TASA WORKING DOCUMENT: RESPONSES TO CONTINGENT LABOUR IN ACADEMIA

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Introduction and aims of the document

In December 2015, the TASA Executive approved the establishment of a Working Group to identify the key challenges facing contingent academic staff, and recommend practices that might mitigate those challenges. This working document sets out the key challenges facing contingent academics, and a suite of practices that can be implemented by individuals to address them. They are not substitutes for broader change. Both TASA and the Working Group recognise the structural, institutional and ideological logics that have driven the higher education sector's reliance on contingent academic labour, and argue that these dynamics must be addressed as matters of social justice and the long term flourishing of sociology within and beyond higher education.

This document is primarily speaking to those academics who have some say over the employment, management and support of contingent academic staff (even if such responsibilities are not formally recognised by their institutions). However, we are not suggesting that this is an 'us and them' issue, nor should our approach be interpreted as an oppositional understanding of different institutional positions. The strength and vibrancy of sociology as a discipline is dependent on a common interest and commitment to advocating for and building sustainable academic practice.

Contingent academics in a global and sociological perspective

The rise of the contingent academic workforce is driven by the trend of escalating casual and short-term contract appointments, relative to declining continuing appointments. It is reshaping higher education workforces around the world. Contingent employees – who receive few benefits and no security of employment – are generally considered a cheap alternative to continuing employees. The organisational imperative to be as "flexible" as possible is also driving casualization as less regulated processes of hiring and firing are seen to make it easier for an organisation to adapt to change and pursue new opportunities.

The casual academic workforce is part of a larger trend towards the growth of the *precariat*, a portmanteau term that combines the concepts of precarious and proletariat. Precariousness speaks to a position that could change for the worse with little or no notice, and thus to an ongoing sense of insecurity and uncertainty. Precariously employed workers fill roles on the edge of the organisation and along the periphery of the workforce, and they tend to be excluded and marginalised.

As both sociologists and academics, we have the resources to argue against the erosion of employment conditions and the growth of insecure employment, and to critique the particular conditions and counteract the particular consequences of these developments within academia. Yet this has not given sociology, or sociologists working across the sector, any immunity from the growth of insecure work. Indeed, many sociologists research and speak about the academic precariat from an insider's perspective.

Contingent academic work in Australian higher education

The proportion of academic staff employed on casual or fixed term contracts has increased significantly over the last two and a half decades. Yet it is difficult to know the exact size of this group of workers because national data records contingent staff only on a fulltime equivalent basis (FTE) (Andrews et al 2016). The Work and Careers in Australian Universities survey undertaken in 2011 (May et al., 2013) found that on a 'per head' basis 49% of all academic staff and 53% of all teaching and research staff are employed on a contingent basis. This is in comparison to 24% of the Australian workforce overall.

Contingent employment is not new. Provisions to enable the employment of academic staff on an hourly basis have existed in Australian universities since 1980. They were introduced with the aim of providing an "academic apprenticeship" to doctoral students and to employ "industry professionals" with specific expertise (May et al., 2013). Perhaps because of this history, the assumption remains that contingent academics are generally doctoral students or people with non-academic jobs whose input remains important in professionally orientated degrees (Andrews et al., 2016). However, doctoral students make up less than half the contingent academic workforce in the contemporary university (National Tertiary Education Union, 2015). Most contingent academics are not contingent by choice and those 'satisfied' with their contingent status are typically retired or in other permanent employment (May et al., 2013). One third have a PhD and half another type of post graduate qualification, most work in one or more universities for more than 3 years, some work at multiple universities, and for a significant proportion this work is their only source of employment (National Tertiary Education Union, 2015). Contingent academic employment can no longer be viewed as predominantly either a source of supplementary income for doctoral students or as an entry point into a secure academic career.

The contingent academic sector could operate as a training ground for a much needed future workforce. However, given that current work conditions do not support contingent academics in achieving ongoing employment, the higher education system now appears to be designed to operate as a tenured core supported by a contingent periphery. This matters because of the negative effects on contingent staff, and as the Bradley review of higher education pointed out, the academic workforce is aging and contingent employment reduces the attractiveness of academia as a profession and the ability of the sector to recruit in the future (May et al., 2013).

Key challenges facing contingent academics

Contingent academic staff are often employed through processes that intensify precariousness, and cycle between being unemployed, underemployed, and overworked but underpaid. The majority of academic contingent staff must 'fish' for work by privately emailing multiple academics as each semester draws near, often relying on benefactors (such as a supervisor) for that work. When offered employment, the processes of getting 'signed on' are often slow, unreliable, and systems are poorly integrated. When employed, contingent staff can experience non-payment, late payment or incorrect payment of wages.

