BRIEFING

STAMP OUT CASUAL CONTRACTS

UCU
University and College Union

Freedom of Information 2023

Support for research staff

Executive summary

66% of research-only staff in UK universities are employed on fixed-term contracts, a figure that has changed little in the last decade. Many others are employed on open-ended contracts with an identified 'at risk' date, which offer little more in the way of security of employment.

Insecure employment has a negative impact on staff; it wears people down, affects their mental health, makes it difficult/impossible to make long-term financial or personal plans and generates inequalities.

Endemic casualisation amongst research staff also impacts negatively on research culture affecting research activity,[1] research integrity, academic freedom[2] and reproducibility.[3]

The new people and culture element (PCE) of REF 2028 also makes it financially expedient for employers to address the endemic casualisation within research culture.

UCU were interested to find out how many employers were taking active, positive steps to address the issue of precarity amongst research staff and in May 2023 we sent a Freedom of Information request to every UK higher education institution (HEI) that employed at least 20 research-only staff and / or where research staff made up at least 5% of the academic staff (according to the HESA staff data 2020/21): 103 employers in total.

In total we asked 10 questions (in addition to institutional details), with a further request for details if the respondent replied in a particular way. The full list of questions can be seen at Appendix 1.

We received 98 responses to the FOI; the University of Southampton sent an incomplete reply and we have had no response from the following institutions: The London School of

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[1] UCU Counting the Cost of Casualisation in Higher Education report 2019
[2] Joint Committee of Experts of UNESCO and the International Labour Organisation report 2022
[3] House of Commons Committee report Reproducibility and Research Integrity May 2023

Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, The University of Bedfordshire, Bishop Grosseteste University and the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama.

We thank every other institution for their assistance in gathering the data we requested.

We now call on employers in the sector to:

➡ commit to working with UCU towards a more sustainable model for the employment of research staff

➡ commit to reducing the use of fixed-term contracts and / or open-ended contracts with an identified 'at risk' date

➡ work with UCU to agree processes and put systems in place that support continuity of employment and minimise the risk of redundancy at the end of a funded research project.

The league table

Using an agreed scoring system (see Appendix 2 for details) we inputted all the data for each institution and ranked them by total score (%) to produce the following league table.

LEVEL OF SUPPORT FOR RESEARCH STAFF TO TACKLE INSECURE EMPLOYMENT

Institution	Total score / 100
Employer demonstrating better practice in all areas	100
The University of Leeds	64
Ulster University	62
The University of Aberdeen	61.5
University College London	54.5
Queen's University Belfast	53.5
The University of Lancaster	53.5
Cranfield University	53
The University of York	50.5
The University of Leicester	49.5
The University of Manchester	48.5
The University of Glasgow	48.5
The University of the West of Scotland	48
The University of Sheffield	47.5
The Manchester Metropolitan University	45.5
Newcastle University	44.5

Institution	Total score / 100
Bournemouth University	43.5
Glasgow School of Art	43.5
The University of Birmingham	42.5
The University of Stirling	42.5
University of Nottingham	41.5
Bangor University	41.5
Swansea University	40.5
The University of Bath	40.5
City, University of London	40.5
Royal College of Art	40.5
The University of Bristol	40
The University of Liverpool	38.5
The University of Sussex	38.5
Liverpool John Moores University	38.5
The University of Essex	38.5
Kingston University	38
The University of Cambridge	37.5
The University of Edinburgh	37.5
Cardiff University	37.5
The University of Dundee	37.5
The University of Kent	37.5
St George's, University of London	36.5
Glasgow Caledonian University	36.5
Imperial College of Science, Technology and Medicine	36
University of Gloucestershire	35.5
University of the West of England	35.5
The Open University	34.5
Anglia Ruskin University	34.5
King's College London	34
The University of Lincoln	34
Oxford Brookes University	34
London School of Economics and Political Science	33.5
The University of East Anglia	33.5

