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A faded, teal-tinted background image of a grand classical building with multiple stories, large windows, and a central entrance with a pediment.

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Non-Standard Academics: A Profile Across Ten UK Universities

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Non-Standard Academics: A Profile Across Ten UK Universities

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ABSTRACT *This paper investigates the profile of non-established teachers and part-time academic staff on fractional contracts (referred to together as “non-standard academics” or NSAs) at a cross section of ten “new” universities across England and Scotland. Using survey techniques, it analyses the profile of NSAs in terms of demographic variables such as gender, ethnic background, age, marital status and qualifications. It examines aspects of their control over conditions, like hours worked, timetabling, training and pay, and the extent to which respondents have been able to improve these areas. It also examines the perceived advantages and disadvantages of non-standard employment, along with individual and household incomes. Finally, the paper analyses reasons for accepting NSA status. The element of compulsion versus choice is critical in determining the kind of satisfaction that NSAs are likely to derive from their various assignments, and the distinction helps to refine our understanding of the status of temporary or permanent part-time work in the labour market.*

KEYWORDS: Non-established teachers, non-standard academics, part-time academics, portfolio workers, temporary workers, visiting lecturers

The fragmentation of labour markets over recent years has led to widespread interest in forms of non-standard employment, including part-time, fixed-term, temporary or agency work and self-employment. This paper examines the use of non-standard contracts for academic staff at a cross section of ten “new” universities across England and Scotland, focusing on visiting lecturers, or non-established teachers, and permanent staff on fractional appointments. We refer to these two categories together as “non-standard academics” (NSAs). At present very little is known about the numbers of workers in these categories or their characteristics, even though universities are firmly dependent on them for providing the delivery of teaching. According to most estimates, non-established staff (captured by our term NSAs) teach up to a third of undergraduate degrees (Blackwell, 2003). This paper explores a variety of issues raised by our sample, including their terms and conditions, the degree of choice involved in becoming an NSA, and their assessments of the advantages and disadvantages of this kind of contractual status.

The survey covering ten universities was entitled “Non-standard contracts in UK universities: choice and compulsion in the creation of portfolio working”, and was funded by the Nuffield Foundation. In April and May 2004 we sent out questionnaires to 5,892 academics on a variety of non-standard contracts, who had been identified for us by the participating universities. These universities kindly organised the dispatch of the questionnaires to the full sample of their NSAs.

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At no time did we ever see their names and addresses. Eventually 1331 questionnaires were returned, a response rate of 22.6% overall. In return for their support in dispatching the questionnaires, we have also written a paper for each university profiling their own NSAs and comparing them to those in the other nine universities. To preserve anonymity, we have given each university an assumed name: East England, East Midlands, Greater London, North East, North West, Scotland, South Coast, South East, South Midlands and West Midlands.

Aims and Objectives

Our research builds on a pilot study of 79 NSAs at Royal Holloway University of London, carried out in summer 2003 (Brown and Gold, 2004). It also develops work conducted by one of the writers into the terms and conditions of freelance translators (Fraser and Gold, 2001; Gold and Fraser, 2002) and contributes to the literature on the “self-employed without employees”. We examine the position of non-standard academics because we are interested principally in employment motivations and the extent to which this group of workers maintains several jobs at the same time. Our hypothesis is that these categories of workers, despite the differences in their employment status, generally earn their living through combining a variety of types of employment, such as teaching, consultancy and writing, and therefore can be seen as “portfolio workers” (Handy, 1990; Handy, 1994). Until now, studies in this area have tended to focus on non-established staff as casualised workers on fixed-term contracts and on their sense of insecurity (Bryson and Barnes, 2000; Husbands, 1998a). Our own study covers a broader group: all those on non-permanent contracts and permanent part-time staff. We are aware of very little work on NSAs’ own perceptions of their working conditions (NATFHE, 2001). Our research therefore builds on such studies both empirically and theoretically, not least by investigating the degree of choice involved in accepting such contracts.

Our survey adds to the growing literature that examines the conditions of “portfolio workers”, such as copy editors (Stanworth and Stanworth, 1997), management consultants (Mallon, 1998) and translators (Fraser and Gold, 2001). However, the significance of our work is underpinned by two further factors. The first is that there is a “relatively sparse literature on academic industrial relations” (Wilson, 1991: 250) – a statement that still remains valid today – and the second is the increasing importance of non-established teachers in delivering higher education in the UK (Cutler et al., 1997; Bryson and Barnes, 2000). We therefore also hope to contribute to a neglected corner of industrial relations research in the UK, with particular reference to a diverse group of non-standard academics who play a significant role within it.

We have sought, first of all, to establish a profile of the workers concerned in terms of demographic variables, such as gender, ethnic background, age, marital status and qualifications. Very little indeed is known about these workers and even national estimates of their numbers vary dramatically (Husbands, 1998b; Husbands and Davies, 2000), so this descriptive aspect of our research should not be underestimated. Since we have also asked about training needs and other human resource related matters, university policy makers are also likely to find our results of practical value when drawing up their human resource strategies. Like contract researchers, NSAs share certain features in common – such as employment conditions and status – but there are also wide divergences in their ambitions and perceptions of their role (Allen-Collinson, 2000).

We investigate aspects of control over conditions like hours worked, timetabling, training and pay, and the extent to which respondents have been able to improve these areas. We examine too the perceived advantages and disadvantages of non-standard employment as well as individual and household incomes.

Finally, our survey also has more theoretical objectives. It examines reasons for accepting NSA status. This element of compulsion versus choice is critical in determining the kind of satisfaction that portfolio workers are likely to derive from their various assignments. Analysis of such push/pull factors helps to refine our understanding of the status of temporary or permanent part-time work in the labour market, a matter that remains controversial because of its association with cost-cutting (Bradley et al., 2000).

