

## **What ongoing staff can do to support precariously employed colleagues**

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# What ongoing staff can do to support precariously employed colleagues

## The Academic Precariat

There is a growing divide between ongoing and precarious academics in Australia. Precarious academics are often exploited, underpaid, and have little hope of gaining permanency. In this article we offer suggestions to ongoing academics on how to improve the working lives and conditions of precarious colleagues. Our suggestions range from easy and straightforward to more challenging. We offer them to encourage discussion and action, and to inspire ongoing academics to consider how the circumstances of precarious academics today may differ from their own experiences as 'early career' academics.

### Introduction: Our recommendations in the face of rising academic precarity

There is a growing divide between ongoing and precarious academics in Australia (Brown, Goodman, & Yasukawa, 2010; Hugo, 2008), sometimes referred to as the 'tenured core' and the 'tenuous periphery' (Kimber, 2003). The number and proportion of precarious academics has expanded in recent decades, and recent data from the National Tertiary Education Union (2018) suggests that around two-thirds of all university staff are now on precarious contracts: 45 per cent casual and 23 per cent fixed-term. A recent analysis of Victoria's eight largest universities' annual reports shows a similarly high figure of 63 per cent of all staff, with women making up 57 per cent of this group (Heffernan, 2019).

Paid academic labour is distributed unevenly between these groups, teaching-only positions being dominated by casuals and research-only positions by fixed-term staff (NTEU, 2018). At the same time, there has been a series of government cuts to higher education and academics first hired during the post-war higher education boom are retiring *en masse* (Hugo, 2008). There is a dearth of new ongoing positions,

and the ratio of students to ongoing teaching-and-research staff has skyrocketed (Hugo, 2008; NTEU, 2018). Academic job opportunities for new PhD graduates are increasingly scarce both in Australia and overseas, and higher education research shows that people often remain 'stuck' in precarious roles for years or even decades (Hugo, 2008; May, 2012). Under such circumstances, senior and ongoing academic staff are increasingly called to manage casual and fixed-term employees, who undertake research towards large projects and take care of overflow or 'buy-out' teaching. Unsurprisingly, the power relations and expectations that develop between such staff can be problematic.

We have developed this short paper for ongoing staff in Australian universities, for their consideration when working alongside, managing, or hiring precarious academics. While many of the challenges facing universities require substantial structural change, there are numerous things that ongoing academic staff – and those on longer-term, fixed-term contracts – can do to ameliorate the situation. This includes ensuring laws, rules, and agreements governing employment are followed; avoiding and calling out exploitation, unequal treatment, and bullying; and offering practical support and

solidarity to precarious colleagues. Other groups have made related reflections or recommendations, writing from a variety of disciplinary positions and national contexts, and we acknowledge the valuable contributions that precede our own (see Anti-Precarity Cymru, 2018; Natalier *et al.*, 2017; Thorkelson, 2019).

As a collective of writers concerned with academic precarity, we offer suggestions that range from easy and straightforward to more challenging. We do so to encourage discussion and action, and to inspire ongoing academics to consider how the circumstances of precarious academics today may differ from their own experiences as 'early career' academics. Yet we also find it important to acknowledge that, as the pool of ongoing academics shrinks, workload pressures are increasing. While some of our suggestions might be viewed as, or might pragmatically require, 'more work' for ongoing academics, we firmly believe that, when precarious staff are routinely expected to perform unpaid or underpaid academic work, the work of ongoing staff is also devalued and threatened. If the labour of ongoing staff continues to be shifted to precarious staff, then universities will no longer require ongoing staff.

A final note: We also feel it is important not to transfer too much institutional responsibility onto individual (ongoing) academics. As part of the writing process, for instance, we debated whether to include a suggestion that ongoing academics 'gift' their leftover personal funds to precarious academics' personal research, career development, or conference attendance. As a collective, we acknowledge that such arrangements are sometimes subject to abuse: for instance, where ongoing staff members make claims of intellectual property on the basis of such 'gifts'. But even where obligation-free support is offered, we wonder at the ethics of encouraging such arrangements. Although some routes for ongoing staff support of precarious staff raise their own ethical concerns, we nonetheless believe that the support and advocacy of ongoing staff is crucial in our shared fight against casualisation and the devaluation of Australian universities.

