of their “increased financialisation and marketisation”.

Oxford Brookes University and Oxford University UCU branches produced a report on precarious academic employment at both universities drawn from testimonies gathered in November and December 2021. It included input from those on fixed-term contracts and from lecturers and researchers paid by-the-hour.

Workers cited a lack of career progression and employment rights and the impacts of low and unstable income in one of the most expensive cities in the UK, with increased stress affecting mental health. Casualisation was experienced as exacerbating existing inequalities, and migrant staff and students spoke of concerns around visa requirements and immigration status.

In 2018, Oxford was found to have failed in its promise of reforms aimed at decreasing the number of staff in “precarious” jobs.

In 2016, the Higher Education Statistical Association (HESA) had reported employment at the University was the most insecure amongst Russell Group top-24 public research universities.

HESA’s report found almost 77 percent of Oxford’s academic staff employed in “precarious” jobs, in contrast to an average 51 percent for universities nationwide. The figure for Cambridge University was 65 percent. Oxford and Cambridge are second only to London in terms of extortionate living costs.

But two years later, the situation had worsened. A survey published in April 2018, showed 87 percent of Oxford’s research staff held insecure fixed-term contracts, marking a 5-year high. Oxford promised they would review the status of those who had been on fixed term contracts for 10-15 years!

The university claimed “some employees will be transferred from fixed-term to open-ended contacts.” But

open-ended contracts are not the same as permanent employment, and they don’t necessarily confer additional security.

Ten years ago, an Oxford academic wrote an exposé for the *Guardian* headlined, “Only the rich can afford to work at Oxford and Cambridge”. The lecturer, from a working-class background, explained that despite working 75 hours a week, they could not meet basic living costs.

They concluded, “After many years of misjudged optimism, I no longer believe that early-career positions at Oxbridge universities are viable for individuals without independent financial means.”

A 2019 survey by the UCU of its own members revealed that on average, part-time and hourly-paid teachers are doing 45 percent of their work without pay.

Publication by the UCU bureaucracy of information exposing the shoddy wages, terms and conditions of academics only adds insult to injury to its 120,000 union members. The massive extent of casualisation in the university sector has been enforced with the complicity of the education unions.

Around one-third of the UK’s 233,930 academics (77,475) were employed on insecure fixed-term contracts, HESA found in 2021-22. It also found 1.9 percent of academics were employed on zero-hour contracts. At private colleges which act as feeder institutions to UK universities, which charge international students extortionate fees, zero-hour contracts are widespread.

The UCU has betrayed the strivings of university staff for a fightback. Over decades the UCU has failed mount any kind of opposition to the casualisation drive of the employers. Entrenched casualisation is the case because the UCU has sold out myriad struggles by its members over precisely this issue over decades, as well as over pay and pensions—including several national strikes over the six years. This followed its betrayal in 2023 of the pensions dispute, which the union fraudulently attempted to portray as a victory. In November 2023, the UCU closed down the national “Four Fights” dispute over pay, workload, inequality and insecure contracts, which was mounted by higher education workers as part of the 2022-24 strike wave by public and private sector workers.



To contact the WWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)