The Survey

As noted above, very little is known about the profile – background, motivation and working conditions – of non-standard academics (NSAs) in UK universities. In an attempt to reveal more about their identity and work trajectory, we carried out a survey of NSAs at ten universities early in the summer of 2004. This report is based on the 1331 usable responses that we received

With respect to their employment as “portfolio workers”, our study of non-standard academics reveals that 47% had one additional paid job, 11% had two and 7.5% had three or more additional jobs. NSAs may have chosen portfolio work in order to meet other goals, such as work/life balance or to engage in voluntary activities. However, many people have also found themselves compelled to become portfolio workers through external circumstance, such as redundancy or lack of other opportunities. For this reason we have also explored whether the people in our survey would prefer to become full-time permanent employees given the opportunity. Across the sample there was some interest in a full-time permanent job (30%), with 26.5% answering “maybe”. This leaves a sizeable proportion rejecting the idea of a permanent full-time post (42.5%). We also asked whether our respondents would like a permanent position “on your current hours”, which in the overwhelming majority of cases meant part-time. This was significantly more popular than a full-time job: well over one third would take such a position (36.5%), and a further segment would consider doing so (25%). The proportion rejecting such a change outright was much smaller at 26.5%.

Personal Details

Of the responses, 1009 were returned by staff on fixed term or temporary contracts and 297 by fractional appointees on permanent contracts. This shows a far greater proportion of insecure rather than part-time tenured staff, although there was wide variation in the usage of different types of contract across the universities in our sample. Where totals for the sample do not add to 1331 in the subsequent analysis, this indicates that respondents answered “not applicable” or failed to answer a particular question.

Table I. Contractual status across all universities

Contractual status	Number	%
Permanent	297	22.5
Temporary	537	41
Fixed term	472	36

All percentages given to one decimal place – totals may not add up due to rounding.

Table I shows by what margin temporary and fixed-term contracts outweighed permanent part-time ones across respondents at our universities.

Table II. Gender

Gender	Number	%
Female	817	62
Male	506	38

In general, female respondents far outweighed their male colleagues at each university in the survey.

Table III. Ethnic background

Ethnic background	Number	%
White	1236	94
South Asian	25	2
Mixed	13	1
Chinese	8	0.5

The sample was almost entirely white. There was, however, evidence of diversity with the largest other ethnic groups being South Asian, Mixed and Chinese.

Table IV presents the number of respondents in each of our six age bands. As our pilot study had showed that there were very few HE academic staff aged under 30, our lowest band captures all those aged less than 35 years. Academia is also characterised by an ageing workforce, so our categories seek to identify the use of those aged 60-64 years and those 65 or older. Figure 1 presents graphically the corresponding percentages in each band. Respondents are concentrated in the 35-44 and 45-54 year age bands. The figures show clearly that our universities have a small proportion of under 35 year olds compared to prime age workers. Looking at older staff, there is much greater employment of the 60-64 year olds than those aged 65 plus years.

Table IV. Age bands

Age band	Number
<35 years of age	213
35-44 years	385
45-54 years	376
55-59 years	193
60-64	114
65 or more years	48

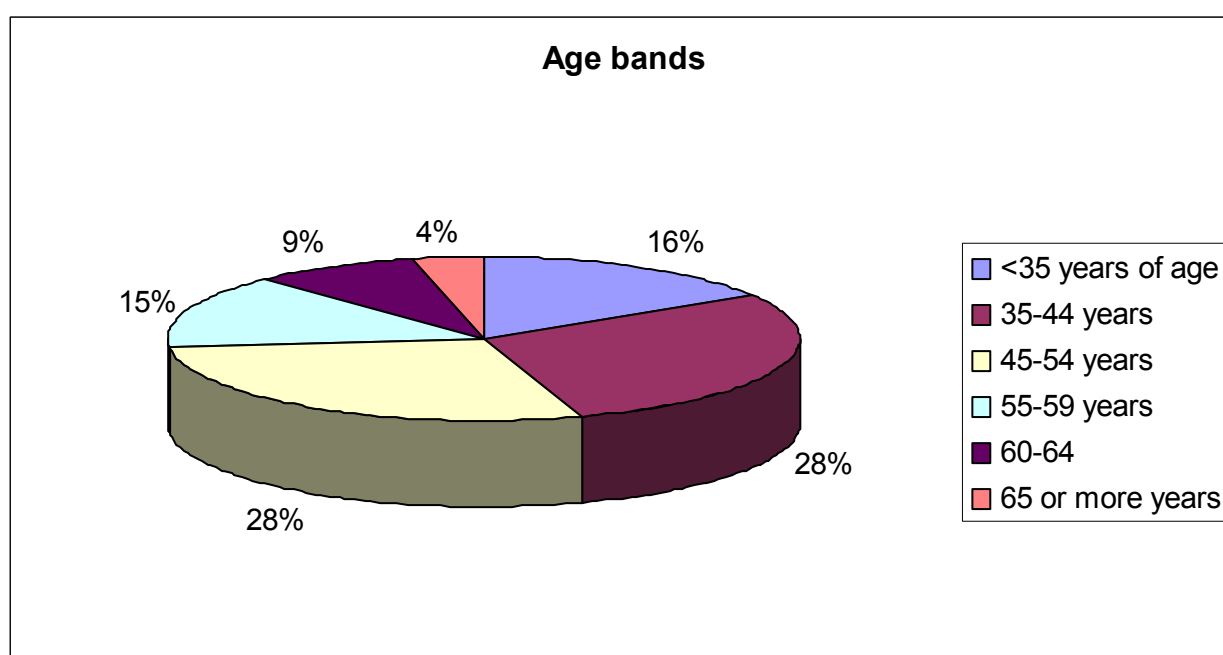


Figure 1. Age bands

Table V identifies numbers falling into each of the marital status bands. Again, the percentages are shown in the following pie chart.

