

Responding to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic for workers in Higher Education

Institution: exploring interactions of gender, caring responsibilities and precarity

Increased use of precarious employment contracts is a growing issue for workers in higher education institutions (HEIs) internationally. In 2020 the first UK national lockdown due to COVID-19 coincided with the end of national industrial action in the sector by the University and College Union (UCU). Emerging from industrial strike action over precarious contracts, workload and pensions, the UCU pivoted to responding to the COVID-19 crisis and its impact on HEI workers. We present data from a survey of 995 UK HEI workers undertaken in April and May 2020. Exploring the experiences of workers through analysis of both quantitative and qualitative survey responses, we demonstrate both gender and caring responsibility are important to understanding the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on employment conditions and work content for precariously- versus permanently-employed workers.

Many precariously employed university staff experienced loss of hourly-paid work or unexpected non-renewal of fixed-term contracts in the first months of the pandemic (Staton, 2020). Our analyses indicate that remote working had an unequal impact on workers experiences and working patterns depending on their employment contract, gender and caring responsibilities. We found existing inequalities between casualised and permanent staff were exacerbated, particularly: reduced hours and pay, work-life conflict, exposure to unsafe conditions, and the impact of technology on working patterns.

From a theoretical perspective, our findings highlight nuances in the stratification of casualised staff, with internationally-relevant implications for industrial relations and representation of precariously employed staff in HEI sector institutions.

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