

Working at the coal-face: contract staff, academic initiation and the RAE

Introducing the Issues

Ideally, one's initial years in academia should be a period of reflection and growth, stimulated by the exposure to varied and challenging intellectual and professional experiences. For many staff, this initiation is a relatively unproblematic process, but changing structures in the academic labour market increasingly mean that this period becomes either never-ending or so fraught with difficulties that academic careers are undermined or abandoned. Of course, very few teaching or research contracts are necessarily 'destructive', but the increasing proliferation of fixed-term contracts is very real, and so too is the casualisation of academic labour that goes hand in hand with this process. There is a prevailing sense of doing one's time at a dark coal-face before being accepted into the profession. The aim of the Contract Research and Teaching Staff Forum (CRTSF) of the Royal Geographical Society with the Institute of British Geographers (RGS-IBG) is to raise awareness of the implications of fixed-term contracts in Geography and to provide support for those who are engaged on such contracts. In this short paper, we aim to stimulate a debate around contract working with particular reference to the role of the Research Assessment Exercise, (RAE) and to outline some guidelines for best departmental practice.

The use of fixed-term and short-term contracts in higher education has been steadily increasing over the past 20 years. Today, 82 per cent of new academic appointments are made on a fixed-term basis, and 40 per cent of the academic labour force is employed on a fixed term or temporary basis, this figure rising to 52 per cent when hourly-paid staff are included (Bryson, 2000). In contrast, 21 per cent of lecturing and contract research staff were on fixed term contracts in 1980 (although this figure excludes hourly-paid staff as figures are not available) (Bryson, 2000). The upshot of this is an increasingly casualised Higher Education labour force. This growth in casualisation benefits the employer by giving flexibility while offsetting the risks associated with the competitive bidding system of allocating research resources, which is underpinned by the RAE. Since the first RAE, this formula has delivered career mobility and a great number of vacancies. However, in a cruel irony, those

staff filling these vacancies are the least likely to benefit from this supposed market flexibility (see Bryson 2001). According to Demeritt (2000), the market discipline has exposed university research to the terminal short-termism of market calculation, exposing universities to the risks of a market-driven system. One way of coping with this risky system is by allowing workers to take most of the risk. Hence the proliferation of fixed-term one to two year contracts; in fact, it is not uncommon to see frequent advertisements in *The Guardian* and the *Times Higher* for contracts of one or two terms or for nine months or less.

In this paper, we account for the marginalisation of contract workers and then focus upon the current RAE system and its role in this ongoing process of marginalisation. We conclude by proposing some guidelines for good practice in the treatment of contract staff.

Marginalisation of contract staff

By their temporary nature, contract staff are assumed to be both transitory and junior, for example within the RAE submission guidelines (RAE, 1999). Perhaps because of this association – both real or perceived by the individual – contract staff are at risk from being marginalised and having their contribution to departmental life and productivity undervalued. Marginalisation is not just the result of the terms and conditions of employment, but is steeped in institutional and departmental work culture. The result of this contractual and cultural marginalisation is an increasing vulnerability amongst contract staff. We see marginalisation as operating in five different but potentially reinforcing ways:

- Invisibility - As a result of their perceived status in a department, contract workers may feel that they are not noticed (Ní Laoire and Shelton, 2001), which breeds a

sense of being undervalued (Bryson and Barnes, 1997), and this undermines their negotiating position, particularly if they are new to the department.

- Exclusion - Related to this, some contract workers are excluded from key decision-making bodies and committees or lack their own representative group (Ní Laoire and Shelton, 2001). Without recognition through representation, contract workers can be excluded from full participatory membership of the department.
- Isolation - from other contract workers or from other members of staff can be a problem, which can be manifest through a lack of feedback or a poorly developed mentoring system
- Exploitation - Contract workers are often expected to shoulder extra responsibilities for which they receive little or no recognition (Bryson and Tulle-Winton, 1994). The contract worker can make an important contribution to department life if enabled to do so. In fact, many already do through their 'extra-curricular' activities such as participation in field trips, informal postgraduate supervision and general advisory roles in relation to specialised research methods or specialist knowledge. This type of contribution, however, is not always recognised. On the contrary, short-term contracting for some may mean no pay over the summer, little space for individual research or writing, little scope for personal and professional development and finally, for research staff, difficulties regarding authorship of research.
- Powerlessness - There is often no time for research and may be limited scope for career movement. Long-term research planning, large research bids, even collaboration, become extremely difficult simply because people do not know where they will be in a year's time, yet usually only permanent members of staff can take funds with them to a new location, further increasing power disparity between permanent and contract staff. This is especially the case for contract researchers. As Wells (1992) puts it: "In simple terms, the contract research

ladder leads nowhere, because the university system makes no provisions for tenured researchers" (Wells, 1992, p 165). However, Barlow et al. (1993) suggest that there are a variety of career directions becoming available to the contract researcher, although they too stress the insecurity inherent in the current system of project-by-project employment of researchers. All of this means that the marketability of the contract academic can become limited in the context of a labour market that is driven by the Research Assessment Exercise.

