

A precarious presence

Some realities and challenges of academic casualisation in Australian universities

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Drawing on various secondary sources and direct encounters with casual academic staff, this article examines the emergent context and lived experiences of casualisation in Australian universities, with specific reference to on-going developments in teaching arrangements across the sector. Particular attention is paid to the challenges associated with the 'precarious' nature of casual employment and what this means in terms of engagement with academics in more secure forms of employment and their respective institutions more generally. The article concludes by inviting continuing academics to reconsider both how they think about and engage with large scale casualisation in their midst, and what this might mean from an activist standpoint that views such employment arrangements as disempowering and iniquitous.

Introduction

Over recent years, casual academic employees have been disparagingly referred to as domestic servants, indentured labourers, army reserves, workhorses and even slaves (see Matchett, 2008). Many senior university academics and administrators, on the other hand, like to consider casuals (publicly, at least) as a new post-industrial breed of flexible, choice-rich, adaptable personnel, capable of multi-tasking and happy to remain in the margins of university life. Within the sector itself, casualisation is considered as something of a 'dirty secret' whereby – as one of our colleagues put it: 'everyone knows it's going on, but we really don't like to talk about it.'

Casuals, of course, see themselves and the world of work in a little different light. Numerous surveys indicate that casual academic staff would like to be more integrally involved in university affairs; generally prefer secure employment; and would appreciate the opportunity of embarking on a genuine academic career path.

Most casuals want more secure and less precarious jobs, either as permanent or part-time members of staff. They do not want to feel, as many do, like expendable flotsam on turbulent institutional waters dictated by the vagaries of supply and demand and cost-cutting practices (Coates, Dobson, Edwards, Friedman, Goedegebuure & Meek, 2009; Junor, 2004).

The National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU, 2012) recently estimated, on the basis of a simple head count, the aggregate number of casual academic employees in Australian universities at around 67,000; or 9,265 'units' when calculated in terms of full-time equivalent (FTE) positions. Of this population, 57 per cent are women, most of whom struggle to balance various domestic and professional demands on their time. Additionally, casuals undertake most of the more demanding areas of teaching with more than 50 per cent of all undergraduate teaching performed by casual staff (May, Strachan, Broadbent & Peetz, 2011).

Such statistics are, however, only crude indicators of the casual academic workforce. There are two significant

problems with obtaining accurate data in respect of this particular group of university employees. The first concerns the ways in which Australia's universities record and report numbers of casual staff. Invariably, such tallies derive from FTE calculations that are sent annually to the university statistics section of the designated Commonwealth Government department (Bexley, James & Arkoudis, 2011; *cf.* Coates & Goedegebuure, 2010). Although the eventual findings convey general data, they do not allow for a clear picture in relation to how many casual staff actually work in universities at any given time and, set against the turnover of casuals and employees on fixed-term teaching contracts – which, anecdotally at least, can be significant – the overall picture gets murkier.

The second related problem in calculating casual academic numbers is that many universities are remiss in keeping accurate records of how many such employees they may have on their books. This may seem extraordinary in a system so pre-occupied with measurement, but the presence of what one university administrator privately referred to as 'ghosts in the machine', was confirmed by a leading higher education researcher from the University of Melbourne, who stated ('off the record') that many universities have extremely shoddy and incomplete methods of data collection when it comes to casuals. For example, casuals who no longer work for a university often remain on the books. At other times, they may be given contracts long after being 'employed', or they have simply 'disappeared' (that is, been summarily dismissed) and their records duly discarded. Given the precarious nature of casual employment, 'disappearances' of casual academic staff are not uncommon in the sector, since casuals can rapidly, and often without explanation, be granted no further contracts and, therefore, are dispatched from the workplace, never to be seen again.

In short, given the high turnover of casual academic staff and the absence of complete records, we may never know the precise number – FTE or otherwise – of those who pass through the university system. Therefore, based on what, in effect, amounts to a guesstimate from the Centre for the Study of Higher Education at the University of Melbourne, casual academic staff constitute the majority of academic staff, with the actual proportions varying according to each institution, but most apparent in regional universities. As such, the role of casual academic staff in universities is pivotal, especially when it comes to teaching. In some cases, casual staff undertake up to 80 per cent of first year teaching and more than 50 per cent of all university teaching, which is euphemised as 'sessional' labour. Additionally, casual staff members often

coordinate large core units (without proper remuneration); mark excessive numbers of assignments; and undertake administrative duties for which, again, they are not adequately remunerated (Connell, 2012, p. 13).

