

UNBLOCK

Issue 2

October, 2026

Precarity, Academic Burnout and Mental Health



6 Interviews
Poetry & Essays
Art
List of Resources

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We are proud to share that the *Unblock Magazine* team was recognised as runner-up for the inaugural Hywel Thomas Prize by the Learned Society of Wales (see: <https://www.learnedsociety.wales/inspiring-mentor-receives-inaugural-hywel-thomas-prize/>). This recognition is a testament to the dedication and vision of our team and contributors, who remain committed to encouraging open and meaningful conversations around the genuine challenges encountered in research, academic culture and higher education.

We extend our thanks to all individuals who participated in interviews and generously shared their expertise and perspectives. We are especially grateful to our dedicated volunteers, Dr Ruselle Meade, Ms Iliana Dagre and Ms Justina Nassif, who joined us for the second issue.

We also sincerely appreciate everyone who contributed to the magazine through their writing, reviewing, and collaborative efforts. This publication would not have been possible without the collective commitment and enthusiasm of our contributors.

Thank you for making the *Unblock's* journey possible.

Explore the first issue of *Unblock* [here](#),
or scan the QR code below to access it for
free.

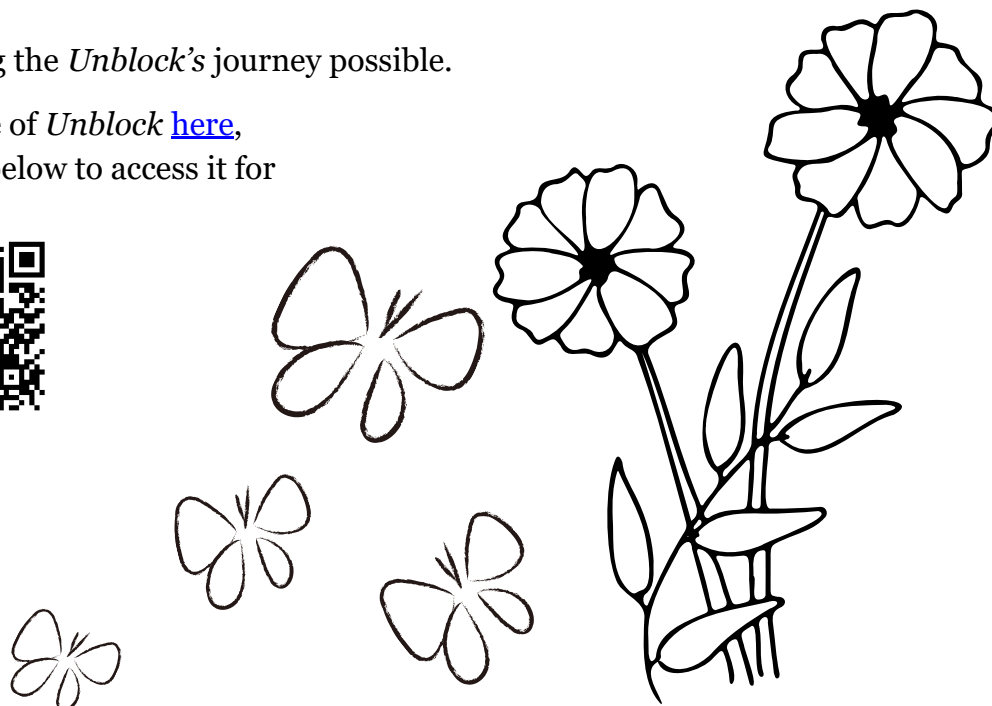
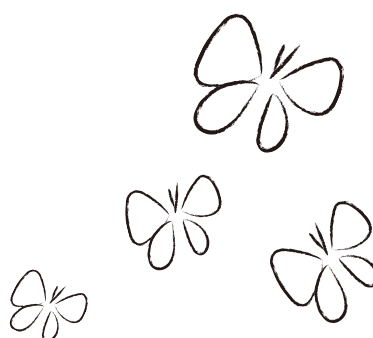


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EDITORIAL

Building Resilience: Stories of Hope and Challenge in Higher Education

Dr Ivana Rozic



We are all surrounded by uncertainty. We face turbulent times, an unpredictable economy, the shifting landscape of research and higher education (HE), and ever-changing natural forces. This environment challenges our ability to stay grounded and maintain hope for better days ahead. Yet, it is often in these moments of uncertainty that we discover resilience, adaptability, and new opportunities for growth.

Resilience is not just a personal trait; it **flourishes most when supported by strong systems of accountability within institutions.**

The relationship between resilience and institutional accountability is especially significant in the context of today's job security and working conditions for academic staff. When accountability systems are lacking or insufficient, uncertainty can become overwhelming and undermine the very resilience individuals and teams are striving to build. The following data and reports illustrate how precarious employment and the absence of strong institutional support continue to challenge the well-being of individuals working in HE.

In 2023, the University and College Union (UCU) released a *Freedom of Information report, 2023: Support for research staff*, indicating that nearly two-thirds (i.e., 66%) of research-only staff in UK universities remain employed on fixed-term contracts. The report notes that this situation has changed minimally over the past decade, underscoring the persistent challenge of job security for academic researchers. More recent data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) for 2024/25 reveal that 60% of research-only staff and 35% of teaching-only staff, whose positions are fully funded by HE institutions, continue to work on fixed-term contracts. While part-time and fixed-term roles can provide some flexibility, they often come at the cost of career progression, mental health issues and chronic overwork among staff on fixed-term contracts, as emphasised in the *2023 LSE UCU Report: The Crisis of Academic Casualisation at LSE*. Notably, 82% of

postdoctoral researchers and Fellows reported experiencing ongoing or persistent anxiety about their career prospects.

Despite some progress, the persistence of academic casualisation continues to undermine the academic sector and its research culture. This ongoing trend not only threatens personal and financial stability but also career development and adversely affects the mental health of our HE colleagues. To address these challenges, the second issue of *Unblock Magazine* explores the interconnected issues of **Precarity, Academic Burnout and Mental Health** in HE. Our aim is to illuminate how these interconnected challenges shape individuals' experiences throughout HE and to showcase practical solutions and resources to help overcome them.

In this issue, we bring together voices from across the academic community to explore the realities of working in HE today. While we reached out to individuals currently experiencing precarious working conditions, many were unable to participate in interviews due to personal and professional circumstances. The voices represented here include individuals who support colleagues in precarious situations, work to improve employment conditions across the sector, and contributors with direct experience of academic precarity, both past and present. Diverse contributors and members of the editorial team also bring lived experience of navigating precarious academic careers, which has informed the development of this issue. Through personal stories, essays, and reflections, contributors at different stages of their academic journeys share experiences of uncertainty, insecurity, resilience, and the challenges of sustaining a career in a changing HE landscape.

We are deeply grateful to everyone who chose to share their stories with us. Their openness reveals how experiences of precarity and mental health are shaped by intersecting factors, including institutional cultures, employment conditions, and wider pressures on universities. Together, these contributions explore burnout, stigma, support, motivations for pursuing academic careers, decisions to leave academia, and the changing models that shape the future of HE.

We hope that these pages provide guidance on areas that need change and build a foundation for progress. By continuing to listen, support one another, and push for direct actions, **we can strive to build a thriving and more equitable future together.**



The Sound of Silence by Ivana Rozic 2026



Finding my Bloom by Ivana Rozic 2025



Luret Lar
PhD Candidate and Medical Doctor
School of Social Sciences
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“...NOW I SIMPLY
TELL MYSELF:
WHEN I GET TO
THAT BRIDGE, I
WILL CROSS IT.”

Talking with PhD candidate &
Medical Doctor Luret Lar

Who is Luret Lar? Can you tell us something about yourself?

It's really a pleasure to be here. My name is Luret Lar, and I am currently a third-year PhD researcher in Social Policy here at the School of Social Sciences at Cardiff University. I am currently funded by the Welsh Graduate School for the Social Sciences, as well as the Economic and Social Research Council.

I came here approximately three and a half years ago from Nigeria. I have a background in medicine in my home country, where I specialised in public health and developed a keen interest in international public health and health services management. I think this interest is part of what brought me here. Over the course of my career, I have experienced something of a career shift. I worked on a project for about seven years in Nigeria, which was led by the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine here in the UK. We worked on the Countdown Project, a multi-country, multidisciplinary implementation research project, where I served as the research manager.

Through that experience, my perspective on practice changed. I found myself asking, “*Where are the voices within the numbers?*” That question sparked my interest in qualitative research. This journey has ultimately brought me to my current research on forced migrant women here in Wales and how they are rebuilding their lives in a nation of sanctuary. I hope this gives you a little sense of who I am and a bit about my journey.

Thinking about your current situation, how do you feel that factors such as gender, race, social class, and other intersecting factors have shaped your experiences of precarity and mental health in academia?

Looking at myself as a Black woman, I remember when I first came to Wales. My funding was structured as a 1+3 *programme*, meaning I completed a year of a master's degree before progressing to the PhD. I remember attending my induction, where part of it involved going to my first conference. Something quite strange happened, or perhaps I should say, I experienced a strange feeling.

Before coming to Cardiff, I had heard people say that Cardiff University was a predominantly white, middle-class institution. But I told myself, *"I'm not going to listen to assumptions. I'll come and experience it for myself."*

At the back of my mind, however, I had what I would describe as a self-induced unconscious bias. What do I mean by that? When I entered the seminar room, it was full of white faces. Eventually, I noticed another woman who looked mixed race. I wasn't entirely sure whether she was Black or mixed race, but I remember thinking, *"I nearly walked out of the room."* And that surprised me, because before coming into this space, I had already had a lot of international exposure and interactions. But as I said, I had that self-induced unconscious bias.

That made me reflect deeply on the role of gender and race in shaping trust and openness within the research process. Through this experience, I have realised that I need to let go of unconscious bias while also acknowledging that it exists in the world. However, I do not want to dwell on it, nor do I want to see myself as a victim, survivor, or perpetrator of unconscious bias. So, that is a little of my experience, reflecting on my identity and intersectionality, particularly in relation to gender and race. Overall, before I finish, I would say that these intersectional identities have, in my own opinion and perception, supported me in my academic and professional journey.

"I'm not going to listen to assumptions. I'll come and experience it for myself."

Interestingly, years later, when we got to know each other, we realised that we had been in the same master's cohort. Through an intersectional lens, we shared many similarities: we were both women, both Black, both funded through the same programme, and, interestingly, both doctors. What struck me was that she told me she had the exact same feeling when she spotted me in the room. To be honest, when I reflect on gender, race, and my experiences here in Wales over the past three and a half years, I would say that these aspects of my identity have, in many ways, supported me. This is, of course, my own perception, and I may be wrong. In particular, they supported my data collection as I navigated the insider, outsider space of research.

Why do I say this? At this stage of my research, I am analysing my data at several levels, trying to make sense of it and define my themes. One thing that struck me was a recurring phrase across many of the 25 interviews I conducted: *"Because it's you, I will tell you this."*

Precarity and burnout

Another topic you mentioned you'd like to discuss is precarity and burnout. How comfortable do you feel talking about mental health, burnout, or precarious work with colleagues or even supervisors?

I think this is a very good question, to be honest, because I come from a cultural background where such feelings are not necessarily encouraged to be expressed or externalised. Instead, it is more of a cultural norm that you internalise mental health challenges, you take them in. The expectation is that you are a human being, you are a woman, and you have so many layers of resilience and resistance that you are expected to simply endure.

However, thankfully, within my family of origin, my nuclear family, the family I grew up in, things were a bit different. My parents were both educationists, and they believed strongly in giving their children a voice, especially my father. To give you some context, I come from a family of five children, four girls and one boy.

At the time, the dominant social and cultural norm was that boys and men were prioritised, while girls and women were expected to take a secondary role. But my parents challenged this. My father, in particular, gave us a voice because he looked beyond gendered expectations and traditional roles.

Of course, growing up, I was still aware of the biases in society around me. But I also carried with me the values I was raised with. When I came here, I had to learn a new organisational culture and adapt to the wider academic environment. As I interacted more with colleagues and supervisors, I became more comfortable discussing issues around mental health, burnout, and precarity. However, I also often ask myself whether I might be burdening others when I share these experiences or whether I am adding to their existing workload. Over time, I have come to realise that these conversations are not a burden, but rather a form of release, a way of seeking advice and support. I now approach them gradually, as I continue to understand people and the surrounding culture.

Speaking with my supervisors, particularly about taking a break between completing my master's and starting the PhD, was very beneficial. It made me realise that burnout is real, and that it is important to speak up. I also realised that people are genuinely there to support and encourage me throughout the process. In my experience, this environment is one of balance, where you work when you are expected to work, but also take breaks to rest, recover, and return with a clearer mind. This is quite different from the environment I came from, where it was more about continuous work, and rest was something you had to figure out for yourself.

Because of this supportive environment, I now feel safe in my workplace. I feel that the space is secure and provides the necessary support for me to be open and honest. There are also anonymous support systems available, which makes it easier to express concerns around precarity and burnout.

To summarise, it has been a process. I come from a cultural background shaped by strong norms, but I also had a supportive family that influenced me differently. Adjusting to the wider academic environment took time, but once I recognised that support was available and encouraged, I was able to engage with it more fully. I would say I am now in a better place. I can work more effectively and efficiently.

“...once I recognised that support was available and encouraged, I was able to engage with it more fully.”

To add one final point, I have also come to appreciate the respectful boundaries in this environment. People are attentive to cues, if someone is not willing to share, they are given space rather than pressure. I have also been supported in navigating precarity, particularly in relation to my immigration status. When I reach out, I receive the necessary guidance and support. My supervisors also regularly check in on what comes next and, where appropriate, signpost me to relevant resources.

Overall, I would say they have been very generous in sharing their knowledge and support.



Immigration and precarity

If applicable, how has being a highly skilled immigrant shaped your experience of precarity in academia, particularly in relation to visa status? And have visa-related challenges, or cultural differences (and language differences, if relevant), influenced your mental health or your career choices?

As an international student on a visa, you are constantly thinking about what comes next because the immigration landscape is very fluid, things can change at any time. To be honest, in my first year and a half, I felt relatively settled. But once I reached the midpoint of my studies, I started to think, *“Oh my goodness, what is going to happen next?”*

Now that I am approaching the end of my programme, I have become even more aware of these uncertainties. My funding was a 1+3 model, but I only realised after arriving that I had the option to apply for a funded extension year. However, that additional year would be unfunded.

Issues like this sometimes affect my ability to challenge the system, in the sense that I feel tied to it, and I sometimes question how much I can critique or challenge a system that I am also dependent on. I hope that makes sense. To be honest, in relation to being a “highly skilled immigrant,” I realise that when I first came to the UK, I already had a master’s degree from my previous work on the project I mentioned earlier, in international public health. However, during my funding interview, I was asked that if I already had a UK master’s, would I still be willing to undertake another master’s year if required by the funding body.

Without hesitation, I said I would not mind at all. I am the kind of person who saw it as an opportunity rather than a drawback, because I knew it would help me settle into a new environment, a new research area, and strengthen my skills. I was actually excited about completing another master’s as preparation for my PhD. At the time, I did not think in terms of “Why should I do this again?” even though some people might question it given their existing qualifications. For me, it felt like a valuable transition period.

However, when it comes to my emotional and psychological experience, the main pressure is the uncertainty around visa status. The situation is very fluid, what is available today may change tomorrow. For example, when I first arrived, I believe students on a research master’s route could bring family members more easily, and there was a post-study work route of around two years, although I understand that this later changed to 18 months in some cases. Even though I am on a PhD route, these changes make me aware that policies are not fixed, and that adds to the uncertainty.

“Honestly, this is the most difficult part to deal with, the precarity linked to the fluidity of visa policies and what comes next.”

Honestly, this is the most difficult part to deal with, the precarity linked to the fluidity of visa policies and what comes next. In addition to that, there are wider structural concerns, such as hiring freezes and limited opportunities. I sometimes find myself wondering: after completing my PhD, where are the opportunities? Especially when I may be competing with citizens who have the same qualifications. At times, this can feel intimidating. It is not about underestimating oneself, I know what I am capable of, but there is still a structural and institutional barrier that keeps coming to mind: *Is this feasible? Am I competitive enough? Will there be opportunities for me?*

So these are some of the thoughts I have. Ultimately, they are closely tied to my visa and immigration status.

Precarity and leaving academia

Have you ever considered leaving academia due to precarity, for example, challenges linked to visa status or other factors you have mentioned? Or have you ever considered leaving academia due to burnout? And do you think it is possible to find an alternative career path outside academia?

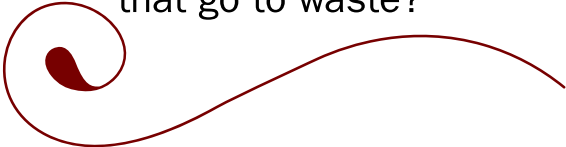
I just want to step back for a moment to say that I am, to be honest, super, super grateful to my funders for the supportive academic environment I have experienced, as well as to my supervisors, who are very generous with their knowledge. One of the things I appreciate most is the constructive feedback they provide.

I often leave supervision meetings thinking, *"I love this criticism."* If I already knew everything, I would not be here. Because I am here to learn from experienced scholars, I have come to see constructive feedback very positively. Of course, we are all human, there are days when feedback can feel difficult, and I think, *"Oh, this hurts."* But in reality, it helps me grow and improve with every round of feedback.

Before I go further, I also want to acknowledge that I would not be here without the participants who have responded so openly and shared their lived experiences with me. I am very much looking forward to sharing this work with academics and policymakers, and hopefully contributing to conversations about the need for more tailored support.



"Sometimes the pressures can feel overwhelming. But I often ask myself: if you have built a career through resilience, support, and lived experience, why should all of that go to waste?"



Sometimes the pressures can feel overwhelming. But I often ask myself: if you have built a career through resilience, support, and lived experience, why should all of that go to waste?

For me, there is also another dimension to this. I am a medical doctor by training, so in a sense, I could return to clinical practice. With my experience in public health, I could also pursue other roles. However, I am aware that I may not yet have extensive UK-specific experience, which is often required to build a career in industry here. This leads me to think about alternative pathways, for example, working as an independent consultant or engaging in research on a more flexible basis, without being fully embedded in academia. I have asked myself these questions.

I do think it is possible, but I also recognise that it could be challenging at the beginning, especially when starting over. Some people might look at my path, coming to the UK to do another degree after already building a career, and question it. But they may not fully see the broader picture and the different layers I am trying to build in my academic and public health journey.

So, to answer your question: yes, I have thought about leaving academia. It is not a simple decision. I see it from different angles, as something that could be both difficult and liberating. At this stage in my career, I might be expected to have a very clear direction, but sometimes it still feels uncertain. So yes, it is something I am still thinking through.

Have you noticed how life has changed for those who have left academia, if you have had experience of observing this career path?

I have worked closely with someone who was previously in academia but is now working in industry. I have been collaborating with this person for the past three years since I arrived in Cardiff. To be honest, I have observed how academic training, discipline, and the ethos of academia translate very effectively into the way she performs her role in industry. Everything is well organised, there are templates for almost everything, and processes are easily accessible. Even events are planned months in advance. Sometimes up to six months ahead.

I have seen her succeed in that transition. She has taught, conducted research, and is now working in industry, and it seems to work very well for her. In some ways, I can relate to this myself. As a medical doctor, I have worked in faith-based organisations, government settings, private industry, NGOs, and community and international contexts. I would say I have had exposure to many different environments.

To be honest, I feel that the academic foundation has helped me navigate many challenges, particularly the discipline, critical thinking, forward planning, and structured approach that academia requires. It is a difficult path, but also a very rewarding one. So I have observed this transition, and I also have some related experience myself. I still see myself as moving between spaces, sometimes an insider, sometimes an outsider, navigating in between.

Overall, yes, I have seen people make that transition successfully, and in some cases, very successfully.

“I think the key lesson for me has been openness.”



Is there anything else you would like to add at the end, something we haven't touched on during this informal interview?

First of all, I have really enjoyed every part of this conversation, but I would like to briefly touch on language and culture. I may have learned, taught, and worked in English before coming here, but when I arrived, I realised I still had to learn new aspects of the language. For example, there are some words like *“lush”* that we do not really use back home. I have picked up new expressions here, and at times I find myself thinking, *“Oh my goodness, is this really English?”* because I am constantly learning new things.

