



## Report on Casualised HE Staff in Art History

### About this Report

This survey was conducted by the Higher Education Committee of the Association for Art History (AAH). Our aim was to get a better sense of the situation of art historians working on fractional and/or non-permanent contracts. It complements a quantitative survey in which the AAH asked Heads of Departments to provide numbers of art history students and of staff with permanent and non-permanent contracts. Our initiative was prompted by the UCU strikes in 2018-20 and the attention it drew to the situation of non-permanent staff working in UK Higher Education which was also echoed in the press. While there were articles and reports addressing the situation of casualised staff in Higher Education at large bringing out the extent to which some UK universities rely on non-permanent staff to deliver teaching, we felt that a report on the specific situation of art historians in this situation was needed.

This report is based on 15 one-on-one qualitative interviews with non-permanent art history teaching and research staff at UK universities. The interviews were conducted by members of the AAH Higher Education Committee who were not immediate colleagues of nor had significant personal relationships with the interview subjects. Participation was uncompensated and voluntary and we thank all participants for their time. Interviews were mostly conducted between fall 2019 and spring 2020. Most of the interviews were thus held before the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, some afterwards. We don't specify this in our report, but would like to stress that the current situation makes the report – and the measures that we propose as an outcome – even more pertinent as it brought out the consequences of precarity drastically. The report and its underpinning research have been guided by the British Sociological Association's 'Statement of Ethical Practice'<sup>1</sup> with regard to our procedures. Italicized text designates that its underlying information has been drawn from a specific interview, although information that can identify that individual has been removed.

### Workload and Working Environment

Casualised staff **teach at every level of art history university instruction**, from first-year undergraduates to postgraduates. While **contracts** vary (including hourly paid work, fractional work, and multi-year positions) the vast majority of these are **non-renewable**. Those surveyed had **on average 7.4 contact hours per week with students**, with some reporting significantly higher amounts. *At one highly ranked art history programme, for example, an individual on a half-time contract was given a teaching allocation roughly double the amount given to full-time permanent members of staff.* **Working in excess of contracted hours appears to be endemic**; most participants described workload that could not be completed within their contracted hours, requiring many to regularly work at evenings and weekends. **Teaching preparation**, for example, is **routinely under-compensated**. **42% of respondents** noted that the preparation time required by their role **significantly exceeds** the amount of time for which they are paid.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.britisoc.co.uk/media/24310/bsa\\_statement\\_of\\_ethical\\_practice.pdf](https://www.britisoc.co.uk/media/24310/bsa_statement_of_ethical_practice.pdf)

**Training for teaching in higher education is not consistently provided.** In most instances, time spent undergoing such training is **not compensated**. Despite this, staff on temporary contracts supply a significant portion of all instruction. *Over 50% of undergraduate teaching at a prestigious Russell Group art history programme is done by those on temporary contracts according to an internal audit, reports one of the survey participants currently employed there.* Evidence suggests this is hardly anomalous.<sup>2</sup> In addition to teaching, casualised workers are often asked to contribute to curriculum design and pastoral care. Roughly **half of those surveyed designed their own courses, but only 17% were paid for this work.** For example, *one of the participants was asked to produce an entirely new course syllabus and received no compensation.* Such requests are often made on short notice. *Another participant was asked to redesign multiple courses with just two weeks' notice, which they characterised as 'an impossible deadline'.*

While a typical temporary teaching contract may not include pastoral care of students, casualised staff at some of the largest UK art history programmes report **significant pastoral duties** that were not part of their initial contract including serving as academic advisor or personal tutor for as many as **40 students at a time**. Even when not serving in an official advising capacity, participants observed that they are typically **the first point of contact for students** and consequently spend a great deal of time answering student queries and helping students navigate disabilities and mental health issues – time which is **not compensated**. *Several participants employed at large Russell Group universities expressed concern that they had not received appropriate training to handle student physical and mental health crises.* Several also observed that pastoral care and related administrative labour disproportionately fall on younger women on casualised contracts.

**Workplace dysfunctionality** is a significant concern. **29%** of those surveyed said they felt **'pressured' to do uncompensated work in excess of their contract**. Several called for greater transparency in workloads, noting that permanent staff are often unaware they are asking precarious workers to take on extra unpaid work. **14% reported that they had experienced bullying in the workplace**, including public episodes of verbal abuse. *One participant describes their 'fear of retribution' if they were to report workplace bullying and exploitative labour practices to Human Resources or the UCU.* Although instances of bullying appear limited there is evidence that on a much broader level **permanent members of staff, despite their best intentions, may be complicit in the exploitation of casualised workers** insofar as their own workload is reduced when they allow onerous tasks to be shifted onto those on temporary contracts.

