

Collective Action Against Research-Related Employment Precarity: Learnings from an institutional project and an emerging national movement

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Abstract

This Critical Reflection details the individual, institutional and national impacts of employment precarity in research-related roles, summarising findings from the University of Nottingham's Revisiting Employment Contracts: Helping Under-represented Researchers Develop, Lead and Excel (REC HURDLE) project. Current sector-wide evidence and practices are summarised, and recommendations are made for changes to organisational processes and research culture to lessen both the extent and severity of employment precarity in UK higher education. Ongoing work to this aim through the national Research Precarity Working Group is detailed. The emotional and practical considerations of effecting change in this area, within a national research ecosystem under financial strain, are considered.

Keywords: fixed-term contracts; research culture; employment precarity; collective action; EDI; professional development

Introduction

Employment precarity is a pervasive, long-standing global issue affecting individuals pursuing research-related careers at academic institutions, with impacts at an individual, institutional and sector-wide level (**UCU, 2023; Advance HE, 2024**). A nebulous, broadly defined term, it has no legal definition but refers to conditions of uncertain, unstable or insecure work, including informal, short-term and zero-hours employment models (**Pósch et al., 2020; Standing, 2011**).

Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data indicates that across all academic staff at UK higher education institutions (HEIs)—spanning research, teaching, technical, and professional services—29 percent were employed on fixed-term contracts in 2022 (**HESA, 2023**). The University and College Union's (UCU) (**2019**) report indicated that, disproportionately, 68 percent of research-only academic staff were employed on fixed-term contracts. A substantial body of evidence demonstrates that individuals from under-represented and minoritised groups are more frequently precariously employed and more severely impacted, with HESA (**2022**) data supporting this across age, ethnicity, disability and gender (**Advance HE, 2024**).

Legal obligations exist for organisations to provide employment protections, including permanent employment, beyond two years of continuous service, with this reducing to six months of service from January 2027 (**Jackson, 2026**). Despite this, the extent and impact of precarity in academia are pervasive due to the relationship between employment contracts and research grant funding in HEIs (**UCU, 2019; Mason & Megoran, 2021**). To meet legal obligations whilst accounting for the uncertainty of external grant income, a significant fraction of staff in UK HEIs are employed on a contract titled 'open-ended subject to fixed funding', 'permanent with underlying funding' (PWUF) or a similar variation (**Coe & Kernohan, 2025**).

Estimating the proportion of staff on such contracts is complex, as they are grouped within HESA data alongside other permanent contracts. As such, HESA's (**2022**) demonstration of 70 percent permanent employment among academic staff must be read in context. By contrast, University and College Union's (UCU's) report (**2023**), which collates data from freedom of information requests, states that across UK HEIs, an average of 66 percent of research staff are precariously employed. At individual universities, this figure ranges from two to 99 percent, demonstrating substantial variation across the sector (**UCU, 2023**). PWUF contracts involve the same underlying occupational instability, can cause many staff the same issues with mortgages and visas as fixed-term contracts (FTCs),

and have a similar disproportionate impact on minoritised groups (**Kahn et al., 2024**).

Due to this inconsistent and localised nature of contract data collection within and between institutions, precarious contract use in UK HEIs is poorly monitored (**UCU, 2019; HESA, 2023**). Universities may choose to become signatories of agreements such as the Researcher Development Concordat (**Vitae, 2019**), which aim to increase parity of experience and opportunity. Despite this, monitoring of adherence to these policies varies greatly by department, institution and funder (**UCU, 2019**).

Poorly monitored employment processes at HEIs can expose staff to systemic risks, including discrimination, exploitation and harassment by a line manager or principal research investigator (**Mason & Megoran, 2021**). The degree of influence senior staff may have over an individual's future employment leaves many feeling unable to report such behaviour (**Mason & Megoran, 2021**).

Employment precarity has worsened with political and financial changes in the sector and the UK (**UCU, 2023; Universities UK, 2026**), including rising energy costs and international student fees and reductions in government research funding budgets. Universities UK (**2026**) project an overall £3.7 billion reduction in funding to HEIs by 2029–30. Despite this, data on existing and previous initiatives and alternative employment models to counter precarity is sparse and poorly coordinated sector-wide (**UCU, 2019**).