Institution	Total score / 100
Heriot–Watt University	33.5
SRUC	33.5
The University of Salford	32.5
Aston University	32
Queen Mary University of London	31.5
The University of Hull	31.5
Edinburgh Napier University	31.5
The University of Warwick	30.5
University of Plymouth	30.5
Teesside University	30.5
University of Hertfordshire	30
The Royal Veterinary College	29
University of Wales Trinity Saint David	29
University of Chester	29
Sheffield Hallam University	28.5
The University of Westminster	28.5
The University of Bradford	28.5
Abertay University	28.5
Loughborough University	28
Royal Holloway and Bedford New College	28
University of South Wales	27.5
The University of Oxford	26.5
Brunel University London	26.5
The University of Strathclyde	25.5
The University of St. Andrews	25.5
The University of Brighton	25.5
University of the Highlands and Islands	25.5
University of Northumbria at Newcastle	24.5
London South Bank University	24.5
Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh	24.5
The University of Huddersfield	23.5
Canterbury Christ Church University	23.5
The University of Exeter	23

Institution	Total score / 100
University of Durham	22.5
The University of Surrey	22.5
The University of Reading	22.5
Robert Gordon University	22.5
Middlesex University	21.5
Birkbeck College	20.5
The University of Central Lancashire	20.5
Keele University	20.5
Goldsmiths College	20.5
Aberystwyth University	19.5
Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine	18.5
Birmingham City University	18.5
University of London (Institutes and activities)	18.5
The University of Wolverhampton	17.5
The University of Greenwich	16.5
The University of East London	16.5
SOAS University of London	13

The responses

The main purpose of the FOI was to gather data to allow us to develop a league table of employers and the levels of support they offered to their research staff to improve their security of employment.

However, it is worth highlighting some of the responses we received.

1   What are the standard contractual arrangements for research only staff at your institution?

The majority of respondents reported that they used a mixture of contracts for research staff or that there was no standard contract in use (84%).

4   Do you offer a period of redeployment to fixed-term research staff (or those with an identified 'at risk' date) where they have priority for suitable vacant or new posts? If yes, for how long.

90% of respondents reported that they did offer some form of redeployment. The most common period in which redeployment was offered was 3 or 4 months or during the contractual notice period.

5.   In the last 24 months, when members of research staff have come to the end of their fixed-term contract or the project they have been working on has come to an end,

what percentage have been successfully redeployed (or had their contract renewed/extended)?

We asked this question to try and measure how successful employers were in putting in place measures to avoid the dismissal of research-only staff at the end of a fixed-term contract or fixed-term external funding, whilst recognising that a high rate of extension or renewal might (also) reflect a particularly egregious use of fixed-term contracts, especially very short contracts, which consequently become easier than usual to renew or extend.

It is of great concern to us that nearly a third of employers (29 or 30%) were unable to answer this question or sought an exemption to the question based on how long it would take to extract the data.

Our simple question is – if you are not measuring this, how do you know how successful your measures are?

The responses from those institutions who did respond ranged from 0% to over 80%.

6. **Do you offer any form of 'bridging' funding to allow research only staff to maintain employment between externally funded projects or other sources of work? if so, please give details.**

    59% of respondents reported offering some form of bridging but in the majority of cases this was not subject to a formal policy nor supported by central funding but was managed on a case-by-case basis, usually where future funding was already, or was likely to be, secured.

7. **Do you offer an enhanced paid notice period to research only staff on fixed-term contracts? If so, please give details.**

    Only one employer offered this (Manchester).

8. **Do you offer an enhanced redundancy payment to research only staff if they are dismissed at the end of a fixed-term contract?**

    The majority of respondents paid only statutory redundancy pay to research staff dismissed at the end of a fixed-term contract. Just 3 (Leeds, QUB and Ulster) offered what we would consider a significant enhancement on statutory redundancy pay.

9. **Is the institution a signatory to the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers?**

    All but 10 of the respondents were a signatory to the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers but this seemed to have little bearing on the level of support they offered to their staff in terms of job security. It should be noted that the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Research staff states that employers must: "Seek to improve job security for researchers, for example through more effective redeployment processes and greater use of open-ended contracts…"

10. **Are there on-going efforts to improve the security of employment of research only staff at your institution within the next 12 months? If so, please give details.**

    76% of respondents responded yes to this question, although this ranged from vague commitments to support research staff to on-going negotiations with UCU locally to improve the security of employment of research staff.