### **What ongoing staff can do: Hiring, pay, and contracts**

1. Facilitate transparent hiring practices, which might include internally advertising casual and fixed-term roles, rather than selecting candidates you already like or know. Research shows that recruiting staff in the latter way leads to inequitable hiring, and that the composition of the cohort of precarious academics, as well as their pay, is currently highly unequal (for instance, male casuals tend to be paid more) (May, 2012; Van den Brink & Benschop, 2014; Van den Brink, Fruytier & Thunnissen, 2013).
2. Ensure the recruitment process for roles is straightforward, equitable, and considers things like the research or topic expertise of prospective staff. For instance, ask for candidates' CVs, hold short phone interviews, or discuss candidates needs to ensure, for example, neurodiverse options.
3. Do not use student feedback for hiring purposes. Research indicates that these surveys have a gender and cultural bias, which has an impact on precarious staff in both the short and long-term (Fan *et al.*, 2019; Mitchell & Martin, 2018).
4. For regular, periodic recruitment (such as sessional teaching), set up a shared email list that all hiring and potential staff can access for announcements about positions.
5. If you are responsible for employing teaching staff, provide information on the classes (hours, time, locations, and content), time and marking expectations, and payments ahead of time.
6. Work to ensure that teaching contracts are confirmed as early as possible and that pay commences promptly in the first pay cycle of teaching. This means being organised and highlighting this as a priority in ongoing staff meetings. Do not arrange for staff to be paid in lump sums, as this will result in higher rates of taxation – already a problem with sessional teaching – which will only be reimbursed at tax time. Consider: Will they be able to pay rent? Pay bills? Buy food? (Heffernan, 2019).
7. For research or administrative roles, make it clear what tasks, duties, and hours will be involved and whether they are likely to change over time. As with teaching staff (point 6 above), make sure that payments are spread evenly over the employment period.
8. Give staff an appropriate amount of time to ask questions and to consider whether they want to accept a role. Allow room for negotiation and discussion of duties.
9. Check that staff are being paid correctly. This is not always the case, as was seen in a recent dispute lodged on behalf of casuals at The University of Western Australia (Glynn, Smith & Pedden, 2019). Indeed, precarious academic work is commonly underpaid (Brown *et al.*, 2010; May, 2012).
10. Ensure that job titles and duties match the tasks performed, and that academic work is paid at an academic rate. Using general/professional rates not only means that staff are paid far less, it also has an impact on their job titles and thus their future employment prospects.
11. If staff are teaching tutorials, they should be paid the tutorial rate that includes preparation time, not at an hourly rate (unless they are being required to take on additional preparation hours above the standard tutorial

rate). It is also important to ensure that, where relevant, staff receive the higher rates of pay appropriate to their formal qualifications such as a PhD or an honours degree.

### What ongoing staff can do: Supporting teaching staff

1. Be aware of the experience of your teaching staff. In many cases, staff have years of experience. In other cases, they may have none. Where appropriate, offer support and access to teaching development activities, training in organisational IT and learning management systems, and other professional development opportunities that front-line staff might need (for instance, mental health first aid training, disability and accessibility training, and cultural safety training). Ensure staff are paid to attend training.
2. Avoid micromanaging staff, especially experienced teachers. It is important to provide advice to new teachers but also to trust experienced people to do their jobs.
3. Set and communicate expectations for the number of hours spent on tasks, especially those that could potentially involve unexpected, unpredictable, or 'never-ending' hours, such as tutorial development, administration, and pastoral care. Ensure these expectations are in keeping with pay standards: if casual tutors are paid for three hours of tutorial preparation, ensure any work you require of them can be done in this time. Make the limits of staff's teaching responsibilities clear to them. Let them know when you expect them to pass work on to you: such as student enquiries, extra marking, and other work that is above their pay grade or beyond their pay allocation.
4. Make sure staff are paid for all teaching duties. If duties are not paid, they should be transferred to ongoing lecturers or convenors. This includes: (re)development of curriculum, course outlines, assessments, teaching materials, reading lists, tutorial plans, and engaging in online learning or social media spaces. Likewise, all marking – including cross marking, double marking, and any work related to reporting academic integrity issues or plagiarism – should be paid.
5. Ensure staff are paid to teach for the entire duration of units, that is, for all weeks during the teaching semester, including pre-semester preparation, online-only weeks where there is an expectation of reading and teaching, and end-of-semester marking.
6. When writing assessments, keep marking and turn-around time in mind, as well as contract expiration dates and student numbers. It is possible to write assessments that are relevant, rigorous, and short on marking time,

including collaborative, in-class, and peer-reviewed assessments.

7. Formulate ways of dealing with additional requests that are likely to come from students, such as requests for written references at the end of semesters. With precarious academics' support and input, you may wish to raise the limitations of precarious teaching with students at the beginning of each unit. Do not allow students to ask teaching staff to work for free. Clearly establish the default time/s and place/s for contacting casual staff (such as the classroom) or ongoing staff (such as online forums, office hours, and email). Discourage students from hanging around after class for one-on-one meetings with precarious teaching staff or from overloading them via emails.
8. Support precarious teaching staff to support each other. Set up meetings and enable them to share resources and workloads as appropriate.
9. Take responsibility for the courses that 'no one wants to teach' rather than outsourcing them to precarious staff. Such courses may deserve a higher workload, a rewrite, or deletion.
10. Value your precarious teaching staff. If a precarious staff member is regularly teaching foundation courses, core courses, or other courses that are essential for your degree/s to function, agitate for their transferral to full-time and ongoing employment.

