

Improving Careers: Philosophers in non-permanent employment in the UK

Report for the BPA prepared by Dr Dawn Phillips, University of Warwick.

This report follows an oral presentation to the BPA on 22nd April 2010

I circulated an email to Philos-L inviting people to contribute their views or experiences. I have incorporated the responses I received into this report, but keep the contributors anonymous.

1) The scope of this report

For the purposes of this report I will talk about people pursuing careers in academic philosophy who have 'non-permanent' employment. Labels such as 'Temporary staff', 'Fixed-term staff', 'Post-docs' or 'Early Career staff' in different ways all fail to be sufficiently extensive. One of the first issues to address is the fact that the group of people in question are not easily or reliably identified on HR staff-rolls or departmental lists, even in ordinary cases. In more unusual cases, some philosophers who have non-permanent employment do not officially count as 'staff', are not on contracts, or (partly or fully) work outside HE philosophy departments.

I don't, in general, include PhD students as these are an independent category. However, in most departments PhD students cover a large proportion of the tutorial teaching, sometimes paid, sometimes not, and that there are significant trends to be monitored. For example: some departments have recently decided that students on scholarships will be expected to teach a certain number of hours for free, when previously teaching was optional and paid by an hourly rate.

2) The need for non-permanent staff

Departments have three principal sources of income:

- ◆ Income from Student numbers
- ◆ Income from RAE/REF performance
- ◆ Income from Research Grants

In practical terms, all three of these sources compel departments to rely on non-permanent staff, predominantly for teaching work: providing supplementary teaching when there is expansion in student numbers, or teaching/admin cover that enables permanent staff to have leave.

Departments require the *flexibility* that comes with employing non-permanent staff, but at present flexibility for a department translates into *instability* and *inequity* for the philosophers who fill these roles. This need not be the case and there are many measures that could alleviate this problem.

Year on year it is a certainty for any department that it will require non-permanent staff. However, in any given year, a department faces uncertainty when budgeting to cover the posts it needs. As a result, departments largely plan each new position to directly correspond to a specific fund or a particular teaching gap. Recent increases in economic uncertainty have led to an increasing deterioration in the conditions agreed for available non-permanent posts.

3) The need for career path improvement

I take it as agreed (but worth explicitly stating) that it is to the benefit of the discipline nationally to actively improve the career path of philosophers in non-permanent employment. This is the first point that needs to be more widely understood and incorporated into concrete features of departmental planning.

4) **Employment trends:**

- ◆ Decrease in replacement posts (for staff who retire or leave for other posts)
- ◆ Decrease in the number of new posts of any kind (permanent or non-permanent).
- ◆ Increase in fixed-term contracts.
- ◆ Increase in teaching-only contracts.
- ◆ Increase in short-term contracts (e.g. just a single term, or commonly 6 or 8 months)
- ◆ Increase in fractional-term contracts (e.g. 0.3, 0.5, 0.75, or absurdly 0.85)
- ◆ Increase in hourly-rate teaching
- ◆ Increase in use of PhD students for teaching

The economic crisis is having an impact on non-permanent philosophers in ways that may be invisible to most people. For example: there are many philosophers who supplement their part-time or short-term departmental work by teaching for other organisations, particularly centres of Continuing Education (Adult Education, Lifelong Learning etc.). Many of these centres are closing down, or drastically cutting, their philosophy programmes.

As departments face budget cuts and look for ways to save money, a more worrying trend has emerged – this has been reported by several people. If a member of staff receives a research grant ‘buy-out’, the department receives funds to cover the cost of a full-time one-year replacement (e.g. sufficient for a £35K salary). In some cases, rather than fund a post with this salary, the department covers the necessary teaching with hourly rate teaching (£6K) or a short-term teaching-only contract (£18K after pro rata).

5) **The essence of the problem:**

Performance in the REF is the paramount concern of every department in the UK. As a consequence, the appointment of permanent staff is overwhelmingly decided according to a candidate’s research profile. And, a department’s priority is to ensure that permanent staff can devote time to research. To make this possible, a department employs non-permanent staff to cover teaching and admin. Non-permanent philosophers are overwhelmingly required to devote their time to teaching at the expense of their research profile. These factors produce divergence, which rapidly widens, between the career paths of those with and those without permanent jobs.

In the following three sections I outline some of the ways that this situation affects the personal lives, working lives and career paths of those without permanent jobs.

Concrete consequences (I): Personal problems

- ◆ Little if any entitlement to relocation allowance.
- ◆ Not possible to secure a mortgage.
- ◆ Reduced entitlement to maternity leave.
- ◆ Expenses, upheaval and relationship or family disruption associated with repeated moves.
- ◆ Lack of incremental salary increase or promotion. Often taking new jobs at a lower salary than the previous job.
- ◆ Patchy (if any) accrual of pension.