Table V. Marital status

Marital status	Number
Married/co-habiting	998
Single	209
Separated/divorced	96
Widowed	17
Working partner	813 (61%)

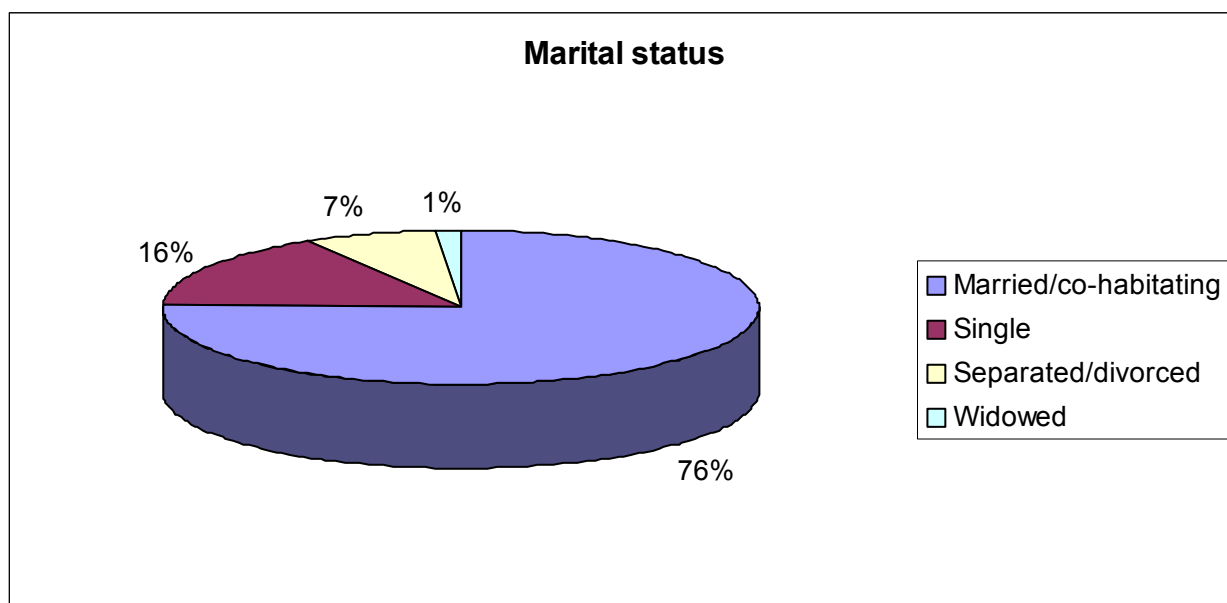


Figure 2. Marital status

The vast majority of our respondents are married or living with a partner. Table V also gives the total number of respondents living with a working partner, which may influence the choices made by employees.

The prevalence of dependents may influence the work-related choices of the participating staff. The questionnaire had asked how many dependents lived in the household: dependents were disaggregated into those of school age and those who were adults. Across all the universities well over half (59.5%) had no child dependents at all, and of the remainder the vast majority had one (16.5%) or two (18%). Only around 5.5% had three or more children. Additionally, adult dependents were relatively uncommon: 11% had one or more, with just 3% having two or more to care for.

Table VI gives details of highest level of academic qualification. Having a PhD as one's highest qualification is less common than a Masters degree. A significant proportion is engaging in academic work with a Bachelors degree as their qualification. A sizeable group have professional qualifications of various types, and 82 have other types of accreditation.

Table VI. Highest level of academic qualification

Qualification	Number	%
PhD	182	13.5
Masters	525	39.5
Bachelors	325	24.5
Professional	211	16
Other qualification	82	6

Well over half of the respondents (59.5%) did not belong to a union. Of union members, NATFHE was the best represented covering 15.5% of all the respondents, outweighing the AUT with just 4%. This reflects the composition of our sample, as new universities continue to be dominated by NATFHE rather than the AUT. The second largest trade union membership was of RCN (4.5%). Union membership was considerably higher amongst permanent part-time staff than those on temporary or fixed term contracts.

Only sixty five respondents stated that they had long-standing health problems or disabilities that limited what they could do at work and at home (5%). These workers were marginally more likely to be permanent part timers.

The “typical” non-standard academic who emerges from this profile is a white, middle-aged woman in good health with a Masters degree who has at least one other paid position. She has a working partner but no dependents living at home.

Current Employment

Our pilot study showed that job titles varied widely. Table VII reveals that respondents generally classed themselves as “visiting lecturer/lecturer”, with those who were “senior or principal lecturers” forming the second largest category. Whilst professorial level staff came in all contractual categories, the majority of senior or principal lecturers were permanent part timers. Ninety respondents had “other” relatively unique titles, indicating that the nomenclature of NSAs varies widely.

Table VII. Job titles

Job title	Numbers	%
Professor	20	1.5
Senior/Principal lecturer	243	18.5
Visiting lecturer/Lecturer	956	72.5
Health professionals	14	1
Other	90	7.5

Length of service was also varied. Fewer than 500 respondents (36%) had started work since 2003, compared with 73% who had been taken on since 2000. The earliest a respondent had joined his/her current institution was 1958, although only a handful had arrived prior to 1990. Continuity was more obvious if we look at contract renewals: 62.5% declared that their contract had been renewed, whilst some 41% of respondents added that they had previously been employed at their main institution on a different form of contract.