The University of Nottingham's Revisiting Employment Contracts: Helping Under-represented Researchers Develop, Lead and Excel (REC HURDLE) project was created in 2024 as a constructive response to the challenges outlined above. REC HURDLE operates at the individual and institutional level towards a culture supporting diverse backgrounds, needs, skill sets and career paths. It provides support and opportunities for those facing varying forms of precarity, with a focus on staff professional development and the impact of precarity on minoritised groups (**Wellcome, 2023**).

The two-year Wellcome-funded project takes a multi-faceted approach to improving the practice and literature around employment precarity, seeking to change local culture and practice and recommending next steps for both the University of Nottingham and the wider sector with three strands of activity:

- 1) A root-and-branch review of institutional and sector-wide contract use and professional outcomes, followed by a pilot of one or more initiatives to tackle institutional employment precarity;

- 2) An expansion of the Careers & Employability service into supporting research staff with their professional development at an individual level;
- 3) A bespoke professional development programme with additional support and development opportunities for those facing more barriers due to belonging to one or more minoritised or protected groups.

The following section explores and documents the effects and mechanisms of precarious employment. This is followed by detailed learnings from the REC HURDLE project and the Research Precarity Working Group and a section identifying future challenges and strategies to combat precarity in research culture.

Individual Impacts of Precarity

Employment precarity has a vast range of impacts on individuals and creates other interacting forms of precarity (**Solomon & Du Plessis, 2023**). The highly individualised and intersectional nature of precarity is demonstrated below through learnings from REC HURDLE.

Occupational and identity precarity

Short-term contracts limit access to professional development and career progression opportunities (**Solomon & Du Plessis, 2023**). Many training and study opportunities require guaranteed future employment, creating barriers even where continued employment is likely. The power of a principal investigator (PI) or line manager over a precariously employed staff member can prevent individuals accessing development time and funding, despite entitlements under the Researcher Development Concordat (**Solomon & Du Plessis, 2023**). REC HURDLE observed that in some cases, staff report their research fields are small enough for individuals to be well-known nationally, and a poor reputation with a senior academic can taint one's reputation sector wide.

Open-ended employment does not guarantee continued grant income. Universities may avoid permanent employment where future salary costs could fall to institutional funds, with individuals instead moving between FTCs across projects. Arguments can be made when recruiting that the required skillset is specific enough to justify an FTC, negating the automatic switch to permanent employment individuals would typically experience after two years of continuous service. Small breaks between the start and end dates of consecutive contracts can result in the loss of the employment protections provided by continuous service (**Jackson, 2026**).

Academic funding processes discriminate against the precariously employed by design. Many funding opportunities do not allow staff on FTCs to be principal investigator or co-investigator, limiting the autonomy precariously employed individuals have over their research (**Solomon & Du Plessis, 2023**).

Although not yet publicly available, case studies created through the University of Nottingham's Research Leadership in Action Programme document numerous mid-career researchers working on PWUF contracts while acting as line managers or principal investigators for staff on FTCs. This practice creates a conflict of interest between protecting and developing one's team and ensuring one's own continued employment, resulting in stress and disincentivising researchers from facilitating the redeployment of their staff. It is common for staff on PWUF contracts funded by external research grants to also provide teaching and PhD supervision, which should be funded by the university (**UCU, 2019**). This threatens the continuity of support for students if a staff member's research grant is terminated.

In the current economic model of UK academia, while research brings in money, on net, it costs the institution. Teaching posts, however, bring in money and therefore warrant permanent employment. As a result, staff pursuing research careers are forced toward three routes:

- 1) Combine research and teaching in exchange for a permanent contract;
- 2) Pursue a highly competitive, permanent research-only post with additional commitments, leading teams and grants;
- 3) Continue in precarious employment, doing research without additional teaching or management commitments (**Menard & Shinton, 2022**).

