

The precarious employment of staff in Irish Higher Educational institutions and its policy implications

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Key words: precarity; higher educational institutions; academic staff; post doc researchers; support staff.

1. Introduction

Since 2014, there have been a series of policy initiatives to increase the proportion of women in senior academic positions in higher educational institutions (HEIs) in Ireland (O'Connor and Irvine 2020). This focus has been criticised for excluding a focus on precarity (Meade et al., 2023; O'Keefe and Courtois, 2019). Since women now make up seven of the 12 university presidents (a change that has occurred over three years), this objective can be depicted as achieved, although even yet 15 per cent of the male academic staff cohort are full professors compared with less than eight per cent of their female counterparts (HEA, 2022a; see also EC 2021: 187). It is suggested that precarity is another manifestation of the impact of a male academic elite in HEIs, in this case driving a research focused agenda which necessitates the employment of large numbers of precarious researchers and support staff with no career prospects.

According to the annual reports by the Higher Educational Authority since 2016 the majority of the core-funded academic staff are permanent and full time (HEA, 2016- 2022a). This created the impression that precarity in HEIs (defined as a state of persistent insecurity with regard to employment or income) was not an issue. This has been contested (O'Keefe and Courtois 2019; Ivancheva et al, 2019). Indeed, precarity was identified as a key issue affecting Irish HEIs by the 2nd report on Gender Equality in Irish Higher Education Institutions (HEA, 2022b). However, up to very recently, no national data was available on this.

In this piece, the main trends emerging from the data published by Irish Higher Education Authority (HEA 2022a) are outlined, and the policy implications discussed. The word non-permanent (which includes the temporary and hourly paid) is used synonymously with precarity. After a description of the overall context; the extent and nature of precarious contracts in Irish HEIs are discussed and the policy implications explored.

2. The context: staff, their types and career trajectories

This section looks first at the situation of PhD students and graduates and then more broadly at academic and research careers in Irish HEIs.

2.1 PhD Students and Graduates

Precarity is seen as a staff issue in the existing data. Those undertaking PhDs in Ireland are officially seen as students and are assumed to be in full-time education. There are a range

of scholarships/stipends provided by research funding organisations or by individual HEIs. Thus, although PhD students may undertake research and teaching responsibilities in Irish HEIs, they are not included in data on staff, and have no employment-related rights. However, in Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM), PhD students are often included on a principal investigator's (PIs) project and may work alongside post docs or other researchers. This raises questions about their status as full-time students. This was recently highlighted by Jeffrey Sardina of the National Committee of the Post Graduate Workers Committee in Ireland, who is classified as a full-time student and receives a stipend, although as he sees it, his 'primary focus at TCD is producing intellectual property and teaching for the university' (Noonan, March 29 2023). There was no response from the HEI or the research funding organisation to this statement, with the Revenue Commissioners indicating that if he was not a full-time student, he should pay tax on his stipend - thereby implicitly discouraging further revelations.

There has been a dramatic increase in the number of PhDs: doubling from over 14,400 in 2006 to just under 29,000 in 2016 (CSO, 2017), with further increases since 2016, and almost 2,000 postgraduate research graduates in 2021 alone (HEA, 2021b). Precarity after graduation is an issue for PhD graduates from Irish HEIs: with just under half (47 per cent) of the 2018 PhD graduates being on fixed term 12-month contracts, and the remainder being in even more precarious situations (HEA, 2021b). Just over 16 per cent of research post graduates were employed as post doc researchers in 2021 (compared with roughly 13 per cent in 2020 and 21 per cent in 2018: HEA, 2020). This contrasts with the US where 65 per cent of US PhDs complete a postdoc (Powell, 2015).

2.2. Academic and Research Careers

In Irish universities (as in the UK) the academic career hierarchy consists of four main positions: lecturer; senior lecturer; associate professor and professor. In the new Technological Universities (established 2019-2022), reflecting their origin in Institutes of Technology (IOTs), the academic career hierarchy is more attenuated and consists of three main positions: assistant lecturer; lecturer and senior lecturer. This may well change in the future (OECD, 2022).

In the pre-2019 Irish universities, academic positions are mainly publicly advertised by each HEI at the top (full professor) and the bottom (lecturer), with recruitment procedures typically involving open competitions. Each HEI decides at what level posts are to be advertised and what the criteria for appointments will be. An internal promotion system provides access to most of the intermediate positions, with the criteria officially including teaching, research and service, although in practice priority in these, as in externally advertised appointments, is given to research. Occasionally, fixed term academic contracts are given (e.g., to cover maternity leave or managerial assignments) and recruitment procedures for these positions may be less rigorous.