Around one third of our respondents (34.5%) stated that they had no other additional paid employment. Of those with multiple remunerated jobs, one post was by far the likeliest response (47%), with two additional jobs held by a further 11%. Only 101 respondents, or 7.5% of the sample, had three or more additional posts, a balancing act which fits most closely the stereotype of the portfolio worker. The propensity to juggle multiple posts varied widely

between universities. Overall there is something of a gender split amongst our respondents when it comes to multiple job holding: women are slightly more likely to hold no other paid jobs, whilst men seem particularly much more likely to hold two or more additional paid posts. Multiple job holding by respondents was concentrated amongst those aged 45-54, perhaps as they had less onerous family ties than respondents of other ages. Those aged over 60 were only a little less likely to be holding down more than one post, but the over 65s were much less likely to have more than one paid job presumably as they eased down towards retirement.

Table VIII. Other paid employment

Paid employment	Number	%
Have one other paid job	621	47
Have two additional paid posts	146	11
Have three or more additional paid posts	101	7.5

Other paid employment covered a diverse range of posts, including many consultants. A large number of respondents were health professionals of some description, but it was most common to find that the second job was also in the academic field.

Looking at the past employment lives of our respondents, well over half the respondents (59.5%) stated that their contractual status in their *previous* job was “permanent”, with relatively only small numbers claiming to have been on “fixed term” contracts (12.5%) or “temporary” (10%). However, 15.5% had previously been “freelance”. This suggests that many respondents were used to a relatively insecure working life. Around one third of our respondents had held an academic post previously (33%), with the next most repeated answers as to previous professions being administration (11%) and some form of health care (11%). Again there was huge diversity across all our participants. With respect to the number of hours actually worked, given the breadth of this range, it is better to take the monthly average: 137 per month, or a median value of 148 hours.

The Desire for Change

The questionnaire asks respondents which of a list of causes drove them to leave their last post. They had the option to offer an additional reason, and these were examined and grouped together to provide additional categories. Reasons for leaving the previous position vary significantly.

Pie chart 3 reveals that a desire for change was by far the dominant single factor. Looking at the push factors, such as the end of a contract, retirement and redundancy, retirement and redundancy played minor roles compared to coming to the end of one’s contract. We return to the issue of “push/pull” factors below in more detail. Family reasons motivated the behaviour of a sizeable number of respondents, a response more common to female respondents than men. More money was a minor factor, affecting just 4% overall and there was a fairly even proportion of men and women citing this influence.

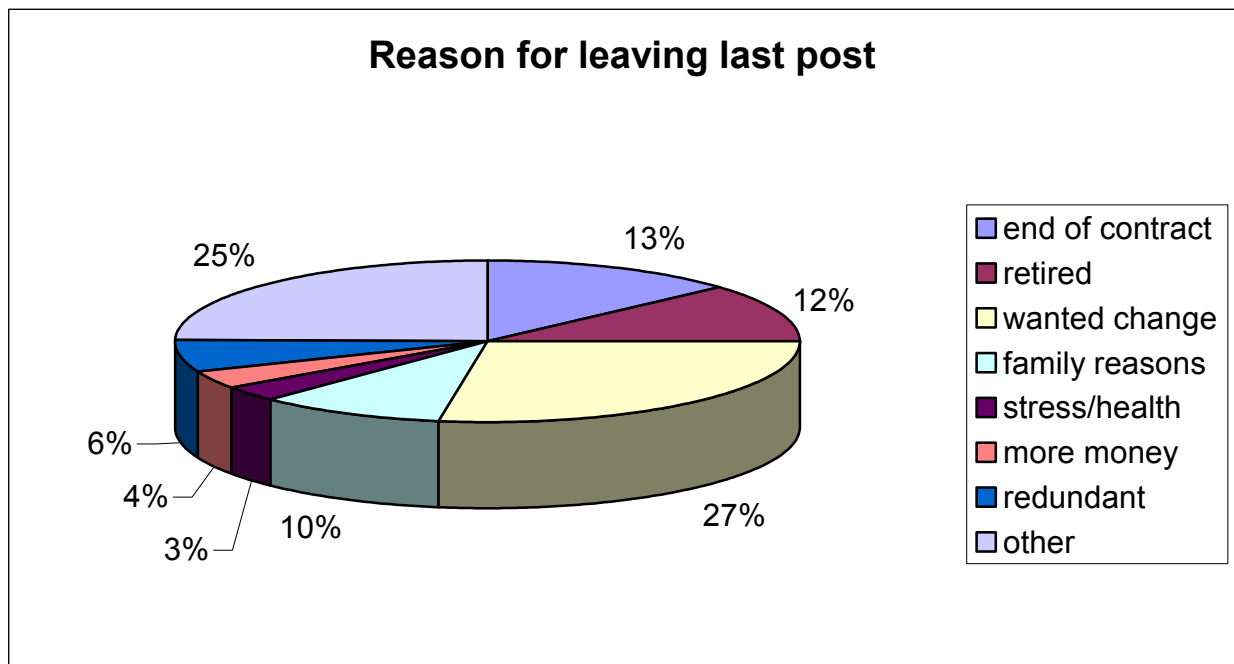


Figure 3. Reason for leaving last job

Push/Pull Factors Involved In Becoming an NSA

One of the principal objectives of this research was to analyse the motivations of NSAs – that is, what induced them to accept this type of contract in the first place. There is a growing literature on the push/pull factors involved (see for example Stanworth and Stanworth, 1997). Broadly, *pull factors involve choice*, while *push factors involve compulsion*. Some writers tend to emphasise the pull factors. Handy, for example, has argued that people with transferable, professional skills will increasingly opt to work freelance than to work for organisations (Handy, 1990; 1994). Other writers tend to emphasise the push factors involving compulsion. Bradley et al. (2000: 69), for example, argue that certain structural barriers prevent the pursuit of portfolio careers that are accordingly restricted to the “relatively powerful and wealthy”.