Limited progression paths for researchers lead to pipeline bottlenecks at the mid-career research stage. At this level, competition for permanent research-only posts is fierce, and many do not wish to, or have the capacity to, teach or lead a research group. As a result, many individuals, disproportionately from minoritised groups, find themselves forced to leave research.

It is common for skill sets to fall outside of traditional job–family boundaries and for individuals with a combination of research and teaching, professional and technical experience to be contracted in only one of these areas (**UCU, 2019**). As such, professional development and employment opportunities in these other aspects of their career are limited, and individuals can once again end up engaging in 'side-of-desk'

work for the institution, carrying out additional tasks beyond formal job descriptions, for personal career development and to contribute to the organisational culture and community. (UCU, 2019; Towers et al., 2024).

Economic, temporal and welfare precarity

Funding-linked contracts can create employment gaps, resulting in loss of income and benefits linked to continuous service (Kalleberg, 2009). FTCs, and in some cases PWUF contracts, can also prevent individuals from obtaining a mortgage (Coe & Kernohan, 2025). Time off work for poor mental or physical health, or burnout, can lead to loss of income when surpassing organisational sick leave commitments (Kinman & Wray, 2013). Precarious employment limits an individual's ability to plan their career and their finances, which can cause stress and impact personal milestones, such as moving house or having children (Kalleberg, 2009).

Ontological and social precarity

Individuals experiencing employment precarity face a higher workload in the search for new work, increased uncertainty and stress, the associated impacts on mental and physical health, and burnout (Kinman & Wray, 2013; Solomon & Du Plessis, 2023).

Through careers staff, REC HURDLE observed that researchers at the University of Nottingham and elsewhere attended careers appointments in lieu of other services more appropriate for their needs, such as counselling, due to the relative accessibility of the service and availability of appointments. Effective signposting by careers staff supported these individuals in navigating university systems, demonstrating the need for continued careers provision for researchers and equitable access to well-being support.

Intersectional impacts

Structural inequalities lead to systemic increases in the incidence and impact of precarity for minoritised individuals (Sim & Biemera, 2025). Data analysis through REC HURDLE, which will be published separately, sees over-representation on fixed-term contracts at the University of Nottingham for all under-represented groups recognised nationally (age, sex, parental status, caring responsibility, disability, sexuality, gender reassignment, marital status, race, religion or belief) (Equality Act 2010).

Key impacts of precarity on minoritised individuals, as observed through REC HURDLE's bespoke support programme for under-represented research staff, have compounding effects for individuals with intersecting identities, including:

- Increased vulnerability to discrimination and harassment

- Reduced capacity for the additional workload involved in securing future work
- Additional financial and practical commitments including childcare, disability costs and visa fees
- Reduced flexibility of location, working conditions and financial needs, reducing opportunities for networking and loss of involvement in upcoming grants
- Difficulty navigating complex funding and progression structures in UK higher education, known as the 'hidden curriculum'
- Difficulty engaging in full-time work due to disability or caring responsibilities: part-time staff are more likely to be employed on a fixed-term contract (43 percent) than those who are full-time (21 percent) (**HESA, 2023**).

Additionally, participants in REC HURDLE's bespoke professional development programme drew attention to the impact of cultural differences on work life, including miscommunications due to the varying interpretations of body language and eye contact across cultures. Some cultures' relationship to asking for help, respect for authority, or the need for an equal exchange of giving and receiving help can also be at odds with UK cultural expectations for networking within academia and reduce opportunities for individuals to secure their next contract (**Graham & Collins, 2026**).

The 'new precarity'

Across the lifetime of REC HURDLE, a new, alternate form of employment precarity has emerged: the ongoing threat of redundancy. As a result of the cost-of-living crisis, rising organisational energy costs amidst wars in Ukraine and Iran, and reduction in government research spending, many universities are facing deficits which risk their very survival (**Universities UK, 2026; Liu & Lee, 2024**). Many have introduced redundancy schemes, which vary greatly both within and between institutions in terms of transparency, the autonomy of career choices they provide staff members, and their parity across job families (**QMUCU, 2026**).