In Irish universities there are separate career trajectories for academics (whose role includes teaching and research) and researchers (whose role is meant to be mainly research). The career path on the research track is not formalised at national level and consists mainly of post doc positions, with a very small number of senior researcher positions. Frequently, recruitment on this track is on an ad-hoc basis for specific projects (typically on two to five-year contracts) and there is no formal promotion/progression system. Researchers tend to

progress from one research contract to another, depending on the availability of research funding and their relationship with the PI (who is typically a permanent senior academic).

In Ireland the Protection of Employees (Fixed-Term Work) Act 2003, implemented the EU Directive (99/70/EC), that an academic employee who has contract(s) totalling more than four years is entitled to a contract of indefinite duration (CID). Following the recommendations of the Cush report (2016), this was shortened to two years, although specific purpose, fixed-term contracts can be used to avoid giving CIDs (Delaney, 2020). The State Employment Control Framework during the economic recession limited the number of permanent staff (from 2011) that could be employed by each university, with research positions to be filled only by fixed-term contracts.

In Irish HEIs there are roughly the same number of core-funded academic staff as core funded support staff (Table 1). Thus, in 2021, across all Irish HEIs, over a third (37 per cent) of the staff were core-funded academics; with just under a third being core-funded support staff. The proportion of non-core funded research and specialist staff and related support staff is not much smaller than core-funded academics. Men are more likely than women to be core-funded academic staff and also non-core funded researchers, with women being more likely to be in the support areas (see also EC, 2021) where salaries and promotion prospects are much poorer.

Table 1: Staff by gender, category funding source in all Irish HEIs in 2021; % (n)

	2021	2021	2021
	Men	Women	Total
Core funded Academic staff	43% (5853)	32% (5026)	37% (10879)
Core funded professional, management & support staff**	26% (3498)	36% (5775)	32% (9273)
Non-core funded Research specialist academic staff**	20% (2640)	16% (2475)	17% (5115)
Non-core funded Research, specialist, prof, mgt & support staff***	11% (1452)	16% (2568)	14% (4020)
Total	46% (13,443)	54% (15,844)	(29,287)

HEA (2022) ; WTE; rounding

3. The extent and nature of precarious contracts in Irish HEIs

We now look first at the type and funding source of positions in Irish higher educational institutions and then at their breakdown by gender and discipline.

3.1 Core and non-core funded research contracts

The most recent HEA data (HEA, 2022a), including all HEIs, shows that 33 per cent of staff in Irish HEIs are non-permanent (Table 2). These are most likely to be in the non-core funded areas. Precarity mainly involves those in temporary contract research positions (and the support positions related to them). In presenting data on contract type and funding source, the HEA (2022a) is now classifying all academic and research staff as academics: with 73 per cent of such staff being full-time temporary in non-core funded academic areas.

Table 2: Staff by contract type and funding source in all Irish HEIs in 2021 % (n)

	Academic*			PMSS**			
	Core	Non-Core	Total	Core	Non-Core	Total	Gross Total
Permanent: -Full-time	83% (9043)	15% (768)	61% (9811)	75% (6929)	35% (1413)	63% (8342)	62% (18,153)
Permanent Part Time	4% (470)	2% (93)	3% (563)	9% (831)	4% (157)	7% (988)	5% (1551)
Temporary: Full-time	9% (979)	73% (3730)	29% (4709)	14% (1258)	55% (2217)	26% (3475)	28% (8184)
Temporary: Part-time	2% (172)	6% (320)	3% (492)	2% (182)	6% (225)	3% (407)	3% (899)
Hourly paid	2% (214)	4% (204)	3% (418)	<1% (73)	-(8)	<1% (81)	2% (499)
% (n) Non-permanent	13% (1365/ 10878)	83% (4254/ 5115)	35% (5619/ 15993)	16% (1513/ 9273)	61% (2450/ 4020)	30% (3963/ 13,293)	33% (9582/ 29286)

HEA (2022): WTE and rounding; * HEA (2022) incl academic and research and specialist posts; **Professional Management and Support services- HEA (2016) defined these as administrative and support.

Thus, almost three quarters of the academic non-core funded staff are temporary full-time (as compared with nine per cent of the academic core funded staff). It is not clear how many of the former are postdocs.

