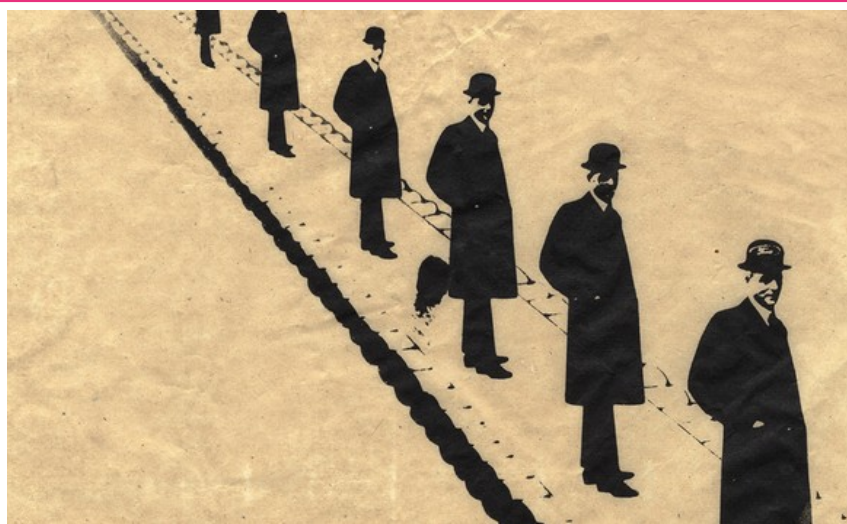


# Performance managed out?



Campus unions negotiated a new **Capability Procedure** with management last year, explicitly removing questions of performance from the **Disciplinary Procedure**. The new formal Procedure has a number of important checks, balances and protections built into it, but Human Resources (HR) have since developed a 'Performance Management Toolkit' for managers that was not agreed with unions. This constitutes an informal procedure that is inconsistently monitored by HR, and while the stated aim to address questions of performance informally in the first instance is laudable, there are real concerns about the arbitrary and inconsistent way this is being used across the institution, particularly regarding the use of so-called 'Performance Improvement Plans' (PIPs).

We have received numerous reports of managers treating PIPs as if it were part of a '**Bullying Toolkit**', imposing vaguely defined plans on vulnerable people, some with disabilities, and compelling staff to agree to meet unrealistic targets. One might here usefully recall the Head of Human Resources being interviewed in *People Management* magazine in 2014, and noting that "everyone" will be expected to "excel" or will have to "leave the institution".

There is good reason for concern about the way the informal Procedure fits in with other aspects of University management such as sickness management and SRDS. **We are aware of cases in which problems encountered by staff, which should properly have been dealt with through various support options and /or reasonable adjustment, have actually been treated as performance issues, with the 'Improvement Plan'**

resembling little more than a conveyor straight to the door.

While there is capacity for PIPs to be used productively as a means to support professional development and to overcome difficulties, this is very often not the case at all. HR are resisting all attempts to agree procedures in this area and **members are therefore advised to treat any mention of a PIP as the beginning of potential victimisation:**

- At the first sign of a manager moving towards the development of a PIP contact the SUCU committee and seek advice, especially if there is a disability element;
- Do not agree to or sign a PIP without advice from SUCU;
- Ensure there are no more than 5 targets in any PIP;
- Ensure all targets are SMART (i.e. Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant and Timely);
- Include any dependencies and ensure any health issues or disabilities are considered [www.ucu.org.uk/media/5445/Disclosing-a-disability-UCU-guidance/pdf/Disclosing\\_a\\_disability.pdf](http://www.ucu.org.uk/media/5445/Disclosing-a-disability-UCU-guidance/pdf/Disclosing_a_disability.pdf)
- Consider asking for a Stress Risk Assessment.

Spring  
2016

In  
This  
Issue

Performance  
Improvement  
plans

Postdoc Fixed  
Term Contracts

Pay—Worth  
making a fuss  
about?

Second HE  
Convention

twitter

Follow us on Twitter  
to receive news  
updates from  
[@Sheffield UCU](https://twitter.com/SheffieldUCU)

Sheffield UCU  
2 Hounsfield Road

Tel: 0114 222 8976  
[ucu@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:ucu@sheffield.ac.uk)

<http://ucu.group.shef.ac.uk>

## Don't forget to vote in the pay ballot

Due to reasons we have made clear repeatedly, the Sheffield UCU committee considers the current pay offer of 1% and no firm commitment to tackle pay inequality and casualisation to be unacceptable, and **recommends voting in favour of strike action and action short of a strike**. But however you decide, **please do vote**. It's your union and your decision and the higher the turnout the stronger the mandate, however it goes.