### Financial Burdens

Pay varies greatly, with reported annual income ranging from £7,000 up to £41,000. Many reported incomes below £20,000 per annum, with only one reporting income over £40,000. **82% of those surveyed stated that they were worried about money.** Those with **dependents** expressed even greater levels of financial strain. *'It would be*

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<sup>2</sup> 'Counting the Costs of Casualisation in Higher Education', University and College Union, published online June 2019. [https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/10336/Counting-the-costs-of-casualisation-in-higher-education-Jun-19/pdf/ucu\\_casualisation\\_in\\_HE\\_survey\\_report\\_Jun19.pdf](https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/10336/Counting-the-costs-of-casualisation-in-higher-education-Jun-19/pdf/ucu_casualisation_in_HE_survey_report_Jun19.pdf)

*impossible' to live entirely from their salary (roughly £7300), notes one individual who is on a fractional 12-month contract at a large Russell Group university. Despite teaching 8 contact hours per week (which is comparable with a 1.0FTE permanent staff's teaching load), another individual describes their pay as 'a bare level of subsistence'. Two participants noted that there is an **added administrative burden** that comes with invoicing one's department, tracking payment for extra work, and other paperwork associated with non-payroll compensation. Many contracts are offered on **short notice**. One participant who has worked for several years at the same university notes that they are typically notified of their employment status in 'late August or early September', just weeks before the start of term.*

Many are compelled to **supplement their wages** by working additional jobs, relying on a partner's salary, taking on personal debt, and requesting financial assistance from family. **More than half of those surveyed work multiple jobs**. Casualised workers paid on a monthly basis were more likely to report satisfaction with their method of compensation than those paid on a per-term basis. **72% of participants did not have a clear understanding of their employment benefits**, such as **sick pay, pension contributions, and vacation days**.

Lack of adequate payment raises serious concerns for **diversity and inclusion**, insofar as it favours individuals whose families and partners can provide sufficient financial support. This system, in the words of one participant, *'works to the benefit of those who are younger, single, with no special needs, support needs, or personal commitments. It discriminates against those with familial and/or relationship commitments, or disabilities, and those who do not have independent means of financial support or financial safety nets'*. It also has a **significant negative impact** on the individual's **quality of life**, including their **mental health**, as outlined below in 'The Personal Toll'.

### The Cycle of Precarity

Those who participated in the survey uniformly expressed a **desire to produce ambitious research and to secure a permanent university position**. **21%** signalled a willingness to accept a permanent post that was **'teaching only'**; some individual interviewees consider a 'teaching only' position desirable as they would be freed from the pressures of REF. **93% described their position as precarious**, several of whom reflected on the *'relentless cycle'* of *'constantly having to be on the job market.'* *'All one's focus during the current job(s)'*, another remarked, *'has to be on finding the next job.'* Although their temporary position was *'repeatedly promised to be a stepping stone to a permanent post'*, in the words of one participant, *'it is a treadmill.'* The primary concerns voiced by interviewees are threefold: (1) employment practices that withhold the time and resources needed to produce research; (2) the labour of constantly applying for short-term positions; and (3) the physical and mental toll of long-term precarious employment. *'I know I am teaching myself out of a job but it keeps hope alive,'* is how one survey participant summarised this state of affairs.

**75% of those surveyed remain 'research active'** in their field. Of those, only **44% were paid** to do research. Because maintaining an active research profile remains a nearly universal requirement to attain permanent employment, the workload of a casualised contract can be a significant barrier to gaining a permanent position. One example of the perverse logic at work here comes from *an individual employed for*

*several years at a top-ranked art history programme on a teaching-only contract. When asked to re-apply after a few years for their teaching-only position, they were required to submit evidence of recent research activity despite research being excluded from their contract.* This exemplifies a system of employment that expects staff to be research active but provides no support or compensation for it.

In addition to workload, there are other systemic barriers to research activity. The first is ineligibility to apply for major research grants without a permanent position. Related to this, several expressed frustration that their university's research support office would not provide administrative support for existing grants and future applications (e.g., by providing economic costing). The second is a lack of institutional support for research activities undertaken by those on teaching-only contracts. **44% of those surveyed received no financial support for their research costs.** *One participant reports having to take on personal debt to pay for the image fees for a major publication.* A few felt disappointed about the lack of recognition their research successes received from colleagues, either within the department or in the broader university community. Additionally, **64% said there was no institutional support for their career development.** Of those who did have access to such support, two remarked that the professional development offered by their employer was '*not geared or relevant to*' employees on short-term contracts.

### The Personal Toll

Many of those who participated in the survey reported **long-term damage to their self-esteem**, suffering from with **depression and anxiety**, work-related **physical impairments**, and a range of other personal challenges. The **financial burden** described above was invoked by many on temporary contracts, who noted its profoundly negative logistical and psychological consequences. Two of the participants flagged the additional difficulties faced by those with **caring responsibilities**, who are less able to work in excess of their contracted hours and are also less able to tolerate significant financial precarity. Others have remarked on the **discriminatory** nature of the exploitative employment practices reported by participants, which work against those who do not benefit from familial financial support and those who come from outside of the UK. Several also reflected on the strain precarious employment placed on their personal relationships, including one who remarked on the '*financial and emotional impact of having a partner whose employment has been derailed through multiple moves.*' It is apparent that precarious employment has **serious negative impacts on the physical and mental health** of individuals.

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Recommendations for good practice from this report can be found in the Association's "Casualised Teaching in Art History, Statement of Good Practice."

1 October 2020