A report from the UCU (25th May 2010) highlights the way that proposed changes to the Universities Superannuation Scheme would have a particularly adverse effect on non-permanent staff:

Many of the employers' demands impact particularly badly on new entrants to USS or 're-joiners'; ie. former members rejoining after a break in service of one month or more. This will clearly have a disproportionate effect on fixed-term contract staff - many of whom routinely have 'gaps' in employment of more than one month. Those in this position will lose the right to a 'final salary' pension and will no longer have access to a tax free 'lump sum' on retirement without having to surrender part of their pension to pay for it. Depending on age and length of service, members may lose huge sums well in excess of £100,000 in future pension expectations.

Philosophers who are already burdened with significant personal difficulties, such as student debt, care responsibilities or disability, are likely to find these – along with the problems below – not merely obstacles, but a barrier to pursuing a career in Philosophy.

Concrete consequences (II): Professional problems

Non-permanent staff face disadvantages that make it harder for them to carry out their day-to-day professional activities. Whilst, individually, these may seem trivial points, they add up to significant working inefficiency.

- ◆ Lack of dedicated office space (often 'hot-desking')
- ◆ Lack of adequate induction processes. Induction is often too general because designed for permanent staff, or entirely neglected for non-permanent staff.
- ◆ Teaching times are scheduled at the most undesirable times (Mondays, Fridays, early mornings, late night evening classes)
- ◆ Lots of new teaching preparation every year – often not easily 'recycled' in the next position, often in areas that are distant from area of research specialisation.
- ◆ Constant job-hunting is time-consuming. Completing even just 15 applications a year at 3-4 hours per application takes up two full working weeks each year.
- ◆ Non-permanent staff often work part-time at multiple institutions, this multiplies meetings, admin and travel time.

It is also very inefficient and expensive for departments to be frequently or haphazardly recruiting for short-term positions.

Concrete consequences (III): Career inequity

- ◆ A new permanent philosopher will get a reduced admin/teaching load for a probation period (sometimes as much as five years).
- ◆ A non-permanent philosopher at the same career stage will be faced with an admin/teaching load that is much higher. Indeed, often disproportionately higher than established permanent staff.

E.g. In some departments the expectation for a Teaching Fellow is *contact time* of 300 hours per year (a large amount of lecturing, not just teaching repeat tutorials).

E.g. Some staff on fractional contracts (0.8 etc.) are nonetheless given senior admin roles (Exams, Admissions) even though this inevitably demands full-time activity.

E.g. Non-permanent staff may be given large numbers of personal tutees, sometimes groups from more than one absent member of staff – often without a 'hand-over'.

- ◆ Non-permanent members of staff are particularly vulnerable to exploitation. A permanent philosopher who guards his or her research time gains (grudging) respect for having ambitious drive and research productivity.

- ◆ A non-permanent philosopher will be told that it is important to be seen as competent and invaluable. Worse, most experience the implicit threat that refusing extra work will lessen chance of contract renewal or a permanent post.

Permanent staff have significant benefits that directly support their research progress:

- ◆ Research travel expenses
- ◆ Accrue entitlement to sabbatical research leave
- ◆ Eligible to apply for research grants that require an institutional post
- ◆ Assured future that makes it possible to plan long-term and high-profile projects (books, conferences, collaborations)

Non-permanent staff are typically excluded from all these advantages.

As a general trend:

- ◆ A department treats its permanent staff as an investment and directly intervenes to ensure career progress of these individuals.
- ◆ By comparison, a non-permanent philosopher who passes through different departments does not receive this attention. Departments do not look at that person's career progress over the next few years as their responsibility.

E.g. in many departments, permanent members of staff have an Annual Review or receive detailed feedback on future research plans from senior research staff. Non-permanent staff are often neglected – typically because these activities are part of REF preparation and non-permanent staff are not considered relevant.

6) On retaining the merits of the present system:

I have not reflected on any of the advantages that are present in the current situation. Temporary contracts are often judged to provide valuable professional experience for philosophers at an early career stage and, if the posts are held in different universities, may provide insight into a broader range of approaches to philosophy. Some of the supposed advantages ('this will look good on your CV') are wishful thinking on the part of employers and have little empirical basis. Others may be real: e.g. some people with family commitments would prefer 0.5 contracts (though only if permanent). However, I think that none of the alleged benefits of the current system would be lost by making the recommended improvements. Rather, wherever real benefits can be shown to exist, these measures would ensure that in future all philosophers can share the same advantages.

