

The neurotic academic: how anxiety fuels casualised academic work



*As higher education undergoes a process of marketisation in the UK and the activities of academic staff are increasingly measured and scrutinised, universities are suffused with anxiety. Coupled with pressures facing all staff, casualised academics face multiple forms of insecurity. While anxiety is often perceived as an individual problem for which employees are encouraged to take personal responsibility, **Vik Loveday** argues that anxiety amongst academic staff should be understood in two ways: as a symptom of casualised work in an increasingly competitive environment; and as a tactic of governance, ensuring compliance.*

It will come as no surprise to those working in the UK's higher education (HE) sector that universities are currently suffused with anxiety. The University and College Union (UCU) has recently been in dispute with employers over proposed changes to the USS pension scheme, and the most sustained period of industrial action in the sector's history has highlighted the fears staff have for the security of their futures post-retirement. Such unprecedented strike action needs to be situated within the [wider context](#) of a public sector undergoing transformation: while the concept remains contested, the influence of "neoliberal" ideas on universities can most clearly be seen in [Success as a Knowledge Economy](#) – the government white paper that preceded the 2017 Higher Education and Research Act – which states:

“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.”

Yet what might “raising our game” mean for academic staff? The university has been described as an [“anxiety machine”](#): the creeping marketisation of the sector along with pressure to recruit students (now “consumers”), increasing managerialism, and the implementation of processes of [audit](#) – such as the REF and TEF – to evaluate performance have arguably contributed to a progressively anxious landscape in which to labour.

In 2016/17, [34%](#) of academic staff were employed on fixed-term contracts – a figure likely to be disputed by the UCU, since in 2016 it estimated the extent of casualisation in the sector to be closer to [54%](#) once atypical contracts had been taken into consideration. In addition to pressures facing many staff in universities – such as time-management, meeting growing employer expectations, and the evaluation of performance – “casualised” contracts present particular challenges for those facing employment uncertainty: in a material sense, this can be a case of keeping up with regular payments for rent and bills, or providing for dependents; on a day-to-day basis, time is spent juggling existing contracts with job applications and interviews, whilst acknowledging that planning for the future often seems unthinkable – even farcical – in the face of the unknown.

In a [recent article](#), I explore this multi-faceted experience of anxiety amongst casualised academics based on 100 interviews, conducted over a 22-month period with 44 fixed-term employees working in different universities and disciplines in the UK. When I initially embarked on the research in 2014, I was struggling myself to come to terms with my own job insecurity: employed on a fixed-term lecturing contract, but with no guarantee that this would be made permanent, I found myself overworked, unsettled, and fretful for an academic career that I could not quite envision coming to fruition. Whilst the irony of conducting research on casualised work to secure my own career had not escaped me, embarking on the research helped me to grapple with my own uncertainty: to echo C. Wright Mills, turning “private troubles” into “public issues” made visible individual experiences of anxiety, and enabled the forging of connections with other academics similarly facing the unknown.

Anxiety was one of the defining themes to emerge from the interviews, and – most obviously – the pervasiveness of anxiety appeared to be a kind of symptom of casualised employment within the increasingly competitive landscape of the neoliberalising sector. Tom, a post-doctoral researcher, framed his own experience of employment precarity as a kind of “looming” feeling, which “leeches into [...] most of the things that you do”. 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/ institutions for work and reputation, or quite simply feeling like an [“imposter”](#).

The experience of anxiety is also a fundamentally isolating one: 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](#), [ethnicity](#), and social class background, as well as [contract duration and mode/type of employment](#). For those participants who had been working on multiple contracts for extended periods of time, fixed-term work had led to feelings of marginalisation and stress in the workplace and – in some serious cases – [mental ill-health](#).



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While anxiety is quite clearly an effect of the conditions under which it is produced, during the project I began to turn my attention to what anxiety itself might be achieving: in the first instance, anxiety can be seen as a symptom of precarious work, which affected the participants on an individual basis; yet their narratives also pointed to the more active role that anxiety played in the quest to find work and the forging of an “entrepreneurial academic self” appropriate to the demands of an increasingly competitive sector. Anxiety, then, can be conceptualised as a kind of [“tactic” of governance](#): fuelling hard work, a striving for so-called “excellence”, and the creation of obedient academic subjects. As Magnus – a post-doctoral researcher – explained, this is akin to a “subtle internal policing”: “put people in insecure positions and they behave themselves”.

Far from providing convenient [flexibility](#), the participants in my research felt as though they had very little [control](#) 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, which was often achieved through chronic over-work fuelled by anxiety, but with no financial security or guarantee of permanent work at the end of contracts. What emerged, then, amongst my participants was a kind of neurotic anticipation based on the unknown: an engagement with the future structured around worst-case scenarios, and career strategies built on “what if?”. Engin Isin’s concept of the [“neurotic citizen”](#) who “governs itself through responses to anxieties and uncertainties” points to how the construction of a successful entrepreneurial academic self 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](#), as several of those I interviewed discussed having considered.

What I have termed as the “neurotic academic” is an entrepreneurial figure who is governed through responses to the anxiety generated by employment uncertainty within an increasingly competitive sector, but who is simultaneously encouraged to then take responsibility for the self-management of those anxieties. As Rosalind Gill and Ngaire Donaghue have noted, even those measures designed to combat workplace stress in universities are “[individualised tools](#)” rather than strategies for addressing the wider structural conditions that precipitate such unhealthy working practices. The “[privatisation of stress](#)” involves a shift from examining the wider conditions under which we labour to a focus on the self, and 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. In the aftermath of the USS dispute, it will be interesting to see if increased scrutiny of the sector leads to a more robust examination of casualisation and its effects, and if solidarity will be extended long-term to casualised academics from their more senior, permanent colleagues.

*This blog post is based on the author's article, “[The neurotic academic: anxiety, casualisation, and governance in the neoliberalising university](#)”, published in the *Journal of Cultural Economy* (DOI: 10.1080/17530350.2018.1426032). The research was supported by the British Academy [SG142753].*

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About the author

Vik Loveday is a Lecturer in the Department of Sociology, at Goldsmiths, University of London. She researches subjective experiences of work in the UK's HE sector and aside from her recent work on the [relationship between casualisation and perceptions of luck](#), she has also published on [social mobility and working-class participation in higher education](#), and [shame](#) and [nostalgia](#) amongst working-class students. She is currently exploring how senior managers in universities are making sense of their own roles within the rapidly changing sector.