**The neurotic academic: how anxiety fuels casualised academic work**

It will come as no surprise to staff in the UK’s higher education sector that universities are suffused with anxiety. The recent strikes have highlighted employees’ fears for their futures post-retirement, but these need to be situated within the [wider context](https://medium.com/ussbriefs/the-pensions-dispute-and-the-marketisation-of-higher-education-b6734f175b61) of a public sector undergoing transformation. The influence of “neoliberal” ideas on universities can be seen in the government white paper [*Success as a Knowledge Economy*](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/523396/bis-16-265-success-as-a-knowledge-economy.pdf):

“Competition between providers in any market incentivises them to raise their game, offering consumers a greater choice of more innovative and better quality products and services at lower cost. Higher education is no exception.”

“Raising our game” has so far involved the creeping marketisation of the sector, pressure to recruit students (now “consumers”), increasing managerialism, and the implementation of processes of [audit](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/cag.12261) to evaluate performance – all of which have, arguably, contributed to a progressively anxious working environment.

In 2016/17, [34%](https://www.hesa.ac.uk/news/18-01-2018/sfr248-higher-education-staff-statistics) of academic staff were employed on fixed-term contracts, although the UCU estimate the extent of casualisation to be [far higher](https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/7995/Precarious-work-in-higher-education-a-snapshot-of-insecure-contracts-and-institutional-attitudes-Apr-16/pdf/ucu_precariouscontract_hereport_apr16.pdf). In addition to pressures on all staff (eg. time-management, growing employer expectations, the evaluation of performance), “casualised” contracts present particular challenges for those facing employment uncertainty, including keeping up with regular payments for rent/ bills, providing for dependents, and juggling existing contracts with job applications and interviews whilst acknowledging that planning for the future often seems farcical in the face of the unknown.

In a [recent article](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17530350.2018.1426032?scroll=top&needAccess=true), I explore this multi-faceted experience of anxiety amongst casualised academics in the UK based on 100 interviews with 44 fixed-term employees working in different disciplines/ universities. When I began the research, I was employed on a fixed-term lecturing contract and found myself overworked, unsettled and fretful for an academic career that I could not quite envision coming to fruition; to echo C. Wright Mills, the research turned my “private troubles” into “public issues”.

Anxiety was one of the defining themes to emerge from the interviews, and – most obviously –appeared as a kind of ‘symptom’ of casualised employment within the increasingly competitive landscape of the neoliberalising sector. Aside from the very real financial concerns associated with short-term work, insecurity permeates the more intangible aspects of working life, such as the ability to construct coherent research profiles, worries over being beholden to managers for work and reputation, or simply feeling like an ["imposter"](http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0170840613508396). The experience of anxiety is also a fundamentally isolating experience: whilst viscerally felt at the individual level, to admit to feeling anxious and stressed-out is also to risk being perceived as failing to cope with the demands of academic life. Yet while anxiety masquerades as an individualised affliction, the effects of casualisation on employees are mediated by wider factors, such as [gender](https://www.tuc.org.uk/sites/default/files/Women_and_casualisation.pdf), [ethnicity](https://www.tuc.org.uk/sites/default/files/LivingontheMargins.pdf), and social class, as well as [contract duration and mode/type of employment](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/0142569980190403). For those participants working on multiple contracts for extended periods, fixed-term work had led to feelings of marginalisation, stress, and - in some serious cases - [mental ill-health](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2022.html).

Far from providing convenient [flexibility](https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2016/nov/16/universities-accused-of-importing-sports-direct-model-for-lecturers-pay), the participants in my research felt as though they had little [control](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/1468-4446.12307) over their working lives apart from the possibility of “working on the self”: taking personal responsibility for productivity, success, and “excellence” through the pursuit of student satisfaction, publications, or external funding - often achieved through chronic over-work fuelled by anxiety, but with no financial security or guarantee of permanent work. What emerged, then, amongst my participants was a kind of neurotic anticipation based on the unknown: an engagement with the future structured around worse-case scenarios, and career strategies built on “what if?”.

Engin Isin’s concept of the “[neurotic citizen](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/1362102042000256970?journalCode=ccst20)” who “governs itself through responses to anxieties and uncertainties” points to how the construction of a successful entrepreneurial academic self -appropriate to the demands of an increasingly competitive sector - is *predicated upon* rather than *in spite of* anxiety; those who fail to meet expectations - or are unable to “cope” with the pressure - may [exit the sector](http://potlatch.typepad.com/weblog/2014/12/governing-through-unhappiness.html), as several of those I interviewed discussed having considered. Thus, while anxiety can be seen as an individualised symptom of precarious work, it can also be conceptualised as a kind of ["tactic" of governance](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/j.1468-4446.2009.01247.x): fuelling hard work, a striving for so-called “excellence”, and the creation of obedient academic subjects. As Magnus - a researcher – explained, this is akin to a “subtle internal policing”: “put people in insecure positions and they behave themselves”.

The “neurotic academic” is an entrepreneurial figure governed through responses to the anxiety generated by employment uncertainty, but who is simultaneously encouraged to then take responsibility for the self-management of those anxieties. The “[privatisation of stress](http://www.newleftproject.org/index.php/site/article_comments/the_privatisation_of_stress)” involves a shift from examining the wider conditions under which we labour to a focus on the self: the stressed-out figure of the casualised “neurotic academic” points not only to the personal but also the political costs of failing to resist processes that are detrimental to the health of staff and the wellbeing of the public university.

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