# Postdoctoral Fixed-Term Contracts: An out-of-date system

**Postdocs play a vital role in research, contributing an enormously to many of the outputs institutions are measured by; so why do we feel unrewarded and underappreciated?** The answer has much to do with fixed-term contracts. Apparently, 68 % of postdoctoral research staff in the UK are currently employed on fixed term contracts.\* However, from talking to postdoc and academics within our institution and elsewhere, we would estimate that for average postdocs with 0 - 8 years' experience, this is proportion is actually far higher.

Fixed-term contracts vary in length from a few months to several years; the one thing they all have in common is an expiry date. This article explores some of the detrimental impacts of such fixed-term contracts on the wide-scale employment of postdocs.

The current consensus is that postdocs need approximately 5 to 8 years' experience (publishing 2-3 papers per year), to have a chance of securing that dream academic job. This means that postdocs need to spend the first 5 to 8 years of their career moving around different universities, always seeking their next contract. The pressure of constantly having to look for a new job, repeatedly relocating home and work and building new social networks has been described as *"exhausting, frustrating, distracting and demotivating"*.

If you have progressed to postdoc status by your mid-twenties (which is realistically the earliest you can get there) this period of repeated uprooting and moving around coincides with the time in life when many people are likely to be considering settling down and starting a family. Many of the researchers we spoke to, who were in their late 20s or early 30s, reported finding it difficult to put roots down during this turbulent period. They often commented that their future feels full of uncertainty: *"If I take maternity leave will I have a job to come back to?"*, *"Am I eligible for parental leave if my contract is less than 12 months?"*, *"Can I get a mortgage if I/we are on short term contracts?"*

Struggling with a mortgage and/or childcare / maternity arrangements are issues commonly faced by postdocs in this situation. An archaic attitude toward female researchers also remains a problem for some. I was told about a particular PI who took a very hard line on postdocs returning after maternity leave, putting them in an all or nothing situation. I have also heard of female researchers being told that being pregnant effectively signalled the end of their research career. *"Are we supposed to choose between career and family life...?"*

**Fixed-term contacts leave us with an ultimatum: continually relocate or seriously damage your chance of getting a permanent job in the future.** But what about those of us who cannot easily relocate? *"As a single parent my career decisions had to be location based. I have had to make sacrifices, choosing not so optimal jobs at times, because of the way the system will affect your career prospects if you do not move."* Those of us with partners (who are also establishing careers), young families, caring responsibilities or disabilities (which may require help with day-to-day living) cannot just move at the drop of a hat. **In short, fixed term contracts fail equality responsibilities.** When you consider that diversity and equality is an important issue for all HE institutions, there is a fundamental inconsistency when they continue to employ so many postdocs on such detrimental and disadvantageous fixed-term contracts.

Is there a way you can choose to stay and develop your career in one place? The short answer has been put to us as: *"yes, but it doesn't look good"*. Staff recruiting postdocs generally prefer to choose from a wider 'world' market rather than their institution's redeployment pool. Living in the same place and commuting to a different university might be an option, but in

addition to the additional stress of extended daily travel time, you would be faced with the same type of fixed-term contract there too.

Even for those who do manage to stay in one place by securing an open-ended contract there are still problems ahead: Without a steady and guaranteed stream of research money, that contract isn't really worth a whole lot, and even if you are successful at bringing in funding, it's difficult to gain the same stature as permanent academic staff. A long term researcher with 16 years' experience has observed first hand that *"research fellows are not treated equivalently [to permanent academic staff] by the University system"*.

What about promotion? Other than acquiring a new role as research fellow or lecturer, there are no promotional steps for researchers. One postdoc described their situation as being *"adrift on the sea of science"*, receiving very little in the way of advice /career support from their supervisor. Although people will tell you that it is the job of the line manager to help postdocs plan and progress their careers, the bottom line is that they too are overworked (and have limited time) or don't understand the issues. A common response from postdocs is that they feel *"undervalued"* especially when they are *"expected to pick up the pieces of over-worked lecturers without the credit."*

You can make it work staying in one place, but it's a lot about luck. You may feel like you are always playing second fiddle to academic peers with permanent contacts; *"if you stay in the role long term, you do begin to wonder if you do genuinely have a career and whether any progression is possible, even when demonstrating superior publications and income than your peers."* The turnover of academic staff is slow and there are many more postdocs than there are jobs (a recent advert for two lectureships in one department attracted around 200 applicants). For those of us who have already dedicated several years to postdoc contracts, there is a difficult decision looming: Do I stay or do I go? If I change career, what can I do with my skills?

