

CASUALISATION IN DUTCH ACADEMIA

TESTIMONIALS FROM THE MARGINS



**CASUAL ACADEMY
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Table of Contents

Samenvatting (NL)	2
Summary (ENG)	3
Acknowledgements	4
Who are we?	5
Background	5
This report	6
Method	6
Findings	7
Demographics	7
Data Analysis	8
1. General nature and effects of flexible contracts at universities	9
2. The role of HR and university management in preventing permanent contracts	12
3. Impact of precarious employment on the individual employee	15
4. The impact of precarious employment on the university as a whole	17
5. Impact on academic freedom	21
Discussion	22
Conclusion	26

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Samenvatting (NL)

In dit rapport worden de preciaire arbeidsomstandigheden en de onaanvaardbare lasten belicht die worden opgelegd aan universiteitsmedewerkers met tijdelijke contracten. Preciaire contracten zijn een grote bron van angst en beïnvloeden daarom stress, gezondheid en welzijn van werknemers. Daarmee heeft het niet alleen invloed op hun privéleven, maar ook op hun professionele ontwikkeling. Precair werk maakt werknemers ook bijzonder kwetsbaar voor intimidatie, machtsmisbruik, discriminatie en uitbuiting. Bovendien is de arbeidspraktijk van flexibele contracten nadelig voor de kwaliteit van het onderwijs aan universiteiten en heeft daarmee een schadelijk effect op het hoger onderwijs en de kennisproductie in het algemeen.

Hoewel het algemeen bekend is dat precair werk nadelig is voor de kwaliteit van het hoger onderwijs, worden de individuele persoonlijke effecten van tijdelijke contracten vaak over het hoofd gezien. Dit komt deels doordat degenen die direct getroffen zijn vaak niet in staat zijn om hun verhaal te delen - hetzij omdat ze zich zorgen maken over hun toekomstige werkgelegenheid, of gewoon omdat ze de academische wereld moeten verlaten. Het doel van dit rapport is om deze persoonlijke verhalen een podium te bieden en zo de stemmen te versterken van degenen die direct worden getroffen door preciaire arbeidsomstandigheden. Met de (geanonimiseerde) getuigenissen hopen we bewustwording te creëren over de impact van tijdelijke contracten op individuen, hun loopbaan en hun professionele ontwikkeling. Dit rapport maakt deel uit van een breder initiatief om bewustwording te creëren rondom vooroordelen, ongelijkheid en intimidatie binnen de academische wereld. Door te erkennen dat het probleem op structureel niveau bestaat, kunnen we een cultuurverandering op gang zetten.

We hopen dat de getuigenissen die in dit rapport aan bod komen de urgentie van deze kwestie duidelijk maken en roepen universiteiten op om nú in te grijpen tegen de doorgeslagen flexibilisering in het hoger onderwijs.

Summary (ENG)

This report highlights the poor working conditions and unacceptable burden placed on university employees on temporary contracts. Precarious contracts are a great cause for anxiety and therefore affect employees' stress, health and well-being. As such, precarity affects their private lives and their professional development. Precarious employment also makes staff particularly vulnerable to harassment, power abuse, discrimination and exploitation. Furthermore, the employment practice of flexible contracts is detrimental to the quality of education offered at universities and therefore has a damaging effect on the higher education sector and knowledge production at large.

While it is widely acknowledged that casualisation has a deleterious impact on the quality of higher education, the personal toll of precarious contracts is often overlooked. This is partly because those who are directly affected by casualisation are often unable to share their stories - either because they are worried about future employment possibilities, or quite simply because they are forced out of academia. The aim of this report is to tell these untold stories by sharing and amplifying the voices of those who are directly affected by precarious working conditions. With the testimonials presented here in anonymized form, we hope to create awareness for how casualisation affects individuals, their careers, and their professional development. This initiative forms part of a more substantive effort to increase awareness of bias, inequities, and harassment within academia. By increasing awareness and acknowledging that the problem exists on a structural level, we can pave the way for culture change.

The report ends with a list of demands and recommendations. We hope that the stories shared here increase the sense of urgency among stakeholders in higher education to stop casualisation now.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all the brave individuals who responded to our call for testimonials for sharing their personal stories with us. We appreciate the trust they placed in us. This report is dedicated to them and all colleagues who suffer the consequences of casualisation. From inception to completion, this report was the result of a collective effort. We are deeply indebted to all those who took time out of their busy schedules to provide input and feedback on this report (you know who you are!) - we could not have done this without you!

If you are affected by precariousness and casualisation, we hope that this report will encourage you to:

- [organize](#)
- unionize
- join [Casual Academy](#) and related support networks
- report illegal and/or dishonest HR- and employment practices to your union representative
- share your story [with us](#)

Who are we?