However, even this analysis may overstate the choices available. Even if we take non-standard academics who are, as we have seen, highly qualified and experienced as a sample, the issue remains whether they have principally chosen to work in this way or whether they have been compelled to do so by other factors. In our questionnaire, we invited respondents to give one reason for leaving their previous position. Whilst a few added secondary factors, the majority identified just one factor which we use as the basis for the following analysis.

Table IX. Reasons for leaving the last position: push or pull

Reason for leaving	Number	%
Push factors		
End of contract	156	13.5
Redundant	76	6.5
Retired	137	11.5
Organisation moved	3	0
Organisation changed	8	0.5
Pull factors		
Wanted change	323	27.5
More money	42	3.5
Family reasons	114	9.5
Stress/health	37	3
Partner moved	32	2.5
Immi/emigration	11	1
Started own business	6	0.5
Increased security	6	0.5
Other	196	16.5

The options added under the “other” category proved less easy to categorise as push or pull factors. Condensed, this gives us the following:

Table X. Push/pull factors

Push (compulsion)	Pull (choice)
39%	61%

The predominant feeling is that respondents have chosen this type of employment relationship, but male respondents were even more likely to feel that they had been compelled to choose their current contractual arrangements than women: 54% against 29.5%.

How do our constructed push-pull factors relate to interest in a more permanent type of contract discussed earlier on p.4?

Table XI. Interest in a different type of contract for respondents

	Yes (%)	Maybe (%)	No (%)
Interested in a permanent job on current hours	36.5	25	26.5
Interested in a full-time permanent job	30	26.5	42.5
Those pushed on to this contract* (compulsion)	39%		
Interested in a permanent job on current hours	37	26	28
Interested in a full-time permanent job	32.5	23	43
Those pulled on to this contract* (choice)	61%		
Interested in a permanent job on current hours	39	23	20
Interested in a full-time permanent job	32	26	41

*Totals may not add up due to rounding, and where the answer given is “not applicable”.

The responses of those whom we categorise as having been “pushed” are not significantly different from those given by respondents who had chosen their current arrangements. Considering first those who were “pushed” into taking their current job, table XI reveals that there was considerable interest in permanent posts on either current or full-time hours, especially if we consider the “maybes”. A full-time permanent post was, however, rejected emphatically by more than 40%. Overall such responses suggest that these respondents had converted to their new found status and were able to see advantages. This group was strikingly no more eager to return to permanent employment than those “pulled” towards their current contract. Such a conundrum suggests that those with initially positive views of NSA life had not found their expectations were met. Of those “pulled” there was more interest in a permanent job on current hours than in a permanent full-time post, presumably as this would enable some continued combination of activities: 39% against 32%. However, the margin blurs if one considers those answering “maybe”. However, there was a strong aversion to a permanent full-time post (41%).

Reasons for Accepting Current Position

We asked respondents to react to a statement that might indicate why they had accepted their current position. This will help to cement our understanding of choice and compulsion. They were asked to agree or disagree on a scale of one to six, where one was “strong disagreement” and six was “strong agreement”. Responses are compared by gender, as significant differences were found for the pilot study when the data were disaggregated in this way.

Table XII. Reasons for taking this position

Statements	Mean response	Mean male response	Mean female response
I always wanted this type of contract	3	3	3
I earn more money with this type of contract	2.4	2.3	2.4
This contract enables me to avoid administrative duties	2.5	2.7	2.3***
No other type of contract was available	4.2	4.3	4.2
I can engage in a variety of occupations	4.1	4.3	4***
I can combine this job with my family responsibilities	3.8	3.6	4***

Agreement ranged on a scale of 1–6, where 1 represents strong disagreement and 6 represents strong agreement. Therefore mean responses of less than three indicate general disagreement and of more than four general agreement. Asterisks are used to indicate a statistically significant response by gender, with more stars representing a starker difference in attitude by gender.

Respondents across the sample disagree to some extent with the statements “I earn more money with this type of contract” and “The contract enables me to avoid administrative duties”. They show some agreement with the statements “I can engage in a variety of occupations” and “No other type of contract was available”. Such responses indicate that most NSAs have mixed feelings about their current position. Respondents showed more ambivalence towards the statements “I always wanted this type of contract” and “I can combine this job with my family responsibilities”.

A number of statements generate statistically significant different responses by gender reflecting the size of the sample – these are statistically significant in three cases. One of the starkest differences by gender comes from answers to “I can combine this job with my family responsibilities”. We saw earlier that 40% had school-aged children, and a further 11% had adult dependents. Women are more likely to use their NSA status to satisfy their multiple commitments, with a mean response to the statement of 4 against 3.6 for men.

Answers to the comment “I can engage in a variety of occupations” also vary along gender lines, this statement having been chosen to reflect commitment to the portfolio-working ideal. Men show significantly greater agreement with this, which is surprising given there is only a limited preponderance of men holding multiple posts.

The final significant difference along gender lines comes in answer to the statement “This contract enables me to avoid administrative duties”. Overall the answers were negative, suggesting that NSA positions do not offer an escape route from bureaucracy, but the aggregate score for women is much lower: 2.3 against 2.7. This suggests that all academics, whatever their contractual status, face bureaucratic requirements.

Aspects of Job Control

We asked our NSA respondents a number of questions relating to the degree of control they could exert over their terms and conditions of employment. Table XIII displays our findings, while table XIV breaks down elements of control by gender. In each case respondents were asked to rank the degree of control they had over hours worked, timetabling, training, pay and the length of their contract. They were given a scale of one to three, where one represented no control, two was some control, and three indicated a lot of influence.