What the results show us

There is clearly a range in the level of support available to research staff to improve security of employment across the sector, and there appears to be no obvious correlation between type of institution and score achieved.

We therefore believe that the amount of support to improve security of employment is a choice on the part of the employer, and not driven by circumstance (as is often claimed).

For all but one factor, at least one institution (and often more than one) scored the maximum points, demonstrating that better practice is indeed possible.

However, no institution scored the maximum on all factors.

We believe that it is possible for an employer to have a range of measures in places and be able to score maximum points under each factor and thus score 100 / 100 overall.

The fact that the highest score was only 64 and that only 8 HEIs scored above 50 points is a sad indictment on the sector.

On a (slightly) more positive note; more than a ¼ (26%) of institutions responded that in the last 24 months, when members of research staff have come to the end of their fixed-term contract or the project they have been working on has come to an end, over 60% have been successfully redeployed (or had their contract renewed / extended). That figure rises to more than a 1/3 (38%) for those who were able to provide a response to that question.

That implies that in a significant minority of institutions there is a lot of work being undertaken to retain research staff in post from one contract or funding stream to another.

Given the likely resource this takes, across different departments and institutional bodies, added to the stress and other disadvantages of insecure employment for the research staff themselves, we are asking why employers continue to use fixed-term contracts / 'at risk' dates as the default option for the majority of research staff. Institutions are proving that it is possible to retain staff but are doing so in a way that is detrimental to researchers, the research they carry out and the institutions themselves.

It is time to move to a more sustainable model for research in UK higher education and we applaud those institutions who are inching towards this and encourage others to join them.

Below, we set out what a better model could look like and how that could, ultimately, move to a more sustainable research model.

Moving to a more sustainable model of research employment

1 THE % OF RESEARCH STAFF ON A FIXED-TERM CONTRACT AND USE OF FIXED-TERM CONTRACTS

The fact that the percentage of research-only staff on a fixed-term contract in research-intensive universities ranges from 2% (UCL) to 99% (LSHTM) shows that the widespread use of such contracts is a choice, not a necessity.

We have been unable to measure the numbers of research staff employed on open-ended contracts with an identified 'at risk' date but we believe such contracts offer few tangible benefits to staff and leave them feeling as insecure as a fixed-term contract would do. Some employers may have scored well on this factor despite employing the majority of their research-only staff on such open-ended contracts with an 'at risk' date. We would like to see the data on such contracts collected nationally so that a more accurate picture of the true level of precarity in the sector can be seen.

Research funding is not insecure when looked at an institutional or even a faculty level. Project funding is, by its nature, time-limited but that is true in many sectors and industries. However, the HE sector is in a minority in responding to fixed-term external project funding by placing all the risk onto individual members of staff rather than shouldering the risk across the institution and using permanent contracts as the norm.

We would like to see HE employers working with UCU to set targets for the reduction in the use of insecure contracts for research staff with the aim of all (but an exceptional few) research staff being employed on a secure contract within an agreed time-frame.

2 THE USE OF REDEPLOYMENT

Given the current funding model in the UK, a move away from current employment practices to something more sustainable will require employers to look at ways of retaining research staff when funding for a particular project comes to an end.

One key factor in this will be the use of redeployment or a method to allow research staff to move between projects. This can and should be a step towards breaking the link between employment contracts and finite external funding altogether. An effective redeployment policy can, in this way, be viewed as a workload management tool.

Such a process needs to be actively pursued by the employer and not left to the individual members of staff. The process also needs to be timely, whether looking for alternative employment at the end of a fixed-term contract or seeking new work for a member of research staff whose current project is coming to an end. The duration of project funding is known so there is no reason why active redeployment cannot start well before the project funding is due to end. Universities are multi-million-pound organisations and it is ridiculous to believe that they cannot plan their research programmes for more than a couple of months in advance.

We would like to see that planning start at least 6 months before current funding is due to come to an end to maximise the opportunities for staff to move to a new project or other areas of work.