We are a team of academics from different universities across the Netherlands who work together under the broad banner of the [Casual Academy](#). In essence, Casual Academy is a network of action groups at Dutch universities who are joined by their efforts to achieve better working conditions, end structural overwork and precarious contracts, and advocate for more democracy and transparency in higher education. This report was initiated and produced by three partner organizations, namely [O.Z.](#), [CasualLeiden](#) and [Organize the RUG](#).

Contact information: testimonials@casualacademy.nl

Background

University lecturers on temporary contracts face “an excessive workload, a lack of transparency and voice within the organisational structure of universities, a culture of silence and cover up surrounding (sexual) misconduct and abuse of power, non-inclusive and just generally poor working conditions all over” (see [0.7](#)). To raise awareness for the need for radical change, various action groups across the Netherlands have started mobilizing and organizing in recent years. On February 14, 2022, these groups organized a National Day of Action themed *The University Won't Love You Back*. This was followed up by a national demonstration on April 1, 2022, called *The Joke's On Us*, which marked the new cycle of negotiations between employers and unions.

Despite these actions, the collective labor agreement (*collectieve arbeidsovereenkomst* – cao or CLA) that was signed in June 2022 did not offer an acceptable way forward regarding the plight of precarious employment conditions of many Dutch academics. While the CLA included a vague promise for a non-binding study “to determine how the contractual position of Docenten can be improved”, it failed to actually address the contractual position of temporary lecturers.

This decision was met with criticism by the various action groups. For instance, [Casual Academy](#) expressed their disappointment that the CLA limits itself to merely mentioning “a shared ambition to conduct a ‘joint study’ of the issue, results of which to be discussed in 2023. No commitments have been made by the employers about the speed or scale of this study, or the nature of the actions they aim to take once the research has been carried out.” [Organize the RUG](#) were similarly skeptical about the CLA, notably because it failed to address the plight of lecturers (*docenten*) on temporary contracts: “While the [CLA] proposal includes a clause to conduct further research on this topic, we are skeptical that this vague promise will offer any concrete solutions. For instance, it is unclear what the timeline is for this study, and who will be involved in conducting the research. According to the negotiators, this is a preliminary and necessary step to achieve any change on this front. To us, however, this feels like a stalling tactic.” In a similar vein, [Casual Leiden](#) lamented the fact that the problem was “kicked into the long grass”, and that the agreement essentially asked “staff members to trust the good will of the employers - the very people who are responsible for the current situation and have failed to make good on their promises in the past.”

Against this backdrop, this report seeks to highlight the unacceptable burden placed on university employees who are precariously employed. Their employment status affects their private lives and their

professional development. Indeed, as shown below, precarious contracts are a great cause for anxiety and therefore affect employees' stress, health and well-being. Precarious employment also makes staff particularly vulnerable to harassment, power abuse, discrimination and exploitation. The employment practice of flexible contracts is detrimental to the quality of education offered at universities and undermines innovation. In other words, the casualisation of educational work has damaging effects on higher education and knowledge production as a whole; after all, "[teachers' working conditions are students' learning conditions](#)".

As the testimonials below show, precarious employment incurs substantial costs for scholars, universities and societies. Because precariousness is closely related to harassment, bullying, discrimination, racism, lack of scientific integrity and academic freedom, support for this form of employment is akin to the moral bankruptcy of the Dutch higher education sector.

This report

The detrimental effects of casualisation on the quality of higher education are generally acknowledged. For instance, according to a [recent study](#) by the Joint Committee of Experts of UNESCO and the International Labour Organization, the growth in casualised contracts in higher education is undermining academic freedom and therefore 'one of the fundamental pillars of excellence in teaching and research'. While it is generally clear that casualisation is problematic (as explained earlier), the personal toll of precarious contracts is often overlooked. This is partly because those who are directly affected by casualisation are often unable to share their stories - either because they are worried about future employment possibilities, or quite simply because they are forced out of academia.

The aim of this report is to tell these untold stories by sharing and amplifying the voices of those who are directly affected by precarious working conditions. With the testimonials presented here in anonymized form, we hope to create awareness for how casualisation affects individuals, their careers, and their professional development. This initiative also forms part of a more substantive effort to increase awareness of bias, inequities, and harassment within academia. By increasing awareness and acknowledging that the problem exists, we can pave the way for culture change.

Method

We started collecting testimonials early in 2022 via various channels, including personal stories shared with us directly at testimonials@casualacademy.nl, stories published online, and stories collected through an [online form](#). For privacy reasons, we emphasized that respondents could share their experiences anonymously, and when sharing these testimonials via Twitter – using the hashtag [#ListenUpAcademia](#) and the handle [Casual Academy Testimonials](#) (@CasAcStories) – or other channels, we therefore withheld names, affiliations, or other identifying information. Through the online form, we also reached out to people (who indicated their availability) for extended interviews.