Contingent academics describe the lack of clarity about the expectations attached to their roles. They may not be afforded access to the materials, technology, information and space necessary to do their jobs. When available, these resources may not be accessible in a useful or timely way. Contingent academics are commonly not eligible for professional development courses or grant funding. They tend to be rendered invisible on campus by the lack of office space, a lack of recognition for their work, and exclusion from institutional events. These challenges are intensified through communication processes that often ignore or only sporadically include contingent academics. Thus they may not receive information about, and comment on, professional opportunities, changes in policies and processes, or availability of key staff.

Contingent staff are often not recognised as members of the institution and disciplinary communities. This undermining of professional legitimacy and collegiality means that an individual might work for a university for many years and still experience marginalisation because of their contingent employment. As more people are employed as contingent workers, this divide within the workforce will likely widen, and experiences of frustration and estrangement will become more commonplace.

In turn, it is fuelling insecurity that can make it very difficult to plan a life, including = starting a family, having a holiday, or securing approval for a mortgage or lease.

Building support for contingent academics

The conditions of employment faced by contingent academics make it difficult to perform their current roles, let alone build an academic career. Any solution to the processes and effects of contingent labour in academia will entail structural and institutional change in the higher education sector. However, we have complied a list of smaller changes can make a difference to the lives and careers of contingent academics, and to the processes and cultures in which we all work.

Develop equitable and efficient employment processes

Contingent academics are often negotiating employment processes that are inefficient and lack transparency and clarity. Implementing employment processes that are standardised and efficient will decrease the stress and time demands on all staff, as well as the material disadvantages experienced by contingent academics.

1. Ensure recruitment processes are consistent, transparent, widely advertised, and fair.
2. Ensure appointment processes include appropriate time for staff to prepare.
3. Process contracts quickly, and before the proposed employment period begins.
4. Apply consistent contractual arrangements across the institution.
5. Implement electronic processes, including signing of documents.
6. Provide contingent staff with information about their rights, responsibilities, and university/disciplinary/ individual supervisor expectations. This includes encouraging staff to join the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU).
7. Integrate systems so that access to all necessary physical and IT resources occurs automatically.
8. Implement automatic payment systems. Where this is not immediately possible, at a minimum, continuing staff should familiarise themselves with the payment systems contingent academics are required to use and, where necessary, intervene to assist them or liaise on their behalf with university/faculty administrations.
9. Develop registers that detail the working history and skills of contingent staff.
10. Develop the capacity of managers, supervisors and professional staff to support contingent academics.
11. Establish clear processes for contingent academics to raise HR concerns.

Be clear about expectations

Expectations for a specific role are often unclear, and expectations for similar roles can vary across academic supervisors and units. Contingent academics can feel unspoken pressure or confusion about the formal and informal expectations attached to a position.

1. Clarify the skills, knowledge and qualifications required for any specific role.
2. Clarify the role and responsibilities of contingent academics – and ensure all work is paid, and paid in ways that reflect the demands of the task. Contingent academics—like all workers—should never be expected to undertake unpaid work as a condition of their employment.
3. Clarify performance expectations.
4. Clarify expectations with learning and teaching academics. Ongoing staff with supervisory responsibilities should seek to address the following issues:
   - How will contingent staff manage student consultation requests beyond contracted hours?
   - Are tutors and markers required to attend lectures?
   - Are tutors and markers required to attend meetings?

- Who develops teaching materials – especially tutorial materials?
- What are the marking deadlines?
- Who is responsible for entering marks?

5. As a course coordinator, give students clear information about what they can expect of contingent academics, and where they can seek support for the issues that are not part of a contingent academic's contract.
6. All work should be incorporated in a fair and transparent way into employment contracts. Where this is not the case, it is reasonable for ongoing staff to make the case for their inclusion to faculty/university administrators but it is not reasonable to insist or imply that contingent academics must undertake any 'extra' work.
7. Develop standardised induction processes so that all relevant information is shared.
8. Provide ongoing informal and formal feedback on performance.
9. Offer opportunities for informal mentoring, de-briefing or problem solving, in addition to formal supervision and support.

Provide access to necessary resources

Contingent academics describe on-going difficulties in getting access to the resources necessary for their employment and their career development. Facilitating access to these resources is helpful.