3.2 Breakdown by gender, discipline and funding source

Post docs are often disproportionately allocated low status undervalued activities (such as routine lab work, tutoring, undergraduate teaching etc) (O'Connor et al, 2023). Walsh et al (2016) estimated that there were approx. 2,5000-3,000 postdocs in Ireland at that time, and they seem likely to have increased since then. The HEA provided data on exchequer funded academic contracts 2015-2019 (HEA, 2021c) - some of which are likely to be non-core funded research ones. There were 2,462 such contracts in the then seven universities in 2019 (equivalent to just under half of the total number of academic core funded staff). The majority (57 per cent) of those on such contracts were men and were in Science, Technology, Engineering, Maths and Medicine (STEMM: 72 per cent: HEA, 2021b). Post docs funded by Science Foundation Ireland (SFI) are likely to be five years whereas those funded by the Irish Research Council (IRC) are at most two years. SFI was unable to indicate the total number of postdocs they fund, their gender or disciplinary profile (SFI, 2021). The IRC mainly provides a small number of fellowships to individuals (63 of the 79 being for two years: IRC, 2021) thus

reducing the possibility of the holders being in a long-term subordinate position and/or contributing extensively to the research output of permanent academics in these areas. (Interestingly, in five of the eight years the percentage of two-year postdocs allocated to women in Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences [AHSS], the stereotypically female pattern, was lower than those allocated to any other category : O’Connor, 2022b). Thus, from the fragmentary and tentative data available it appears that the longer post doc contracts are most likely to be in STEMM in the universities, with men in STEMM being most likely to get them.

EU data on the precarity of postdocs (defined as recognised researchers i.e., PhD holders who are not yet fully independent: EC, 2021: 156) shows no difference in their gender profile in the higher educational sector across EU27 (roughly 10 per cent in both cases). However, men are much more likely than women to be in such positions in Ireland (i.e., 24 per cent versus 13 per cent: EC, 2021: 160).

Table 3: Academic Staff* by contract type and funding source in all HEIs:2021 % (n)

	Core		Non-Core		Total		Gross total
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Total
Permanent: -Full-time	86% (5011)	80% (4032)	16% (428)	14% (340)	64% (5439)	58% (4372)	61% (9811)
Permanent Part Time	3%(192)	5% (278)	1% (40)	2% (53)	3% (232)	4% (331)	3%(563)
Temporary: Full-time	8% (481)	10% (498)	74% (1942)	72% (1788)	28% (2423)	30% (2286)	29% (4709)
Temporary: Part-time	1% (56)	2% (116)	4%(120)	8%(200)	2% (176)	4% (316)	3%(492)
Hourly paid	2%(112)	2% (102)	4%(110)	4%(94)	3% (222)	3% (196)	3%(418)
% (n) non-permanent	11% (649/5853)	14% (716/5026)	82% (2172/2640)	84% (2082/2475)	33% (2821/8493)	37% (2798/7501)	35% (5619/15994)

HEA (2022); Data from 2021: WTEs; rounding; * includes research and specialist staff

A qualitative study of STEM in one Irish university, found that postdocs had frequently been groomed by an academic as an undergraduate, invited to do a PhD with them and then to be a postdoc on their project, where although they are typically interviewed, the position may be one designed by and for them (O’Connor, 2022a). Since most senior academics in STEM are male, this informal sponsorship may be more likely to favour junior men. Paradoxically then, the male dominated academic STEM track may potentially facilitate their precarity and a very uncertain career path in research.

Men are more likely than women to be in core-funded, permanent, full-time academic positions in Irish HEIs (Table 3). There is little difference in the proportion of non-permanent men and women in non-core areas (Table 3). In contrast to what has been suggested (Ivancheva et al, 2019), only tiny minorities of men and women in the core-funded area are paid on an hourly rate (and hence have no employment rights). However, the possibility that this may reflect under-reporting by the HEIs cannot be eliminated.

Non-core staff were traditionally referred to as administration and support staff (HEA, 2016) but are now referred to as PMSS (Professional, Management, Support Services: HEA 2022a). The overwhelming majority of these (83 per cent) are non-permanent-mostly full-time temporary (55 per cent as compared with the 13 per cent of those in core-funded support areas). The support area is typically a female area (EC, 2021). However there is no difference in the

percentage of men and women in the support area who are full-time permanent, although men were marginally more likely to be non-permanent (see Table 4)

Table 4: Support Staff* (PMSS) by contract type and funding source in all HEIs: % (n)