However, the most important thing I have gained is academic English and academic phrasing. That has really helped me significantly. So while it has been relatively easy for me to adapt in the ways I have described, I think the key lesson for me has been openness. I believe that is my closing reflection. When people ask me, *“Why are you doing this?”* or *“What comes next?”* I used to have very fixed answers. When I was younger, I would say, *“This is next, then that is next.”* But now I simply tell myself: when I get to that bridge, I will cross it.

**“...I simply tell myself:
when I get to that bridge, I
will cross it.”**

I prefer to keep my options open. It might seem uncertain or even unstructured at this stage in my life, but I do so because I know that, with the experiences I have had, I can always create new opportunities when needed. So I think we should not be too rigid in everything we do. We should allow some flexibility and space to adapt along the way. Thank you very much.

“WE ARE TRYING TO SURVIVE THROUGH ALL OF THIS AND FIND SOLUTIONS, AND WE MAY EVENTUALLY REACH THEM. BUT THE IMPACT THIS HAS ON MENTAL HEALTH IS HUGE”

Interview with an anonymous university lecturer from the Anglosphere

Thank you so much again for joining us today. Could you tell us a bit about yourself, who you are, and what you do in your everyday and working life?

I hold a teaching and research position and teach mainly undergraduate students in the humanities and built-environment disciplines.

My research is interdisciplinary and engages with a range of themes related to the built environment. I have a mixed academic and professional background, and my work combines insights from multiple disciplines. My current research is similarly interdisciplinary in scope and methodology.

How has your experience of precarity changed across different stages of your career, from your PhD through to your lecturing position? And, if possible, could you describe a time when changing or precarious contracts affected your sense of well-being or stability, or perhaps when they did not? Overall, we are interested in this journey and how your experience has evolved over time.

After completing my undergraduate studies, I initially worked in a heritage-related professional role before returning to academia. I had always anticipated that I would continue my studies at a later stage.

I completed my master's degree abroad, having previously studied and worked in my country of origin. During this period, I also undertook short-term international projects. As I approached the end of my master's, I began considering my next steps, balancing the possibility of employment with further study. Financial constraints were an important factor, and I needed funding in order to continue.

Eventually, I was awarded a fully funded PhD position in another country. This support was essential, as I was unable to self-fund further study. During this period, I was also gaining experience through temporary work and gradually becoming aware of the challenges of entering professional sectors outside one's country of origin.

Although I was initially uncertain about pursuing a PhD, I began doctoral study with the intention of maintaining flexibility in my career options. The early stages of the PhD were productive, particularly as financial support reduced immediate pressures. However, changes in my personal circumstances during this time, specifically becoming a parent and taking on new caregiving responsibilities, meant that the PhD took longer to complete than originally planned.

Throughout this period, I became increasingly aware of the structural uncertainties associated with academic and professional trajectories, particularly in relation to funding, employment transitions, and mobility. I also began teaching towards the later stages of my PhD, alongside applications for academic and research positions.

I often felt positioned between disciplines, not fully aligned with a single professional identity, which was both enabling and challenging. **While this interdisciplinary positioning allowed flexibility, it also sometimes contributed to feelings of uncertainty about belonging within specific academic or professional communities.**

Eventually, I secured an academic position shortly after completing my doctorate.

After starting the job, I experienced a period of low mood and only later realised I had been struggling with depression. It was somewhat counterintuitive, I had finally achieved stability, yet I did not feel stable. I started my job soon after completing my Ph.D., with no real time to recover before immediately beginning to teach.

Only in retrospect did I realise how much the entire period had affected my mental health.

Intersecting Impacts of Caregiving Responsibilities and Precarity on Mental Health

You mentioned having a child, and the caregiving responsibilities that come with that. I was wondering how you feel these intersected with your experience of precarious employment and career development. For example, starting a job immediately after completing your PhD, without a real break, and soon after maternity leave, it sounds like a very intense period. If you feel comfortable, could you reflect on how that experience affected you?

This period also coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic. I had a child shortly before the pandemic began, and the timing significantly shaped my experience of returning to doctoral work. While there were some practical benefits to lockdown conditions, overall the situation increased feelings of isolation. I had previously been part of a supportive PhD community, but opportunities for informal contact were reduced, and the shift to remote working contributed to the dissolution of that network.

At the same time, I was transitioning into a new academic role, alongside multiple overlapping life changes. Around the same time, when I started my new job, I also came to realise that I am neurodivergent. I have always struggled with transitions and unpredictability, although I did not fully understand why at the time. During this period of multiple transitions, I began to understand that this is part of how I function. Of course, this helped me make sense of why my mental health was affected so strongly during that time.

Having a child also influenced how I thought about career trajectories and feasibility, particularly in relation to the practical and financial demands of caregiving. These considerations made the relative flexibility of academic work more appealing, although balancing caregiving responsibilities with work commitments required ongoing adjustment.

Caregiving responsibilities required constant negotiation of time and availability, particularly when unexpected demands arose. Although academic work can offer flexibility, I often felt the need to manage perceptions of availability and performance carefully, which sometimes contributed to feelings of pressure and guilt.

These experiences were closely linked to broader concerns about financial stability and job security, which were important for my mental wellbeing. Although securing an academic position initially brought a sense of relief, the wider context of uncertainty in higher education meant that concerns about stability did not fully disappear, even in a permanent role. **Broader sector conditions contributed to an ongoing sense of precarity.**

“Although academic work can offer flexibility, I often felt the need to manage perceptions of availability and performance carefully, which sometimes contributed to feelings of pressure and guilt.”

You mentioned feeling quite isolated during COVID, and it sounds like a very difficult period for you, especially as you had a young child and were also dealing with precarious working conditions. Do you think these different aspects of your situation, such as caring responsibilities, financial pressures, and job insecurity, combined to make things more difficult? And do you feel your experience might have been different if your financial situation had been more secure at the time?

I have sometimes reflected on how aspects of my identity may influence how I am perceived in academic recruitment processes, particularly when applying to institutions where I am not already known. While it is not possible to identify specific causes for recruitment outcomes, I have occasionally noticed differences between situations where I already have professional visibility and those where I am an external applicant.

In some cases, I have felt well aligned with the requirements of roles for which I applied, yet I was not shortlisted for interview. While I cannot determine the reasons for this, I have become aware of how informal recognition and prior familiarity may play a role in academic hiring processes, alongside formal evaluation criteria.

On one occasion, I received feedback on a funding-related application that appeared to rely on assumptions about my background and linguistic abilities. This led me to reflect on how perceptions of identity and origin can shape how applications are read, even when they do not explicitly state such characteristics. It highlighted how implicit assumptions may influence evaluation processes.

More broadly, I have come to understand my career experiences through an intersectional lens, where migration background, institutional structures, and changing policy environments can shape access to opportunities differently for different groups. In this context, broader structural changes in higher education and mobility regimes can produce uneven experiences of precarity depending on individual circumstances.

Additionally, as I have become more aware of my own support needs over time, I have reflected on how navigating institutional expectations around disclosure and adjustment can create uncertainty about entitlement and self-advocacy. These experiences are not unique, and they relate more broadly to how support systems are accessed and interpreted within academic environments.

Overall, these intersecting factors contribute to a more complex experience of career progression, shaped by both formal structures and informal practices of recognition and access.

Visa Dependency and Financial Insecurity as Barriers to Leaving Academia

Is there anything else you think is important or interesting to say about precarity in relation to the second issue of *Unblock* magazine?

I think there is also a theme around leaving academia.

I am not saying that changing career would not work for me, but the reality is that I still need a visa and I need financial stability. Because of that, I cannot really afford to go for long periods without my current level of financial support. This makes me very hesitant when thinking about changing my career. I would not say I feel brave enough to seriously entertain that option.

Even the idea of shifting, for example, from full-time to part-time, or changing the type of work I do, feels very constrained. It feels as though I do not have much freedom to make those kinds of changes, even if they might potentially improve my situation.

So some of these feelings of precarity continue, even though I now have a permanent contract. **Of course, my situation is much better than many others', but there is still a persistent sense that I am not completely secure. This has affected how I think about whether I want to leave academia, or change how I work, for example, moving to 80% rather than full-time to improve work-life balance.**

I also think that for people who do not have to worry about visa status or financial stability in the same way, these choices are more possible. Even within the current broader context, such as redundancy processes in the sector, some colleagues have decided to leave because they do not want to deal with that uncertainty. But I do not feel I can simply leave in the same way.

In particular, for early-career academics, the more junior you are, the more precarious your position tends to be, because you do not have the same range of options. Overall, this wider environment contributes to a continuing sense of instability.

Is there anything else you would like to add or discuss, for example about your future plans?

In terms of future plans, I am mainly trying to hold on to my current job for as long as I can. As I mentioned, during the recent redundancy situation, especially since my school was not directly affected, I also experienced something like survivor's guilt. I was quite strongly affected by the situation, but at the same time felt I should not really talk about it, as others were in much more difficult positions. I know that some of the people involved in this project are in far more precarious situations than I am. I think some of us sometimes felt that we should not even mention how we were feeling, because our situations were not as severe as others'.

However, there is still an impact on mental health. Anxiety works in a way that can amplify concerns, and you begin to worry even when, in reality, your situation may not be extremely precarious. I have also seen colleagues around me experience this. They begin to feel anxious about their careers, even if they are not necessarily in highly precarious positions, simply because the wider environment creates that sense of uncertainty.

Vassilissa: Thank you so much. What you've said really shows that precarity is not a single, uniform category. I'll now pass over to Ivana, who has a few more questions.

You've talked about visa-related issues and what was going on at the time. Do you think universities could do more to support doctoral students who want to find jobs afterwards, or staff who are working under similar conditions? In what ways do you think they could offer better support?

I became aware of how precarious teaching arrangements for doctoral researchers can interact with broader caregiving responsibilities. At the time, I was undertaking teaching on a casualised basis alongside my PhD, with no stable guarantee of hours and fluctuating workloads from month to month. This made financial planning difficult and created uncertainty about whether I would meet external requirements linked to access to childcare support.

This situation created a tension: working too few hours could affect eligibility for support, while working too many hours risked exceeding what was feasible alongside doctoral study. This produced a sense of financial and logistical instability, particularly during a period when I was already balancing multiple responsibilities.

I also became aware that **pay structures for doctoral teaching roles are often less favourable than those for externally contracted tutors performing similar teaching work.** This raised questions about fairness and equity within casualised academic labour, especially given that the work and responsibilities involved are often comparable.



Within this context, I was performing the same teaching roles as other tutors who were not doctoral researchers, which highlighted disparities in how teaching labour is remunerated depending on employment status. Although I raised questions about this at the time, there was no change in the arrangements.

Overall, these conditions contributed to a heightened sense of financial precarity during my doctoral studies, particularly when combined with caregiving responsibilities and the lack of stable employment conditions.

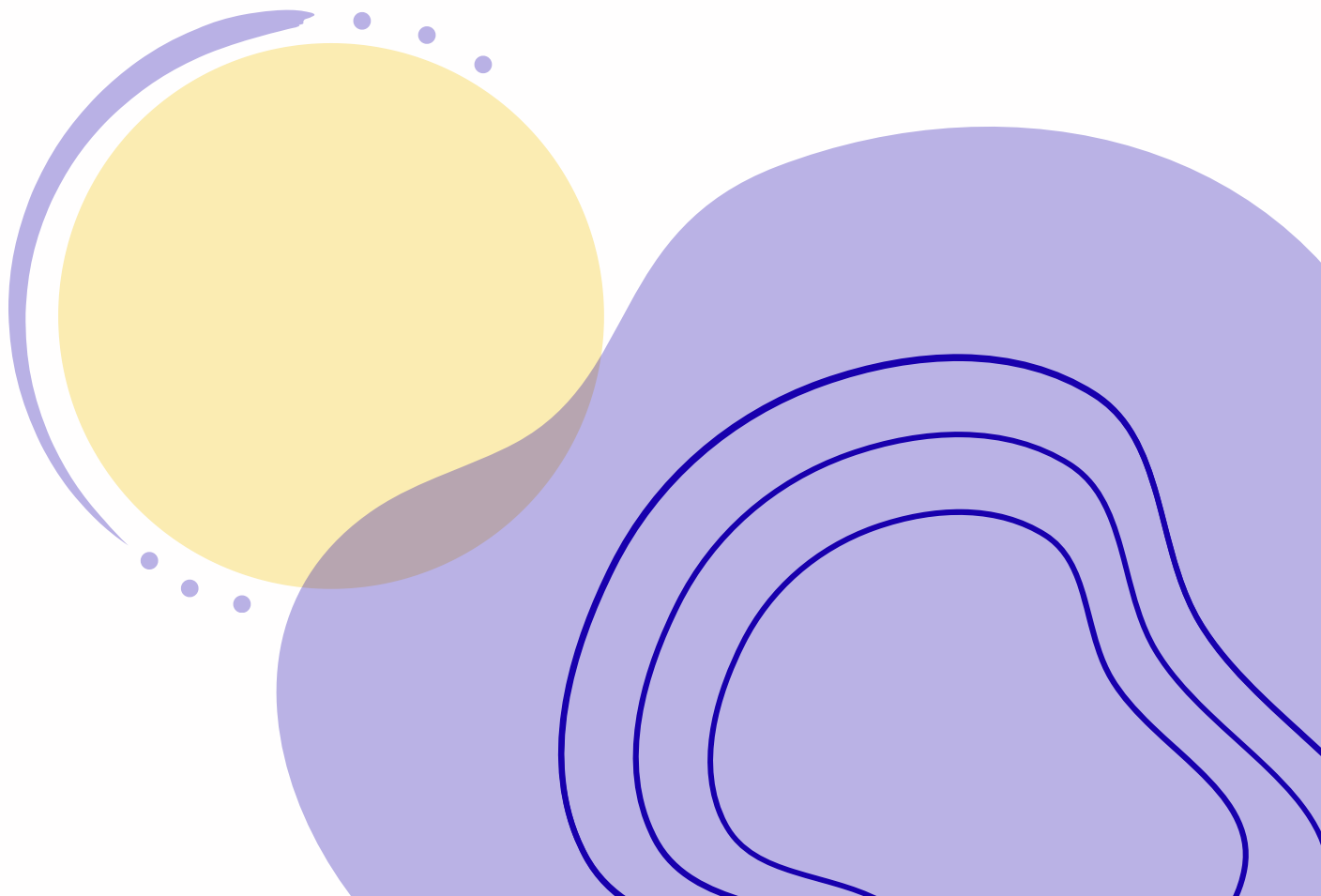
In terms of visa-related costs, some universities offer support schemes in the form of interest-free loans to cover visa application expenses for international staff. However, such support is typically only available once an individual is already employed, meaning that the financial burden is initially carried by the applicant.

There have also been broader discussions within the sector about whether employers should take greater responsibility for covering or subsidising visa-related costs for international staff. This is particularly significant for individuals with dependents, as visa fees can become a substantial financial burden in such cases.

Even for single applicants, these costs can represent a noticeable proportion of annual income, effectively reducing overall take-home pay for international staff and contributing to a sense of financial inequality compared to domestic colleagues.

So of course the university should be able to help. But I do not see that happening, especially given the current financial situation. However, you cannot deny that there is a financial burden for international staff. And for PhD students, it is even worse, they receive even less support. And I have now realised there are even more restrictions in terms of how many family members or dependents you can bring on a student visa, which makes it even more difficult than in my case.

So yes, it just gets worse. **We are trying to survive through all of this and find solutions, and we may eventually reach them. But the impact this has on mental health is huge, and I think people do not talk about it enough.**



Burnout and the Silence We Carry

By Sarah O'Prey

Across universities, conversations about mental health and burnout are becoming more visible. This matters. Growing openness and wellbeing initiatives signal a recognition that something is not working as it should. Yet awareness alone may not be enough. Alongside talking more, we may also need to rethink how we talk about burnout, and how we respond to it, both individually and collectively.

How burnout is defined shapes how we talk about it

Burnout is often described as emotional exhaustion, reduced capacity, and a sense of disconnection from work or study. The World Health Organization (2019) frames it as an “occupational phenomenon” arising from chronic workplace stress that *has not been successfully managed*.

On the surface, this sounds neutral. But for many people, it lands as a quiet accusation: you didn't manage your stress well enough. The implication is that burnout reflects a personal shortcoming, a failure of resilience, organisation, or coping.

This is where definitions matter. Burnout is not a sign that someone has done something wrong. It is a normal, understandable human response to prolonged demand, uncertainty, and pressure. In academic life, so often shaped by precarity, financial strain, short-term contracts, heavy workloads, and cultures of constant evaluation, these pressures are not incidental; they are structural. In such contexts, burnout is not surprising; it is predictable.

Why burnout feels so hard to talk about

Despite its prevalence, burnout often remains strangely difficult for us to name. Even in environments that encourage conversations about wellbeing, there can be an unspoken boundary around what can be safely shared.

A powerful driver of this silence is that story about personal responsibility. When burnout is framed as a failure to “manage stress,” struggling becomes something to hide. Speaking openly can feel risky, exposing, or professionally unsafe. Silence becomes a survival strategy.

In competitive environments shaped by performance metrics and insecurity, it can feel safer to appear endlessly capable. The result is a collective illusion of resilience, sustained by individual self-blame.

The compassion gap

One of the most striking patterns I see in my work is the difference between how people respond to their own burnout and how they respond to someone else's.

When we struggle, the internal voice is often harsh and absolute:

- I should be able to handle this.
- Everyone else is coping.
- I just need to try harder.

But when a colleague or student is struggling, our response is usually much more compassionate:

- This looks really tough.
- What support might help?
- What feels realistic right now?

We recognise the external context in their situation; workload, pressure, uncertainty, yet overlook it in our own. This asymmetry deepens shame and keeps the taboo alive. Naming this discrepancy opens the possibility of extending the same compassion and understanding to ourselves.

An ACT-informed shift: from self-blame to context

Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) offers a way of reframing burnout that disrupts the cycle of shame and silence. From an ACT perspective, the mind and body are not malfunctioning when we feel exhausted, anxious, disengaged, or unable to concentrate. They are responding to prolonged demand and perceived threat. These reactions make sense in context, even when they are painful.

This reframing invites a pause. Instead of pushing through on autopilot, we can begin to notice:

- What thoughts are showing up?
- What emotions or sensations are present?
- What might these experiences be signalling about my current capacity or needs?

From this more flexible position, new questions become possible:

- What is within my control, and what is not?
- Given my current energy, what is realistic?
- What small step might move me toward what matters?

These questions shift the focus away from self-critique and toward sustainable, values-guided action.

Talking differently and acting differently

Importantly, this approach is not about accepting unsustainable conditions or lowering aspirations. It is about responding more clearly to them. Values-guided action might include: setting boundaries, seeking support, adjusting expectations, naming workload pressures openly or challenging norms that individualise systemic strain.

Sometimes these actions begin quietly:

- Saying, "I'm at capacity, can we rethink this timeline."
- Acknowledging, "I need to adjust what's realistic for me this week."
- Choosing to name workload pressures rather than normalise overwork.

These small moments interrupt the silence that keeps burnout hidden. They also model a culture where limits are acknowledged rather than concealed.

Breaking the taboo requires more than talking

If breaking the taboo around burnout is to lead to meaningful change, talking more will not be enough. We need to talk differently, with context, compassion, and honesty, and we need to act in ways that reshape the environments we work and learn in.

Change often begins in small, individual moments. Moments of awareness, courage, and choice that slowly reshape what can be said, and what can be shared, within academic life.

What one small action might gently shift the silence for you?

Sarah O'Prey UKBA(cert)

ACT Tutor, Lifelong Learning Cardiff University

Bio:

Sarah O'Prey UKBA (cert) is a Behaviour Analyst and tutor in the Lifelong Learning Department at Cardiff University. Her teaching focuses on using Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT) to support people to navigate life's challenges through curiosity, compassion, flexibility, and values-guided action. She also provides 1:1 and group support through her CIC, Calm Tides Wellbeing, and is a mixed-media artist exploring the intersection of creativity and psychological flexibility.



Rupture Sarah O'Prey (Mixed media painting on canvas)



“I sometimes find that when things go wrong, the responsibility is shifted onto the individual, rather than considering whether the person was properly supported in the first place. I think that is a problem.”

TALKING WITH JAN DECKERS
SUPPORTING STAFF IN BURN-OUT, PRECARIITY AND WELL BEING DISCUSSION

Who is Jan Deckers, and can you tell us about your journey in academia and research?