### What ongoing staff can do: Supporting and acknowledging research

1. Forward job opportunities and advertisements to precarious staff, including grants, calls for papers, conferences, and job openings.
2. Where possible, offer to read draft papers as well as grant and job applications.
3. Put precarious staff forward for roles or awards that will raise their research profiles.
4. Introduce precarious staff to senior scholars in their area, either in person or online. Insecure and low-paid work means that staff are often unable to attend conferences and events and help with 'networking' is always appreciated.
5. Consider your capacity to use or leverage funds to pay precarious staff for their research and writing contributions. Given the current state of the academic job market, the promise of career progression alone is inadequate when offering 'opportunities' for collaboration (Kuehn & Corrigan, 2013). If co-authoring papers or grants: do not let casual or fixed-term staff do all the work and avoid situations where funding 'runs out' before writing up begins. If funding does run out,

ongoing staff should complete the project, ensuring that precarious academics are properly acknowledged as authors and collaborators.

6. Do not require or encourage unpaid or uncredited research and writing work. Be aware of your university's ethics and intellectual property rules, which often include strict guidelines on authorship.

### What ongoing staff can do: Questioning opportunities, inequalities, and flexibility

1. Acknowledge that times have changed, and precarious academics have little hope of obtaining permanency based on unpaid or volunteer work (Hugo, 2008; NTEU, 2018). Before becoming an ongoing academic, you may have engaged in the kinds of unpaid, uncredited work still expected of your precarious colleagues as a 'rite of passage'. Yet it is widely acknowledged that in the contemporary workplace 'hope labour' – 'un- or under-compensated work carried out in the present... in the hope that future employment opportunities may follow' – is largely a means of 'capturing' workers and extracting free work from them (Kuehn & Corrigan, 2013, pp. 9–10).
2. Precarious staff are often asked to attend unpaid meetings, either for teaching, research, or departmental/school decision-making. While it is important that precarious staff have a voice in these areas, if their attendance is expected they should be paid. If not, make it clear that they should not attend, and consider alternative ways of including their input. For instance, pay a precarious staff representative to attend, or gather and raise concerns on their behalf.
3. Be sensitive to the fact that only certain staff will have the financial capacity to perform unpaid work. Consider if, by offering unpaid 'opportunities' to those who can afford to work for free, you may be inadvertently reproducing gendered, classed, and racialised inequalities within universities (Acker, 2006).
4. Assure part-time or casual staff that they do not need to be available for full-time hours. Casuals and fixed-term staff often need to hold multiple positions to earn a liveable salary (Brown et al., 2010). Unpredictable or irregular hours can cause undue stress. While flexibility is often sold as a 'benefit' of casual employment, in practice it disadvantages precarious employees, who are expected to be available at all times (Cantrell & Palmer, 2019).

### What ongoing staff can do: Listening and speaking up

1. Have honest conversations about the state of the higher education sector and academic employment. If you are

someone's first academic employer, inform them of the ways that the university and ongoing colleagues may try to exploit them. Provide a pay schedule, pay rates, your university's enterprise bargaining agreement, and other relevant documents. Tell them about the NTEU and any other groups campaigning against casualisation on campus (for instance, Supercasuals), and encourage them to join.

2. Provide precarious academics with information on who they can contact when tasks exceed their allocated work time, or the responsibilities stipulated in their contracts.
3. Support staff in their contract negotiations, especially if they are new or belong to a group (for instance, women) where they are likely to be exploited or paid less than other precarious colleagues (May, 2012; Van den Brink & Benschop, 2014; Van den Brink et al., 2013).
4. Encourage precarious staff to come to you with any other issues relating to their employment.
5. When presented with new policies, workplace changes, and teaching modes (such as online, blended, or flipped classroom methods), ask how these will have an impact on precarious staff. Raise issues in departmental meetings, in committees, among colleagues, in public forums, and anywhere else you can think of. Ask precarious staff what they think – being careful not to encourage extra, unpaid work – and be prepared to raise matters on their behalf.
6. Argue for institutional and departmental support for and access to:
  - a. Office space, with ergonomically suitable equipment (not just hand-me-downs);
  - b. Printer, photocopier, IT (including university email access), the university library, during and outside semester;
  - c. Internal research/travel grants and awards, including the possibility of being listed as the Chief Investigator, the removal of any rules requiring that recipients have long-term contracts, and the inclusion of rules enabling funds to be used to pay precarious applicants/CIs;
  - d. Research office assistance and grant writing support; and
  - e. Professional development, such as mentoring, teaching, and supervision guidance; access to courses and conferences; and the possibility of giving paid guest lectures on topics of expertise.
7. In your institution, department, discipline society, and other forums, argue for schemes that provide access for low-paid and precarious academics to:
  - a. Conference scholarships and fee reductions;
  - b. Travel, writing, and research development funds; and
  - c. Mentoring opportunities and career advice.

8. Finally, if you see other academics treating precarious staff poorly – whether through bullying, discrimination, overwork, wage theft, or sexual harassment and assault – speak up! While academic precarity is clearly a systemic problem, some staff seek to benefit from the growing inequalities in university employment, and these people need to be held accountable. Precarious academics often do not feel they have the cultural or institutional capital to call out exploitation of themselves or others and may even have been told that this treatment is normal. Offer a sympathetic ear, advice, and help to stand up for them!

*#TheAcademicPrecariat is a collective that writes about precarious academic employment from the perspective of those who have and continue to experience it.*

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