

The Sessional Curse: Universities and the Casual Work Force

By [Dr. Binoy Kampmark](#)

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Universities have become bastions of sessional torment, feeding grounds for despair. The term “sessional” is merely a euphemised way of describing an academic employee who has no ongoing employment other than what is offered, a person ever at the mercy of the subject or course coordinator of a department. They are the toiling poor, the barrel scrapers, the trudged upon and demanded.

The problem here is loathsomely international. In 2014, CBC News noted the increasing use of contracted sessionals in the university curriculum in Canada. The case of Kimberley Ellis Hale [was cited](#), an instructor in sociology at Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo, Ontario, who had essentially slaved for sixteen years on a precarious contract. Despite those years of service, “she has no job security. She still needs to apply to teach her courses every semester. She gets none of the perks a full time professor gets”.

As with Canada, the United Kingdom’s tertiary education system sees approximately half of all academic staff employed on low-paid temporary contracts. In the United States, half-time work characterises half of faculty staff while the majority do not fall within a “tenure track” category. The doors to employment security are, for the most part, barred.

In Australia, as a consequence largely of shifts that took place in university education in the early 1990s, teaching and research institutions became servers of market goals and ideologies, overseen by a none-too-benevolent master in the form of the Commonwealth. Casual academic staff [are](#) the “proletariat of the academic profession”, something akin to a tribe abandoned and lost.

“It seems,” [reflect](#) Jane Kenway and Diana Langmead rather ruefully, “that the triumph of economics over university education is now complete.”

Central to this is fragmentation and increased expectation: the former, focused on splitting management from workers and ongoing workers from casual employees; the latter, on converting the academic into a consultant, entrepreneur and wearer of all hats of incongruous size and meaning, all the while inflating workloads on diminishing returns.

Casual academic staff are, according to [research](#) done by Robyn Day, David Peetz and Glenda Strachan, “not integrated with the permanent academic labour market and that discipline is a key determinant of the level of ‘frustration’ of casual academic staff.”

With this environment comes a subservience peppered by anxiety. Free thinking is feared and despised; grovelling and silence is rewarded, if only sporadically. Colleagues compete

for diminishing resources; the casual labour force fears the loss of favour and, to that end, remain consciously indifferent to university policy that might well undermine pedagogy and research. Resistance and protest is, in some cases brutally, quelled.

Little wonder then, that university politburos and their over-remunerated consultancies insist on collective binges of wellness days, the psychobabble that substitutes decent policies for crank panaceas. (We care for you by showing how we detest you.)

“Searching for wellness and well-being on most university websites,” [write](#) Brad Wright and Matthew Winslade in *The Conversation*, “will lead to a dedicated page detailing a wealth of independent strategies and programs focusing on specific areas of health, such as mental health or workplace safety.”

These grotesque exercises serve one purpose: to demonstrate the ongoing failings of a university system to either care for teaching and research staff and, in a grim spinoff, the students themselves. Staff employed on a casual basis will emit levels of psychological distress so acute as to be contagious; the students, in turn, will react.

The university politburos are, however, on to this, appropriating such fairly meaningless concepts as the [“healthy university”](#). Issuing from the 2015 International Conference on Health Promoting Universities and Colleges in Canada, such holistic approaches find ample room in conference proceedings but serve to remain stuck in a management, public relations void. While the [Okanagan Charter](#) arising from the gathering was fed by the thoughts of health professionals, researchers, students and policy makers from 45 countries, local implementation remains within the purview of the management classes long lost to academic thought.

The dictates of finance and delivery are all powerful. Quality can be left to hang. While a tenured or ongoing employee at academic rank might well be given a set number of courses to teach, those same courses, and number, can be taught by a sessional staff member for a fraction of the price.

The academic sweatshop, in other words, burgeons with desperate members hoping for admission. Managers and higher academics, noting this, see chances to mine the pool of labour, and boast accordingly of having lesser teaching loads to enable them to pursue fictional and, in most cases, the stodge that counts as research. (Evaluators, take note.)

The sessional curse also extends to undermining the broader university environment. While fat cat managers gorge themselves upon increasing salaries to cut ribbons, imbibe, identify appropriate paperclips and fill rooms with their insipid and, in the end, irrelevant presences, the pay for the sessional academic remains fairly constant in its impecuniousness.

Hours are capped; students are not permitted, depending on the policy of the department, any attention beyond an hour in terms of marking and consultations. The learning process, in other words, is cut at its most vital point, discouraging the sessional from marking the paper in any way beyond the bare limit whilst depriving the student of the rigour necessary to benefit from that said education.

This age of education is marked by the struggling part-timer and the looting manager barricaded behind protocols of control and discipline (do not, academics are told, challenge

the management line). Any reconciling of these is impossible on current trajectories and requires an enthusiastic, collectively orchestrated coup d'état.

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Dr. Binoy Kampmark was a Commonwealth Scholar at Selwyn College, Cambridge. He lectures at RMIT University, Melbourne. He is a frequent contributor to Global Research and Asia-Pacific Research. Email: bkampmark@gmail.com

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