All of the above may become a vicious circle for the contract worker, which can weaken their role within the department and/or institution, and also their own personal and professional development. This gestalt process may have hidden effects. Whilst risks such as powerlessness are roughly quantifiable, stress and paranoia are much less so. However through reducing inequity of those causes which are quantifiable, we can address the less visible effects.

Contract staff and the RAE

Academic research in its current form would be impossible without the existence of contract researchers at the coal-face, and contract teachers putting in the pit-props. Despite being at the very centre of academic research however, the status of the contract worker in the RAE itself is at best marginal. The core of any RAE submission is the research output of 'research active' staff. The inclusion of 'research active' contract research staff is open to ambiguity. Some will be included because they can boost the publications profile, others will be excluded (and even 'hidden') because they cannot. Most worryingly, there is even less expectation for the inclusion of contract teachers, and casual or hourly-paid staff are not included at all. These guidelines are further complicated by the distinctions drawn by the RAE between the different 'types' of contract research staff, such as Research Fellows, postdoctoral

Research Assistants, postgraduate Research Assistants, Teaching Assistants and other fixed-term contracted staff.

Generally, the expectation from the guidelines is that contract-research staff, however they are categorised should be excluded from the RAE. The 'exceptional circumstances' for their inclusion are where they are clearly the Principal Investigator (PI) on a significant piece of research, or where they function in this capacity but are not named because of the need for the PI to be a permanent member of staff (RAE, 1999). The perception that the cases of contract staff being PIs (either named or nominally) are exceptional is misguided as ongoing research by Ní Laoire and Shelton (2001) indicates.

At present, the RAE uses a distinction between postgraduate and post-doctoral Research Assistants in determining those who are 'research active'. The RAE recognises post-doctoral as those whose salary is graded 1A and above on the former University Authorities Panel (UAP) pay scales, or graded B and above in the former Polytechnics and Colleges Employers Forum (PCEF) pay scales. Those paid on lower scales are described as postgraduate RAs. Furthermore the RAE guidelines assume that postgraduate research assistants normally do not have a research-based degree and are more junior (RAE, 1999). These statements do not reflect the current labour market in Geography. At the time of writing there were posts advertised in Geography on both the lower 1 (PCEF) and IB (UAP) scales where the departments were seeking to recruit individuals with higher degrees (jobs.ac.uk).

The RAE guidelines also recognise that permanent member of staff may be the named PI solely because most funding bodies will not accept contract workers as PIs (RAE, 1999). Despite this many contract workers will be counted instead within the RAE submission of their PI which could lead to a conflict of interests. It is crucial for

the career development of contract workers that they and their publications are recorded individually. Otherwise a prior record of publications would not be criteria for employment by institutions for contract workers and existing employers might not encourage their contract staff to develop a personal record of publications, which is vital if the contract worker hopes to gain tenure in the future.

As most fixed-term contracts run for less than a single RAE period, there is a high likelihood of the contract worker having to change institutions between RAEs. Currently, the institution that was the previous employer of research-active contract staff can also count their publications, despite no longer offering them employment, whether they are employed elsewhere or not. As a result, the former department now gains at the expense of the contract worker; the employer benefits from the casualisation of the labour force. It is crucial for the career development of contract workers that they are identified as research active, and making them plainly visible to the RAE will also encourage departments to assist their contract staff in developing their own personal research profile. If this happens, it is to be expected that authorship will become an even more highly contested issue than it is at present, especially where contract staff are involved in multiple-authored publications with other (permanent) research active staff.

In order to address some of these concerns, we suggest the following recommendations to ongoing discussions on the future of the RAE:

- The guidelines for the inclusion of contract workers in the RAE should be redesigned with a policy of promoting the contract worker before the department. Academic research is enabled by the existence of a large body of casualised research staff and the RAE must recognise this and give credit where credit is due.

- Credit should be given to those institutions that provide long-term, rolling (or even permanent) research posts, thereby making the activity of research staff central to its research strategy. We echo the recommendation that “there must be some movement away from routinely employing research staff on fixed-term contracts, and a move towards established posts for researchers” (Owen, 2000, p 11).
- The guidelines for distinction between Research Fellows and Research Assistants should be revised. Other funding bodies must be pressed to allow contract workers to be named PIs, following the lead taken by the ESRC. Fixed-term PIs should be allowed to employ their own RAs in the same way as permanent staff.
- Departments should not be able to make contract workers invisible, or mere addenda to other staff’s RAE profiles – we cite the infamous case of Jocelyn Bell. Bell discovered pulsars in 1967; her PI (Tony Hewish) and Bell published in Nature in 1968. Hewish alone was awarded a Nobel prize for the discovery in 1974 (www.nmt.edu/~kweather/bell.html).