	Core**		Non-Core**		Total		Total
	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	
Permanent: -Full-time	83% (2914)	70% (4015)	35% (510)	35% (903)	69% (3424)	59% (4918)	63% (8342)
Permanent Part Time	3%(93)	13% (738)	<1% (14)	5% (143)	2%(107)	10% (881)	7%(988)
Temporary: Full-time	12% (431)	14% (827)	60% (877)	52% (1340)	26% (1308)	26% (2167)	26% (3475)
Temporary: Part-time	1% (43)	2% (139)	3%(46)	7%(179)	2%(89)	4% (318)	3% (407)
Hourly paid	<1% (17)	1% (56)	<1% (5)	<1% (3)	<1%(22)	<1%(59)	<1% (81)
% (n) non-permanent	14% (491/3498)	18% (1022/5775)	64% (928/1452)	59% (1522/2568)	29% (1419/4950)	30% (2544/8343)	30% (3963/13,293)

Data from 2021: WTEs; rounding *In HEA (2022) these are referred to as PMSS (Professional, Management, Support Services); **In HEA (2016) these were referred to administration and support staff; *** In HEA (2016) these were referred to as research and specialist posts

In summary, precarity in Irish HEIs appears to overwhelmingly reflect the consequences of that focus on research which is a key element in facilitating the global ranking of HEIs and in enhancing the career prospects of permanent academics at the expense of temporary researchers.

4. Policy implications

Pressure to deal with the issue of precarity in HEIs is coming from the OECD (2021). This issue raises questions about the prioritisation of the research function in HEIs in the context of a concern with their global ranking (Hazelkorn, 2015, 2018); about the imbalance between the numbers of PhDs and post docs relative to permanent academic positions, and about the research funding and knowledge creation models in STEM, which require large numbers of non-permanent staff who have little or no possibility of permanent positions in HEIs.

4.1 Challenges of contract policy in Ireland

Within Ireland the problem of precarity is beginning to be recognised. The WRC (2022) recently awarded a contract of indefinite duration under the Protection of Employees (Fixed Term Work) Act (2003) concluding that, despite a break of six months (April-October 2017) during seven years of contracts, there was an understanding that the applicant's employment was to continue. This decision has potential implications for other postdoc contracts. Easy solutions such as defining all those with long research contracts as permanent academics (HEA, 2022a) poses not only financial challenges, but also is likely to affect the disciplinary and gender profile of HEIs. Thus, if those with non-permanent longer-term research contracts are given permanent positions, men and particularly those in STEM, are most likely to benefit.

Furthermore, since such research staff are likely to have limited teaching involvement it raises questions about the teaching versus research function of HEIs and the differential status of the two activities.

Since temporary researcher positions draw on an increasing numbers of PhD graduates (and that seems likely to further increase), precarity raises questions about the imbalance between them and the number of permanent academic positions. This is a global problem which has been recognised by the OECD (2021) and is being variously tackled in different countries (O'Connor et al., 2023). It could be reduced by increasing the proportions of such PhD graduates seeking employment outside HEIs. Indeed, there is some evidence that the Odyssey programme in University College Cork (2022) has been helpful in getting PhD students and graduates to consider this. However, a study of postdocs globally found that one third of them, and 80 per cent of those currently working in North America or Europe, saw academia as their preferred career destination (Woolston, 2020). Furthermore, in the absence of any data tracking postdocs' careers in Ireland (O'Connor, 2022b), it is not clear how effective this is likely to be.

4.2 Policy implications for research funding models and other issues

There is also the issue of the ongoing acceptability of a research funding model where funds are allocated to a professorial, permanent academic (predominantly male) whose career is enhanced by the work of these full-time temporary researchers to whom neither the HEI nor the grant holding PI has any responsibility. To date there has been no evidence that either SFI or permanent academics are willing to advocate for change in this research funding model.

The situation of the predominantly female staff in precarious non-core funded support areas has been largely ignored. In both the core and non-core support areas (with the exception of the very small minority of very highly paid administrators) salaries are lower and there is no system of promotion, apart from seeking to regrade posts or accessing more highly graded positions. Thus, these positions are not only precarious: they are also effectively financial and career cul-de-sacs.

In an Irish context, there has been no public discussion of these issues, although the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (2022) recommended that the Minister review the precarity of researchers, postgraduate workers, support staff and hourly paid academic contracts. It is not coincidental that the Higher Educational Authority (2022a) subsequently published detailed data on staff by contract type for the first time. However, its sleight of hand in obscuring the distinction between academics and researchers by defining them all as academics cannot be seen as a satisfactory solution.

At the very least the implications of such a move in gender, disciplinary and financial terms for HEIs need to be discussed with all stakeholders.

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