I'm a philosopher, so the question "Who is Jan Deckers?" is a difficult one to answer because I'm still trying to find out who Jan Deckers really is. Anyway, I can give you some information about my background, which might help both you and me understand myself a little better.

I'm originally from Belgium, which has a Flemish-speaking part and a French-speaking part. I'm from the northern part, which is Flemish-speaking, or Dutch-speaking. I attended the University of Leuven, a Catholic university and one of the main universities in Belgium, where I studied various subjects, including religious studies, theology, and philosophy.

I then went on to complete a PhD at the University of St Andrews in Scotland. Since then, I have been working at Newcastle University, primarily teaching ethics in the Faculty of Medical Sciences, for the past 25 years. I also work for the University and College Union as a caseworker.

I've been a member of the union for a long time, although I've only been a caseworker for about three or four years. I think this is one of the things we'll be talking about today.

Apart from academic research, I also have some hobbies. I enjoy playing football and tennis, and I like working in the garden. Unfortunately, I can't find enough time for those hobbies, but that gives you a little sense of who I am.

Can you describe a little bit about that experience? You've spent many years working in academia and research, and you've also become involved in the union. How did that come about, and what led you to get involved?

I think I was very lucky to get an academic job. When I finished my PhD, I didn't actually have any publications, and securing a lectureship without publications is not easy. Yet I managed to obtain an academic position very shortly after my viva. It was either my first or second interview, so I consider myself fortunate to have found a position so quickly after completing my doctorate.

Having said that, my career progression was not straightforward. For more than twelve years, I was employed part-time. Initially, I worked at 50%, then at 75%, and only later obtained a full-time position. It was not easy to move from part-time to full-time employment, despite the fact that I was already carrying out a substantial amount of teaching, even when I was officially working half-time.

Another challenge was becoming involved in collaborative research and grant applications. The university provided many opportunities to learn about research funding. For example, there were seminars where funding bodies, or people familiar with them, would explain funding opportunities. However, for many years, no senior colleague approached me to ask whether I would like to be involved in a research bid. As a result, virtually all the research applications I have been involved in were initiatives that I started myself.

Looking back, I find that frustrating. In my view, when someone is beginning their career as a lecturer, senior academics should actively support them and help integrate them into research projects and funding applications. That simply did not happen in my case.

Early in my career, I was involved in securing funding for a major grant from the Wellcome Trust. However, just before the application was submitted, I decided to withdraw from the research team because I felt that I would struggle to work effectively with one of the investigators. During the application process, I had not developed a good working relationship with that person, and I made what was perhaps a somewhat rash decision to step away.

As a result, I received some recognition as a research collaborator on the grant, but my school did not receive any research income from it. To achieve that, I would have needed to remain involved as a principal investigator or co-investigator, which I chose not to do. It was an important learning experience. I later heard the principal investigator say that the grant became a catalyst for securing further funding for people associated with her institute. At the time, I had no idea how significant that opportunity might prove to be.

Unfortunately, no one subsequently approached me and said, "Let's work together on a research project." I applied for funding independently on a few occasions, but without much success.

I also found it difficult to balance research with teaching. Throughout my career, I have devoted a great deal of time to teaching, and as a consequence, the number of research applications I have submitted has been relatively small. Teaching, committee work, and administrative responsibilities all come with clear and immediate deadlines. Meeting those deadlines can be rewarding because the outcomes are tangible and short-term. Research proposals, by contrast, are often more open-ended. Unless there is an imminent funding deadline, they can easily be pushed to the back burner.

Unfortunately, I do not think the environment has changed very much. Of course, I am now more senior than when I started. I began as a lecturer and am now a senior lecturer, so perhaps it is less reasonable to expect others to invite me onto their projects. Perhaps the initiative should come more from me.

At the same time, my focus has gradually shifted towards teaching. Part of that shift resulted from moving from a teaching-and-research contract to a teaching-and-scholarship contract. That change encouraged me to focus more on teaching and teaching-related activities because there was less expectation that I would be involved in externally funded research. In some ways, that has been positive. However, I also feel that the change reflected a lack of support for my research ambitions.

Despite this, I have remained research active and continue to be so. My research time is currently more limited because my teaching responsibilities have increased, partly as a consequence of voluntary severance schemes introduced during the University's recent financial difficulties.



The nature of my research has also influenced my attitude towards funding. Much of my work involves literature-based research. I do not require a laboratory, specialised equipment, or large-scale participant recruitment. As a result, I have felt less pressure to secure major grants in order to continue my research.

Nevertheless, I sometimes feel that more could have been done to ensure that I could remain as research active as I would like to be. For me, good teaching depends on ongoing research. I do not think every teacher necessarily needs to be a researcher, but conducting research is essential for keeping my teaching fresh, current, and intellectually stimulating. It helps me update my knowledge, my teaching materials, and my methods.

So, while I remain committed to both teaching and research, I still do not find it easy to gain recognition for the research that I do.

Research Support: Teaching-and-Scholarship (T&S) vs. Teaching-and-Research (T&R) pathways

You mentioned support, and especially how it changes over time. I'd like to explore that a bit more. How does the research support you receive now on a teaching-and-scholarship (T&S) pathway compare with what you had before on a teaching-and-research (T&R) contract? Has anything improved or changed, or does it feel largely the same?

I do try to carve out focused time for research, but I feel that this time is not always well supported institutionally.

In my school, many colleagues are on teaching-and-scholarship contracts, and the overall emphasis tends to be strongly on teaching. If most colleagues are primarily focused on teaching, then research can start to feel like something that is optional or secondary. That cultural effect is, for me, quite significant.

Because of that, I don't always feel strongly supported in my research ambitions. I understand that universities may hesitate to invest research time unless there is clear output, but I think that when staff are actively producing research, that work should be properly supported and encouraged.

Universities often talk about making a wider impact beyond their immediate teaching context, but that needs to be backed up in practice by supporting people who are actually doing research.

At the same time, I am not suggesting that teaching should be neglected. Teaching students well has to remain a priority.

The difficulty is that there does not always seem to be a clear limit on teaching demands. As a result, research time often has to be found in evenings, weekends, or holidays, rather than being protected within normal working hours.

Burnout, mental health and job precarity

I'd also like to talk about burnout and job precarity. But first, what led you to join the union and become an active member?

I cannot remember exactly what first prompted me to join the union, as it was a long time ago. However, what led me to become a representative was a sense that union presence and communication were important, and that every school should have someone local that staff could speak to if needed.

That was my starting point as a UCU representative.

I later became a caseworker after I needed support from a caseworker myself in dealing with a complex issue. Reflecting on that experience, I felt it was something I would like to do myself.

Part of my motivation was to help colleagues. Part of it was to better understand how the university works. And part of it was also to feel less isolated when facing certain difficulties in my work, because I realised that others were going through similar experiences.

I'd like to explore that further. You support academic staff and researchers, so you've seen the kinds of challenges people face. One area we'd like to focus on is burnout, mental health, and job precarity. From your experience supporting colleagues, what is your view of the current situation in academia in relation to these issues?

That's quite a big question, so perhaps I'll start with precarity, which is the area I probably know the least about, partly because I have been on an open-ended contract for many years. I did begin on a temporary contract, which later became permanent.

However, I do know colleagues who are in precarious positions, and I find it very problematic that some people who have worked at the university for over 20 years are still on insecure contracts.

The university has moved towards offering more open-ended contracts to researchers once they have been on a research project for more than three years. However, many projects are relatively short-term and dependent on external funding. This means that some research staff still do not have long-term security, even after many years at the institution.

I find this division between research staff and academic staff somewhat unusual. In principle, it might make more sense if there were simply academic staff—lecturers, senior lecturers, professors—with different types of contracts depending on funding availability, rather than a two-tier system of research and teaching staff.

I recognise that funding is not always stable or predictable, but I am not convinced that the current structure is the most helpful way of managing that uncertainty.

I have also seen a different form of precarity among research staff who avoid taking on more senior roles, such as principal investigator positions, because higher salaries can make them less competitive in future funding bids. In effect, people may feel pressured to keep their salaries lower in order to remain employable on future grants. I find that quite problematic, as it forces a trade-off between job security, career progression, and income.

“One possible alternative would be to introduce a more flexible system of employment.”

One possible alternative would be to introduce a more flexible system of employment. For example, there could be a pool of staff on research contracts who, when their projects end, transition into teaching roles within the university. That would create continuity of employment while still allowing flexibility for research funding.

In such a system, those applying for research grants could draw from this pool of staff, knowing that they have a secure place in the university even between projects. I think this kind of arrangement might reduce some of the precarity associated with short-term research funding. It is difficult for me to fully assess the current state of mental health and burnout across academia, but I do think that many universities in the UK are currently under financial pressure.

In that kind of climate, people are more likely to feel that they are being closely monitored or under scrutiny. If there are no clear and realistic expectations about workloads, there is a risk that individuals will overwork themselves, believing they need to do more than is actually required.

That can contribute to burnout, and it can also have a negative impact on mental health.

Overall, I think these pressures have likely increased issues of burnout and mental health difficulties in universities in recent years.

Supporting staff in cases of burnout and employment issues

In your role within the union, how do you support staff in situations like these? And what kinds of support does the union offer more generally?

In relation to precarity, for example, I have attended meetings with investigating officers when staff have submitted grievances to the university, often concerning issues such as the conduct of appointment panels or claims that the process that led to them not being shortlisted was unfair.

In those situations, I support colleagues by reading their written submissions and advising them on whether their case is clearly expressed and coherent. This might help them feel more confident in presenting their grievance. These experiences have not always led to positive outcomes, but at least people feel that they have been able to make their case properly, which I think is important.

I have also supported staff during performance management processes. The university has a formal system in which performance is managed in stages: informal performance management, formal performance management, and ultimately dismissal.

I have assisted colleagues in attending difficult meetings with management, particularly at the later stages of this process. In these meetings, I take notes and occasionally question whether there is a fair basis for claims of underperformance, based on discussions with the staff member concerned.

Simply being present can also change the dynamic. Managers often communicate differently when a union representative is in the room, because they are aware that what is said is being recorded. In that sense, the presence of support can help ensure that discussions remain more balanced and accountable.

At the same time, I may also intervene to suggest that performance issues are not always solely about the individual, but may reflect unclear institutional expectations or a lack of adequate support from line management.

I also recall a disciplinary case in which a staff member was found to have committed a category 2 offence. On appeal, this was reduced to a category 1 offence, which the individual felt more comfortable with, as they accepted that a mistake had been made.

However, the context suggested that the error was largely due to insufficient support and unclear guidance. In that sense, responsibility was initially placed on the individual, whereas a more careful review indicated that institutional structures and line management practices may also have contributed to the situation.

You mentioned that some cases don't always go as well as they should. You've also talked about systems and support. How do you find the current university system for supporting staff who are experiencing issues like burnout or going through performance or disciplinary processes?

I sometimes find that when things go wrong, the responsibility is shifted onto the individual, rather than considering whether the person was properly supported in the first place. I think that is a problem.

I have also supported colleagues who have raised concerns about bullying. In these cases, it is often important to manage expectations, because bullying is rarely straightforward or easy to prove. People are very unlikely to openly admit to bullying behaviour, and it can often consist of repeated, subtle actions rather than a single clear incident.

"I sometimes find that when things go wrong, the responsibility is shifted onto the individual, rather than considering whether the person was properly supported in the first place. I think that is a problem."

Because of that, it is difficult for such allegations to be formally upheld unless there is very strong evidence. As a result, complaints about bullying often do not progress in a meaningful way through formal processes.

In practice, the focus is often on trying to improve the situation for the individual, even if the underlying behaviour is not fully addressed. One practical step I sometimes suggest is a change of line manager, where possible. This does not resolve the underlying issue, but it can make a significant difference to the person involved, who may feel relieved or less constrained in their working environment.

I have also seen cases where individuals with significant line management responsibilities have had those responsibilities reduced following concerns about their behaviour. While this does not necessarily resolve the root problem, it can still have a positive impact.

A broader issue, in my view, is that line management in universities is often given to senior academics who may not have had formal training or experience in managing people. They tend to reach those roles because of their research output, publications, or teaching record, rather than because of their ability to manage others.

Yet strong academic performance does not necessarily correlate with strong interpersonal or managerial skills. In many cases, the activities that lead to academic success—such as writing grants and publications—are quite solitary and individual-focused. As a result, those placed in management roles are not always the people best equipped for the interpersonal demands of supporting and managing staff.

"A broader issue, in my view, is that line management in universities is often given to senior academics who may not have had formal training or experience in managing people."

Based on what you've seen, what would you say are the main contributors to burnout, mental health difficulties, and precarity in academia today, within the current university context?

I think precarity is quite significantly related to the existence of a two-tier system in universities, where some academics are relatively well protected regardless of performance, while others are much more exposed and insecure in their employment.

Unless that two-tier system is addressed, I think we will continue to see people struggling with job insecurity and precarity in academic roles. I am mainly referring here to academic staff, as the UCU primarily represents them, although we should also not forget precarity among professional services staff.

One issue I am particularly concerned about in relation to professional services staff is that career progression often depends on changing roles rather than being recognised for sustained performance in the same role. Unlike academics, who can progress from lecturer to senior lecturer to professor while remaining in broadly the same job, professional services staff often need to move into different positions to be promoted or regraded.

"I think precarity is quite significantly related to the existence of a two-tier system in universities. Unless that two-tier system is addressed, I think we will continue to see people struggling with job insecurity and precarity in academic roles."

This creates a different kind of insecurity. If someone is highly skilled and effective in their role, it is not clear why they should need to change jobs in order to be rewarded or progress.

For example, I know of a colleague who recently retired after around 20 years in the same professional services role. She was very good at her job and remained committed to it throughout her career. However, because she did not change roles, she was not able to progress in the same way that academic staff might. While she likely received cost-of-living adjustments, she did not receive the same kind of structural career progression.

To me, that suggests that certain roles are undervalued within the university system. In contrast, academic staff can progress to senior positions, such as professor, without fundamentally changing what they do day to day, whereas this is often not the case for professional services staff.



Given these contributors to precarity, stress, and burnout, what do you think universities need to do at this point to improve the situation for researchers, academics, and professional staff?

One positive development is that researchers applying for grants are now often required to include a development plan for any research staff they plan to hire.

This could potentially go further. For example, funders could ask what has happened to research staff from previous grants when new applications are submitted. That might help recognise researchers who support staff development, and also highlight cases where that support is lacking.

However, this would not be easy to implement. Sometimes it is difficult to assess whether a junior researcher is performing well, and principal investigators may not always have full information. So there are practical limits.

I do not think it is realistic to support staff indefinitely if they are not performing. But the current system is still unbalanced. Senior staff often remain in secure positions regardless of performance, while junior staff face much greater insecurity and fewer opportunities to progress.

That imbalance needs to be addressed. Accountability should apply at all levels, not just to those in the most precarious positions.

The focus, in my view, should be more on institutional mechanisms that improve research environments, rather than on measuring individuals or relying too heavily on individual performance metrics.

That approach could be a positive step forward.

We also haven't spoken much about ethnic minorities, but there is substantial research showing that people from ethnic minority backgrounds are less likely to reach senior academic positions. The same is true for women. We need to understand why that is happening and what can be done to address it.

This means looking at how institutional systems operate and how decisions are made, rather than assuming that existing structures are neutral. In particular, we should consider how management systems might be designed so that they are not simply shaped by the dominant majority, but could instead be designed to actively include and reflect those who are more marginalised.

People from underrepresented backgrounds may also bring valuable perspectives, particularly because they often have more diverse experiences. That diversity can enrich institutions in important ways.

"...we should consider how management systems might be designed so that they are not simply shaped by the dominant majority, but could instead be designed to actively include and reflect those who are more marginalised."

At the moment, I do not think there is enough emphasis on ensuring that these voices are heard and meaningfully included in decision-making. The challenge is how to develop a culture of inclusion that goes beyond formal statements and is reflected in how institutions actually operate.

Do you have any reflections or advice for academics or researchers who are navigating these systems and challenges moving forward?

One final reflection is that people and institutions are often very good at covering up mistakes. Nobody likes to admit mistakes because it can affect how they are perceived by others and how they feel about themselves.

However, unless we are willing to acknowledge mistakes, the same problems are likely to be repeated.

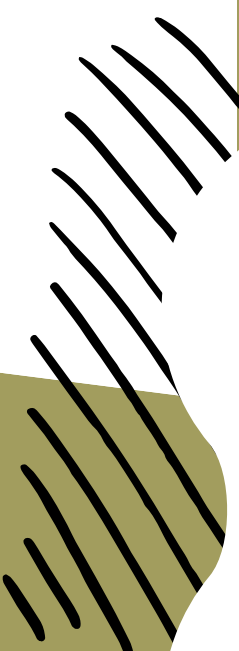
I think it would be helpful to develop a culture in which mistakes can be acknowledged more openly, at least internally. For example, in the context of the current financial pressures facing UK universities, this would require university leadership to take a long, honest look at how some of these problems have developed.

I understand that universities operate in a competitive environment, and there may be reluctance to publicly highlight errors or failures. However, avoiding reflection for reputational reasons risks preventing meaningful learning and change.

Even if such reflection is not always possible to acknowledge externally, it should at least take place internally. Without opportunities to critically examine where things have gone wrong, it is difficult for institutions to learn and improve.



"I think it would be helpful to develop a culture in which mistakes can be acknowledged more openly, at least internally."



"Without opportunities to critically examine where things have gone wrong, it is difficult for institutions to learn and improve."

Solitary Bodies and Undisciplinarity in Neoliberal Academic Organizations: Learning from Butoh 舞踏

In 1961, American photographer and filmmaker William Klein went to Japan to work on a photographic reportage of Tokyo (Klein, 2014), almost a decade after the country lost the Second World War and was severely damaged by atomic bombs dropped by the United States on Hiroshima and Nagasaki (Dower, 1995). Upon his arrival, as one of the few Westerners in Japan at the time, he created a photographic book titled *Tokyo 1961* (Klein, 2014). Before travelling to Japan, Klein had also completed photography projects in New York (1956), Rome (1958), and Moscow (1961) (Marenzi, 2024). His project related to Japan was his last book in a series themed around cities.

In *Tokyo 1961* (Klein, 2014), the book opens with a sequence of photographs called *Ceremonies*, in which he depicts outdoor and street artistic performances. Among the figures shown are Tatsumi Hijikata, Yoshito Ōhno, and Kazuo Ōhno, the founders of a new performative culture, called Ankoku Butoh (Marenzi, 2024) the *Dance of Utter Darkness* (Curtin, 2010). This encounter between documentary photography and emerging performance practices already suggests that Butoh can be read not only as an artistic phenomenon, but also as a form of bodily expression shaped by the social and cultural transformations of postwar Japan. In this sense, darkness emerges not as a source of fear, but as a forgotten space of stillness, silence, and reflection (see Iwana, 2023).

In 2021, a new collection of 516 photographs titled *William Klein: Dance Happening June 1961* (NPO Dance Archive Network et al., 2021, pp. 324–329) was published. The volume documents Klein's encounter with Butoh dancers, who spent two days working with him. Klein describes the performers' movement as "spastic, somber, disquieting, international modern," emphasising the intensity and unconventional nature of their dance.

He also reflects on their cultural position, observing that although they had not seen choreographers such as Jerome Robbins or Martha Graham, they were nevertheless familiar with Western visual culture and "adapt and translate [it] into their own particular genius." Klein further recalls inviting them to perform in the streets the following day, where "we stopped traffic and attracted huge crowds, but the police did not interfere" (Klein, cited in NPO Dance Archive Network et al., 2021, pp. 324–329).



Kazuo Ohno, photograph by Marco Tambara (Lightversus), 1986. CC BY 3.0.

Although Klein's work highlighted the contrast between Butoh dancers and ordinary passers-by through a form of street photography that he described as "acting photography", photography in action (Marenzi, 2024), it was a Japanese photographer, Eikoh Hosoe, who introduced him to the dancers. Unlike Klein, whose photographs focused on the relationship between the performers' bodies and the urban environment, Hosoe was less concerned with the external landscape. Indeed, he had been involved with the Butoh movement since its inception

and documented its early development through two booklets entitled *Dance Experience*, which focused on performances organized by Tatsumi Hijikata, one of the founders of Butoh (Marenzi, 2023a). As Marenzi (2024) notes, while Klein concentrated on the external landscape, Hosoe's work explored an inner landscape, offering a more introspective interpretation of Butoh. Hosoe was therefore not merely a documentarian of the movement but an active participant in its development from its earliest stages.