3   THE USE OF BRIDGING FUNDS / EXTENDED NOTICE PERIODS

The purpose of both bridging funds and an extended paid notice period following a finite-funded project is to allow research staff (and the employer) time and space between funded projects to find further / alternative work. This could allow time for redeployment, a move to another project to be properly explored and / or for a member of staff to pursue other interests that may lead to further employment. It can also function as an investment on the part of the institution in securing further external research funding.

Although the majority of employers did offer some sort of bridging fund, very few had an agreed university wide process or central funding. Even the more advanced policies had stringent criteria to access them including length of service and future funding having been secured.

We would like to see a far more proactive approach to the use of bridge funding, with employers seeking new opportunities for staff and providing funding for a range of options to avoid dismissal.

We think a better scheme would be:

➡ actively managed by the employer

➡ available to all research staff (and indeed all staff with research qualifications or experience)

➡ centrally funded with dedicated funding

➡ not requiring future funding to be already secured, and enabling staff to actively work towards gaining future funding during the bridging period itself (a form of 'active bridge funding')

➡ long enough for alternatives to be properly explored

➡ allowing staff to explore a range of opportunities as an alternative to dismissal.

We are ultimately seeking permanent underwriting of research roles (and more permanent teaching and research posts) through workforce planning that recognises the continuity of work and/or funding in many areas (though there may be a particular finite funding arrangement at any given time).

High-quality bridge funding merges seamlessly into permanent underwriting, and can transition into it.

Whilst we are not recommending them, we have included some examples of bridge funding and extended notice periods that are in operation at Appendix 3. All of these failed to score the maximum in our league table but they did score the most highly and would be a good basis to build from.

4   ENHANCED REDUNDANCY PAYMENTS

Obviously, we are seeking to avoid dismissals but a substantial redundancy payment could provide the following:

➡ a financial cushion to allow the member of staff time to find alternative work

➡ an incentive for the employer to properly explore all alternatives to dismissal

➡ the option to transform some of the redundancy payment into an extended notice period to maximise the possibility of redeployment.

Employers offering only statutory redundancy pay are doing nothing to compensate researchers for their insecure careers nor to recognise that the current endemic use of fixed-term contracts leads to research staff moving between institutions and failing to build the level of statutory redundancy payment that would give them any period of financial security if they were to be made redundant.

See Appendix 4 for examples of more generous schemes that we awarded a maximum score to.

5   MEASURING HOW WELL EMPLOYERS AVOID DISMISSALS OF RESEARCH STAFF

We know that measuring the percentage of research staff on a fixed-term contract is only one measure of employment security, so we were keen to try to find out how successful employers were in avoiding dismissals of research staff by means of redeployment or contract extension / renewal.

We were shocked by how many employers were unable to answer this question.

If employers are serious about wanting to increase the security of employment of their research staff, how are they going to measure what that success looks like? The only true measure is one that measures the avoidance of dismissals and we urge all employers to look at how they can put in place systems to measure this so they can measure progress against any agreed objectives on improved employment security.

6   WORKING WITH UCU TO IMPROVE THE SECURITY OF RESEARCH STAFF

We awarded a maximum score to those employers who were working with UCU (or planning to) on an agreed policy targeted at improving job security of research staff.

Tackling these issues is something that the employer needs to do with UCU, setting agreed objectives and a work plan to meet those objectives.

No-one is claiming that changing the culture of research staff employment is going to be easy. But it will only be done by working together and finding solutions to the challenges together. UCU, nationally and in branches, are ready and willing to work with employers on these issues but we will not stand by and witness another decade of inaction.

Recommendations to employers

➡ **Commit to working with UCU towards a more sustainable model for the employment of research staff** with a view to breaking the link between the individual job and a specific piece of grant funding. We applaud the efforts being made at Bath university to do just this (see: https://www.ucu.org.uk/article/12843/Groundbreaking-anti-casualisation-agreement-at-the-University-of-Bath)

➡ **Commit to reducing the use of fixed-term contracts and/or open-ended contracts** with an identified 'at risk' date by moving research staff to genuine open-ended contracts, agreeing a target with your local UCU branch for such a reduction over an agreed period.