The growth of the number of casuals over the years has also become a major focus of the sector quality regulator—the Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA)—highlighting the relatively poor reputation that Australian higher education institutions have on an international level, partly because of their general failure to offer secure employment to the ranks of casual academic staff and, importantly, because of the perceived poor standard teaching resulting from the sector's over-reliance on casual staff who often have only a passing knowledge of their allocated teaching areas (Probert, 2013).

Such perceptions are the result of systemic rather than individual failings. For instance, it is widely recognised that sessional staff often receive little induction or professional development in respect of teaching, are generally less available to students (because of limited time allocation), and are generally marginalised within their schools and departments because of the fragmented and discontinuous nature of their employment and because of organisational cultures that are less than inclusive (Probert, 2013, p. 35). Significantly, the casuals' plight appears to receive little support from their non-casual colleagues, with whom they often have a one-sided 'arrangement of convenience' that liberates non-casual staff from heavy teaching and marking loads.

Even though the NTEU has placed its support behind the creation of 2,000 entry-level Scholarly Teaching Fellow positions in order to reduce the unsustainable levels of exploitation among casual teaching staff (Rea, 2012), sector managers are likely to sanction this new category of workers by offering conversion into 'teaching-only' or 'teaching-focused' positions of eligible casuals. It remains to be seen to what extent this newly created category of 'university teachers' will be able to escape exploitative terms and conditions, as well as the further casualisation and marginalisation among Australia's academic workforce (Probert, 2013).

Probert's (2013) discussion paper draws attention to current developments that will have significant effects on the future of Australia's academic workforce, as well as the role of teaching at Australian universities itself, which hitherto has been characterised by a widespread cultural acceptance of the nexus between teaching and research. Further institutional ramifications are likely to unfold in the wake of heated industrial debates that appear to dominate current national enterprise bargaining negotiations

relating to proposed reductions to the number of casuals at all universities. Such measures, if accepted, will further alter the position of casuals in the context of the academic workforce. For non-casual employees, the consequences of these reforms are far-reaching particularly when it comes to the common managerial attempt to assert the nexus of teaching and research activities. Indeed, as Probert (2013, p. 38) suggests, the inherent risks involved in 'unbundling' the traditional role of academics, may lead to a situation that encourages 'the stratification rather than differentiation of roles'. This may, in turn, create yet another perceived 'inferior' echelon of workers required to generate sound financial returns in a globally competitive environment.

Explaining mass casualisation

Various explanations have been offered to account for the disproportionately high numbers of casual academic staff in Australian universities. The Commonwealth Government has attributed the rise, in part, to: various cost-cutting measures; the drift of full-time academics away from the workforce because of factors such as ageing, take-up of other professional positions, retrenchments and redundancies; and/or general disillusionment with academic pay and conditions. Often, vacant full-time teaching positions have been filled by casual staff, with up to four casuals taking up the reins of a single continuing position (Bexley, *et al.*, 2011).

In 'Transforming Australia's Higher Education System', DEEWR (2009) noted that the then Australian Labor Party government under Prime Minister Kevin Rudd anticipated that Australian universities would utilise a significant part of additional funding for the purpose of workforce renewal and growth. It was recognised that job insecurity, as experienced by casual academic employees, along with other organisational factors, were significant contributors to a drift away from the profession (DEEWR, 2009, p. 23).

Notwithstanding the deepening crisis over the decline in continuing appointments, it is apparent that rather than creating more permanent positions to counter the increasing number of retirements among baby-boomers, as well as greater student demand, the trend in casualisation remains upwards (Rowbottom, 2010a). Of particular significance is the rapid growth of casuals and fixed-term appointments among 'early career academics' who are forced to join the 'post-doctoral treadmill' (Edwards, Radloff & Coates, 2009), which is characterised by an almost endless series of repeat sessional contracts, without ever leading to a substantive, permanent appointment. Such

employment practices make little sense when put into the context of the anticipated demand for some 40,000 extra staff, by 2030, to cover the growth of the sector and the estimated replacement of some 16,400 staff who will retire over the next few decades (Bexley *et al.*, 2011, pp. 2-3). Hugo predicted, in 2005, that approximately 50 per cent of Australia's on-going academics would retire between then and 2015 (see May *et al.*, 2011, p. 2).