This distinction between external and internal landscape also opens a broader question on how bodies are interpreted and/or disciplined within specific historical contexts and political conditions in which Butoh emerged. Developed in the late 1950s in the aftermath of the Second World War, Butoh can be read as a critical response to cultural hegemony (Curtin, 2010), the legacy of war and American occupation in Japan. It is from this perspective that the relevance of Butoh to the second issue of *Unblock*, which focuses on precarity and mental health in neoliberal academia, becomes visible. If Butoh can be understood as a response to postwar cultural hegemony and as a way to "fight power" (Kasai, 2010, as cited in D'Orazi, 2016), it also provides a framework for thinking about how bodies continue to be regulated within contemporary institutions, including neoliberal academia, and how some scholars respond to the marketization of higher education.

The first issue of *Unblock Magazine (Black Women in Academia: Challenges, Collaborations, Communities, February 2026)* was created to address the underrepresentation of Black academics in senior positions within British academia and to provide a space for Black and minoritized scholars in predominantly white countries, with a focus on the UK. In that issue, I questioned neoliberal academia and its tendency to commodify Blackness for institutional gain, while also inviting reflection on the political and social roles scholars assume once they reach positions of leadership beyond representation (Carangio, 2026). In this second issue of *Unblock*, I turn instead to a different question: how can we unlearn performance in academia? Is it possible to escape the mental imposition of performative metrics within an already unequal academic system structured by hegemonic and imperial forms of elitism? And what can we, as solitary and precarious bodies shaped by different forms of marginalization, learn from the philosophy of Butoh?

As a precarious lecturer and working-class scholar moving between institutions to make a living, I am acutely aware that contemporary higher education is increasingly shaped by imperatives of productivity, efficiency, and quantification. This lived experience of precarity is not separate from the broader structural transformations of higher education, but is one of its most visible effects. Yet I am also aware that, no matter how hard one works, entrenched inequities continue to privilege artificial standards of knowledge production and those bodies that conform to imposed social conditioning.

I therefore reflect on how, if Butoh dancers once drew inspiration from the transgressive avant-garde, we, as solitary bodies within neoliberal academic organizations, might likewise learn from the founders of Butoh as a means of reconnecting with ourselves and resisting the seductive appeal of elitist imperial, market-driven logics. This is not to suggest that all scholars who study human societies, and especially those fortunate enough to work full-time in universities, at a time when jobs are being cut (Hughes, 2023; Simpson, 2021) and contingent instructors increasingly exploited, necessarily feel a duty to foster critical intellectual work. Many are themselves structurally integrated into the governing class. In Italy for instance, Gallino (2012) has stressed how academics have become supporters, and often pillars, of economic and political power.

Gallino's analysis (2012) mainly refers to the academic barons who occupy positions of influence rather than to the subordinate and precarious adjunct faculty working at the margins of the academic system, including negatively racialized scholars whose experiences of precarity are shaped by intersecting inequalities. According to Marta Fana and Simone Fana (2019), contingent employment functions as an institutional strategy for dismantling the workforce as a collective entity, reducing it instead to a mass of individuals competing against one another for temporary appointments and subsistence wages. Yet academic precarity is not a universal or a homogeneous condition. For working-class scholars who rely on academic work as their primary source of income, precarity is experienced as material instability and constrained life chances. This differs significantly from those who engage in short-term academic contracts as a supplement to other forms of income or who benefit from inherited economic security, for whom precarity is less structurally consequential, as they are more securely embedded within hegemonic institutional systems.

The higher education sector is now filled with a detached cadre of managers who emulate corporate executives (Fleming, 2021) and armies of functionaries (Ginsberg, 2011), expecting obedience to bureaucratic authority in the name of institutional financial prosperity. It is important to recall that since 1995, education has been included in the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) as a commercial service (Lantero & Kulumzhanova, 2025). Consequently, this has increased the internationalisation of higher education institutions (Lantero & Kulumzhanova, 2025) and undermined their identification with the *res publica* (Fleming, 2021), a public ideal that was itself historically entangled with imperial formations. The *homo academicus* is among the most scrutinised figures in modern society, and dissenters often attract retaliation within what Fleming (2021) calls *darkocracy*, a hidden system of power that operates alongside official bureaucracy. Yet this "tyranny of metrics" (Müller, 2018) within Westernized universities cannot be separated from longer histories of patriarchal and white epistemic violence. Hence, within this context, intellectually transformative, undisciplined, and revolutionary work can easily be perceived as a threat by those in positions of power.

In his inspiring speech "From Performance to Communion", Lantero (2026), drawing on a key theme of Pope Leo XIV's encyclical *Magnifica Humanitas*, asked what kind of human beings we are helping to form within these market-driven logics. I am likewise left wondering to what extent neoliberal Catholic universities in the U.S. have truly engaged with *Magnifica Humanitas*, and what implications its vision might have for their understanding of higher education, particularly in contexts marked by persistent racial inequalities, institutional gaslighting, precarity, and workplace bullying. This concern with how institutions shape people's minds inevitably leads to questions about the possibilities and limits of 'legitimized' intellectual practice beyond the university.

In his powerful 1974 speech on Walter Rodney, *When We Are All Enemies of the State*, Stuart Hall stressed how Rodney, Caribbean-born radical intellectual assassinated by an agent of the Burnham dictatorship, moved beyond the confines of the university to engage directly with ordinary people (Hall & Camp, 2025). We may therefore wonder whether we are all becoming enemies of Academia when we refuse to accept the immutable horizons of disciplined knowledge, and instead seek to restore higher education's civic mission. Hall was acutely aware that intellectuals such as Rodney were feared for the power of critical ideas which moved people into action, and that academia has long functioned as a restricted universe that often prevents intellectual work, as he suggests, from fully escaping institutional boundaries (Hall & Camp, 2025). Perhaps we cannot fully save ourselves from the abuse and violence of corporate systems that ultimately reduce many adjunct scholars to precarious labour. Yet we can reconnect with those practices that have historically unsettled dominant structures. For instance, while Rodney's example demonstrates, in his tragic short life, how critical intellectual work can challenge state power through political engagement, Butoh reveals how undisciplined artistic practice can similarly disrupt dominant social systems. Indeed, not only speeches or ideas expressed through words and texts can be considered threatening; intellectual work created through performance may also be perceived as a form of resistance. When Hijikata, one of the founders of Butoh, performed *Kinjiki* (Forbidden Colours) in 1959 (Centonze, 2016), based on a novel by the Japanese intellectual, playwright, and martial artist Yukio Mishima, he created a raw performative space in which shadows unfolded (Marenzi, 2023a). Following this performance, which involved Yoshito Ōhno and Kazuo Ōhno, Hijikata was banned from the Japanese Modern Dance Association (Holca & Săpunaru-Tămaș, 2020).

Despite this institutional exclusion, Hijikata attracted the attention of intellectual figures such as Mishima, one of Japan's most important authors, as well as Eikoh Hosoe, who, as mentioned earlier, introduced Hijikata to American photographer William Klein. This trajectory offers a reminder that institutional rejection does not necessarily prevent the formation of alternative networks of recognition beyond dominant organizational structures, a dynamic that also resonates with the experiences of precarious scholars within neoliberal academia. In the project *Dance Experience*, Mishima wrote in English that "the classics and the advance guard have come to a crisis" (Mishima, cited in Marenzi, 2023a). He also described Hijikata's performance as "heresy ceremony" and saw in Butoh a new symbolic universe and a new language (Marenzi, 2019). Butoh therefore became a space through which to resist forms of cultural domination that had profoundly reshaped Japanese traditions in the postwar period.

Hijikata's dance was articulated through words known as *butoh-fu* (Butoh notation), as he trained dances using verbal images rather than conventional movement instructions (Kurihara, 2000), producing a new theatrical language (Marenzi, 2016). Not only did Hijikata start collaborating with Mishima and Hosoe, but he also became

friends with Shibusawa, translator of French literature, who wrote that under Hijikata's dance flows "the pain of Japan" (Shibusawa, 2019). Shibusawa himself faced prosecution for translating texts that were considered scandalous at the time, particularly the works of the Marquis De Sade (Marenzi 2016). Yet through translation and intellectual exchange, he contributed to the emergence of alternative ways of knowing.

If contemporary research shows that rates of daily reading have declined in the past 20 years in the United States (Bone et al., 2025), we should not forget that Tatsumi Hijikata, born in 1928, son of Japanese peasants, read the works of Antonin Artaud, a playwright and leading figure of the avant-garde, and Jean Genet, a radical French novelist. This illustrates how Butoh inhabits the thresholds between different fields, fostering cross-pollination through hybrid artistic and intellectual networks.

As now contingent instructors are considered little more than "knowledge-based production-line operators" (Fleming 2021, p.145), this does not mean that they cannot reconnect with themselves from the openings created by undisciplined practices. For instance, in Hijikata's studio, the Asbestos-kan (also known as the Asbestos Studio), the performer studied, worked, and opened a bar that became a meeting place for undisciplined intellectuals, fostering exchanges of ideas among peers (Marenzi, 2019). Hijikata's admiration for Shibusawa, who translated the work of Genet and Artaud into Japanese, was enormous. He used their words to generate mental images that Butoh dancers were expected to reproduce in the form of a revolutionary dance practice. As stressed by Curtin (2010), Hijikata's work implicitly criticised Western influence, particularly the rationality and individualism associated with modernity, while incorporating elements from marginalized Japanese traditions alongside the work of Western intellectuals who themselves challenged dominant orders of knowledge. Butoh therefore constructed its aesthetic and philosophical vocabulary through what dominant cultures excluded or repressed.

Hijikata wrote that his dance shared a common basis with crime because its behaviour "explicitly flaunts its aimlessness in the face of a production-oriented society" (Tatsumi, 2000, pp. 44–45). Drawing on the work of Jean Genet, a playwright and political activist who was repeatedly imprisoned, Hijikata spoke about the "legs of criminals" (Tatsumi, 2000), referring to bodies that were not subject to social pressure and rules. He therefore sought to dance in a body that is not disciplined by performative societal norms. Shibusawa also introduced Hijikata to Antonin Artaud, a playwright and actor of the avant-garde, famous for his conceptualization of the Theatre of Cruelty, a concept aimed at breaking down self-containment in order to provoke radical transformation (Curtin, 2010).

We can certainly assert that those parts of the French avant-garde represented by figures such as Genet and Artaud were not seduced by the appeal of white elitist imperial logics, even while they remained situated within a broader French colonial fabric. Genet wrote books in prison and also dealt with homosexuality, themes considered taboo both in France and in Japan. He was also engaged in a notable alliance with Palestinians based in refugee camps (Genet, 2002). Artaud was interned in a psychiatric asylum in France under Vichy rule, during the period of Nazi occupation, and was also censored (Artaud, 1988). Hence, we can see how the intellectual and artistic influences that inspired the founders of Butoh did not emerge from the most disciplined forms of Western cultural authority, but from those figures who challenged its dominant assumptions. This logic of undisciplinarity becomes particularly relevant in neoliberal institutions, where bodies are valued according to what they achieve or produce. It raises again the question of how undisciplined and solitary bodies might escape corporate academic practices.

To be undisciplined means to question the processes through which we exist and resist. The performers of *Butoh-fu* operated from the sense that modern society had lost connections with older traditions. Within the second wave of Butoh, new forms emerged. Among these was *Butoh Blank*, founded by Masaki Iwana, who committed himself to isolation (Marenzi, 2023b). As Marenzi (2025) explains in her lecture on Butoh, Hijikata, born in the rural areas of northern Japan, lived through the Second World War and witnessed Japan's transformation into an economic power shaped by US influence. Iwana belonged to a different generation: he graduated in economics and started working for a business company, which he eventually decided to leave.

In 1989, Iwana wrote that his "White Butoh" was not intended as an antithesis to Hijikata's *Ankoku Butoh* (the Dance of Darkness), but rather as an amplification of darkness, where the dancer's own experience becomes fully exposed under the white sun, within a cloudless light (Iwana, 2011). For Iwana, the purpose was not to replace

darkness with illumination, but to reveal the darkness of existence itself. Hijikata suggested, as recalled by Iwana (2023), that people often do not understand darkness until the arrival of morning. In this sense, White Butoh does not eliminate darkness but creates a tension between darkness and light through which the body becomes visible. Light on stage indicates time and position, yet the dancer does not simply submit to illumination; standing outside the light, the dancer decides whether to approach or withdraw from it (Marenzi, 2024). White Butoh therefore exposes the reality of life through a body awakening from a long sleep.

Although Iwana's terminology, particularly the use of *Blanc* ("White"), may evoke racialized metaphors of difference and histories of colonial violence, within the genealogy of Butoh, darkness represents an embodied dimension of existence that modernity has marginalized and feared.

In *Solitary Body*, he wrote that a *butoka*, someone who practices Butoh, is not a Butoh dancer but rather a Butohist, a follower of Butoh thought and philosophy (Iwana, 2023). Iwana criticised modern Japanese society, in which money circulated at an ever-increasing pace. In his critique of the shortcomings of capitalism, he encouraged people to embrace solitude. For him, there is nothing more difficult than living alone, yet it is through solitude that individuals can truly make their own all the time and space of their emotions. In solitude, no one wins or loses.

As Cristiani (2023) highlights, Iwana argued that the *Olympic spirit* of contemporary society encourages behaviours that push us to remain constantly visible and to expand rapidly. Yet in this race, there is no possibility of stepping back or giving up. There are no other dimensions of human experience. Isn't this what happens to bodies in neoliberal academic institutions, always observed, ranked, and measured through the endless illusion of meritocratic performance?

Unperforming and reconnecting with ourselves therefore requires slowness and solitude. Iwana (2023) suggests observing elderly people who move with care. By observing them, one can understand how to rediscover action and our life breath. For Iwana, dance is found in the internal movement of the body, which stands in contrast to bodies trained to move according to externally imposed discipline. Although many bodies within academic settings have been homogenised, undisciplined bodies, even when spiritually mutilated, can provide a lens through which to consider how pedagogical spaces might be reimaged.

In this new issue, for instance, I found some parallels with the concept of undisciplinarity in Dr Peter Shukie's journey, as he shares part of his story in this magazine. Despite the imposition of precarious contracts throughout much of his career, he refused to accept his role solely as an instructor. He created alternative spaces in which he entered into dialogue with intellectuals, performers, and artists through the organisation of free online conferences during and after the pandemic (Working Class Conferences). As an active photographer, artist, designer, and teacher, he also chose to work in places that are less attractive to elitist academia. He has also pushed back against the language of productivity, which he considers a form of sterility. Peter embodies what Iwana describes as a deep body, one that does not move according to predetermined rules. Using his own words, Dr Shukie explores "outsider art and the creative lives that unfold beyond official cultural spaces" (Shukie, n.d.).

This resonates with Iwana's concept of the solitary body, where the performer's solitude was embedded in the invitation to find one's own path. He contrasted the expressive body, trained to move according to predetermined artistic rules and established techniques, with the existence of a deep body that is not regulated by laws that remain permanently fixed (Iwana, 2023). Within the businessification of universities, the undisciplined body opposes the trained academic star persona, shaped by individualism, recognition, and competition. In this sense, the academic institution can be analysed as a site of performance, where visibility and evaluation produce their own forms of choreography. Yet undisciplined bodies should preserve whatever remains of the human dimension of academia, while recognizing that academic institutions remain permeated by imperial whiteness.

To conclude, in this issue, I have not aimed, through the analysis of Butoh, to resolve the problem of academic performativity. Rather, I invite undisciplined, solitary bodies to reflect on how undisciplinarity might change the way we inhabit academic life and to look back at Butoh performers who, in different ways, offered a third path, releasing, as Kasai (2010, as cited in D'Orazi, 2016) suggests, a flow of forces directed at those who are listening; an energy whose purpose should not be subordinated to colonial forms of performance. This is a counter-energy that keeps humanity alive when the myth of meritocracy within neoliberal universities, ingrained in imperial legacies, dies.

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Author bio:

Vassilissa Carangio is an organization scholar whose research examines inequalities, power relations, and processes of exclusion and privilege within workplaces. Her work has been published in *Ethnic and Racial Studies* and *Gender, Work & Organization*, focusing on organizational inequalities. Working within the conditions of contemporary academic precarity, she is currently writing a book, under contract with Palgrave Macmillan, examining colonial power relations in labour markets and the experiences of highly skilled immigrant women in Australia. Her research on workplace inequalities and migration has been cited in a UN Women report on racially marginalized migrant women, human rights abuses, and the intersections of race, gender, and migration. As an adjunct and working-class scholar working across international higher education institutions based in Rome, she is also interested in how market-oriented transformations reshape academic labour and knowledge production.

"REAL WORK IS DIFFERENT. IT IS NOT JUST TALK; IT IS CHANGE"

Talking with Dr Peter Shukie, educator, writer, artist, film maker, poet

Can you tell us something about yourself?

My name is Peter Shuki, and I started teaching in 1997, when I was working in Greece. I spent a year there teaching English as a second language, and I enjoyed that very much.

After that, I returned to the UK. My degree is in cultural studies, which isn't directly related to English language teaching, but I began teacher training around that time. From the beginning, my aim and ongoing interest has been to work in contexts of limited educational expectation.

By that, I mean working in what I would describe as working-class education, particularly with groups where low expectations were often placed on learners. In the places I worked, including a training provider, many of the learners had been excluded from school and were in alternative provision outside mainstream education. These were young people of school age, up to around 20 or 21, placed in "life skills" classes that had no formal curriculum. During my teacher training, I designed a curriculum for them, and that was a real pleasure to do.

The reason I wanted to work in that area is that I come from a working-class background myself. I still consider myself working class, and I understood what low expectations look like and what they mean in practice.

Over the years, I moved from a training provider into further education colleges, and then into higher education, contributing to education studies degrees. I also wrote and developed modules for teacher training, including action research modules, and spent almost 20 years working in this area.

The education studies programme I helped develop focused largely on class, although not explicitly, because you cannot simply label a degree programme in that way. Instead, I ensured that issues of class were embedded across modules. For example, we designed project work that engaged with community settings and approached technology critically, not as something to avoid, but also not something to accept uncritically.



Dr Peter Shukie
educator, writer, artist, film maker, poet

Do you know the term "Luddite"? The Luddites were people who smashed machinery because they believed it would destroy their livelihoods. There is a long history of anti-technology sentiment in the UK.

I'm based in Lancashire in the northwest of England, where there was a major historical shift in weaving technologies used to produce cotton, part of the wider industrial expansion that drove cities like Manchester. What was once a small-scale industry became highly technologised and moved into factories.

I'm not part of that anti-technology tradition, but I am part of an educational approach that uses technology in ways that take account of difference, social justice, and inclusion, something I have worked with for a long time, and which was also the focus of my PhD in Technology Enhanced Learning and E-Research.

"...I am part of an educational approach that uses technology in ways that take account of difference, social justice, and inclusion..."

My research looked at how we understand technology and education as practices that need to be continually examined in relation to privilege, access, and inclusion, including a deeper engagement with diversity, such as class.

This is something I have found to be widely recognised in many countries, particularly through international conferences. However, in the UK, class remains especially significant. Unlike gender or race, it is not formally recognised as a protected characteristic within equality and diversity frameworks. As a result, much of my work has focused on how class can be meaningfully included in educational thinking and practice.

I have always worked, probably by choice, though I'm not entirely sure, in predominantly working-class settings: the towns I've worked in, the students I've taught, and the colleges I've been based in. This has given me a strong opportunity to think carefully about inclusion: whose voices are heard, what we expect students to do, what we expect them to learn, and, perhaps most importantly, why we expect them to learn it. In other words, the question of what education is for has been central to my work. I think we first met in 2020, at the first Working Class Conference, Vassilissa.

We began planning it in 2019, and at the time we expected it would attract around 50 people. The college where I was working said they would not support it and had no interest in it. We contacted a number of institutions to ask whether anyone could host it, as we needed a venue, but none were able to help.

In the end, we arranged to hold it in a museum in Blackburn, the town where I was working at the time. However, because of the pandemic, we were unable to use the museum and moved the conference online instead. We began promoting it on Twitter, and what we expected to be a very small event, perhaps 30 to 50 people, grew significantly. In the end, we had over 1,000 registered participants for the first conference. Around 60 speakers took part, including yourself, and it was genuinely remarkable. The event centred on the idea that being working class in academia, and the precarity that can accompany that, is an important and often overlooked issue in higher education.