Looking forward, how should we fund and employ postdocs? Any solution will require a bold change. We think the bottom line is that the fundamental building blocks of the system fail to promote equality and are not fit for purpose. A good research proposal relies on solid principles and clear aims, so let's apply the same approach here.

**Ultimately we want the conditions of postdoctoral employment to be founded in fairness, stability and clear continuity, so we can focus on our work, instead of desperately searching for the next job.** The University could support this by using bridging funds more effectively with open-ended contracts, developing alternate career streams, (e.g. career researcher pathways), offering promotions into non-academic positions, or challenging this outdated culture by actively nurturing and promoting home-grown talent.

The problem is a shared one: We all (individuals, universities and research councils) have a responsibility to ask questions, stimulate discussion and implement change. **To effectively promote equality across the HE sector, through the use of fair selection processes, we first need equality in the talent pool.**

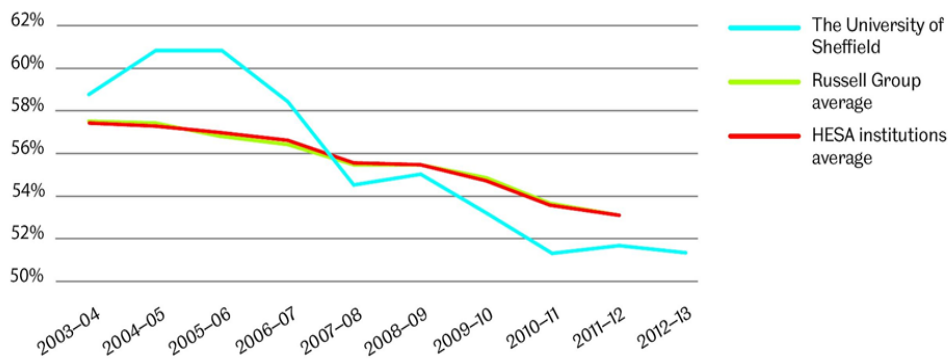
Fixed-term contracts are archaic leftovers from academic cultures of times gone by, they are a barrier to equality, and ultimately a threat to the future of academia itself. Their negative impact continues to be felt, not only by current postdocs, but also by those just starting out in research. As one PhD researcher told us; *"I'm done with research after my PhD, I don't want to be in the same situation as you 3-4 years down the line. It's a lot to gamble on, when you may not achieve what you set out to."*

\* UCU Researchers survival guide, July 2015



# Pay—Worth making a fuss about?

Staff costs as a percentage of income



(Source: 2012-13 University of Sheffield Annual Report)

**When we ask members about their biggest concerns, high workloads, stress, and unreasonable performance pressures often come higher on the list than salary. Does this mean that staff are being treated fairly on pay? Or is something else going on?**

Every year, UCU, along with sister unions, negotiates nationally for an increase to the central pay spine on behalf of all higher education staff. In the wake of the 2008 financial crash, universities latched on to the language of austerity to justify a string of below-inflation settlements.\* The effect of this has been a well-known devaluation of pay in real terms of around 15%. That is, you have 15% less spending power now than someone who was on the same salary point seven years ago. Or, to put it another way, those starting today will find their finances significantly tighter than those who started in 2009.

How much difference does that 15% really make? After all, 15% fewer clothes or treats and 15% shorter holidays doesn't sound all that bad. But this misses the point: fixed costs take

up the majority of the average pay packet, meaning this pay cut represents a much, much bigger squeeze in disposable income. And for those near the bottom of the pay scale, it could be the difference between sinking and swimming

UCU's Rate for the Job feature ([ucu.org.uk/rateforthejob](http://ucu.org.uk/rateforthejob)) allows you to see just how much more pay you'd be getting if universities had the integrity to view inflation-matching as the minimum acceptable offer. Instead, out of choice rather than necessity, they have squeezed spending on staff while raising both cash reserves and landmark buildings. In Sheffield, expenditure on staff as a

proportion of income has been reduced from 55% in 2009 (and over 60% in 2006!) to below 52% now. Not only that, but this fact is trumpeted as a recent achievement in the CV of our director of Human Resources ([bit.ly/1nUlvSD](http://bit.ly/1nUlvSD)).

And let's not forget the huge downgrade to the USS pension scheme that came into effect in April, which was deemed necessary by outrageous projections, such as pay settlements of 4.5% each and every year, in perpetuity. **Not only has this led to benefits being slashed and the start of an attempt to dismantle the defined benefit nature of the scheme, but employee contributions received a hike in April 2016** resulting in a noticeable cut to your take-home pay.