Table XIII. Aspects of job control

Area of control	None		Some		A lot	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Hours worked	373	28.5	568	43	370	28
Timetabling	379	29	607	46	317	24
Training	511	39.5	539	42	218	17
Pay	1127	85.5	143	11	39	3
Length of contract	908	69.5	221	17	143	11

All percentages given to one decimal place – totals may not add up due to rounding.

The issue over which respondents felt they have the least control is pay: 85.5% have none and 11% some. This is unsurprising given the continuing role of unionised national pay negotiations over a common pay framework. The length of the employment contract is also an area over which respondents felt relatively powerless: 69.5% felt they had no influence, and 17% limited control. The greatest control is felt to be wielded over hours worked: only 28.5% of respondents claim no influence and almost the same proportion (28%) state they have a lot of influence. Similarly, around a quarter claim to control the timetabling of their commitments, with just 29% unable to affect this. It would be surprising if NSAs could not exert influence over these two most basic aspects of employment, so perhaps the figures for control over hours and timetabling are lower than we might have expected? The pilot study suggested that women exerted, or perceived, a greater degree of control over aspects of work than men. We turn to this issue next.

Table XIV uses dummy variables to investigate statistical variation in perceived job control by gender. Table XIII showed that the greatest degree of job control was felt to over hours of work. So looking first at control over hours worked and timetabling, these dummies reflect significant levels of influence. Unlike the results of our pilot we find that there is little significant variation in answers by gender.

As mentioned previously pay is the issue over which all of our respondents felt they had the least control, reflecting the (relative) transparency of pay settlements. However, there is a 0.01 advantage in female respondents’ perceived control over pay, compared to their male peers but this is too minor to be significant.

Table XIV. Differences in aspects of job control by gender

Area of control	Mean for men	Mean for women
Hours worked	0.71	0.72
Timetabling	0.71	0.71
Training	0.57	0.62*
Pay	0.13	0.14
Length of contract	0.28	0.29

Answers for these questions are conflated into dummies, with 1 indicating a degree of control and 0 indicating no control. * indicates that the means are significantly different at the 10% level.

We saw too in table XIII that respondents felt unable to affect the length of their contract. Our dummy variable reflects this with a low value for both men and women: 0.28 against 0.29. Responses on the question of control over the length of contract vary only marginally by gender across our ten institutions: women’s responses again generating a slightly higher mean score. Again such a slight variation is not statistically significant.

Such a highly skilled profession requires high standards of performance, a demand reinforced by both the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) and Quality Assurance Audit (QAA). On the issue of control over access to training, women exert or think they exert more influence than male respondents: the mean scores being 0.62 and 0.57 respectively. This gender variation, with females claiming greater control, is in line with results from the pilot project. Such a variation needs to be pursued in interviews.

Further analysis shows that job control is more prevalent as one rises up the hierarchy. Professors, senior lecturers and senior health professionals are more likely to exert a lot or a little control over all working conditions, other than pay, than respondents working as more junior health professionals, lecturers, technicians or teaching assistants. On the issue of pay, managers, professors and senior health professional are more likely to claim a limited degree of influence than others in the hierarchy. Similarly control over issues other than pay and the length of contract rises with age, though this may be capturing some hierarchy effects.

We asked our respondents if they had been able to improve upon aspects of their contract, how many aspects, and which ones. Almost half of our respondents (46%) stated that they had been unable, or had not needed, to improve upon any aspect of their employment at their current institution. Five respondents claimed they had been able to improve upon all five of the given aspects of their contract: pay, length of contract, hours, timetabling and training, 5% had won improvements in three areas, and just 1% on four issues. The commonest area of improvement, in line with our previous statements, was timetabling.

We asked respondents how they had effected this change. Many reasons were complex and unique, and these form the bulk of the “other” category in later analysis, so we concentrate on the most commonly used.

The most commonly cited single method was by reducing or condensing one’s working hours, to minimise the days across which teaching was spread. Whilst 17% of respondents who bettered their contract cited this method, a further 16% had improved upon their position using the inverse tactic: increasing their hours. A strategy of flexibility offers obvious benefits to the employer, and may fit with NSAs’ other commitments – accordingly, 3% asserted that this had won them better conditions. A small proportion had seen improvements arise when they had been converted to permanent contracts (4%). Training and development was another popular route to achieve improvement, being cited by 6%. Relying on good performance seems to be a route not unrelated to training and development, and it was cited by a further 4% of our sample.

Whilst some respondents focused on the action they took to improve their pay and conditions, others talked more about the processes they used. The use of processes is captured by the negotiating category, and was used by 12% of the sample. Significantly, a greater proportion of women cited this approach: 57% of negotiators were female. Women also favoured the training and development strategy.