Moving Forward

The Contract Research and Teaching Staff Forum seeks to catalogue the extent of contract working conditions in Geography departments and to publicise good practice. It is important to move away from a feeling that contract work is simply a period of doing one’s time. Contract work should be a dynamic period of the professional life of geographers and we are aware of the benefits associated with some fixed-term contracts (such as flexibility, variety and autonomy). However, although recent research indicates that 22% of contract geographers prefer either fixed term or rolling contracts over a situation of permanency, this still leaves 78% who see contracts as a temporary step in their careers (Ní Laoire and Shelton 2001). For this ‘temporary step’ to be worthwhile, it needs to be fulfilling; not just to the benefit of employers or departments, but fulfilling for the contract workers

themselves. There is no shortage of intellectually satisfying and personally fulfilling work out there - the key is in the way that such work is perceived and 'valued' and, ultimately, managed.

This commentary proposes a set of guidelines of good practice for departments employing contract workers. The work of the IBG Equal Opportunities Working Group in the early 1990s suggested that:

"Policies which reduce the differentials in facilities, which exist between contract/part-time staff and their full-time permanent colleagues should be implemented. Equal opportunities for contract and part-time staff means equality of treatment with permanent academic staff and an equal opportunity to develop a long-term career" (Bromley, 1995, p 273).

We wish to resurrect this appeal and we call on learned organisations such as the RGS-IBG to take a lead role in promoting the guidelines below. At this stage, these are merely suggestions for measures that can be adopted by departments and grant-holders, and do not refer to the entire spectrum of policies on fixed-term contracts. They are also provisional and it is hoped that through dialogue over the coming months a more formal and final list can be drafted.

Proposed Guidelines for Departmental Action

- Regular review and career guidance of contract staff
- Conversion of short and fixed term contracts to permanent ones and/or the introduction of a rolling contractual programme towards permanency - These moves also require the construction of clear guidelines for progression onto such a system, in line with current promotion criteria. This would automatically

encourage the retention of contract staff within departments. Senior contract staff should have the option of transfer to permanent contracts to prevent departments employing external over internal candidates to permanent posts (usually lectureships) in a misguided fear that an increased teaching/ administration load might reduce their existing staffs' output.

- A minimum term contract - An understanding that contract staff should have personal development time factored into a contract of employment to enable them to pursue their own research money (thereby securing their own future in the department) or teaching agendas
- Pay - Employers/grant-holders should recognise that many contract researchers and teachers will have accumulated considerable employment experience and therefore are entitled to be appointed on a suitable point on the salary scale, moving beyond a frequent dichotomy of at point 6 or below. Funding bids should also include an allowance for incremental progression.
- Mentoring - Contract staff should have a designated mentor from the permanent staff (such as their appraiser), who ideally is not involved in their day-to-day work, with whom they can discuss career development options and issues within the department. Moreover, in larger departments with large numbers of contract staff, a mentoring co-ordinator is required.
- Departmental membership - Contract staff should be included in staff meetings and other departmental activities. In larger departments with high numbers of staff, there may be a case for establishing a dedicated contract workers committee with representation on major decision-making bodies within the department. Individual RAE submissions should be supported.
- Good line management - Academics managing contract workers and research projects should undergo staff and research project management training. Ability to perform such duties should be factored into their own promotion criteria.

- Authorship -Clear guidelines for authorship of publications should be drawn up, as part of the contract.
- Information on networking and external support - Contract workers should be given adequate information about any labour groups that can provide support.
- The EU Directive - The EU Directive on Fixed-Term Work is due to be introduced in the UK in July 2001. If incorporated fully into UK law, it provides opportunities for the improvement of the rights of the fixed-term worker. We call on UK Universities to embrace fully the sentiments and the policies of this directive.

Conclusions

We have argued here that it is in the best interests of departments to provide a supportive environment in which contract workers can develop, learn and publish and that moreover, contract workers must be seen as an asset. In a period of casualisation, it is no longer appropriate to view contract working only as a stepping stone or testing ground at the start of an academic career.

Whilst there are many contract workers within the UK who are employed under sympathetic and rewarding terms, some are not. We call on Geography departments to reflect on their management practice and to give full consideration to the guidelines suggested above. We hope that these guidelines generate debate within the academy and that other geographers will add their own priorities to this list.

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