Australia's casual academic employees are part of a much larger population of over two million Australians who experience varying degrees of precarious employment. Integral to the employment practices of the neo-liberal economy, academic casuals represent the changing face of industrial relations whereby occupational mobility, choice and flexibility over-ride job security and longevity (Travers, 2011; Bexley *et al.*, 2011).

The report of the Independent Inquiry into Insecure Work in Australia (Howe, Biddington, Munro & Charlesworth, 2012, p. 14), defines insecure work:

... as poor quality work that provides workers with little economic security and little control over their working lives. The characteristics of these jobs can include unpredictable and fluctuating pay; inferior rights and entitlements; limited or no access to paid leave; irregular and unpredictable working hours; a lack of security and/or other uncertainty over the length of the job; and a lack of any say at work over wages, conditions and work-organisation... [and] challenges... most often associated with non-permanent forms of employment like casual work, fixed-term contracts, independent contracting and labour hire—all of which are growing.

Generally, 30 per cent of all academic casuals have been in casual jobs for more than 3 years; 20 per cent for more than 5 years; and 10 per cent for more than 10 years. This means that 60 per cent of all casuals have been in a position of insecure employment for 3 years or more (Rea, 2012a, pp. 19-20).

Additionally, all academic casuals are subject to the idiosyncrasies of academic supervisors, deans and heads of school. By virtue of their employment status, the vast majority of casuals have no entitlement to sick leave, holiday pay, or long service leave, and can be fired 'at will', without any right of appeal. Furthermore, casuals do not generally receive support to progress their research skills and publications output, and are rarely—if ever—involved in curriculum development, all of which are commonly considered core activities of an academic. Ultimately, the result of such precarious arrangements is a workforce that exhibits distinct signs of stress and insecurity, made worse by the perceived necessity of adhering to the expectations of their supervisors in an institutional

context that is increasingly characterised by competitiveness, diminished collegiality and excessive workloads (see Gottschalk, 2007; McInnis & Anderson, 2005).

Casualisation and the market

Universities operate in a ruthlessly competitive global environment in which everything possible is done to lessen 'costs', including employment costs. Typically, these are reduced through a variety of institutional means including the employment of a relatively cheaper casual academic workforce which is required to deliver course materials on a 'session-by-session' basis. However, the employment of casual academic staff impacts negatively on the quality of teaching in higher education by what amounts to the *ad hoc* allocation of specialist teaching areas and the erosion of continuity resulting in the diminution of intellectual capital. Casualisation also limits sustained, independent inquiry and the involvement of casuals in community affairs, as well as opportunities for public intellectualism – a problem besetting most Western universities (Ferudi, 2012). Arguably, universities as largely publicly funded institutions are doing a disservice to the public interest, by deliberately undermining a long-fought battle for academic job security and, by implication, academic freedom. As Robinson (2012, p. 21) observes:

[W]ithout security of employment, moreover, they [casual academics] cannot effectively exercise their academic freedom. Institutional censorship need not be the blunt and visible instrument of dismissal, but rather simply a quiet contract for non-renewal.

Equally, the 'quiet contract' may enforce a culture of institutional compliance and acquiescence, since casuals, who are often desperate for continuing employment, seek to avoid conflict by adhering tacitly to the expectations of their immediate supervisors and colleagues. The precarious nature of casual employment, in effect, means that compliance is achieved through the application of iniquitous employment arrangements that privilege powerful institutional agents, thereby rendering casual academic employees vulnerable to the vagaries of those in more secure forms of work (Brown, Goodman, & Keiko, 2010).

As noted above, there is also a gender dimension to precarious employment. Many female academic casuals (who make up the bulk of casual academic employees) seek to balance home and work in often highly stressful circumstances (May *et al.*, 2011). As noted, casuals tend to hold multiple positions at several different universities, suggesting that they struggle to achieve acceptable levels of income or the conditions associated with continuing

employment. For women in diverse household arrangements, the insecure nature of casual employment can mean material hardship, lack of job security, and diminished prospects of career advancement (see Hosking & Western, 2008; Wright, Williamson, Schaubert & Stockfeld, 2003; Strachan, Troup, Pectz, Whitehouse, Broadbent & Bailey, 2012).