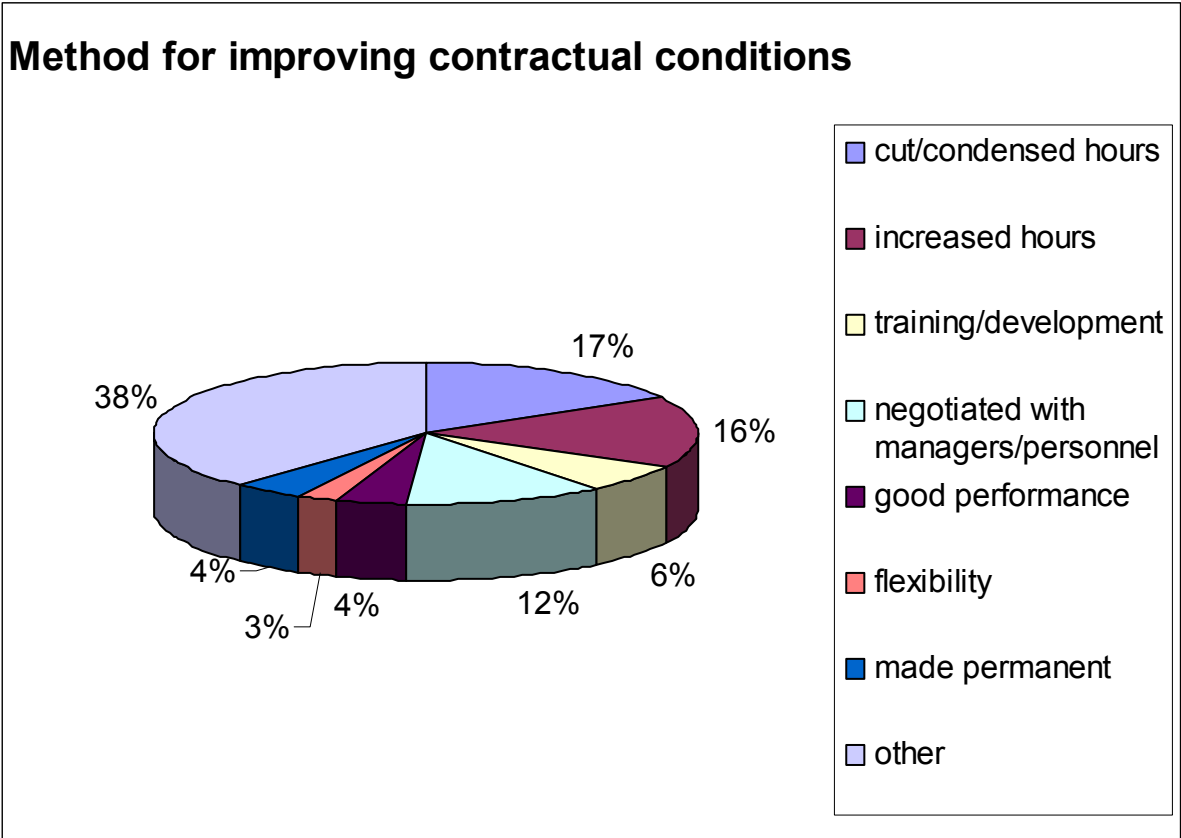


Figure 4. How respondents improved upon contractual conditions

Advantages and Disadvantages

Following the analysis of motives for taking NSA status in the first place, we enquired into the advantages and disadvantages of employment on this type of contract once it had been accepted. Respondents were asked to agree or disagree with a series of statements relating to their thoughts on their working lives on a scale of one to six, where one was strong disagreement and six was strong agreement. Two and three could be characterised as “somewhat” and “slight” agreement respectively, and four and five “somewhat” and “slight” disagreement. We treat mean answers falling between three and four as neutral responses. This provides us with a particularly interesting picture if we compare responses by gender.

Table XV. Advantages/disadvantages of this type of contract

Statements	Mean male response	Mean female response
It is an advantage to be able to work from home	4	4.3***
Receiving an irregular or uncertain income is a problem for me	3.5	3.5
I have greater independence than in a permanent full-time post	4.2	4.1
My wages subsidise my other activities	3.3	3.1*
I can carry out my family responsibilities with this contract	3.5	3.9***
The lack of pension and other benefits worries me	3.3	3.5*
I do not like the isolation from colleagues	3.2	3.4**
I feel there is no established career path	3.8	3.9
I am concerned by the lack of training provision	3.1	3.1

Agreement ranged on a scale of 1–6, where 1 represents strong disagreement and 6 represents strong agreement.

*** indicates that the means are significantly different at the 1% level (most significant).

** indicates that the means are significantly different at the 5% level (more significant than 10%).

* indicates that the means are significantly different at the 10% level.

Female respondents agreed more forcefully than their male peers with the statement that it was advantageous to be able to work from home, giving a mean answer of 4.3, compared to 4 for the men. Not unexpectedly, there is a strong correlation between interest in working from home and the travel to work time. Respondents are also more likely to rate this aspect of their working lives highly if they have child or adult dependents.

Reactions to the statement “receiving an irregular or uncertain income is a problem for me” were fairly neutral, with absolutely no variation by gender. This indicates that, in general, NSAs

are not significantly worried by their financial position. The presence in the household of a working partner reduces the likelihood of agreement with this statement.

The average score for both sexes in relation to the statement “I have greater independence than in a permanent full-time post” indicates that respondents feel their current contractual status gives them a little more independence than a full-time permanent post. The gender split, however, is marginal.

In theory portfolio working offers the opportunity to subsidise less well paid activities with more remunerative work. The answers to the statement “My wages subsidise my other activities” suggest this is not happening in practice. The difference in responses by gender is small but achieves significance, implying that male respondents may be cross subsidising activities more than women.

Our analysis of individual universities showed that there were some respondents who agreed strongly with the statement “I can carry out my family responsibilities with this contract”, particularly among women with younger families. Overall, though, the aggregated male and female responses fall into the neutral range. Even so, significantly more women than men agree with the comment, which implies that women are behaving in a more “traditional” way, shouldering much of the burden of caring for dependents. Again there is a significant statistical correlation between the presence of child and adult dependents and agreement with the statement.

Whilst fractional permanent staff have guaranteed pro rata benefits, those on fixed term contracts may miss out. More than three quarters of respondents to our survey were on fixed term or temporary contracts, suggesting that this is an issue worth looking at. Responses to the question “The lack of pension and other benefits worries me” were fairly neutral, but women showed marginally more concern. Despite this result, women were more likely to hold permanent part-time contracts than men, with the attendant benefits. Therefore this concern may possibly reflect a previous broken employment history.