This type of precarity similarly has psychological and professional impacts on individuals, with under-represented groups at risk of being disproportionately impacted, and financial and research impacts at individual, institutional and sector-wide levels. This 'new precarity' is impacting those on fixed-term, PWUF and permanent contracts alike. In fact, internally funded staff, who are more often permanently employed,

are at greater risk when universities are looking to reduce internal spending.

Institutional impacts

Institutions also face their own burdens from employment precarity. Precarity results in poorer talent retention, organisational short-term thinking, and time lost both at the start of research grants due to recruitment delays and at the end of grants with staff leaving early to begin their next contract (**ARRC, 2024**). This would, in theory, result in reduced grant income and quality and quantity of institutional research outputs and has the potential to impact large-scale research income through institutional performance in the Research Excellence Framework (REF). The impacts of precarity on teaching and supervision provisions could influence student satisfaction league table results and, as such, student fees income. FTCs incur additional human resources costs for recruitment and onboarding and increased costs from sick leave due to stress, sickness and burnout (**Kinman & Wray, 2013; ARRC, 2024**).

Precarity also reduces diversity in the research pipeline due to its impact on minoritised groups and contributes to under-representation of these groups in senior positions. Such diversity is key to organisational wellbeing; intersectionality has been highlighted as an important reflexive tool in combating the culture of precarity in academic institutions (**Sim & Bierema, 2025**).

Precarity and ethics

Further concerns have been raised of the impact of precarity on research ethics. Research journals see a publication bias for conclusive findings (**Fanelli, 2010**), resulting in substantial evidence of researchers consciously or unconsciously misrepresenting their results to increase the likelihood of publication, a behaviour known as ‘p-hacking’ (**Fanelli, 2010**).

Progression to a permanent role requires a strong publication record, creating a financial incentive to publish. It has been theorised that as such, precarious employment increases the likelihood of ‘p-hacking’ in academic research (**Martinson et al., 2005**). This is currently speculation but presents an interesting avenue for future exploration.

Sector-Wide Initiatives to Combat Precarity

Although varying in scale and form based on institution, precarious employment is experienced across the sector. Fortunately, with a national focus on research culture to improve research income through the Research Excellence Framework’s increased interest in people and

environment (REF, 2025), there are many initiatives currently working to combat employment precarity. REC HURDLE benchmarking research identified five key points of activity:

Pooling

These are practices centred around pooling staff resources to distribute according to need. An example is ‘roving researchers’, who cover extended sickness or parental absences or periods where a post is vacant (Coombs, 2024). Schemes which employ ‘staff scientists’, who move flexibly between projects without changes in their permanent contract, exist across several UK universities, although there is no published literature on this to date.

Bridging

These practices involve extending the length of staff employment. This includes ‘bridge funding’ to employ staff between research funding contracts, and ‘continuation funding’, extending staff for a period of weeks or months with no future contract yet in place (UCU, 2023).

HR practices

HR practices to mitigate precarity include improved workforce planning and flexibility. These initiatives may involve dedicating more resources for more creative, agile working practices and less precarious employment conditions. These initiatives differ in approach and scale across institutions.

Contracts

Contractual initiatives support the altering of research employment contracts to combat precarity. Examples include reducing the minimum service period required for permanent employment, increased redundancy payments for staff with over four years of service, and increased restrictions on use of FTCs (UCU, 2023).

Development

Development initiatives are focused on improving the parity and extent of access to professional development support and career progression opportunities (Fisher, 2024; Pain, 2018). For example, the University of Sheffield’s Anti-Ableist Research Culture project allows one day a week for professional development of all staff employed on the project (University of Sheffield, 2026) and the University of York employs a designated PRISMs manager to support professional services research staff with their career development and ensure PRISM roles are appropriately advertised, graded and recruited (University of York, n.d.).

Barriers to Combating Precarity

Reviewing the existing initiatives and the present economic and cultural context at the University of Nottingham, the REC HURDLE project mixed agile contract design and workforce planning in its 'Researcher Transition Support' database. Combining the 'HR planning' and 'pooling' approaches, this pilot provides earlier visibility of upcoming job opportunities and methods for staff to connect with their PIs. Evaluation of this pilot includes data collection designed to support the continued development of institutional initiatives.