We ran the conference again the following year, and it grew further still, with around 1,700 participants and 85 speakers. The focus on class remained central throughout.

You've had a long career in education alongside your work as a writer and filmmaker. Could you tell us a little about that path? In particular, how did your teaching career develop alongside your PhD, did you begin the PhD after many years of teaching?

Before starting my PhD, I had already been teaching for about 15 years. By the time I'm talking about that period, I had roughly 20 years of teaching experience overall. I continued teaching throughout my PhD, as I was in a full-time role and didn't take time away from work, which made completing it very challenging. In the themes you mentioned, there are two things I think are increasingly common among people with PhDs from working-class backgrounds.

The first is that I was made redundant from my teaching role two years ago, which led to an 18-month period in which I focused more on writing and filmmaking. During that time, I was still working, but on a self-employed basis, which brought its own challenges.

The second is that the PhD didn't lead to any formal change in my position. There was no promotion, no increase in pay, and no shift in role or recognition within the workplace. My responsibilities were already significant, but the qualification wasn't acknowledged in any practical sense.

So you've been working as a lecturer for many years, both before and after your PhD, but the PhD didn't really change your situation in terms of precarity. Am I correct?

Well, no. About four or five years after I got my PhD, I was actually on less money for a period due to changes in contracts. And then I was made redundant, even with a PhD, which was the first redundancy I had experienced in education. It was quite ironic, really, that I had a PhD at the time I lost my job. But it certainly didn't protect me from redundancy, as it doesn't seem to be doing for many people now.

I've just read this morning about around 200 redundancies at another university in the UK. I've also heard figures, and I can't verify this exactly, so I don't want to state a precise number, but in the same year I was made redundant, there were something like 12,000 redundancies across higher education. It's an extraordinary number.

I know the context has changed, partly due to things like Brexit and broader shifts in policy around what education is and who it is for. But the college I worked at, and more broadly what I would call "working-class spaces" in education, including degrees delivered outside traditional universities, in further education and community college settings, are being cut significantly, in very large numbers.

I don't think that is being properly addressed at all.

These are not simply alternative forms of learning in the sense of being lesser or different; they are equivalent degrees, but designed to support people who cannot access a traditional university campus. The students are embedded in their communities. Very often they are parents, they have jobs, families, and other responsibilities. For them, the idea of leaving everything and going to university simply isn't possible.

So if those provision routes are closed down, you are effectively shutting the door for a huge number of people.

Precarity and intersectionality

We mentioned in our themes the concept of intersectionality and how our intersecting identities, such as race, gender, class, etc., can also affect precarity. Would you like to say something about this?

I think I have a number of privileges in this context: being male, being white, and being Northern European. But that is not the whole picture. Sometimes there is a tendency to become overly fixated on identity in isolation, even though it is important. What we are really talking about are the structural spaces in which intersectionality becomes visible and meaningful.

The majority of my students, especially in the last decade of my teaching, were young Muslim women, though not exclusively. They were also, almost without exception, from working-class backgrounds. I think my role was not to claim their experiences as my own, but to recognise the challenges they faced and to work in ways that helped us find paths through those challenges. These are structural issues rather than individual ones, and I mean that in a positive sense: individuals should not be expected to carry the full weight of these social markers alone. Instead, those realities should already be recognised within institutions and organisations.

In terms of my own identity, class has certainly been a significant factor, as has accent. There are real challenges that come with that.

“In terms of my own identity, class has certainly been a significant factor, as has accent. There are real challenges that come with that.”

At times, this has contributed to issues around mental health, both for myself and for others. I have also conducted research in Lancaster as a participant rather than as a researcher. The difficulty is that even when we understand these issues as structural rather than individual, we still internalise exclusion. We carry it with us, even when we shouldn't. And that is not healthy.

Unhealthy responses can include mental distress, prolonged struggle, and a sense of futility, which I have experienced myself and, I think, for understandable reasons. But the response cannot become self-defeating or self-deprecating. Instead, it has to involve holding institutions to account.

For a long time, I was quite anti-institutional, even while working within them and teaching degrees. I was highly critical, and institutions often gave me reason to be so. At the time, I felt they did not care. I am no longer anti-institution in the sense of wanting to abolish them. I believe institutions are important. As Paulo Freire argued, the task is not to eliminate institutions, but to hold them to account, to ensure they meet their responsibilities to the communities they serve. In many ways, I do not think they currently do.

So when we talk about intersectionality, we are talking about something that concerns all of us. Education is a right, and it should belong to everyone. But within that, we cannot simply expect individuals to adjust themselves to fit institutional norms. There must be a two-way process of development.

Education is not inherently white or middle class. It does not speak in a single voice or represent a single set of values; it contains diversity across all of these dimensions. My work has affected me in many ways. It has made me unwell at times, it has made me poor at times, and it has brought fear and uncertainty. But it has also brought immense love, enjoyment, engagement, and purpose.

All of that exists together, because that is life. Life is up and down, good and bad, often at the same time.



“Education is a right, and it should belong to everyone. But within that, we cannot simply expect individuals to adjust themselves to fit institutional norms. There must be a two-way process of development.”

Precarity and mental health

From your experience working in these institutions, have you noticed differences in how mental health is supported depending on whether someone is on a secure or insecure contract? And how do things like teaching load or administrative responsibilities play into that?

Yes and no, not so much through institutions directly, but through employment law. Employers do have a duty to address people's mental health conditions, or at least to provide mechanisms for support.

But what does that actually mean in practice?

I've worked in a number of institutions, and I'm currently in another one, I'm not going to name any of them, because that's not the point. The important thing is the pattern.

I'm in an institution now that feels very supportive in the way it addresses staff wellbeing and works with staff. But I have also been in institutions where, during periods when I had concerns about my own mental health, I was simply given a phone number and told to call it. That number did not belong to the institution itself; it was a private organisation. You ring them, and they talk you through your rights and responsibilities.

Interestingly, they always began with responsibilities.

The problem with that, I think, is that there is no "golden era", I genuinely don't believe there ever was. I know some people talk about the 1980s or 1990s as a golden age in education, and even earlier generations sometimes say the same. But I have never experienced that.

What has clearly changed, however, is that the logic of the market is now embedded in every part of education. I once had a principal who visited staff rooms and told us explicitly that we should refer to students as "customers." That was the direction of travel.

Once you do that, you fundamentally alter the relationship between lecturer and student. If students are customers, then what am I? I am no longer a teacher in a meaningful sense, I become a service provider. That shift changes everything.

These ideas then start to accumulate in the background and gradually undermine professional identity. In some ways, they de-professionalise education on purpose. People who are confident in their expertise and the value of their work become a problem within a system that is increasingly organised like a market. In earlier periods, those same people would have been seen as the foundation of the institution, as long-standing, committed, and valuable members of staff.

But in a system that calls itself a market, and starts referring to students as customers and institutions as providers, that relationship breaks down. A different set of relations takes its place, and it adds pressure everywhere.

And when we talk about stress, what do we actually mean? For me, it often means a loss of control over one's working life. There are constant external pressures that have little to do with teaching and learning: attendance, metrics, performance indicators, questions like "Are students showing up every day?" without acknowledging that some students are ill or have caring responsibilities or other commitments.

Meanwhile, more and more work is placed on lecturers, often for fewer hours and on more insecure contracts. Of course that creates conditions that make people unwell.

So what is the solution? Very often, the response is to individualise the problem. The message becomes: *you are unwell, therefore seek help, call this number*. But in many cases, it is not that the individual is "unwell" in isolation; it is that the situation itself has produced that state.

Yet institutions are rarely held to account for the number of staff who are off sick or relying on these services. Everything is reframed as an individual issue.

And I find that deeply problematic. In some ways, I think it is harmful, not necessarily always intentional, but certainly uncaring in its effects. The priority has become process, production, and productivity, rather than care or education in any meaningful sense.

But what does productivity even mean in education?

Surely it should mean people learning, developing, growing, and leaving the process stronger than when they entered. Not exhausted by systems of measurement that have very little to do with them.

I'm sorry, I may have gone off on a tangent there, but that's how I see it.

"The priority has become process, production, and productivity, rather than care or education in any meaningful sense."

Taboo of speaking about precarity in research and academia

You also mentioned the idea that precarity in academia can be something of a taboo topic. Would you be comfortable talking about that?

I wrote an article, not peer-reviewed, about redundancy. In it, I reflected on being on strike shortly before I was made redundant. Within a year of that redundancy, I was on strike again over pay, and that strike was successful in achieving a resolution.

So I am not speaking from outside the union context. I was a union learning representative; I was actively involved in union work, sat on committees, attended meetings, and participated in educational activities with other members.

However, during my redundancy, there was very little meaningful support offered. I contacted the union several times and noted that, while they advertise a wide range of courses and training opportunities, there was nothing addressing redundancy, precarity, or the experience of losing work and how to respond to it. There was simply no structured engagement with that issue.

In the article I wrote, I raised this gap. It was not published, despite having initially been invited for submission. I was later told it had been submitted too late, even though both editors had previously written to say they looked forward to reading it. Once it was read, and because it was not complimentary towards the institution or existing support structures, it was not published.

This remains the case today, despite the scale of redundancies in the sector, around 12,000 in that year alone, with continued high levels since. There is still very little structured support.

What I am describing is not an external critique. I was part of the system, a union member, active within it. But there is a sense that within these structures, you are either inside or outside. Once you are outside, you seem to no longer matter.

And when you try to speak about it, there is very little interest. If institutions are not interested, if unions are not engaged with it, and if the wider sector documentation ignores it, then these experiences are effectively erased.

The result is that redundancy is reframed as an individual issue rather than a collective or structural one. In reality, redundancy is the abrupt ending of something you did not choose, often arriving earlier than expected or intended.

What makes it more difficult is that speaking about it is not just discouraged, it is often met with hostility. There is an implicit message not to talk about redundancy, not to criticise institutions, not to articulate the experience.

In some cases, particularly where people leave due to precarity or illness, non-disclosure agreements further prevent them from speaking at all. All of this contributes to isolation and reinforces the idea that it is an individual problem rather than a structural one.

It becomes a very isolating experience to leave any institution, not just in academia, but in work more generally, without that transition being properly recognised or supported.

And I think that is a major flaw. A significant one. I have never had articles rejected like that before, especially not in situations where there seemed to be a concern that I had done something fundamentally different from what they were expecting. The piece they had originally asked for was a personal reflection, but that is not what they ultimately seemed to want.

Overall, the situation felt very strange and unsettling, and the conversations with the union reflected something similar.

When I raised concerns, I pointed out that there were 116 courses, or whatever the exact number was, available online for members, yet none of them addressed redundancy. It was a very difficult time, and I am sure many other members have experienced similar difficulties.

The response, however, tended to be framed in individual terms: "I'm sorry you are finding it so difficult."

In this way, there is a tendency to individualise experience, to frame redundancy, mental health, and intersectional exclusion as personal rather than structural issues. If institutions, or even the organisations meant to support people, continue to approach it in this way, then there is no space left for structural understanding, and therefore no real possibility of addressing it.

Professionals in research and academia

Not all lecturers on temporary contracts are in the same position. Have you also encountered people who teach alongside another primary career, for instance, professionals who teach part-time in addition to their main work?

No, I haven't come across many people who choose that route, although they do exist. I know people in the arts, for example, people I know personally, who teach because they enjoy it as an adjunct to their main practice. It is a separate but related part of what they do, and they often find it valuable. They are practising artists, and teaching forms part of that wider professional activity.

When I first started teaching, there were quite a few people on shorter contracts, and at that time it wasn't necessarily seen as precarity. It was often understood as a matter of choice. Some people had other forms of work or income, or other commitments. There were also older staff, for example, who preferred to work a day or a day and a half a week, or an evening session or two. That was quite common.

That seems to have changed. Shorter contracts are now more often seen as something unwelcome. Increasingly, they exist because they suit the institution rather than the individual. What were once flexible arrangements that could benefit both sides are now more often shaped by institutional convenience.

In the past, institutions would bring in experienced people for specific pieces of work, and that arrangement had value for both sides: the individual remained professionally active and was paid, but did not necessarily rely on that work as their sole income.

Now, however, precarious contracts are more often problematic because they are designed around institutional need rather than individual choice. Alongside this, there has long been a system of hourly-paid teaching where staff are paid for teaching but do not receive sick pay, holiday pay, or other benefits, and in some cases these arrangements last for years without becoming full-time posts.

This is not entirely new, but I think it has intensified. It represents a kind of "breaking of the ladder", a breakdown in progression. In my own experience, I moved from one institution into colleges, starting on a fractional post, gradually increasing my hours, and eventually moving into a full-time role. But if those pathways no longer lead to full-time positions, then progression becomes severely limited and the system far more constrained.

So I have seen both models, but there is now a clear shift away from arrangements that were more flexible and mutually beneficial.

What were once flexible arrangements that could benefit both sides are now more often shaped by institutional convenience.

Altruism in research and academia

Thank you, Peter. You also mentioned altruism as something you'd be happy to talk about. Do you think altruism exists within academic or working communities? And how does that relate to your experience of unions?

In the end, I didn't think about altruism in a simple way. I think there was altruism present for a long time. I worked with some very good people in the union, and many of them were people I knew and had worked with. I also know there are genuinely committed people within unions more broadly, I'm not denying that.

But there was also a part of the system that didn't reflect that same spirit, and that made me think more critically about the idea of altruism. I think it is an important theme.

There is something we sometimes call "goodwill in colleges." It is part of what holds the system together. People routinely do far more work than is formally expected of them. Take marking: it often exceeds what can realistically be completed within contracted hours, alongside teaching, meetings, and other responsibilities. As a result, it is done in evenings, at weekends, and on Sundays, because students need timely feedback on their progress.

There is also a more general form of goodwill, attending events outside working hours, designing better lessons than can reasonably be fitted into paid workloads, and constantly thinking about teaching beyond the workplace. You might see something in a shop and think it would be useful in class, and end up buying it for students. There is constant reading, reflection, and engagement with ideas that go far beyond formal requirements.

We sometimes forget this is work, because it becomes a vocation. And I do think it is a vocation.

But that vocational element can also be exploited. It is the personal investment people bring, the desire to do well for students, colleagues, and the values they believe in. People want their work to matter; they want it to be meaningful.

When institutions rely on that goodwill without recognising or supporting it, then altruism begins to function as exploitation.

I would never have worked in a research-intensive institution with REF status, but I did carry out research that was significant in the context I was working in. It may not have been considered significant in a large university, but it mattered in my setting.

The same applies to conferences we organised: they were done in our own time, despite work rather than because of it. In fact, institutions often did not support or engage with them. Yet when there were successes, publications, events, recognition elsewhere, those were often taken up and used to enhance institutional profile, even though the institution had not supported the work that produced them.

In that sense, altruism can become something inverted.

I think it is important that we recognise our own worth. It took me a long time to understand that. If our value lies in what we do, and we do it for the right reasons, then we should also be able to own what we produce, rather than it simply being absorbed elsewhere.

"When institutions rely on that goodwill without recognising or supporting it, then altruism begins to function as exploitation."

Life after leaving academia

How do you think about life after redundancy, and what life looks like after leaving academia?

There was a massive sense of relief. That might sound difficult, but I didn't lose my interest in the work I was doing.

I still read in the same way, not exactly the same, but I continue to read some of the same texts, as well as books I genuinely think are great. I no longer feel obliged to engage with material that has been institutionally designated as important. It is not that I avoid it, and I am not trying to create an echo chamber, but there was a certain sterility in institutional education in the later years. It often seemed to prefer less richness and more rigid, standardised approaches to learning. But education has never been like that. It is messy, improvised, and full of competing ideas that are tested and worked through in practice.

What I miss most is students. I miss being around young people with unexpected and often remarkable ideas, ideas I would not have had myself. It was always a joy to see people develop, and to create opportunities for them to express their thinking in academic form, whether through projects, papers, or dissertations. That kind of engagement is something I realised I no longer had once I left. You do miss that. You really do. But you also find it in other ways.

I find writing outside academic papers much more freeing, and it reaches a different audience. I enjoy writing poetry and fiction, because the same themes I once explored academically can be expressed in a more open and imaginative way.

I also found the academic publishing world quite stifling. It is not a particularly open space. That is not unique to academia, publishing more broadly is shaped by very established, often middle-class systems that define value in particular ways. As working-class people, we are not always fully included in that world.

At the same time, stepping outside it has allowed me to grow differently. There are moments of fear and uncertainty, but also moments of real exhilaration. You meet different people, you work in different ways. I have valued that.

Still, I do miss students. I do miss that kind of engagement.

Thank you, Peter. Is there anything else you'd like to discuss, or anything you feel we haven't touched on that's important to say?

Only one thing, and you've made me think of it, is the Working Class Academics Conferences.

One of the key features of that for us was that nobody was rejected. Everyone who came was accepted. We brought together very experienced speakers and first-time speakers, and tried to organise them in ways that created supportive groupings and shared development.

The reason that matters is because I think working-class identity in academia is no longer unspoken. There are now many discussions about it. I've had invitations myself to contribute to edited volumes and chapters, and there is much more work in that area more broadly. In that sense, the idea that it is unvoiced is no longer accurate, and that is a positive development.

However, I have not seen corresponding change in institutional policy or government approaches. In those spaces, class is still rarely mentioned in any meaningful way.

What we do now see is academia talking to itself about class, particularly at a practitioner level, and that is happening widely.

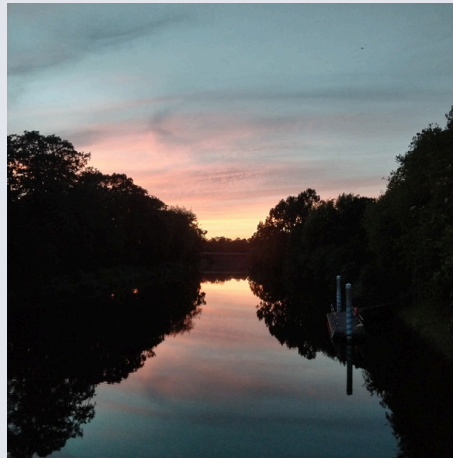
But I think the most important thing across your themes is that there must be purpose in what we do. It cannot be only about exploration. Academia can become a space where issues are identified and endlessly analysed without anything changing. Understanding is important, but there also has to be direction, there has to be change.

From being outside, I think I've come to see that more clearly. Inside academia, people will let you talk for as long as you like, and in a sense it becomes easy not to listen.

Real work is different. It is not just talk; it is change.



Singleness and Precarity in Academia and Research (2026)



Singleness and Precarity in Academia and Research (2026)
Digital Photograph © Daniela Duc 2026

Singleness in academia and research has many shapes and forms.

It can look like:

*the recently graduated PhD dude full of hope,
the young woman who has been in there for 4 years trying to make a name for herself,
the single-mum research assistant trying to secure the next gig,
the single dad with child support to meet,
or the nearly homeless guy trying to make rent and working in a lab for free.*

It can also look like:

*the daughter caring for her sick parent or widowed mother,
the son supporting his younger brothers and sisters,
the aspiring mum delaying family-life because the lab still says: 'it is not the right time',
the middle-aged fella who still cannot secure a mortgage,
or the forever country hopper, never finding 'a home'.*

While the single person is often viewed as The Cool, The Adventurous, The Brave,

The single person's problems in research/academia are many:

*Economic vulnerability, isolation, Invisible labour
Forever mobile, no social anchor, no stability,
Forever available to work, overworked, exploitation,
No housing support, less allowances, no safety net - policy blind spot,
Loneliness, isolation, emotional wellbeing – a real roller-coaster.*

The dichotomous choices to be made, more distressing by the day:

Have a life or a job?

Have a lab or a family?

Have a home and a mortgage or stay in academia on the never-ending short-term contracts?

Show loyalty to your lab or apply for that lectureship/independent fellowship?

Take that career-break for your mental health or keep your tenure?

The solution?

*Lies in the lens through which we see people as people,
Human beings with diverse life dimensions,
With aspirations for family, belonging and community,
Individuals needing support and stability to Live,
Who like a beautiful sunset sky reflecting in the water,
Enrich the life of all around who See them.*

For more information on singleness and precarity in academia, please see the following resources:

Barnard, S., Mukundan, S., Henson, S., North, K. (2026). The Personal Costs of Researcher Precarity: A C-DICE Survey of Researchers on Fixed-Term Contracts in UK Higher Education. C-DICE, UK.