Across the sample we again derived neutral responses to the statement “I do not like the isolation from colleagues”. However, this conceals slightly greater concern over isolation on the part of women. Again this seems strange given their greater propensity to have permanent part-time contracts. Low status might explain this concern. Whilst there are proportionately fewer female professors and managers amongst our sample, they are otherwise well represented throughout the levels of the academic hierarchy as a whole.

Neither men nor women expressed strong feelings in response to the two final statements: “I feel there is no established career path” and “I am concerned by the lack of training provision”. Gender variation was also absent. This lack of concern may reflect the high level of qualifications and experience, and the self-starting nature of academics as a group.

Income

We asked respondents about their individual and household income to gauge how they fared compared to average earnings, and also enquired about the proportions of their income coming from different posts. Our respondents were fairly evenly distributed across individual

income bands from less than £10,000 per year, to in excess of £40,000. The modal individual income band was under £10,000, with 20% of the sample, capturing a disproportionate number of women. However, 10% earned more than £40,000, with men being more likely to fall in to this category than their female peers.

The modal band for annual household income was £20,000 to £29,999 (18.5% of the sample). Again, there was a fairly even spread across the other bands, with the exception of the lowest band, less than £10,000, which covered just 3.5%. The highest band for annual gross household income was the £70,000 or above band, comprising 14% of respondents. The difference in individual and household income may explain why NSAs are so unconcerned by their salary levels, and the low response to the question about the cross subsidy of activities – they may be receiving subsidies from their partners.

Table XVI. Proportion of income from different jobs

	Mean response	Male	Female
Proportion from main job (observations)	48.5%	40% (480)	53.5% (744)
Proportion from second job (observations)	48%	47% (315)	49% (453)
Proportion from third job (observations)	23.5%	24.5% (117)	23% (132)

Columns do not sum to 100 as many respondents had only one job, and few had three.

Respondents were also asked about the proportion of their individual income that they earned from their various positions, and the results are displayed in table 16. A similar proportion of income was earned from the main (academic) job (48.5%) and the second position (48%). This disguises a slightly greater reliance on the main job as a source of income for female respondents. Whilst this may seem confusing, recall that many respondents held only one paid job. Any third position made a smaller contribution to household finances.

General Conclusions

In some ways, the non-standard academics in our full sample corresponded to the profile of “portfolio worker” that can be found in the literature. They were all highly qualified and about two thirds had other paid employment, with a sizeable minority having second and third jobs. Multiple job holding was concentrated into the 45-54 age bracket, though very few of those aged over 65 held down more than one post. The range of portfolio work performed by our sample is quite narrow. It was most common to find that the second job was also in the academic field, though consultancy and health care also featured.

However, there is an issue about how committed our sample was to this kind of work. Almost three quarters had been appointed since 2000, and just over a third since 2003 (that is, they had only about one year's service at the time of the survey), though just over six in ten had had their contract renewed. Even so, commitment to their current contractual status is not entirely clear, as demonstrated by the proportion desiring other, more permanent forms of employment contract. Overall, 36.5% declared that they would accept a permanent job *on their current hours*, though 26.5% would not (the rest were "maybes"). However, only 30% stated that they would accept a *full-time* permanent job, with 42.5% against (again, the rest were "maybes"). In other words, there is, arguably, general satisfaction with current hours – with only 30% definitely wanting a full-time permanent job – but less adjustment to impermanence, with 36.5% wanting a permanent job provided it was on current hours. There is, then, a sign here of adaptation to certain forms of non-standard status (hours), but not to others (impermanence), though either way it is not pronounced.

The majority of respondents had chosen their contractual status (61%), with a minority having been compelled to accept it (39%), though many more men (54%) than women (29.5%) felt so compelled. Despite this, choice and compulsion did not feature as major determinants in guaranteeing satisfaction with their status. For example, amongst those choosing their status, 39% would accept a permanent job on current hours, whilst amongst those compelled, the percentage was almost identical, at 37%.

So why had respondents accepted this kind of contract? There is no evidence that they had "always wanted this type of contract" (responses were neutral) – indeed, there was slight agreement overall that "no other type of contract" had been available. Furthermore, they disagreed that their contract allowed them to earn more money or that it enabled them to avoid administrative duties.

However, they maintain that the contract allowed them "to engage in a variety of other activities" (particularly amongst men) and that it allowed them to "combine a job with family responsibilities" (particularly amongst women). Indeed, it appears that the advantages of being a non-standard academic may emerge after the event, perhaps as a process of rationalisation. In this respect, answers to questions about the advantages and disadvantages of this kind of contract were revealing. They were neutral overall about the irregularity of income and lack of pensions and benefits, perhaps because they were being subsidised by a working partner. Nor was there evidence that their job was helping to finance other activities, and they were neutral over the isolation and the lack of career and training. However, women – as noted above – valued their chance to combine the job with family responsibilities, whilst both sexes responded favourably to the independence they had and their ability to work from home.

Our findings reveal that the concept of a "portfolio worker" is fragmented. Around four in ten NSAs are "pushed" into this kind of work through redundancy or expiry of an existing contract. Six in ten are "pulled", having made a conscious choice to take up this kind of employment. The latter group would appear to be the classic "portfolio workers". Yet only 20% would reject a permanent job on current hours, with the remainder willing to accept or at least consider it. This does not imply a great deal of adaptation to portfolio status – possibly because their expectations have not been met. Nevertheless, 41% would reject a full-time permanent [DB] position.

Overall, NSAs express mild anxiety over isolation, irregular income and lack of pensions and benefits. The opportunity to work part time is clearly popular, but these areas of uncertainty may also create barriers to the extension of portfolio work along with the issues of “race, gender, disability and class” noted by Bradley et al. (2000: [DB2]69).

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