1. Ensure contingent academics have timely access to the resources necessary to do their job. The list is large, and includes: institutional space (desk, and key/swipe card to access to this space, and after-hours access); a computer; a telephone; an email account; access to on-line learning systems and other institutional on-line systems; stationary; a library account; storage; use of a tearoom and access to a fridge; and teaching resources (e.g. set textbooks and readers).
2. Have clear, institutionalised, and integrated processes for timely access to the above resources.
3. Develop an institutional culture that recognises that providing these resources is a necessary investment associated with higher education – and not an 'optional extra' that may or may not be offered to contingent academics.
4. Give contingent academics all of the information relevant to their employment, in a timely fashion. For teaching academics this may include unit outlines, all assessment materials (including assessment and marking advice, rubrics and shared comment banks), and key dates. For research academics, this may include the grant application, project timetables, and publications schedules.
5. When contingent staff are taking over topic/course coordination, provide a detailed and systematic handover, and debrief at the end of teaching.
6. Provide extended university affiliation beyond the dates of a contract.
7. Ensure contingent academics can participate in teaching evaluation processes, including institutional student evaluation processes and peer evaluations.

Communication

Poor communication processes mean that contingent staff may not receive information about professional opportunities, changes in policies and processes, and availability of key staff.

1. Regularly update lists of contingent staff.
2. Institutionalise communication to contingent staff as individuals associated with a particular research project or teaching role, and as members of the institutional academic community/ unit.
3. Include contingent staff in email lists.
4. Offer contingent academics the opportunity to provide feedback.

5. Liaise with contingent academics about when they are available for meetings and any teaching activities.
6. Ensure contingent academics are informed about changes to relevant policies, processes and expectations.

Offer professional development

Contingent academics are usually seeking to establish a career in academia. However, they are typically offered no professional development. Opening training and professional development opportunities to contingent staff benefits individual staff and builds capacity in the discipline and institution.

1. Institutionalise a small grant scheme to fund contingent academics' research.
2. Open internal grant schemes to contingent academics, as individual researchers or in collaboration with continuing staff members.
3. Open opportunities for contingent academics to publish from research work they are employed on.
4. Invite contingent academics to participate in the professional development and skills training offered to continuing staff.
5. Offer relevant and on-going learning and teaching training beyond mandated induction.
6. Allocate each contingent staff a set number of paid hours to attend professional development
7. Be available as a mentor to contingent staff.

Build community

Many contingent academics experience isolation and disconnection from their workplace. Strategies to address this problem can facilitate a sense of belonging to an academic community.

1. Invite contingent academics to attend and participate in academic functions, such as seminar series and public lectures.
2. Invite contingent academics to social events hosted by the institution.
3. Invite contingent academics to attend and contribute to staff meetings as paid work.
4. Welcome contingent academics into staff tearooms and other shared spaces.
5. Physically co-locate space for contingent academics within the buildings hosting the academic unit they are working for.
6. When leading team teaching, ensure that all contingent members of the team know each other, and make opportunities for the sharing of strategies and experiences.
7. Facilitate and practically support a contingent academic support group.

Recognise the contributions and expertise of contingent academics

Contingent academics typically have extensive experience, knowledge and expertise in their field of research, learning and teaching activities, and university systems and governance. These skills are largely unrecognised. The following strategies are designed to recognise the work of contingent academics:

1. Open awards to contingent academics so that excellence is formally acknowledged.
2. Build opportunities for contingent academics to contribute to policy development.
3. Involve contingent academics in decision-making processes.
4. Offer contingent academics opportunities to share their good teaching and research practices.
5. Where appropriate, offer contingent academics the opportunity to contribute to curriculum development and learning and teaching resources. Pay them for their work, and formally acknowledge their contributions.

Change one thing

You may not be able to advocate for or implement all of the suggestions in this document. However, inspired by the writers at the CASA [Casual, Adjunct, Sessional staff and Allies in Australian Higher Education] website (https://actualcasuals.wordpress.com/change-one-thing/), we encourage TASA members to commit to changing just one thing in how we or our institution work with contingent academics.

Further resources

Andrews, A., Bare, B., Bentley, P., Geodegebuure, L., Pugsley, C., & Rance, B. (2016). Contingent academic employment in Australia universities.

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Strachan, G., Troup, C., Peetz, D., G Whitehouse, Broadbent, K., & Bailey, J. (2012). Work and careers in Australian universities *Report on employee survey* Australia Centre for work, organisation and well being, Grifith University

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