7) 1st Major Recommendation

The current expectation for a philosophical career is to finish a Ph.D., have a succession of fixed term posts, then go into a permanent position. Whilst the Ph.D. stage and permanent post stage are both (generally) well managed – or, at least, have expectations for best practice – the middle stage is left to chance.

As a matter of priority, departments need to take greater responsibility for the career development of their non-permanent staff – not just passing them on to a new temporary position in a different department, but right the way through into a secure position.

Increasingly (and following the US) departments have Placement Officers and publish information about the destinations of their PhD graduates (though at present most only publish the 'success' stories rather than a full record). It would be perfectly appropriate for departments to be expected to put on record and be judged according to the career progress of non-permanent staff who have worked at that institution. We could also expect funding councils to take an interest in this data.

8) 2nd Major Recommendation

In this report I have focused on non-permanent staff who are employed to teach and said little about Research Fellows. At present Philosophy departments have a poor understanding of these positions which as a consequence often lack appropriate induction and management structure. Where expectations are unclear, it is too easy for departments to treat Research Fellows as temporary lecturers – or teaching fellows.

Seven key principles to guide best practice are laid out in a national document: the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers.

<http://www.researchconcordat.ac.uk/index.html>

All UK Universities are signatories to this document and Heads of Departments and Principle Investigators are expected to implement the recommendations.

In other disciplines which have large numbers of non-permanent researchers, especially the sciences, measures are being taken to improve the career path of non-permanent researchers e.g. the Athena Swan awards for good practice <http://www.athenaswan.org.uk/html/athenaswan/>

Most importantly, significant funds e.g. the 'Roberts Money' are available to support these initiatives. While the sciences are alive to the potential of using these funds to support non-permanent staff, the humanities are lagging behind.

<http://www.vitae.ac.uk/policy-practice/1685/Roberts-recommendations.html>

So here's something you should really be worried about:

In the sciences non-permanent staff tend to be researchers. In the Humanities, non-permanent staff tend to be teachers. The push by government and research councils to make initiatives and funds available for the career development of non-permanent staff is currently and increasingly targeted only at researchers – teaching staff are not covered by Roberts Money. As a consequence, the sciences are far more likely to benefit from all the new opportunities to improve the career paths of their non-permanent staff. The humanities are doing little to take advantage of the resources on offer and, in fact, are making it harder for non-permanent staff to be eligible.

And the obvious solution: in the humanities we should be doing everything possible to ensure that our non-permanent staff are recognised and supported as researchers, not just as teachers.

This means recognising that a one-year teaching position (or several temporary teaching-heavy positions) is not 'good experience' or 'good on the CV'. Instead it will have a negative effect on the career path of a philosopher unless appropriate measures are taken by the institution which employs that individual.

9) Concrete suggestions

- ◆ When devising a contract, time devoted to research should be expected and remunerated.
- ◆ Wherever possible combine funding sources to create 2- or 3-year contracts rather than anything shorter.
- ◆ Apply for additional 'bridge funds' (e.g. available from central University funds) to turn a 10 month contract into a 12 month contract, or a 0.75 position into a Full-time position.

- ◆ Apply for Roberts Money to fund initiatives to support your non-permanent research staff (conference fees, travel etc.).
- ◆ Improve the induction and exit procedures for new non-permanent staff (these need to be well-designed).
- ◆ Ensure that non-permanent staff have Mentors who are trained and conscientious and who will protect the individual from exploitation.
- ◆ Offer institutional affiliation ('Honorary Research Fellow' or similar) to staff when a contract comes to an end, if they would otherwise have no affiliation.
- ◆ Create more opportunities for non-permanent staff to apply for research grants (including as Principal Investigator).
- ◆ Where a research grant restricts the category of applicants, this should not be an age-restriction (e.g. the current norm of 35) but rather a restriction to people who have not held a permanent post.
- ◆ Ensure that grant holders who are responsible for Research Fellows have appropriate management training (e.g. in accordance with the Concordat).
- ◆ Entitlement for benefits: Pension scheme, relocation allowance, research travel expenses, maternity leave, redundancy pay.
- ◆ Relating to REF a department should receive credit (and be judged by) whether staff produce research *while working in the department*. This would show up cases where departments exploit non-permanent staff in ways that are invisible to the current system.

This is, of course, just the beginning of a long list. The BPA needs to ensure that Departments recognise that their individual actions, whatever they take to be their specific financial justification, are not merely localised or incidental; they are part of a clear pattern that is pointing philosophy in the wrong direction needs to be addressed at a national level.