Dawn Culpepper , Courtney Lennartz , KerryAnn O'Meara & Alexandra Kuvaeva (2020): Who Gets to Have a Life? Agency in Work-Life Balance for Single Faculty, Equity & Excellence in Education, DOI: 10.1080/10665684.2020.1791280

Menard CB. The systemic marginalisation of long-term casualised researchers in UK higher education. *Front Sociol.* 2025 Oct 8;10:1626458. doi: 10.3389/fsoc.2025.1626458. PMID: 41132701; PMCID: PMC12540501.

Murgia A. and Poggio B. (2019) Gender and precarious research careers. A comparative analysis. Routledge Research in Gender and Society. Routledge, Oxon.

OECD (2021) OECD Study: Precarity of Academic Research Careers. <https://www.ei-ie.org/en/item/25122:oeecd-study-precariety-of-academic-research-careers>

Thibaut, P. (n.d.) Loneliness and Early Career Researchers: An Evidence-Based Perspective. The Association of Child and Adolescent Mental Health. <https://www.acamh.org/blog/loneliness-and-early-career-researchers/>

Bio:

Dr Daniela Duc is a Lecturer in Pharmaceutical and Health Technologies at Cardiff University whose research combines biomaterials science, neurotechnology, and health equity. She develops sustainable, responsive biomaterials for brain and nerve tissue engineering, creating new approaches for neural tissue models, regenerative therapies, drug delivery, and biodevice development to tackle neurological disorders. Through this work, she seeks to address the growing global burden of neurological disorders while advancing more equitable access to innovative healthcare technologies.

Alongside her scientific research, Daniela is committed about fostering inclusive, equitable, and supportive research culture. She is the founder and editor of *Unblock Magazine*, a community-driven publication that aims to be an open door for kind yet candid discussions about tangible challenges in research, research culture, and academia. *Unblock* seeks to amplify diverse voices, foster meaningful dialogue, and showcase practical solutions that can be implemented collectively to regenerate and strengthen our research community.

EMPLOYMENT LAW IN UK HIGHER EDUCATION AND RESEARCH: PRECARIOUS CONTRACTS

Author's Note:

I am not a lawyer or legal specialist. My objective in this article is to synthesise relevant legislation, policy documents, and academic literature related to precarious employment in UK academia. Any errors or omissions are my own, and readers should refer to the original legal sources or seek professional advice when interpreting their rights and obligations. This is for informational purposes only and does not constitute employment or legal advice. Always verify the most recent legislation on [GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk) or consult a qualified employment solicitor for your specific situation, as employment law is continually changing.

Introduction

Precarious work has become a defining feature of the United Kingdom (UK) labour market, with approximately 6.1 million people, or 19% of the workforce, in insecure positions (Richardson 2023). Furthermore, as indicated by Carvalho and O'Connor (2025), there is an increasing disparity between academics on unstable contracts and those holding permanent positions in many Western countries. In the UK higher education (HE) sector, reliance on 'Deliveroo-style' contracts is growing as more institutions turn to adjuncts and temporary staff to fill teaching positions (Boston Brand Research & Media 2024). Hence, high levels of precarity continue because institutions depend heavily on hourly workers and fixed-term contracts. More precisely, according to HESA Staff data for 2024/25, around 21% of employees wholly financed by HE were on fixed-term contracts. Among employees partially financed by HE, 23% were on fixed-term contracts. In addition, as stated by HESA in 2024/25, 36% of part-time staff on academic contracts (excluding atypical [1]) and 7% of part-time non-academic staff reported to HESA were hourly paid, compared to less than 1% of full-time staff. More staff on fixed-term contracts, both academic and non-academic, were paid hourly than those on permanent contracts. Additionally, excluding atypical contracts, 92% of 3,440 academic staff on zero-hours contracts and 92% of 450 non-academic staff on such contracts were hourly paid.

This phenomenon of casualisation is reflected not only in insecure jobs, inconsistent income, and the absence of benefits, but also in hidden costs borne by individuals, often called the "insecurity premium", including additional costs and income implications of casualised and insecure work, such as higher travel costs and high childcare expenses, cancellation of social events, and increased difficulty in financial budgeting and making social plans (Richardson 2023). This uncertainty has a significant impact on the mental health and morale of staff in higher education institutions that rely heavily on hourly-paid and fixed-term employees. In fact, in the education sector, 84.9% of staff on fixed-term contracts report that their contract status negatively impacts their wellbeing, expressing an inability to plan for the future as a primary stressor (Squire et al. 2025). Moreover, staff members often perceive themselves as undervalued, and concerns such as inadequate compensation and job insecurity-related stress can adversely influence their mental well-being and morale. For instance, as highlighted in the UCU Survival guide for hourly-paid staff (2020), precarious employees frequently perceive themselves as second-class citizens in comparison to their full-time counterparts. Furthermore, as observed in Pösch et al. (2020), although precarious workers are more prone to experiencing a heightened risk of exposure to non-compliance, they appear to rarely pursue justice or report instances of non-compliance. In this context, the present article aims to provide insights into employment legislation in Academia and Research in the UK.

The legislative framework

Employment in UK academia is governed by a legislative framework based on general labour law, including the [Employment Rights Act 1996](#) and the [Equality Act 2010](#). Additionally, it is supplemented by specific regulations such as [The Fixed-term Employees Regulations 2002](#) and [The Part-time Workers \(Prevention of Less Favourable Treatment\) Regulations 2000](#), which reflect the sector's dependence on temporary contracts. It is also important to note that the [Employment Rights Act 2025](#) (ERA 2025), which became law in December 2025, will introduce additions and amendments to existing legislation during 2026 and 2027. Importantly, starting in 2027, ERA 2025 grants eligible workers the right to request guaranteed hours, to reasonable shift notices, as well as the right to compensation for cancellations, moved or curtailed shifts. Furthermore, with modifications to the qualifying period and compensation, employees need at least six months of service to claim unfair dismissal, reduced from two years.

Understanding Precarious Contracts in Academia

Precarious employment in HE is generally characterised by greater insecurity and unpredictability of contractual terms and employment conditions (Carvalho and O'Connor 2025; Squire et al. 2025) and “precarious employment” lacks a formal legal definition under UK employment law. In fact, an individual's employment status (employee vs worker; see [Employment status](#) at <https://www.gov.uk/employment-status>) plays a key role in determining their rights and responsibilities. In particular, when an individual works under an employment contract (i.e., a contract of service), they are regarded as an employee and are entitled to the full spectrum of employment rights. In contrast, workers undertake work under a contract of arrangement. Furthermore, while employees benefit from full statutory protections, including unfair dismissal rights, workers are entitled only to basic rights (Collins 2024). Table 1 below demonstrates some key differences.

Table 1 Key difference in employment status in the UK

	Employee	Worker
Contract type	Contract of employment	Flexible or casual arrangement
Job security	High	Low
Unfair dismissal rights	Yes	No
Redundancy pay	Yes	No
Sick Pay	Yes	No
Parental leave	Yes	No
Holiday pay	Yes	Yes
Minimum wage	Yes	Yes
Workplace pension	Yes	Yes

Regarding the types of precarious contractual models commonly used in HE, they are as follows:

- [Fixed-Term Contracts](#) (FTCs) that are used for a predetermined period of time;
- Hourly-Paid Contracts that are used for employees paid only for contact hours; and
- Zero-hours contracts (contracts that do not guarantee work hours); they only specify the payment if you accept the work.

Additionally, it is important to recognise that academic staff may be salaried or paid by the hour, and their contracts can be either fixed-term or open-ended. In other words, while a fixed-term contract refers to the fixed duration of employment, hourly pay refers to the method of compensation.

Fixed-Term Contracts

Fixed-term contracts are commonly used during the early stages of an academic career (Vitae, 2019) and as highlighted in the introduction, universities employ nearly a quarter of their workforce on fixed-term contracts, which are used for a predetermined period. In other words, as noted at [Fixed-term employment contracts: What counts as a fixed-term contract](#) (see <https://www.gov.uk/fixed-term-contracts>), an employee is on a fixed-term contract if they have an employment contract that ends on a set date or upon task completion.

It is important to note that student workers are not considered fixed-term employees. Nevertheless, it is also important to note that a person is considered a fixed-term employee if they are seasonal or casual staff hired for up to 6 months during busy periods, specialists brought in for a project, or covering maternity leave. Termination of this type of contract is legally defined as a dismissal.

Additionally, an employee who has continuous employment for four or more years will automatically become a permanent employee unless the employer can demonstrate a valid business reason not to do so. In cases where an employer offers to renew a fixed-term contract on less favourable terms, the employee has the right to negotiate to reach an agreement. If the contract expires without an agreement, the employee might be eligible to claim unfair dismissal (see [Dismissal](https://www.gov.uk/dismissal): your rights at <https://www.gov.uk/dismissal>).

Hourly- Paid Contracts

Hourly-paid contracts are common in the HE. As noted earlier, in 24/25, more academic and non-academic staff were paid hourly compared to those on permanent contracts. These types of contracts are generally used for graduate teaching assistants and tutors, and are often fixed-term for one academic year or zero-hours (UCU Survival guide for hourly-paid staff 2020). It is important to note that zero-hours contracts and similar arrangements do not constitute binding contracts, so no employment rights apply to the relationship (Collins 2024). Therefore, staff employed on zero-hour contracts are generally classified as workers. Nevertheless, as suggested by the UCU Survival guide for hourly-paid staff (2020), in the case of disputes, the court will look beyond the written contract at several key factors:

- **Control:** Does the employer decide what tasks you do and exactly how you do them?
- **Integration:** Are you treated as a full part of the organisation (e.g., invited to meetings, given office space)?
- **Mutuality of Obligation:** Is the employer legally required to offer you work, and are you required to accept it?
- **Substitution:** Can you send someone else to do your work, or must you perform it personally?
- **Financial Risk:** Does the employer bear the financial risk of the work, or do you (which would suggest self-employment)?

If the majority of responses are affirmative, your status may be that of an employee (see, for example, court cases mentioned in Collins 2024). To check your employment status and other work-related issues, such as pay, sick pay, employment contracts and other issues, you can check [Work at Citizens Advice](https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/work/) (see <https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/work/>).

Additionally, the current reform of zero-hours and similar contracts in the ERA 2025 seeks to eliminate one-sided flexibility by guaranteeing a minimum level of security and predictability for all jobs (Department for Business & Trade n.d.).

Conclusion

Overall, although UK employment law offers legal protections for insecure contracts, having legal rights does not always guarantee security, since practical issues such as future references, contract renewals, or career prospects in HE may still cause concerns.

Support

If you need free legal advice or support regarding employment or social welfare issues in Cardiff or the Vale of Glamorgan, contact the [Speakeasy Law Centre](https://www.speakeasy.cymru). Visit: <https://www.speakeasy.cymru> for more details. [Citizens Advice](https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/) also provides free, independent and impartial guidance. For more information, visit <https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/>.

[1] In 2024/25, 57,365 staff were employed by HE providers on academic atypical contracts. For the definition of atypical contract, see <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/support/definitions/staff#terms-employment>.

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Bio:

Dr Ivana Rozic is a Lecturer in Accounting and Finance at Cardiff University and holds a PhD in Accounting with a focus on financial reporting from Kingston University, UK. She is the co-founder, editor and lead designer of *Unblock Magazine*, an innovative publication dedicated to fostering open, respectful and constructive dialogues about research culture and academia. Throughout her academic journey, Ivana was employed on various zero-hour and hourly contracts. As an international scholar, she had limited familiarity with UK legislation; therefore, she hopes this brief article may serve as a helpful guide for those who are new to the UK or are at the beginning of their career in academia.

Institutions and precarious contracts



Talking with Dr Mary Muers

Dr Mary Muers
Research Environment Programmes Lead
University of Oxford, England, UK

The views expressed here are those of the interviewee and do not necessarily reflect the position of the University of Oxford.

Who is Mary Muers and can you tell us about your journey in academia and research?

I suppose we can start with the job title, which is lead of the University of Oxford Research Environment Programmes team. Broadly, the purpose of this team is to strengthen our research environment in Oxford by enabling a positive, inclusive and sustainable research environment that supports rigorous and high-quality research. We look at structural and strategic initiatives across the whole scope of research culture. This includes projects related to supporting careers, good research practice, and valuing diverse contributions in research.

But I suppose that's a rather formal way to look at it. It is perhaps more interesting to consider: Why am I here doing this work and how did I get here? Throughout my career, I have had a passion for research, and I believe in the importance of research for society. I started off as a researcher myself, working in molecular biology and genetics as a postdoctoral researcher. I wanted to carry on being involved in research, but outside of the lab, taking a broader perspective. My career journey has taken me through academic publishing, working as an editor. That was really exciting because I got to read fresh research all the time, work with academics on developing review articles, attend conferences; really being close to research but not doing it myself.

Then for various reasons I wanted to come back to work in Oxford. I worked in one of the cancer research institutes at the University of Oxford in a professional services role. There I was supporting various different aspects of research, from helping people with writing grant applications, developing strategy, writing papers, and so on. That role enabled me to work with everyone in the research ecosystem: the research students, the technical staff, the director, the PIs, also the HR, admin and finance side of things.

I developed a broad understanding of all the pieces that need to fit together to enable research to happen, and also the challenges in doing that.

Was this across the university?

That was just within one institute. Oxford is a very large university. I was within the Ludwig Institute for Cancer Research, which is a unit within the Nuffield Department of Medicine, which is one department, but absolutely huge in terms of research activity – bigger than some universities.

And that is one department in the vast research ecosystem that we have in Oxford. So in a sense, I was in quite a small bubble within that but getting really deep experience of the needs of different roles.

Again, I was then interested in having a bigger perspective. I did a secondment working on REF impact case studies for the REF 2021, which gave me different insights on research impact and working with other colleagues around the university.

A role became available focusing on research culture, and this was across the whole of the medical sciences in the university. I was really interested in that opportunity because I thought, well, here's a chance for me to see a different aspect of how research functions, but also bring all that experience I had from working with different people in the different parts of the research life cycle and putting that into practice in a different way.

In early 2022, it was the first role in the university with 'research culture' in the job title. At that point, there weren't many roles in the sector that were called 'research culture'. It didn't mean that there wasn't work happening! That's something that's really changed in the past few years; there are currently quite a lot of people who are now really focusing on research culture as a core part of their role.

That's quite a bit of a journey there. You moved as things evolved. Was that also guided by curiosity?

Yes, I suppose I like to ask why things are the way they are.

One of the challenges of working in a research culture related role is its breadth; these are very broad terms: research environment, research culture. It's a very complex portfolio with lots of sub-disciplines.

Even when I was working in the Ludwig Cancer Institute, I was still quite focused on the actual substance of research, the science. The big change in moving into a research culture role was stepping away from the content of the research to the 'how' we do research, how we enable research: the people, the systems, the incentives, the environment. I now feel very rusty talking about, say, cell biology. I can't remember any of the details, which is a bit of a jump for someone who used to know all the specifics. My experience now is about connecting and understanding the people and the context; understanding systems, and what are the drivers and what are the levers.

It's very easy to talk about the problems and that's important to do, but the really sticky bit is trying to work out what's within our sphere to influence or change. I'm naturally a fairly practical person and I am an optimist; I think one has to be an optimist to work on research culture, especially when you talk to people and you hear about some really difficult experiences they're having and challenges they've encountered.

We need to find some practical ways forward within what can sometimes seem very frustrating or cumbersome systems. Let's not be defeated because something feels like a large challenge in the sector or internationally that we can't influence. Let's find some positive steps forward.

I find that I need to be comfortable in operating with uncertainty and in areas without precedent. This isn't the kind of job for people who like neat, clear-cut defined processes. You are by nature trying to find a way through something that probably no one's found a way through before, or trying to find a new route.



“It's very easy to talk about the problems and that's important to do, but the really sticky bit is trying to work out what's within our sphere to influence or change.”



Precarious contracts and the effect on mental health

Let's talk a bit about precarity and the effect on mental health. We understand that you've worked on projects related to these. Based on your experience, what do you think are the current challenges in regard to precarity, in terms of how people are employed, and the impacts on individuals and on academia?

From the beginning of working in research, fixed-term contracts and precarity was the number one thing researchers wanted to talk about and still want to talk about. It is high up the list.

But it is very tricky. I think it's worth also just stepping back and thinking about contracts, as well as the experience of precarity. From a contract point of view – I'm not an HR professional – we've got broadly two types of contracts: there's a contract with a fixed end date and there's a contract that doesn't have an end date on it.

The latter—those that don't have an end date—have two flavours in universities. There are ones that don't have an end date and are sometimes called 'permanent' or 'open-ended'. Then there are those where there is a clause related to having limited funding. These are sometimes called 'open-ended with limited funding' or 'open-ended externally funded' contracts. There's a clause that says that if that funding ends, then the contract can be ended. However, I think it's worth noting that HR colleagues always point out that any contract can be ended.

Unfortunately, in the current environment, that's painfully real for many people. Permanent doesn't necessarily mean permanent.

Some of the complexity around those 'open-ended with limited funding contracts' is that what it means in practice varies amongst universities because of local processes and policies. In some places, when that external money runs out, they can be ended in essentially the same way that a fixed-term contract does. In some other universities, Oxford for example, the 'open-ended with limited funding' or 'open-ended externally funded' contracts have a longer or more complex end of contract process that is actually much more similar to that for a permanent contract. I'm sure your readers come from lots of different places. They may have different experiences, which is something for people to be aware of.

Another thing that is worth thinking about is that, for fixed-term contracts, there are many different staff groups that are employed on fixed-term contracts. I suppose the majority of people I'm working with on fixed-term contracts are researchers, but there's lots in teaching, professional services, technical staff, etc.

I think the main challenges come from living with uncertainty, which is really hard. And people's individual circumstances vary a lot. **The impact of uncertainty can have very different impacts depending on people's personal circumstances.**

We've had conversations about that, and people highlight many different intersecting factors: caring responsibilities, whether you can move geographically, visa restrictions, all sorts of things that can intersect with your particular contract type.

I was on fixed-term contracts for about of 10 years, but I didn't have too much experience of that uncertainty – that precarity – because they were relatively long fixed-term contracts, of at least three years, and in an institute where there was some core funding that gave a degree of stability. And I also felt that I had a transferable skill set. But that was just my particular personal experience, which is quite different to many other people's. I think it emphasised to me that the contract itself, the label, is one factor within the whole mix.

We need to be thinking about systems and processes that work best for a wider group, whilst also being aware of the variations amongst individual cases.

Ensuring that people don't feel that they're isolated is important. Also, ensuring that people also have the information they need, because that sometimes can be a challenge.

Can you tell us a bit more about how you got involved in these projects looking into contracts?

Although precarity has been high up the list for a number of years, within Oxford and also as a sector, we've all felt that it's been hard to make much progress. No one's really cracked it. I think that's probably universally acknowledged. What we decided was to think, okay, what can we do within the current funding landscape?

One way of thinking about precarity and the use of fixed-term contracts is to think about the whole funding model for academic research, which is another conversation, I would say. But let's put that to one side. Let's look at our current models, whereby research is mainly funded through grants. This is the main reason for a lot of researchers being on fixed-term contracts. Those grants come and go. So, given that context and that funding model, what other things could we be doing to reduce that experience of precarity?

In a project I've been involved in, which started early 2025, we started off by saying, 'let's come up with as many ideas as we can'. Let's look out there in the sector to see what has been thought of, what is being tried? Put lots of ideas on the table irrespective of whether they're small scale or larger scale, but that we could do – at least theoretically – within the university. For example, we had a broad group of options that looked at what are the things that could be done better to help someone on a fixed-term contract when that's coming to an end if they want to stay employed at the university?

The standard current model is that we think about employment at quite a small scale of research projects: a grant comes into a PI, they want to employ someone to do a piece of work on that project, without much connection to potentially similar roles in other projects.

A thing to think about is, is that efficient? And is it helping us to give people more stable employment when there could be opportunities for that skill set, and for that person to work on other projects too?

Other considerations are the types of roles or skills where there is a long-term need, but which the funding for is coming in short term bursts. fixed-term contracts are following the funding. But can we think about what roles are needed for research continuity?