Any lingering doubts about the challenges facing casual academic employees are surely dispelled by the latest survey of casual employees conducted by the NTEU's (2012) Casual Teaching and Research Staff Survey 2012. Based on interviews conducted with 1,243 employees across a range of Australian regional and metropolitan institutions and disciplines, the study makes for salutary reading. Here are some of the salient findings, which confirm some well-established trends:

- Most casuals worked far more than the hours for which they were paid.
- Sixty per cent did not attend staff and other faculty meetings.
- Most casuals presided over tutorials of 20 or more students, although many taught much larger groups.
- Nearly half had no rooms to meet or consult with their students.
- Many received little or no induction or staff development training.
- Most did not have access to the resources required to do their work (in some cases including adequate rooms, phones, or access to a computer).

Beyond such worrying conclusions, we still know relatively little of the lived realities of casual employment in today's university system. While there are data alluding to disempowering employment and work practices—like late contracts, lack of induction, training and development, poor resources and support, as well as the teaching of unfamiliar units, and so forth—few studies make plain the routine personal and professional challenges faced by casual academic staff (Brown, Goodman & Yasukawa, 2006). The following narrative extracts, collected over a period of some two years from conversations with other researchers and colleagues who were all employed as casuals, or on fixed-term teaching contracts, tell us a good deal about the lived-experiences of people who aspired to become non-casual academics.

Stories from the frontline

As noted, the Centre for the Study of Higher Education, the NTEU and the LH Martin Institute have pointed to challenges facing casual academic employees, and there is

even a website that enables casuals to record their experiences of precarious employment in the sector (Bexley *et al.*, 2011; Coates & Goedegebuure, 2010). Not surprisingly, the site includes a litany of familiar complaints of the sort identified above. Below are some additional accounts that could well be included on the site. A particular theme highlighted here relates to the relationship of casual academics to their full-time colleagues, and the actions—or lack thereof—taken by those in more secure employment in respect of those who are in precarious positions (particularly when it came to advancing the employment prospects of casual employees). This has become a recurrent theme not only in our own encounters, but throughout the relevant literature (Bryson, 2004; Gottschalk & McEachern, 2010; Kimber, 2003).

'Jim' is a highly intelligent casual employee in his mid-forties who, during protracted periods of casual employment at a regional university, obtained a PhD. He was employed by the university for over two years, during which time he experienced a range of difficult challenges, not only in terms of keeping on top of his workload (which included duties commonly carried out by 'Level B' employees, such as unit coordination), but also in negotiating the challenging conditions present in his school's organisational culture. He claimed to have witnessed arbitrary decision-making in respect of his casual colleagues (for instance, as to which subjects they would teach and what exactly they would be paid for), patronage (decisions based on favouritism) and outright intimidation and bullying by both other academics and the school head (for a general discussion on patronage, see Martin, 2009).

Shocked and distressed by what he saw as the exploitation and powerlessness experienced by casual academics, 'Jim' decided, as the advocate of the school's casuals, to undertake a survey of what they were experiencing, the results of which were eventually communicated at a tense and sombre staff meeting. The full-time academic staff had known for some time about the inequities experienced by their casual colleagues, but had either remained silent, or mouthed their objections only in private.

But 'Jim' was a person of conviction and determination, and so presented to the meeting his data on the school's governance. Among the conclusions was that casuals were routinely left out of the decision-making processes; held

little sway over course content; and felt generally marginalised and estranged from the institution in which they worked. They also complained about many of the things identified in the aforementioned NTEU survey. One of us was at the meeting, and also remained silent, other than to mouth support into the ear of one of the colleagues who leaned over and (presciently, as it turned out) whispered: 'that's the end of his career, here'. And so it proved. The casual academic advocate was almost immediately cold-shouldered by his unit supervisor and the head of school. He was never reappointed and nothing was heard from him again. No-one mentioned what happened to him and, instead, the hegemonic order was preserved. (The said person did, however, go on to a successful academic career in a major metropolitan university and is now a leading international expert on environmental govern-

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ance). In reflecting on his experience as a casual, 'Jim' reserved most opprobrium for his former full-time colleagues, who he considered as less than forthcoming or supportive when it came to the iniquitous treatment of himself and his casual colleagues; 'I suppose that was my biggest disappointment',

he later remarked.

