

Thank you for the invitation.

My name is Niall Kennedy and I'm speaking on behalf of a new campaigning organisation, the Irish Precarity Network.

Since 2018 I have been employed in Trinity College Dublin. For the first two years, I was an hourly-paid lecturer. I received a flat fee per class, which was also to cover preparation and marking time. I had no pension contributions or any right to sick pay. During those years however, I taught the same number of classes as my permanently employed colleagues. The Cush report of 2016 envisaged that an hourly-paid arrangement be used for occasional visiting lecturers, teaching on highly specialised modules to fulfil a specific need. However, much of my teaching was on core modules, taken by every student in our department. The need for this teaching was ongoing and predictable.

I taught over 200 students per year, and each of them paid at least €3000, the biggest financial contribution of students in any EU country. Yet, as an hourly-paid lecturer, and despite being PhD-qualified I made less than €7000 a year. Starting salary for a full-time lecturer is €36,369.

Since 2020 I have been on a series of temporary contracts with somewhat better terms. This June, in just a few months, when my current contract expires, I will again be unemployed, as has happened every year for the past five years. I hope to return to work in the sector in September, but there is no guarantee I will be offered any further contract by Trinity or anywhere else. I am 40 years old, and I live in constant insecurity and worry about the future.

My situation is very common. Across Irish Higher Education Institutions, precarious employment practices are now the norm. As you will read in our group's submission, 50 % of teaching and lecturing staff in Ireland are part-time or on a temporary contract. This equates to around 13,000 lecturing staff in a given year. According to IFUT, the rates of precarious employment in Irish academia are worse than for any other branch of the public service. Just under half of all precarious workers in Higher Education, according to recent research, earn a salary keeping them below the poverty line in Ireland – and this includes up to 77% of hourly-paid staff. Extra and unpaid work is commonly reported. Precarious academics frequently have to rely on social welfare during periods of unemployment. They have very few of the entitlements, benefits, or other forms of workplace protection offered to those on fixed full-term contracts.

This is not a short-term situation. These staff have no obvious career progression or route out of precarity since university management now replaces retiring permanent lecturers with more hourly-paid positions. Many precarious workers have endured these conditions for a decade or more. According to our research, the average is 7.1 years for women, and 5.7 years for men.

Thus there are also significant gender and racial imbalances created by a reliance on precarious labour. Some studies have shown that up to two-thirds of precarious academics are women, and they make up most of the extreme cases. No institution which relies heavily on precarious work can claim to support gender and racial equality.

This situation impacts heavily on research and teaching. Precarious staff are not paid for their research and receive no paid time off, nor financial support towards their expenses from institutions. The very high turnover of precarious staff within institutions, a situation intended to prevent them from qualifying for a Contract of Indefinite Duration, has a significant impact on teaching quality, since these lecturers must constantly learn new material for new groups of students.

While there is no doubt government funding of universities has been significantly reduced, we believe that the universities should also be held to account for their own choices and spending

priorities. Significant expansion of the spend on managerial staff, has meant that Irish higher education institutions now employ more non-academic than academic staff. Universities have also in recent years found the money for significant campus developments, but have neglected the backbone of their workforce, who deliver the core functions of the university: teaching and research.

Our report offers some possible solutions. We believe hourly-paid contracts should be banned. We believe universities should move away from a reliance on short-term contracts. The sector should no longer be subject to the Employment Control Framework. The state should set targets for the percentage of staff in a university who are precarious, and sanction those institutions which fail to meet them.

For the past fifteen years and more, the Irish state has stood by and allowed the ruthless and devastating exploitation of these workers, employed in an Irish public service. It is time for this to end. I am calling on this committee to exercise its oversight function, and to ensure that a strategy to end precarious employment is at the heart of this funding bill.

Go raibh míle maith agaibh.

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