Those were some of the broad topics that we looked at. We did focus groups to get feedback. What was really important was to hear from the different people who are involved in employing someone. This involved staff who are funded from the research grants, including project managers and technical staff and research staff whose salaries are all coming from these grants, the hiring managers, the PIs, also the HR professionals who understand all the policy context, as well as the heads of administration and finance who are dealing with the financial modelling and the risk. We aimed to get all of that input to be able to pick up a few ideas that looked potentially promising to then scope out further as models to pilot. It's been a really interesting of exercise and hearing that feedback was valuable. There are a lot of shared concerns and understanding across all of those different staff groups.

Have the outcomes of this project been published?

It was a quite early investigative and scoping work, so we haven't published anything yet. At some point it would be really useful to synthesise what we have heard.

A couple of the things that we're investigating further are things to do with a pooling model, where we've got particular skill sets that are valuable for multiple projects. Can we do something other than just employ people on a fixed-term contract or on an individual project, to give them more stability in their employment, but with the expectation that they will be moving around projects or bits of their time will be used on different projects? This has been tried to some extent in a few cases, such as with research software engineers. A few universities have project managers that work in that way. But can we develop models to enable that?

From the point of view of trying to retain staff, particularly in fields where there are potentially really good opportunities in industry, like for computational skills, sometimes it's hard because the salaries offered in industry are often higher. It's quite hard to retain them when you're only offering a fixed-term contract. There are benefits if something more stable can be offered; universities always need those computational skills. But I think it is also worth reflecting that this is one model that will suit a subset of people, depending on the career aspirations of the individuals. It might be that someone who wants to specialise in a particular research area may not want to move across projects.

Different models work for different people.

So you think that current contracts contribute to precarity. What are the key aspects of the contracts that can be addressed?

I think the length of the contract is important and does have an impact on precarity. That's something that has come from the discussions that we've had. A fixed-term contract of five years is very different to a fixed-term contract that's less than a year. The experience of precarity is much more acute when you're on short contracts.

The reasons for these short pieces can vary. Sometimes there's a limited need towards the end of a project. Sometimes money gets released in tranches and because of concerns about financial risk, the contract is made as short as each tranche. Another thing that can leave people in a very stressful position is when decisions come very close to the wire at the end of their contract.

Why is that happening? This is partly related to when decisions are made about funding, which are usually out of the control of the people who are trying to renew the contract. There are all of these different pieces that come in on different timelines. But leaving people in that situation, being unable to plan ahead, is so disruptive to people's personal lives. You don't know where you're going to be, what job you're going to have in a few weeks, let alone a few months. Is there's anything that we can do to ensure that where a contract has an end date, that we ensure that support and conversations are happening as early as possible?

We need to think, from a research culture point of view, about who are we disadvantaging and how that affects who feels they can stay in research. We need diverse contributions in research, different experiences, different perspectives. And if elements of the system mean it is unfeasible for people to stay in research because of their personal circumstances, then that's not good for research as a whole.

Similarly, from a skills point of view, how are we ensuring that we are not losing the talent and skills we have developed. The flip side of that is, people say, 'okay, let's make everyone permanent'. But where does that give room for new ideas and different perspectives to come in? **We need to think about the mix in the system.**

Based on your experience, what are the changes in contracts that you found were helpful over the years?

In the medical sciences in Oxford, we've worked to support departments to review cases where fixed-term contracts have been used repeatedly. That has been a very interesting exercise and has resulted in quite a number of people being moved from fixed-term contracts onto open-ended, externally funded contracts, which do give this greater degree of stability. In each case, there was an objective justification for each fixed-term contract, but when you look at it longer term, we've needed the role and there's always been a funding source. Is there actually a low financial risk here from putting that person onto an open-ended contract?

This has helped give the confidence in a managed process of saying, 'well, let's start with this group of people who've been on the fixed-term contracts the longest and then gradually work down in a systematic way'. The numbers of staff in some of these departments is huge, so the amount of work is quite substantial. But going through it in a managed process has meant that progress has been really positive. That then gives a bit more confidence that this is a change that can start to happen.

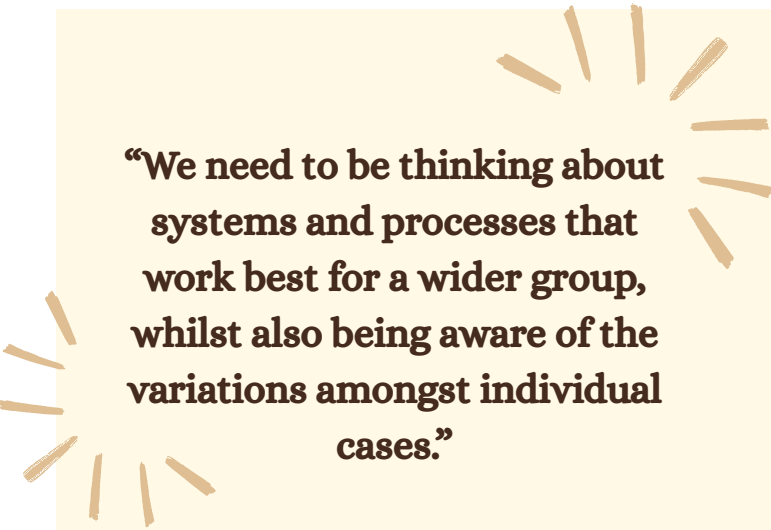
Something that's been really interesting in the conversations that we've had in the focus groups, is how many myths and misunderstandings there are about contracts and processes, particularly in redundancy process, and end of contract processes.

Is that misunderstanding on the part of researchers or employers?

Interestingly, it's for everyone; for researchers, for the employees on those fixed-term contracts, but also sometimes for the managers and people administering the situation. There are a lot of complexities.

Clearly, we need to do better at enabling people to understand their contracts, what they're being offered from the beginning, and what is realistic. I think it is helpful to ensure that there is clarity and honesty from the beginning about what a contract means, what will happen if the funding comes to an end. For example, that they will be supported to find alternative redeployment.

These challenges around understanding policies and processes have popped up in other conversations I've had in the sector. This is not a unique situation by any means, so let's have clearer conversations and clear information so people know understand their situation and what their options might be.



“We need to be thinking about systems and processes that work best for a wider group, whilst also being aware of the variations amongst individual cases.”

And this is about expectations as well?

Exactly. I suppose one has to be a bit careful. If you start off 'welcome to your new job' then say 'oh, by the way, this is what will happen at the end', that might feel like a negative start, but actually, honesty is usually the best policy. People need to understand the timelines and the likelihoods of contracts being renewed. I also think that understanding of how finances work is limited as well, which is understandable because sometimes financial models are very complicated and vary depending on where you are. But understanding why a particular contract type is being used because of the funding model or project need is also important.

I think something we haven't talked about is the kind of **psychological contract** with the employer. Some people who have been on repeated fixed-term contracts can sometimes feel undervalued by the organisation, even if they know that their direct line manager and absolutely values their work. The fact that they've been on repeated fixed-term contracts can be difficult for people when they're giving so much of their energy to their work.

That's an interesting term, 'psychological contract'. It's the first time I've heard this.

I don't know whether it's an accurate term... But **is my organisation, my employer, committed to supporting me?** I would hope that that feeling would come through, but some people don't feel that as much.

I suppose we were talking about honest conversations. If one looks at the data, the proportion of people who start off as a post-doctoral researcher and become a senior academic is naturally very small. And that's not to knock people's aspiration, but to give the reality.

There's a huge amount you can learn at each career stage, which doesn't mean you're tied into a particular path.

We need to enable academic pathways, absolutely, but we also need to be enabling a whole range of other pathways. We need to ensure that people feel that it is a positive option, not a failure, not to stay in academia. An interesting area is thinking about how we could change the language about working in other sectors.

Also, how can we enable and incentivize working across sectors so it's not like you're 'in' academia or you're 'out'? If more people spent a bit of time in both, that would hopefully break down that barrier. For example, if people did more secondments in other sectors and came back into an academic setting, I think that might help to approach some of those real challenges about the perception of leaving academia. Let's say you work in the NHS and then you move into a charity sector, you don't really say I'm leaving a whole sector, you're just moving jobs.

The nature of many assessment processes within academic research are set such that recognition of experience gained in other sectors and in other settings has, historically, been quite narrow. If you're not in a setting where you've been getting papers in recognised journals, it is going to make things harder for you.

There is certainly movement to improve that, but it's still quite a bit of road to go. That's a bit separate from precarity, but actually it intersects with people's thinking about what their careers could look like and should look like, and that if we can move away from the binary of academic and non-academic, and remove blocks to moving in either direction, that enables people to feel less anxious about their future prospects.

It's interesting which things are culturally embedded still. For example, looking at an authorship list and just taking first author and last author as a proxy for how important your contribution was to that research project and not paying much attention to the essential work that was done by all the other people in the system. The names of those doing technical roles would actually be in the middle.

That's important from the point of view of appointments and promotions, but also from a funding perspective. When reviewers and panels are assessing funding applications, what are they looking for? The movement towards using things like narrative CVs instead of standard academic CVs enables people to describe the nature of their contribution.

But there's a lot of work to do there in terms of understanding how reviewers are making assessments, because changing the judgements that people make and on what basis, takes a longer period if particular habits are ingrained.

Next Steps and Future Actions

What more do you think can be done moving forward?

I think there are also some potential cultural barriers that we still need to think about. Some people want or need to stay in a particular local environment. They may be looking for redeployment opportunities if they've been on a fixed-term contract. We have heard of barriers to that in terms of how potential hiring managers – Pls – perceive employing an internal candidate for redeployment, rather than via a big international recruitment.

How do we rethink that? Do we need to recognise how to upskill people? And for which roles do we really need someone who's specialist in that very specific area? Sometimes we do because it's a particular area of research where that specialism is absolutely essential. But we can be a bit more open-minded about some other types of roles where the skills are more transferable or where someone who's got broad research skills could easily learn the specifics for that topic and bring a lot of value there.

We're also talking about encouraging early thinking about multiple career options. I don't want to call them plan A and plan B because that implies a sort of a hierarchy. We can enable researchers to do that through the career development opportunities we're giving them, but also through exposure to peers who have a range of experiences. If you talk to someone who's been in a situation similar to yours before and

has found a way through it and done something different, that can be really meaningful. **Connecting people up through sort of alumni networks, peer networks can be a valuable thing to do.**

I know that's easy to say and less easy to do. When you're in the depths of a research project, you need to get the research done. That is felt both by the PI and the postdoc as well. They will need that to get their next grant too, so the time pressure is real; even though research staff have 10 days professional development under the Researcher Concordat. What I encourage people to think about is that they're probably doing a lot of development that supports their current role and their future careers at the same time. If you're writing an abstract to submit to a conference, you're developing your skills in writing, you're thinking about your current research project, you're presenting it to a different audience. These are all skills that are very useful for lots of different aspects, so you're not taking time away from your current research to go and do something completely different. You're actually developing a lot of skills.

There was an interesting report published by the University of Cambridge Careers Service recently where they'd done a survey and interviewed people who had been postdocs in Cambridge and what did they go on to do next. For those who had moved to roles not in academia, a high proportion were directly using a whole range of skills they'd been using or developed in research.

What other things can universities do to support researchers and academics in precarious working conditions, on top of these current developments?

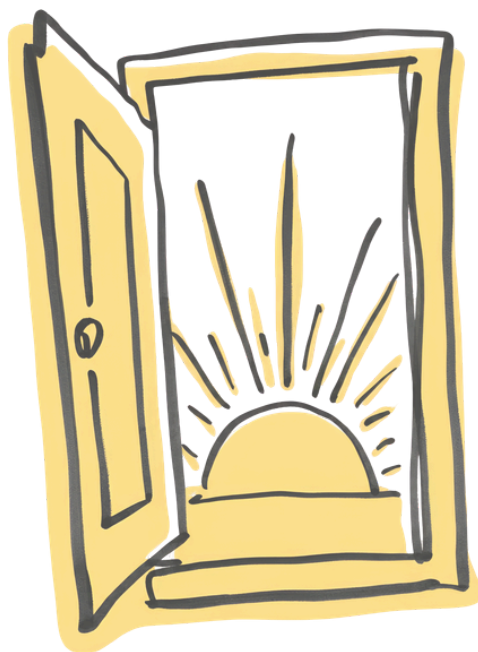
Career development is absolutely crucial. Also, it's worth thinking about whether there any things that a **university can spot in their current criteria, for example, for internal funding opportunities that may be inadvertently disadvantaging people on fixed-term contracts.** For example, are there any particular clauses in eligibility criteria that mean that if you're on a contract with a particular length or a fixed-term contract, don't have access to opportunity? Those may be tractable, practical changes that could be made. **Funders can also look to see if anything in their criteria and policies may affect contract type usage.** For example, we know of cases where a department might be willing to put a researcher on an open-ended funded contract but they've actually opted to stay on a fixed-term contract because otherwise they wouldn't be eligible for funding from particular fellowship scheme.

Given that funding and access to funding is such a fundamental part of people's careers in academia, **we should be thinking about how the experience of precarity is often compounded by other experiences. We should be looking at the equity and inclusivity of our funding schemes.** Sometimes a university has a limited number of people they can put forward to a particular scheme. How are those processes run to make internal selections? Can we do more to ensure that those people who are already in a precarious position are not having further barriers to their career progression inadvertently put in their way?

We've been doing some work on equity and inclusivity in funding schemes in Oxford, but also with others in the sector. We've developed an **'EDI matrix and toolkit'** so we can self-assess different parts of funding schemes. For example, How is it advertised? How are the panels constituted? What are the criteria? We look at each of those elements of the funding schemes to see is there anything that we could just do to make it more inclusive, whether that might be a small change in the way it's communicated or something that could be tweaked in the criteria.

Thank you. Do you have any final thoughts or words of encouragement?

I think the fact that we've got conversations happening that involve funders and universities, and that these are happening much more regularly now, is a positive thing. We are well beyond the point of just accepting things the way things are. There is an optimism, a real appetite to do things differently. **While there are really difficult pressures on universities at the moment, it is encouraging people to think differently.** Whilst I would love to wish away all of those challenges, let's at least make the best of this opportunity. We have to make sure what we build next isn't reinforcing some of the negative cultural situations we've had before.



Health Inequalities Research at a Crossroads: Why We Cannot Afford to Retreat from Health Equity Research

By Dr Tanimola Martins

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed, with striking clarity, the deep and persistent inequalities that shape health outcomes across societies. Disparities in mortality, access to healthcare, occupational exposure, housing conditions, digital exclusion, and vaccine uptake demonstrated that health is never determined solely by biology or individual behaviour. Instead, it is profoundly shaped by social, economic, and structural factors. The pandemic therefore became not only a global public health emergency, but also a moment of reckoning for researchers, funders, policymakers, and institutions worldwide. In the years that followed, there was meaningful progress in embedding equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) principles within research and healthcare systems. Although substantial gaps remain, health inequalities moved from the margins to the centre of many research, funding, and policy agendas. Universities, public health agencies, charities, journals, and research funders increasingly prioritised work aimed at understanding and addressing inequities in healthcare access, outcomes, and participation in research.

“The pandemic therefore became not only a global public health emergency, but also a moment of reckoning for researchers, funders, policymakers, and institutions worldwide.”

This momentum was important. It created opportunities to broaden participation in research, improve representation in clinical studies, strengthen community engagement, and develop more inclusive approaches to healthcare delivery and innovation. Crucially, it also reinforced the understanding that scientific excellence and equity are not competing priorities, but closely interconnected ones. However, recent political developments in the United States now place much of this progress at risk. Federal actions under the current administration have reportedly reduced, paused, or re-evaluated NIH grants linked to DEI initiatives or race-focused health equity research. The implications of this shift may be far-reaching. Given the scale of US research funding and its influence on global scientific priorities, changes in the American funding landscape rarely remain confined within national borders.

“...scientific excellence and equity are not competing priorities, but closely interconnected ones.”

There are already signs that some research funders and institutions are reframing funding calls and strategic priorities to avoid explicit reference to EDI-related agendas. Whether motivated by political caution, legal uncertainty, or reputational concerns, this shift risks creating a chilling effect across the wider research ecosystem. Language matters in funding environments. When terms associated with inequality and equity become politically contentious, researchers may feel pressured to dilute, repackage, or abandon important lines of inquiry altogether. Thankfully, research funders in the UK and many parts of Europe have so far maintained their commitment to addressing inequalities in health. Many continue to recognise that inequity is not a peripheral issue, but a central determinant of population health, healthcare quality, and economic productivity. Nevertheless, the absence of clear leadership and consistency of purpose from the United States represents a significant setback for global progress in this area.

The consequences are likely to extend beyond rhetoric and policy positioning. Researchers are increasingly competing for shrinking pools of funding in an already highly competitive environment. Work focused on health inequalities, community-based research, and the social determinants of health may become particularly vulnerable if perceived as politically sensitive or strategically disadvantageous. This could slow scientific progress at precisely the moment when healthcare systems are facing ageing populations, widening socioeconomic disparities, workforce pressures, and the long-term consequences of the pandemic. This challenge is further compounded by the rapid rise of artificial intelligence (AI). AI undoubtedly offers transformative opportunities for healthcare and research, from diagnostics and predictive analytics to drug discovery and administrative efficiency. However, it also introduces new risks and uncertainties. In the medium term, AI may reduce opportunities in some professional and research fields, while in the longer term it could fundamentally reshape labour markets, research practices, and academic career pathways. Without careful governance, AI systems may also reproduce or amplify existing inequalities through biased datasets, unequal access to technology, and uneven implementation across populations.

“Health inequalities are not abstract concepts confined to academic debate.”

At a time of accelerating technological change and growing political polarisation, the commitment to addressing health inequalities becomes even more important, not less. Progress in this field has never been linear, and setbacks are perhaps inevitable. Yet abandoning or deprioritising research into health inequalities would be a profound mistake scientifically, socially, and economically. Societies cannot meaningfully improve population health while ignoring the structural conditions that produce unequal outcomes in the first place. The lessons of COVID-19 should not be forgotten. Health inequalities are not abstract concepts confined to academic debate. They shape who becomes ill, who receives care, who survives, and who is left behind. Sustained investment in equitable and inclusive research is therefore not simply a political choice, but a public health necessity.

Bio:

Dr Tanimola Martins is a leading researcher specialising in inequalities in cancer diagnosis. His work aims to understand barriers to early diagnosis and to develop interventions to improve outcomes for patients, regardless of age, sex, gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic circumstances, or place of residence.

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Professor Kerenza (Kerry) Hood
Professor of Trials and Dean of Research, Innovation & Enterprise
College of Biomedical & Life Sciences
Cardiff University
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Institutions and precarious contracts

Talking with Professor Kerenza (Kerry) Hoods

Who is Kerry Hood and can you tell us about your journey in academia and research?

I've never done anything straightforward. I ended up studying maths at university by accident. I didn't do very well in my A-levels, and then after one year of my undergraduate degree, I had my son. I took a year out and went back and finished my degree. At that point, I got a bit of a bug to apply for a PhD rather than to go into the world of work. Each step just seemed to be the natural one that looked interesting, rather than being part of any big plan. Certainly, it wasn't what anyone else in my family was doing. I did statistics for my PhD, which was a rarity.

I rather luckily managed to walk into a lectureship as I finished my PhD, which does not happen these days. But it was a two-year rolling lectureship so, every year they'd decide whether they'd give me another two years.

I had a young son and a husband who was out of work. He'd just finished his master's and wasn't able to get a job. That aspect of precarity was quite noticeable as I was the main breadwinner. After about two years, there was a permanent job opened in another department within the university, and I applied for that.

This was at the University of Wales College of Medicine. We were a separate university to Cardiff University, but we've merged since. It was in a clinical department, and I was to be the only statistician, so the post was a lecturer in statistics. All my statistical colleagues told me that it would be the end of my career if I went there because I would not develop as a specialist anymore. I would just become a general person who helped everybody. But it was a permanent job, so I took it.

I had to work out a way to continue to develop as a specialist statistician in a place where there was nobody else of my discipline. I think that was quite an interesting experience, but it gave me the permanence, a lack of the precarity that I had quite early on in my career. I've done different things at Cardiff, but I've maintained that permanence, for which I'm very grateful, and which is probably why it makes me quite alert to when others don't have it.

I was in a department of what was then called general practice. I absolutely loved doing research in primary care and getting involved in clinical trials. I was promoted to senior lecturer while I was there. At that time, the Welsh Government was looking at how it would invest in infrastructure to support health research in Wales. I developed the proposal for a clinical trials unit. I was a senior lecturer at that point and was working heavily on that bid as part of a far bigger bid from the university for something that was then called a clinical research collaboration. I think it was a £24 million bid from the university to Welsh government. We put in this trials unit as a small part of it.