Another academic casual, this time in a metropolitan university, was a keen aspirant to the scholarly life. In the midst of research for his PhD and balancing several jobs just to get by, 'Rod' was subjected to all the disempowering and humiliating practices associated with patronage, being referred to, at one stage, by the head of school as a 'good lad' and having to comply with decisions he thought objectionable, such as teaching units of which he had no knowledge. He was also compelled, as he saw it, to undertake work for which he was not adequately paid; and having his views on unit material routinely dismissed. Additionally, he was never consulted in relation to key issues about course-coordination, nor was he invited to offer ideas as to how units could be improved in terms of content or delivery. At other times, he was chastised publicly by an administrator for imagined misdemeanours to which he hesitated to respond for fear of retribution from those upon whom his employment depended. Invariably, his contracts were processed long after he had started teaching, and there was no promise of renewal, let alone a career path toward full-time employment. Rarely did he spend meaningful time with other academics and

only spoke with students during allocated consultation times. There was precious little sense of an academic 'community' or the abiding collegiality that should make university a congenial place in which to work. But again, his most heartfelt response to such circumstances was in relation to his permanent colleagues:

[A]s some staff unconsciously sometimes said, casuals were not considered 'real staff'. And they ranked well below tenured admin-staff in power dynamics. Effectively, casual teaching staff constituted a pool of disempowered labour outside the university as an organisation. The fact that some of them had offices inside the physical campus did not alter this. Casual staff were exploited, bullied, manipulated and disrespected in ways that the general public would never believe. In the historic past, this may have been a form semi-brutal initiation into academia – now it's just how it is...

After three years of loyal service in difficult circumstances, and constantly seeking to do 'the right thing', 'Rod' received no further employment or adequate explanation as to why this should be the case. Suffice to say, any mention of the school in which he once worked is greeted with seething dismissals of its claims to ethical or contractual propriety.

For those casual academics, seeking conversion to permanent employment, often after years of repeat contracts, the response of universities can be less than supportive. Some senior academic managers, in conjunction with human resources personnel, adopt various 'blocking' tactics that include endless excuses to justify the lengthy delays in decision-making process among the hierarchical chains of command, thus resulting in further demoralisation of those employees who are 'promised' some form of permanency when hesitantly accepting excessive workloads during 'summer schools'.

According to many of our former casual colleagues, common excuses for such practices would be: 'wait and see how next year's enrolments in the new course evolve'; 'let's see what next year's budget looks like'; 'as acting head of school only, I am not in a position to make any long-term commitments pertaining to the school's future staffing profile'; 'let's wait until the new enterprise agreement is ratified'; or, 'we will look after you, once your PhD has been conferred'. Other tactics might include constant changing of the criteria applying to the requisites that may determine conversion from fixed-term contracts into a permanent appointment.

Take the case of 'Julia' who, after over eleven years of successive fixed-term contracts and a series of satisfactory Performance Management and Development Reviews

(PMDRs), as well as receiving official awards for teaching excellence, was initially unsuccessful in her bid for conversion to a permanent position. Worse still, the school in which she was employed, began advertising for permanent teaching-focused positions during the same time when she had lodged her application for conversion. The advertised position sought almost identical duties to which 'Julia' had attended over the last six years, during which time she had taken no breaks over six successive trimesters. Despite her 'ticking all the boxes' with regard to required qualifications, relevant experience, and the official recognition of her excellent employment record, she was rejected in her bid for permanent employment on the grounds of a perceived lack of research outputs. What eventually secured permanent employment for 'Julia' was the unrelenting efforts of an NTEU industrial officer who, following rejection after rejection, was successfully able to present her case as coterminous with each and every condition stipulated under the university's enterprise agreement. In addition, the industrial officer was able to highlight the many contradictions in the university's interpretation of the requisite conditions among the different layers of administration and senior officials. Her conversion to permanency was agreed to at the level at which she had been working for the last five years, although she was again placed on probation for a new term of three years.

Compulsory self-reflection?