Such local initiatives are creating a valuable evidence base and seeing promising results but demonstrate the difficulties involved in effecting lasting change at an institutional scale within the timeframe and budget of current initiatives (**Studio Susegad, 2026**). With increasing cost demands, redundancies that increase workloads for remaining staff, and reductions in the scale and frequency of research culture funding, it is becoming increasingly difficult for universities to provide the resources to carry out lasting change. REC HURDLE found that increasing workloads mean many staff whose principal roles do not include research culture can no longer contribute to institutional research culture activity. Nationwide changes to current processes and policies are required, developed with the broad experiences of individuals in mind, to provide permanent solutions.

Further difficulty in locating and coordinating initiatives in this field has arisen due to variations in terminology. While 'research culture' is a space predominantly occupied by professional services staff, many research staff working on similar topics find themselves in the world of 'metascience', i.e. the study of research itself. This semantic difference reduces opportunities for collaboration across job families, and the transfer of learning from research to practice, and practice to research. Other examples of varying terminology include cross-institutional differences in job-family boundaries and contract types (for example, 'permanent with underlying funding' versus 'open-ended with fixed funding') and various terms used to describe technical and professional staff (e.g., 'research enablers', 'research professionals' and 'PRISMs', i.e. professional research investment and strategy managers).

Such differences in terminology result in a scattered community and missed collaborative opportunities. REC HURDLE's experience of driving policy and cultural change with a varied team demonstrates the value of communication and co-creation between academic and professional staff, opportunities for which are currently limited at a national scale by these semantic divisions. A move towards coordinated collaboration is essential to combat employment precarity.

Current research culture activity demonstrates an increasing appetite for tackling problems in a strategic, evidence-based and people-focused manner. Emergent regional and national research culture networks such as the Research Culture Enablers Network (**Moriarty & Nair, 2024**) and Wellcome's Institutional Research Culture Community (**Towers et al., 2024**) have provided a space for collaboration and have resulted in several targeted action groups. These groups focus on a variety of topics including community engagement with funders, theoretical 'systems thinking' approaches from social change research (**Stroh, 2015**) and political influences within and outside research culture. This environment provides a strong foundation for a coordinated national movement against precarity.

The Research Precarity Working Group

In June 2025, the Research Precarity Working Group (RPWG) was founded for the purpose of taking collective action to reduce the level and impact of employment precarity in research-related careers at higher-education institutions. The group's mission is to make a strong case for national change to current employment practices and improve support for those currently facing employment precarity, including research, professional and technical services staff. Developed with the broad and deeply individualised experiences of precarity in mind, RPWG engages with funders, higher education institutions (HEIs), government organisations, unions and other relevant national organisations supporting academia, calling for systemic changes to research employment processes, with open and collaborative discussion of the forms these could take.

Co-creation and decentralised decision-making were central to the formation of RPWG and are a fundamental practice throughout its ongoing work. For instance, through a collaborative session at the 2025 International Research Culture Conference (IRCC2025), hosted by the University of Warwick, we identified actions necessary to combat research culture precarity, which fall under three main categories:

Data and Evidence

- Collate existing data and evidence, including ongoing initiatives and key contacts across the sector, to assist those carrying out ongoing work on this topic.
- Gather data to fill gaps in current research.
- Found an online evidence bank to collaboratively build a national case for change.

- Provide data, advice and direction for others carrying out work on employment precarity in research.

Organising and Outreach

- Map, liaise with and signpost existing support structures.
- Promote, support and coordinate with regional and national research culture networks and emergent areas of activity relating to precarity.

Making the Ask

- Engage with funders and HEIs to request changes to policies, practices and/or funding processes with the aim of reducing the extent or impact of precarity.
- Have open, frank discussions focused on accountability and collaborative change.
- Increase awareness of employment precarity beyond academic circles.