My then head of department took me aside and said I don't think anyone's going to make you a prof based on what you're doing now and suggested that I think about leadership in what I'd been designing. It was quite helpful that someone else was thinking and pointing out to me that I needed to build in some leadership into these big investments.

The proposal ended up getting funded and, on the basis of that, I got promoted to reader. The Welsh Government bought me out of teaching to lead the development. That was in 2006, and I became director of a trials unit of what was then 15 people. We grew it to about 60 by 2015, at which point it was merged with two other trials units within the university, and I was appointed to do the merger. I then became the director of the whole thing that now has about 170 staff. It was what I stood down from to become Dean.

I'm now Dean of Research, Innovation and Enterprise for the College of Biomedical and Life Sciences, which is quite different to being director of a trial's unit. I'm enjoying the new challenge. It involves a lot of strategic engagement with funders, thinking about how they do things, not just what they fund, which I really find quite engaging.

I also took on the role of director of the Clinical Trials Unit Network for the UK, which I do at the same time. There's quite a lot of engagement at Westminster level rather than at Welsh Government level, which is helpful, I think, for both roles.

I was definitely in need of a new challenge. That's not to say running a trials unit isn't challenging, but it was definitely time to do something different. I have half a day a week left to think about teaching and research, so I still keep my hand in a little bit.

Is it still a part of your role to do teaching and research? Is it a requirement or an option?

It's a requirement if you're a teaching & research member of staff and I am, even if it's only half a day a week outside my leadership roles. I take that quite seriously. I still spend a bit of time with undergraduate students, and I still spend a bit of time with those trying to do research in what is actually quite a challenging environment, particularly in the NHS. I'm not sure I'd have the credibility for those other leadership roles if I didn't do at least some of that.

Contracts improvements and policy changes

How would you describe your experience of working in academia so far, and of employing or managing others in this sector?

I've really enjoyed the challenges that have come my way. What's often the precursor to taking the step to do something different is a frustration that you can only change the things within the power you have in that environment. You hit a ceiling of what you're empowered to change. Then you think, well, I need to have a more senior title or a different role if I'm going to change things more.

When I talk to others, I think it is quite different having an academic journey in a school that is not your discipline. There is sense of isolation sometimes and a need to find networks of support to continue with your discipline development, not just your applied development, which comes easily from your local network. From talking to people who have grown up in a mono discipline school, they have their peers to help them with their disciplinary development, but they have to build external networks to help their interdisciplinary development.

Before we had the trials unit, I managed to get Welsh Government to fund a research assistant for me in statistics in primary care, because primary care data is

very different. I pointed out to them that I was the only person in the whole of Wales who knew how to work with primary care data and that maybe they needed to make sure that I wasn't the only person. At that point they supported me to have a research assistant.

I started with a small number of research assistants. In the classic way in universities, you get some money, you can employ them for a bit, but then you're always trying to work out what to do with them next and how you can help them to develop. I started line managing people in the same discipline as me, but then quite quickly moved into managing people from different disciplines. I can remember employing graduates from psychology, their knowledge base is different and where they want to go might be different.

I've always been quite hands on. One of the things I realised was the limits of being able to do that as your teams grow. And how do you change your management style to manage being slightly more remote but not wanting to be remote in all ways.

If you look at a children's growth chart, what you see is that they have saltatory growth spurts, so they go up in height and then they'll go out and then they'll go up in height and then they'll go out. It feels a bit like that when you're managing. You have a management style that works and feels like it works for you and the people around you, and then you grow fatter, if you like, and then you suddenly realise you can't be doing that anymore. **You've got to grow up and think about how to do it differently.**

Then you start to realise the more systemic challenges, like precarity. **I've had to challenge the university at times to give parental leave to PhD students. I wrote a policy for PhD parental leave in the department I was in, which was then adopted by the school. Now the university has a policy.** There didn't used to be one. Similarly, I tried to get the university to fund a parental leave for people funded on external grants, as they'd say you couldn't deliver the

study anymore because you've spent all your money on someone's leave. You only have those arguments so many times before you realise **there's a systemic problem here, not an individual problem.**

We understand that you have been involved in efforts to improve contracts for researchers in academia. Could you tell us more about this work?

I think some of it is negotiation. As a legal entity we have to pay maternity pay. That's accepted. The challenge is how it's implemented. For example, how can you employ someone on an externally funded research project that lasts 18 months, if six months of your budget is spent on maternity pay? That's a legal responsibility for the university. It's not in doubt that they should get paid, it's who should pay so that you can still deliver the project.

I tried for a long time to negotiate a maternity leave policy for externally funded researchers and wasn't getting very far. I interviewed someone for a job and then phoned up the school and said that they're the best person for the job, but that I couldn't employ them. 'Why?' they'd ask? 'Because I can't afford it'. And I said, 'I'm going to write that on the HR form' and they said 'You can't do that. You can't say you're not going to employ someone because they're on maternity leave'. And I said, 'well, what else can I do?'. Of course I was calling their bluff, but it created a policy change that didn't come from lots of lobbying.

In the trials unit, we had lots of people with partial funding from lots of different research grants. We didn't have a group of people who were all fully funded from single grants. To manage, we ended up with a very large spreadsheet with about 60 people and all the grants, trying to make sure that gaps were filled going forward. HR processes meant that some people would potentially be getting an end of contract notice every three months because a part of their funding finished. So, we become quite adept at working across all the projects to continually fill gaps so that people didn't get made redundant. We'd been running that for about 8 to 10 years and never made anyone redundant.

So, that was our evidence base to then say, 'could you just let us employ these people and just sort the funding without using these relevant factors which are tied to a grant code?' We were successful at making that case. We were supported by the Deputy VC at the time, and that became the model that we moved forward with, so all the staff within the trials unit have open-ended contracts without a relevant factor.

It became our default assumption that a new post would be open-ended and you'd have to have a reason to make it fixed-term. A reason might be that it's maternity cover, so it's fixed-term. It might also be that we're trying out a new type of role and we're not quite sure how it's going to work so we're going to give it some time to see if it works.

We have to show to the university that we're financially solvent, so it requires a lot of business work, but it takes the risk away from individuals. It felt like the right thing to do. We then had a group responsibility to bring in enough money for everyone to be continued to be employed. That was a big change in culture.

I think there are strengths and weaknesses of the model. It does take away the constant anxiety, the inability to get a mortgage because you've always got a fixed-term contract. But it doesn't completely take away redundancy risk as we're seeing now in universities. Also, there are other things that have to change in terms of management and support, particularly around training and induction because once someone has passed probation, you then also have to develop them.

That's a really interesting model. It's basically that the centre takes responsibility for those who come in on individual grants?

Yes. It's behind the scenes in terms of the technical solution. During COVID we had a matrix of 170 people against 250 grant codes to prove that you've covered everybody's salaries and then a separate process to model that forward. If you think there's a risk, it takes about 6 to 9 months to run a redundancy process in the university. So if you think there's a major risk of shortfall, then we have to trigger a redundancy process. We did have to do one a few years ago. We lost a million pounds a year of core funding from Cancer Research UK because they shifted their priorities. That was about a 10% reduction in our income. Most teams managed a 10% reduction with just natural turnover, but in one of the biggest teams we didn't have much turnover and we had to go through a redundancy process.

The Centre for Trials Research was created by the merger of three entities and that was in 2015, so 11 years. We were doing it in the centre that I ran before that, but then we expanded it to everyone when we created that centre. So probably more like 14 or 15 years. It is quite different to the way of managing in other places. We work in partnership with other academic teams and we do sometimes have people say 'you run everything like a business'.

And I guess that's somewhat true. That doesn't mean they're not academics. I think they are, and they would think they are, and they're doing great research. But it does mean that probably everyone is a bit more aware of what needs to be done where. You know, I'm doing one day a week on that trial and three days a week on that study, and that is where going to be where my balance of effort is.

We have people at relatively senior grades who have come all the way through. We have a reputation in terms of retention of talent, knowledge, skills and expertise. People want to come and work with us because of that level of expertise. Only a few years ago

a lot of us were lobbying for allowance for promotion on the R-only pathway. Now you can be promoted on the R pathway.

There are still some issues. We've now got people at reader or principal research fellow level who still are on external funding. At what point is the university going to say 'you don't have to do this anymore'?

Although I'm talking about researchers, we actually applied this to all staff, so administrators, programmers, everybody. We don't have a distinction in the method of employment between researchers and research-enabling staff.

“... a lot of us were lobbying for allowance for promotion on the R-only pathway. Now you can be promoted on the R pathway. “

Navigating challenges: Contractual issues facing researchers and technicians

Based on your experience, what are the key challenges in current contracts for researchers and technicians? What impact do these challenges have on individuals and on research more broadly?

I think the big challenge is the fact that **we have so fewer tenured University funded posts now.**

There are people who've brought in prestigious fellowships covering 7, 10 years of their time who face having no job afterwards. That does not feel right. Don't get me wrong, I know that things are difficult, so it's not that we can give everyone jobs. But I also don't think we have a clear approach to guarantee that where we do give jobs, it's done fairly rather than because someone has managed to lobby or negotiate. I suppose that's the bit that is in my sights at the moment. We do need to keep some of these people.

So, how do we make sure that there is a pathway for people who are becoming more senior but are externally funded? We almost lose them because it seems cheaper to get in a new lecturer who doesn't have their experience and knowledge.

As Russell Group university, you want to make sure that your teaching and research are connected. But do we need to assume that everyone who's good at research is good at teaching? If the researchers are really niche in areas where we don't have high volume of work going on, to continually just churn them just seems so wasteful of knowledge and expertise.

I'm a also big fan of prospective planning for people rather than saying, 'oh, you can go on redeployment'.

Do you think current contracts for researchers and academics contribute to precarity? If so, in what ways?

I think there's a bit of us being fixed in our ways. It's easy to point fingers at HR, but they do what other people tell them to. There are so many interconnected bits to changing how we do it.

How you manage finance, how you manage allocations, all of those can be quite scary to think about changing. I've had a few other departments come and talk to me about my model because they like it and then they realise that everyone would all be in a pool and you might not get the person you want out of the pool. You get the person who's allocated to you. They'll have the right skills, but they might not have been your first choice. So sometimes people feel 'I prefer to just employ my own person.'

That can be challenging for the individuals themselves. You might turn around to them and go, 'well, I know you're really, really interested in women's health, but all we've got right now is a cardiovascular study. So, if you want to pay your mortgage, you've got to go work on the cardiovascular study. But we'll try and find something that's more in women's health next time.' There is that compromise on both sides that's required.

I do wonder whether part of our challenge is that we all see ourselves as independent researchers with our own research teams that only do what we want. But what we're talking about is working in an environment where we're all teams-based where we're all having to collectively agree how we look after a community of individuals. For all it might seem that processes are the problem, there is also a cultural shift.

You can probably tell I've spent a lot of time thinking about infrastructure and the way in which we do research, not just the research itself. What that actually means is that I don't have many first-author papers. I'm in a discipline where first and last authorship matters so much. The assumption is that you're a bit part player if you are in the middle of an authorship order.

That was definitely a challenge earlier on. The more we do this group working, that happens more as well. I think people look at what gets rewarded and will think maybe that's not the way to get the rewards and the promotions.

I think there should be recognition that people who aren't necessarily going to be lead investigators are independent in their own right because, for example, they led a methodology. They might exhibit independence slightly differently. In the early days of the trials unit, I had a head of school who believed that

statisticians were technicians, that they should be PS staff, and shouldn't be considered academics. That disappeared once everyone understood that if you haven't got a statistician on your paper, then you're not going to be credible. We've seen a similar trajectory for our trial management staff.

It's also sometimes about how people perceive themselves. If you've taken a scientific idea written in a grant application and managed to turn it into something that is a trial that can be run in practise on the ground. You've written a protocol, you've done all of this. Why is that not academic? That is using methods, knowledge, skills, expertise, knowledge of the literature, knowledge of practice, you know, it is all academic.

That's one of the things I've worked quite hard on in Cardiff. There is that thing about how people introduce themselves. And a classic in schools of medicine is you might also have people who say, 'I'm a qualitative researcher'. And I say, 'yes, But what are you?' It tells me your methodological expertise, but what are you?' There's someone I mentor who sat there one day and said, 'I think I'm a primary care sociologist'. And I said, 'So introduce yourself as that'. It makes such a difference if you walk into a room and say, 'I'm a primary care sociologist'.

Enhancing support and structure: A collaborative approach to improvement

What improvements do you think would be really helpful at this time? Could this model be applied university-wide? What would be the next step towards improving things?

I can't quite get my head round whether you could do it substantially at a university level and manage it as a university because I think you need some lower-level cognate grouping at which to manage staff. That doesn't mean there are no lessons for the whole university.

I suppose the other thing is having a clearer process by which people transition from being externally funded to... well, I was going to say internally funded, but actually they're still bringing in major amounts of money. It's just that they're internally underwritten, if you like. I think getting that process right might also help individual researchers in places move away from precarity.

I don't think with the current state of the sector, we're in a position where we're going to be able to just get rid of the use of fixed-term contracts, much as I would like us to.

Do you think that funders should also be involved in that conversation, so their requirements maybe start matching those new structures?

Well, we can certainly see this with schemes like the UKRI's FLFs. They're demanding permanence at the end of funding. I suspect we're going to see more and more of that in relation to the higher-level fellowships.

I was interviewed by Vitae on behalf of Wellcome for a report on how we use contracts in Cardiff University, because they were quite interested in the way in which their funding requirements about when you can and can't ask for salary related to this. **I think how funders write their terms and policies might drive university employment practices because they can or can't ask for their costs. So they're also part of the solution.**

What support can we offer to support people on who are now in precarious working conditions?

What can universities do at this point? Well, I think we could do with a better way of assessing risk. So, for example, someone's had a grant, and they're getting a follow-on grant, but the contract's not quite there, and they're coming to the end of their contract. We know it's coming. We know they can deliver on a grant. Why are we not just extending the staff's contracts?

Why don't we give heads of school a bit more flexibility to say this is really low risk? It doesn't remove precarity, but it stops us taking people to quite so close to the end. You know, that kind of awareness and willingness to take a little bit of risk to move people over. The other thing I think we could do is we could **we could ring fence a small amount of money for bridging, if you think about how much it costs us to undertake a recruitment process.**

You know, there's plenty of work to do in the university. We wouldn't be paying them to do nothing. They could do some research culture development or could contribute to things that would be for the betterment of the university.

It can also give people some leeway as well to maybe apply for other things in that time, if you know things don't work out.

Any final reflections, thoughts about the future, or words of encouragement?

There's always hope. You know, we can take steps without seeing the full picture. I've never been able to see the full picture. You know, now I can look back and see, 'oh, I've taken all these steps, and I've managed to achieve this.' I could never see all of that.

It was luck, it was serendipity, it was pushing at the right door at the right time. But sometimes I'd had those ideas for a while, it's just that suddenly they become topical and you can get a change made. That would be my key one: Even if the only thing you can change is for the people immediately around you, you create the example that then could be the pilot for others to think about things.

I had the privilege facilitating an online webinar for International Women's Day this year between two women who've been leaders in the clinical trials field. One had just retired and one was about to retire, so the webinar was about their reflections. And right at the end, one of them made a comment that in her experience, if you got things right for the person in front of you, it was always right for the business. It was never people versus business. And I thought 'yeah, actually, you're right'.



**“Even if the only thing you can
change is for the people
immediately around you, you create
the example that then could be the
pilot for others to think about
things.”**



Explaining the importance of addressing bullying at work, using simple Maths 😊

Legend

Subtraction sign (-) = does not address bullying behaviour

Addition sign (+) = addresses bullying behaviour

Staff engaging in bullying behaviour: -1

Responsible staff e.g. manager: +1

When **responsible staff** does not address bullying behaviour in the workplace, it becomes worse

$$(+1) - (-1) = 1 + 1 = 2$$

When **responsible staff** addresses bullying in the workplace, bullying is reduced

$$(+1) + (-1) = 1 - 1 = 0$$

Hence, imagine when a **Team of responsible staff** addresses bullying in the workplace, bullying is not only reduced but the whole environment improves for everyone in the long run (including for the person who engaged in bullying behaviour) 😊

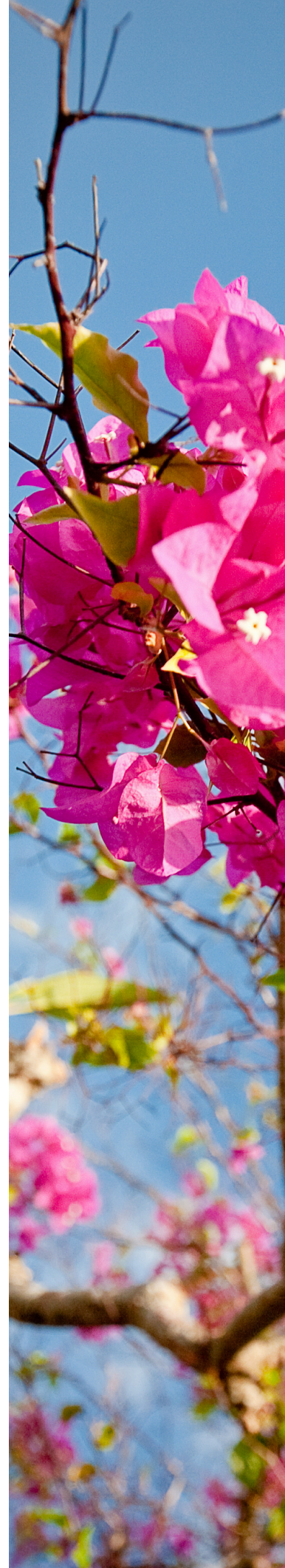
Address bullying. Do not neglect it, for the good of everyone



Bio:

Dr Daniela Duc is a Lecturer in Pharmaceutical and Health Technologies at Cardiff University whose research combines biomaterials science, neurotechnology, and health equity. She develops sustainable, responsive biomaterials for brain and nerve tissue engineering, creating new approaches for neural tissue models, regenerative therapies, drug delivery, and biodevice development to tackle neurological disorders. Through this work, she seeks to address the growing global burden of neurological disorders while advancing more equitable access to innovative healthcare technologies.

Alongside her scientific research, Daniela is committed about fostering inclusive, equitable, and supportive research culture. She is the founder and editor of *Unblock Magazine*, a community-driven publication that aims to be an open door for kind yet candid discussions about tangible challenges in research, research culture, and academia. *Unblock* seeks to amplify diverse voices, foster meaningful dialogue, and showcase practical solutions that can be implemented collectively to regenerate and strengthen our research community.





RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

This selective and curated list of films, scholarly works, and creative texts accompanies the second edition of *Unblock Magazine*, developed as part of the Cardiff University / Wellcome Trust-funded Cynnu/Ignite Research Leadership Development Programme.

While necessarily limited, these resources invite readers to engage critically with questions of precarity and mental health in academia.

MEMOIRS AND TESTIMONIOS

Bringing together collective feminist testimony, this work highlights how personal narrative can function as critical knowledge, making visible the structural conditions that shape inequality and precarity.

Latina Feminist Group (2001) *Telling to Live: Latina Feminist Testimonios*. Edited by L. del Alba Acevedo, N. Alarcón, C. Alvarez, R. Behar, R. Benmayor, N.E. Cantú, D. Cocco De Filippis, G. Holguín Cuádriz, L. Fiol-Matta, Y. Flores-Ortiz, I. Hernández-Ávila, A. Levins Morales, C. Lomas, I.O. López, M.N. Quintanales, E. Rivero, C. Souza and P. Zavela. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.



SCHOLARLY AND CRITICAL WORKS

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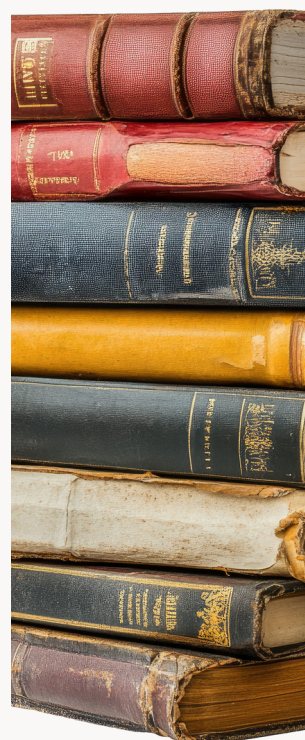
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