Such accounts can be multiplied by the hundreds, perhaps thousands, and have swirled around the higher education sector for a decade or more. The less precariously employed—continuing academics—have occasionally commented within and beyond their institutions about the exploitation of casuals, but generally have watched this situation endure under their collective watch. To be sure, industrial action in a small number of universities has been directed specifically at growing casualisation, but these actions have been sporadic and uncoordinated within the sector.

Why is this case? How can such widespread inequities occur in institutional places – in the above cases, schools of arts, social sciences and humanities – where social justice and human rights are espoused as a matter of course in teaching, research and publications? The explanation is of course rather complex but, in part, is attributable to the administrative intricacies and power relations of the neo-liberal, corporate-managerialist university (Connell, 2012). Altered systems of employee regulation, exponential

increases in workloads, and a stifling culture of 'busyness', have rendered the academic workplace unrecognisable when compared to even a few years ago (NTEU, 2009; see also essays in Molesworth, Scullipon & Nixon, 2010). The urgency of responding to the demands of a 'massified' global student market, new forms of cyber technology and the rigours of quality assurance, have each added to the burdens of today's academics (Hil, 2012). Consequently, there is often precious little time to deepen collegial relationships, or to address many of the challenges and inequities that arise in the workplace.

Often, the supervision of casual academic employees can feel more like a burden than collegial endeavour, with contracts requiring completion, administrative demands, and regular supervision being the order of the day (Rowbottom, 2010b). New casuals need to be formally interviewed and inducted into the often bewildering world of university administration, though more experienced casuals invariably find their own way through the bureaucratic thicket. Busyness contributes to an organisational culture in which academics find themselves increasingly secreted away in highly self-contained and individualised work places that afford little space or time for collegial engagement, other than in infrequent staff and other meetings (which in any event, can be highly disempowering forums committed to financial and administrative affairs, rather than ethical or political questions).

To question institutional arrangements or employment orthodoxies in the context of a corporate culture, is to risk being viewed as a 'trouble maker', or as someone not quite in keeping with the main imperatives (or 'strategic' goals/directions) of one's university and, therefore, school governance. Employee compliance, brand allegiance and an institutional commitment to income generation and long-term profitability are all the contextual constraints under which academics now operate. Invariably, therefore, school cultures tend – despite their best intentions – to position casuals as marginal to routine corporate challenges and, although non-casual academics may at times voice their disapproval of never-ending casualisation and the shoddy treatment of their casual academic colleagues, the tenor of political opposition rarely rises above the corridor whisper.

Concerted collective action in relation to casualisation is rarer still, although over the years the academic union, the NTEU, has undertaken surveys, created a website for casuals to express their views, and has fought on behalf of casuals through enterprise bargaining processes. To be sure, this has produced some significant improvements to the situation of some casuals in some universi-

ties, although there is no national strategy to deal with the challenges facing casual academics in the university system. Notwithstanding this perceived lack of active opposition, the 2013 round of (collective) enterprise bargaining will, as indicated before, include policies aimed directly at creating new jobs and replacing a minimum of 20 per cent of a university's casual academic teaching staff with permanent positions (Rea, 2012a, p. 20). Regardless of such developments, the response of continuing academics to the inequities experienced by casual academics has over the years been the growing acquiescence to and normalisation of such practices – so that they become an embodied but 'regrettable' aspect of university governance – occasioning, in its wake, a general inertia brought about by compliance regimes designed to reduce costs, protect the brand, and therefore, to ensure market share.

Arguably, and in effect, by feeling unable or unwilling to speak out, 'turning-a-blind-eye' to patronage and bullying, and by ignoring the often comparable pay and conditions linked to casual work, those in secure, non-casual employment who have remained silent, carry some responsibility for what is a significant and long-enduring injustice. As noted, some academics will speak out about such injustices through their union (although only about 25 per cent belong to the national union), and others have made representations at staff and other institutional meetings, or argued their case in print (Cowley, 2010), only for such arguments to be brushed aside or be consigned to ongoing review, thereby ensuring that the current situation prevails. Yet others have sought to protect the interests of casuals and to treat them with dignity and respect. On other occasions, however, as noted by a number of our own casual colleagues, some academics have treated casuals with disregard bordering on disdain and often appear oblivious to the negative consequences of precarious employment.