➡ **Work with UCU to agree processes and put systems in place** that support the continuity of employment and minimise the risk of redundancy at the end of a funded research project. E.g. proactive redeployment, active bridge funding and extended notice periods and enhanced redundancy pay.

Appendix 1: The FOI questions

1. What are the standard contractual arrangements for research only staff at your institution?

2. How many research only staff do you currently employ on a fixed-term contract with less than 4 years' service?

3. How many research only staff do you currently employ on a fixed-term contract with at least 4 years' service?

4. Do you offer a period of redeployment to fixed-term research staff (or those with an identified 'at risk' date) where they have priority for suitable vacant or new posts? If yes, for how long.

5. In the last 24 months, when members of research staff have come to the end of their fixed-term contract or the project they have been working on has come to an end, what percentage have been successfully redeployed (or had their contract renewed / extended)?

6. Do you offer any form of 'bridging' funding to allow research only staff to maintain employment between externally funded projects or other sources of work? if so, please give details.

7. Do you offer an enhanced paid notice period to research only staff on fixed-term contracts? If so, please give details.

8. Do you offer an enhanced redundancy payment to research only staff if they are dismissed at the end of a fixed-term contract?

9. Is the institution a signatory to the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers?

10. Are there on-going efforts to improve the security of employment of research-only staff at your institution within the next 12 months? If so, please give details.

Appendix 2: The weighting and scoring

Metric	Question	Weighting	Possible responses	Scoring	Notes
1	% of research only staff on a fixed-term contract	16%			The group were conscious that this was a crude measure and does take into account staff who may be on open-ended contracts but with an identified risk date. However this is a measure of casualisation. from an established source
			75% or more	0	
			60-74%	3	
			45-59%	6	
			30-44%	8	
			15-29%	12	
			0-14%	16	
2	Type of contracts used	5%			
			Open ended	5	
			Fixed-term	0	
			Open ended with an at risk date	2.5	
			FTC-open ended after 2 years	4	
			FTC-open ended after 2 years with at a risk date	2	
			FTC-open ended after 3 years	3	
			FTC-open ended after 3 years with at a risk date	1.5	
			FTC-open ended after 4 years	2	
			FTC - open ended after 4 years with at risk date	1	
			No standard contract (mix of contracts)	2.5	
3	% of research staff on a fixed-term contract with at least 4 years' service	5%			The group felt that that employers who has a large % of staff with long (4 years +) service were in breach of the spirit of the fixed-term regulations which seeks more secure contracts for staff after 4 years.
			76-100%	0	
			51-75%	1	
			26-50%	2	
			26-50%	2	
			11-25%	3	
			6-10%	4	
			0-5%	5	
4	Do you offer redeployment?	12%			
			No	0	
			Yes, 1 month before contract end	1	
			Yes, 2 months before contract end	3	
			Yes, 3 months before contract end	5	
			Yes, for notice period	5	
			Yes, 4 months before contract end	5	
			Yes, 5 months before contract end	8	
			Yes, 6 months before contract end	10	
			Yes, more than 6 months before contract end	12	
5	% of staff successfully redeployed, renewed or extended at the end of their fixed-term contract or at the end of a fixed-term funding stream	16%			
			Not able to provide data/sought exemption from question	0	
			0-20%	2	
			21-40%	6	
			41-60%	12	
			Over 60%	16	

