

# Results of Survey of Casualised Members: Impact of Financial Restrictions

## Context

In light of the university financial restrictions that came into effect in October 2024, the branch was hearing concerning issues being raised by staff who are on casualised contracts, including but not exclusively: associate lecturers, teaching assistants, demonstrators, PGRs who teach, and those on fixed term contracts or open-ended subject to funding contracts. In light of this the branch has arranged two meetings for casualised members to discuss their concerns, and in addition, we sought to survey our members to give them an opportunity to share the impact that the financial restrictions were having on them.

Jackie Scott was asked as part of the VC's Town Hall meeting on Thursday 17th October how the university intended to support casualised staff who would lose work or be made redundant sooner as a result of the financial restrictions, to which she answered: "I'm not aware of people being quietly made redundant." It is concerning to the UCU branch that these measures have been rolled out without due care or consideration, or an attempt to map or track formally (equalities impact assessment) or informally the impact for colleagues who work for the university in a range of precariously employed yet vital roles.

Between the meetings and the survey approximately 70 members shared their experiences and concerns over the impact of the announced financial restrictions. In communication with the branch, Jackie Scott has asked for evidence or information pertaining to loss of work and the differential impact the financial restrictions are having on members. It is in this context that we provide a snapshot of some of the issues and impacts being faced by our members.

## Impacts

### ***Workplace well-being and stress***

As a union we are concerned by the high levels of emotional anxiety and stress reported by members to us. People reported feeling:

- Stress
- Anxiety
- Depression
- Concern
- Unhappiness
- Anger
- Alienation
- Frustration
- "A terrible mental state to be in"

Additionally, members are concerned that there is a lack of empathy from UEB and those making decisions and a lack of awareness of the turmoil that the financial restrictions and

poor communication of the consequences is creating. Rumours and misinformation being able to proliferate is indicative of a “lack of care” on the part of management.

***Loss of employment (in various forms)***

The immediate loss of work for some staff, particularly those who have fractional, part-time or hourly paid teaching responsibilities is causing huge amounts of “stress”, “anxiety” and “depression”. It was noted that for those also undertaking a PhD that the stress is “affecting my mental health and work progress”.

For those whose semester two teaching allocation is yet to be determined the “considerable anxiety and concern” was directly “due to the lack of information provided”.

***Personal financial uncertainty***

The decisions taken by the university have led to an overall reduction in hourly paid teaching hours, fractional work and has seen a freeze to contract extensions and contract changes. This inevitably leads to loss of work for those who are already precariously employed by the university. Members have told us that it is becoming increasingly “difficult to survive” financially. Some have felt that pressured to take on personal debt in order to ensure they can fund activities necessary to further their career.

Many associate lecturers, TAs, demonstrators and PGRs noted that their income from teaching was essential. Many are facing rent increases and the ongoing impact of the cost of living crisis. Loss of hours, for some a total loss of work, poses a significant threat to their financial stability.

For those who have had some hours in the autumn semester, the looming concern of if or how many hours they might receive in the second semester is causing great distress. Some are having to consider taking on additional paid work outside of the university, leaving the university, or leaving the country and return to their home countries, against their desire to stay and continue their work and/or studies at Newcastle University.

***Negative impacts on current & future research***

Members reported being told that they were no longer able to attend conferences, and similar, due to the freeze of finance. This included funds being removed and travel and accommodation being cancelled for prebooked and planned attendance at prestigious conferences. In addition to the harm this causes the career progression, members are concerned that this could potentially harm relationships established with organisers and academics in other institutions. This could limit the opportunities for future research collaboration or ongoing work.

In the example of NUAcT fellows the promise of research funds and PhD studentship was a draw that led them to feel that these fellowships were prestigious and valued by the university. With a loss of these things they feel this has been devalued, and as a consequence, the value of their work and their career prospects have been devalued as a result of these financial restrictions. For some an increase in teaching workload also meant that their ability to undertake research was being pressurised.

***Concerns about career progression***

Members feel stuck within their pay grades or unable to move contract type in a manner that reflects the value and necessary labour they provide to the university.

Members noted that when considering where to apply for national fellowships, such as Leverhulme, they were now contemplating doing so elsewhere due to the precarious financial state that mismanagement has led the university to be in. A concern that support from the university when making applications could be withdrawn at any moment due to financial restrictions placing pressure on staff, was concerning members and leading them to question if Newcastle University is a safe place to attempt to establish a career.

Given that many casualised staff report feeling undervalued, invisible, exploited or unfairly treated, numerous staff report that their previous loyalty towards the university was now at an end and that they were actively looking for employment elsewhere and outside the sector. The retention of talent is a concern to the union.

### ***Inequalities and exploitation of casualised staff***

There is a concern that the manner that these financial restrictions are being rolled out is not consistent, and therefore not equal in their impact, across staff groups across the institution. For example, NUAcT fellows who were under the impression that as a cohort they had very similar or equal employment agreements and expectations have reported that the financial restrictions are not being equally felt amongst this group.

Members are concerned that there is scant communication or information that is tailored to, or takes account of the impact on, casualised staff. Members are aware that these measures are designed to be temporary, but when casualised or early-career, the restrictions and impact on their future career prospects harms them in a disproportionate way to more secure and established colleagues.

Casualised staff are concerned that there is no clarity or evidence to suggest that those who led us into this financial situation do not appear to be subject to financial restrictions themselves.

Unfortunately our confidential survey uncovered concerning behaviour of senior staff in relation to their precarious colleagues with reports of some being pressurised to “borrow” their external funding to those permanent colleagues without funds.

## Summary

This report does not represent an exhaustive list of the impact and experience of the financial restrictions for our casualised members. However, given the claims made at senior levels of management for this information or not being aware of what is happening, it is clear that there needs to be greater understanding and engagement of what is going on, and the serious impacts this is having on casualised members. We would anticipate that UEB take serious consideration of these issues in order to alleviate the impact and concerns of our members who “feel generally like we are forgotten or simply they [University management] don’t care”.