The foundational work of the RPWG determines the scale of changes we hope to effect and considers the workload, emotional labour and likelihood of success for each. Possible areas for improvement include:

- Sector-wide strengthening of precarity data collection, monitoring and oversight;
- Standardising promotion and progression frameworks, professional development commitments, and parental and sick leave entitlements across institutions and funders;
- Improving recognition of individuals, departments and organisations for research culture work by HEIs and funders.

Two significant evidence gaps have been identified by the working group as important areas for data collection: First, there is little data on the demographic of staff who have left academia and their experiences both inside and outside academia. This data would facilitate targeted support for key demographics identified as likely to leave and appropriate support to meet the needs of those who have already left. Second, due to localised, unstandardised and unmonitored data collection on precarity sector-wide, estimating the cost of precarity to an institution, or indeed to the research ecosystem, is complex. Such data is vital to make a financial case to HEIs, funders and the government that reforming the employment model of academia is required.

Learnings from a Grassroots Movement

In its first year, RPWG has surpassed one hundred members, established a preliminary online evidence bank of precarity-related resources, and produced a roadmap for future engagement with key stakeholders. RPWG has adopted a devolved leadership style, regularly reviewing its approach, to develop a sustainable organisational structure.

Many group members are themselves precariously employed with limited additional workload capacity. This results in untold lost collective knowledge and often requires substantial emotional labour. Group members have described the emotional burden of tackling precarity, leading to regular variations in their optimism for progress. Members noted that an important factor in successfully navigating this burden is prioritising care for oneself and one another.

Reflexive consideration of one's own precarity is also instrumental in understanding how we each can impact and improve the system for those around us (**Sim & Bierema, 2025**). Personal experiences of precarity bring vital understanding of its mechanisms but could impact the objectivity of work in this area. RPWG plans to mitigate this risk by developing a robust and comprehensive evidence base and providing equitable opportunities for co-creation across stakeholder groups.

The business model of higher education currently sees universities spending more on teaching and research than the income these activities generate (**UKRI, 2023**). Universities, on net, frequently lose money from research activities due to rising staff costs and overheads, especially as they are required by many funders to contribute 20 percent of the full economic cost of externally funded grants, e.g., UKRI's dual-support model (**UKRI, 2023**). Due to inflation, the costs of teaching UK-based students now also outweigh income generated from UK student fees (**Universities UK, 2025**). Instead, income is primarily generated from international student fees and commercial endeavours (**UKRI, 2023**), both of which have reduced following fee changes and the cost-of-living crisis (**Universities UK, 2026**). Increases in energy costs have also contributed to the financial deficit, leading many UK universities to reduce staff costs (**Martin, 2026**).

Under the current funding model, many universities face structural financial pressures while performing their primary function; hence, there is a natural argument to be made that the commercial model of the university is inherently unsustainable (**Universities UK, 2026**). HEIs face a leaky career pipeline, and with it the loss of diversity, knowledge and experience, while simultaneously needing to increase profits. This exposes a significant risk to the UK's research ecosystem and provides a strong case for government involvement and significant sector-wide reforms.

Conclusion

The REC HURDLE project has demonstrated both the efficacy and the limitations of institutional initiatives in lessening the extent and impact of precarity at an individual and institutional level. REC HURDLE has benefitted greatly from strong cross-departmental cooperation and the support of 'allies' working in equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI), research culture and leadership roles across the university. The project would not have been possible without external funding, and while the activities of REC HURDLE have led to lasting changes to university provisions and processes, not all initiatives created by the project will continue. A more sustainable model of research culture funding is required within HEIs, with greater efforts needed from universities to dedicate internal funding to research culture activity and to permanently employ research culture staff. There is also a need for funders to prioritise calls for research culture projects, in order to sustain the current level of research activity and support UK research culture's precarious community.

The establishment of the Research Precarity Working Group builds on decades of data collection, research culture and policy change initiatives on precarity and aims to provide a foundation for future progress. While RPWG will not eliminate employment precarity alone, it aims to demonstrate that meaningful institutional and sector-wide change is achievable and document it when it occurs. Widespread and collective action is essential for lasting change in this area and requires those within the research ecosystem to be reflexive in their coordination efforts, spreading awareness within and beyond the sector while prioritising self-care and care for each another along the way.

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