Metric	Question	Weighting	Possible responses	Scoring	Notes
6	Do you offer any form of bridging between funding?	12%			It was not always easy to award scores given the information provided but we have sought to be consistent in how the scores have been allocated.
			No	0	
			Ad hoc funded, varying departmental /unit policies, on future external funding	4	
			Ad hoc funded, university-level policy, dependent on future external funding	6	
			A centrally funded scheme less strictly tied to future external funding but with length of service criteria in excess of 2 years	10	
			A centrally funded scheme with less restrictive criteria regarding length of service and relationship to external funding	12	
7	Do you offer an enhanced period of paid notice to research staff?	10%			
			No	0	
			Yes	10	
8	Do you offer enhanced redundancy pay to research staff?	12%			
			No	0	
			Yes, we not apply the statutory weekly cap	6	
			Yes, no weekly cap and enhanced weeks	8	
			Yes, generous enhancement	12	
9.	Are you a signatory to the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers?	2%			For more details see: https://researcherdevelopment concordat.ac.uk
			No	0	
			Yes	2	
10.	Are there on-going efforts to improve the security of employment of research staff within the next 12 months	8%			It was not always easy to award scores given the information provided but we have sought to be consistent in how the scores have been allocated.
			No	0	
			Yes - ongoing or planned commitments under broad initiatives	4	
			Yes – ongoing or planned vague commitments under agreed policy with UCU	6	
			Yes, on-going or planned specific commitments under agreed policy with UCU	8	
11.	Are you a signatory to the Vitae HR Excellence in Research award	2%			For more details see: https://www.vitae.ac.uk/policy/ hr-excellence-in-research
			No	0	
			Yes	2	
Total		100%			

Appendix 3: Examples of bridging funds and extended notice periods

None of these schemes scored maximum points on our scoring scheme but they are examples of existing better practice in the sector. They fall short of our maximum score due to eligibility criteria and / or length of funding.

SHEFFIELD HALLAM UNIVERSITY

The University has implemented a Sheffield Hallam Research and Innovation Fund (SHRIF) which aims to support inclusive and impactful research and innovation activities towards growth and sustainability. One aspect of the fund is to invest in individuals and teams – this includes bridging funds for researchers on fixed-term contracts where short-term staff retention is critical for grant/contract delivery and skills retention. The scheme operates three competitive calls per year via an application process, which is reviewed by the research community and overseen by the Research Leadership Group. Criteria include:

1) Quality and timeliness of the activity

2) The need for internal investment to support the transformative activity and the justification as to why this cannot be supported through other means.

3) Evidence-led plans to lever future funding.

4) Alignment to the scheme and the University plan.

5) Support for the transformation of our research culture, embedding the principles of climate action, EDI and our Hallam values (ambition, collaboration, inclusion, innovation, integrity)

6) Clear potential to deliver the transformative activity.

ULSTER UNIVERSITY

For those on open-ended contracts with an identified 'at risk' date, an additional 6 months of funding support will be offered by the University as a bridging period to allow some additional time for the outcome of funding proposals to be confirmed and/or to allow researchers the opportunity to seek alternative sources of funding for their research activities.

UNIVERSITY OF MANCHESTER

University of Manchester UCU has recently negotiated improved terms and conditions for an extended notice period of up to three months, currently available to externally funded fixed-term staff with 4 years' continuous service (originally agreed in 2010/11). This notice period typically extends a contract beyond the end date of a particular project, and so staff can be reassigned to new work. The new policy allows requests for reassignment to particular short-term work in the interests of their career development and stipulates that efforts must be made to accommodate such a request. In addition, the affected employee may also

use this period 'to focus on finding another role within the University and/or externally'. This allows the employee to actively work towards securing a new contract, either at Manchester or elsewhere, during the extended notice period. If a new role begins within the three-month period, the notice period functions as a form of bridge funding.

Appendix 4: Example of enhanced redundancy scheme

The following schemes all scored maximum points as being generous enhancements of statutory redundancy payments (albeit limited to longer serving staff in some cases).

LEEDS

The following arrangements apply to fixed term or ongoing staff:

➡ Staff who have been employed for less than two years are not eligible to receive a redundancy payment.

➡ For staff who have two to four years' service, redundancy payments will be the statutory redundancy entitlement.

➡ For staff who have over four years' service, enhanced redundancy payments will be as set out in the table below:

YEARS SERVICE	ENHANCED REDUNDANCY PAYMENT
Over 4 years	4 months net pay
Over 5 years	6 months net pay
Over 6 years	8 months net pay
Over 7 years	10 months net pay
Over 8 years	12 months net pay

QUB

1 week's pay for each year of service for those with up to 2 years of service;

Between 1–3 weeks pay (dependent on duration of service) for each year of service plus statutory redundancy pay up to a maximum of 2 year's salary overall

ULSTER UNIVERSITY

Redundancy payment is based on statutory calculation without a weekly cap plus 20% of annual salary.