**So why are we not more angry about this?** Has the narrative of austerity has been so prominent in national debate that we feel it has to apply to us too? Are workload and stress issues are so big they seem to dwarf everything else? Whatever the reason, enough is enough. Universities know the facts are on our side. **It is time to get angry and demand fair treatment.**

\* Since 2009, these have been 0.5%, 0.4%, £150, 1%, 1%, 2%, and 1%.

**Are they taking us for a ride? Watch out for the SUCU parking survey!**



# The Second Convention on Higher Education

The Second Convention on Higher Education took place at University College London on 27th February 2016, with a particular focus on the HE Green Paper published in Autumn 2015. Sheffield UCU sent three delegates to the event. What follows are the thoughts of one of them.

The format of the day was a mix of plenary and parallel sessions, so I was able to attend the following:

- *Welcome (plenary)*
- *Teaching quality, social mobility, and the TEF (plenary)*
- *Opening the market to private providers (parallel)*
- *The future of research (parallel)*
- *Strategies to win (plenary)*

The introduction was sobering, yet put the current situation in context. The current Tories have been making massive changes to the public sector for years; the party as a whole for decades. Until now, Higher Education (HE) has remained relatively unscathed, but is now being forced into the same situation as Royal Mail, the NHS, and so forth. The Green Paper, described as a 'radical reshaping of the landscape of Higher Education', is the focus of these changes. It is not universally embraced; not only has our own Vice-Chancellor criticised it, there was a 'scathing' criticism written about the TEF by the VC of Cambridge. **The Green Paper was essentially written backwards, starting from the ideological conclusion and then constructed to support that conclusion.**

Regarding Teaching Quality, Lee Jones talked about debunking the TEF. He noted that the TEF will not result in additional monies for universities. Indeed, universities will be required to absorb the cost of the TEF, which will likely outweigh any additional revenue. For reference, the most recent REF cost universities £230m to conduct. Our universities already spend approximately 8% of the teaching budget on quality assurance exercises, and the TEF will push this figure even higher. It is a myth that the TEF will provide any benefits to teaching budgets. Whatever extra money is generated will pay the bureaucrats who conduct the assessments. Indeed, the Vice-Chancellor of University College London is on record as saying that the TEF does not make any financial sense.

Just as the REF took effort away from research, the TEF will take effort away from teaching. **We will wind up "teaching to the test" and doing something similar for student satisfaction.**

Although excellence in teaching is a laudable goal, the TEF is unlikely to actually measure any such a thing. The proposed metrics are likely to be employment outcomes (which skews results against the humanities and the arts in favour of STEM) and student satisfaction. The latter is a particularly poor metric; surely, as educators, we should be expected to know better than students about what helps them learn. There would be no point in taking a PGCE or training in teaching if this did not train us how students learn. **Decades of research into education are employed in training us in heuristics and pedagogy; replacing this with a measure of how well we can entertain our students is not conducive to excellence in teaching.** Indeed, student satisfaction is often inversely correlated with teaching. Many students like easy assessments and they like to be 'spoon-fed' knowledge. Challenging them with difficult assessments and making them work things out for themselves leads to better learning, but lower satisfaction ratings.

Moving forward to address these problems, a number of solutions were proposed. Some very general; others more specific. It was noted that there is not huge public support for the Green Paper on Higher Education. Thus, if the HE sector unites, we can win. This must be a unified front at multiple levels. HE staff must unite against the Green Paper if we are to win, but so must students and our VCs. Roger Brown explicitly said that "VCs should show solidarity with the rest of the HE sector."

The most specific proposal made, and one that is being actioned, is to prepare an alternative White Paper. The government is planning to release a White Paper on Higher Education in May or June. There is a plan in motion for the HE sector to produce our own White Paper and release it at the same time as the government releases theirs. This plan was begun at Goldsmith's University of London under the working title of a 'Gold Paper', but support has grown broader and momentum has become national. Not everyone favours such a plan. Some present at the Convention, particularly younger delegates, thought that producing a paper was an overly academic approach and that would not be effective. Speaking personally, I can see their concerns, but I think there is good PR value in releasing an HE-drafted White Paper at the same time as the government's White Paper. It makes a very useful vehicle for discussion; additionally, **it is always helpful to have an alternate plan, rather than just saying NO!**



## Are high workloads leading to missed opportunities?

On our recent recruitment stalls, a straw poll identified heavy workloads as the biggest concern for our members. We had planned for a piece in this bulletin, but due to excessive workloads no-one had time to write the compelling article required to do this important issue justice.

A full article will follow in our next bulletin, workloads permitting...