For those academics and union representatives with a strong sense of social justice, another survey (or a round of ritualised complaints) may be less important than a commitment by those in secure, non-casual employment to make clear what they consider acceptable or not in terms of pay, conditions and career pathways for their less than fortunate colleagues. More specifically, they might argue against further casualisation in various fora, appoint advocates, call for more equitable governance arrangements, and seek to open up career paths for those who have received recurrent contracts. They might also build close campaign alliances through the tertiary education sector union and state what they

intend to do if significant improvements are not forthcoming. At the very least, the precarious circumstances facing casual academic staff should never be left off school or university-wide agendas.

The NTEU is about to undertake yet another round of negotiations relating to casualisation and, as noted above, some universities have already made headway in this regard. But without explicit sector-wide public commitment and collective action on the part of continuing academics to no longer tolerate blatant exploitation in their midst, there is every likelihood that the many problems associated with mass-casualisation will endure. As part of the struggle against institutional inequities, it is also important to counter the rationalisations of senior university administrators that casual employment is necessarily about 'market flexibility', 'cost saving' and 'choice'.

More importantly, in view of the NTEU's position with regard to converting a significant proportion of casuals into entry-level scholarly teaching fellow positions across the sector nationally, continuing academics will now also have to become more vigilant about the concerted efforts by university administrators to increase the number of teaching-focused roles among eligible casuals, as well as via conversion of some of their existing 'teaching and research' staff. However, as noted by Probert (2013)

[T]he status of teaching-focused appointments in Australian Universities, and the development of full career paths, are widely seen as dependent on greater agreement about what constitutes excellence in university teaching. There is an acknowledged danger that differentiation will, in fact, mean stratification.... Teaching-focused appointments can raise the status of teaching or continue its marginalisation (p. 3).

Not only are the future career-chances of many casual employees at stake here, but the position of thousands of non-casual academics will rapidly become the main issue in a battle between managerial prerogatives and the protection of a long-established culture of academic roles, public responsibilities, rights and entitlements.

Conclusion

In the current context of corporate managerialism and marketised 'casino capitalism' (Sinn, 2010), the demand for casual academics is set to continue along on its current trajectory. Australia-wide, academics are increasingly pressured to comply with the imperatives of neo-liberal ideology and maintain an educational sector that requires an ever-increasing number of 'flexible' workers. However, as Rea (2012b, p. 2) observes:

[T]he academic job is changing, but we cannot let the tenured teaching and research academic become a rarity replaced by rafts of often highly qualified and skilled, but precariously employed learning and teaching professionals employed casually and on short term contracts. This is not educationally or financially sustainable. Teaching is the core business of universities, not to be reduced to a series of projects because of funding shortfalls and mistaken budget priorities.

Yet, to question institutional orthodoxies in relation to employment practices is, like much else in the university sector, to run the risk of being regarded as opposed to hegemonic corporate governance. School cultures in this climate tend to position casual academic staff as marginal to the main strategic challenges of the day, and although continuing academics may voice their disapproval of the iniquitous treatment of their casual colleagues, active, sustained and targeted opposition is a rarity.

Arguably, in order to address the possibility of changing the precarious situation of casual employees, non-casual academics – under the critical leadership of the institution's professoriate – may need to become more assertive and strategically astute in pursuit of justice, fairness and equity in relation to their casual colleagues who, from a corporate perspective, are positioned as short-term, marginalised and ultimately expendable labour. Academic articles like the current one are one form of academic activism, but critical knowledge of social injustice is only one part of a broader struggle to address the inequities experienced by casual academic staff.

Alternatively, non-casual academics will need to be extremely vigilant about the response of university managers with regard to pressures from both the NTEU and TEQSA, albeit each for different reasons, to reduce the unacceptable high levels of casualisation at Australian universities. The proposed erosion of the traditional academic role in the form of 'unbundling' research and teaching (Probert 2013), is likely to create a new category of 'casualties' and a 'reserve army' of cheap(er) labour that will change the essence of teaching in higher education, as hitherto delivered by Australian universities, forever.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments and valuable suggestions for revising this paper. Special thanks to Robyn May (Griffith University) who in her personal and helpful email correspondence has made available a number of links to research projects in which she is currently involved.

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