These combined approaches initially resulted in the collection of 28 testimonials. Eight of these 28 respondents were willing to participate in an in-depth interview. These interviews were conducted between April and June 2022. These interviews lasted between 30 to 90 minutes. They were held in

English or Dutch, and the recordings were subsequently transcribed. Where appropriate, quotations have been translated into English by the authors of this report and revealing information such as affiliation removed. The testimonials collected through the survey and in-depth interviews were subsequently analyzed using thematic coding. The insights generated from the data are shared below.

Findings

Demographics

27 respondents shared information about the duration of their employment time without a permanent contract. Only one respondent indicated having a permanent contract. Respondents indicated that they had worked without a permanent contract for 1 (minimum) to 12 (maximum) years. On average, respondents worked on precarious contracts for 5.42 years. This number does not imply that someone worked for only one university, in one function, or for only one faculty during that time. Thus, someone who has been precariously employed for three years might have occupied three different positions during that time, at different universities, either sequentially or in parallel.

The table below shows respondents' affiliation.

University	Percentage
University of Groningen	38.5
University of Utrecht	23.1
University of Amsterdam	11.5
Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam	7.7
Erasmus University Rotterdam	7.7
Leiden University	3.8
Other	7.7

Note: Not all respondents disclosed their employer.

Some universities are overrepresented in this report. This is largely due to the fact that Causal Academy has active networks in these universities. However, as shown below, despite the seeming sample bias, the stories highlighted in this report are symptomatic of a broader, structural issue. Temporary contracts are widespread among university staff in the Netherlands and [recent figures indicate](#) that the number of temporary contracts at Dutch universities is still on the rise.

Data Analysis

We asked respondents to tell us their story and share their experiences as precariously employed staff at Dutch universities. A thematic analysis of their answers yielded a number of broader topics that revolve around the following five categories:

1. the general nature and effects of flexible contracts at universities;
2. the role of Human Resources (HR) and management in deliberately preventing employees from meeting the criteria for permanent contracts and engaging in all kinds of ‘constructions’, tricks and ‘sleight-of-hands’ to circumvent the necessity to provide permanent contracts;
3. the impact of precarious employment on the individual employee (professional development, career, mental and physical health);
4. the impact on the university as a whole (their colleagues, the quality of education and research, contribution to excessive workloads, but also the reputation of universities);
5. the impact on academic freedom. These five themes form the backbone of this report. The following sections are structured accordingly.

The report is structured along these five categories.

1. General nature and effects of flexible contracts at universities

Most respondents report working on flexible contracts for years, oftentimes combining different “gigs” in order to make ends meet, sometimes at different universities within the Netherlands, but also internationally, thereby sometimes even forcing them to commute across borders in the midst of a global pandemic. The lack of continuity is permeating every aspect of their private and professional lives. Respondents feel uprooted, tired, burned out, and exploited. Flexible contracts often leave little to no opportunities for conducting research. Research output, however, is needed to eventually get a permanent contract – a Catch22 that entraps those on flexible contracts. Employees on flexible contracts live under conditions of constant change and uprooting of their social and private lives, while simultaneously experiencing stagnation of their careers and professional development.

“I've been on short contracts (1-2 years) for the last 6 years, at 3 different institutions in 3 different countries. In addition to the social and personal toll of being uprooted, I feel I am falling further behind in terms of research and other additional qualifications such as attracting third party funding or bringing PhD students (I cannot take on PhD students on short-term contracts, PhD supervision supposedly helps on an application). Permanently applying for jobs, moving countries (housing, banking, legal requirements), adapting to a different administrative context (including e-learning platforms), constantly teaching modules for the first time, all of these things take time out of whatever time there is left for research.”

“This academic play is tiring. Moving from one country to the next takes a lot of energy to do so. My current colleagues are not very helpful and my life - a card house - just falls apart. It is really hard to pick it up again having moved and only a loose social network in my current workplace.”

This situation pushes even scholars out of academia who are successful in research and attract substantial grant money, lose their motivation as a consequence of how the university treats them. In other words, temporary contracts cause academic institutions to lose out on talent:

“I have several large grants pending and if I get one of those, I can enter a Tenure Track (I do have an embedding guarantee). However, the contract policy, if one could even call it that, has destroyed my motivation for academia and scientific spirit to the point that I may even turn down a large grant now. Currently I am actively applying for non-academic jobs and if I get a good offer, I'll take it and won't return back, no matter what scientific grant I may be rewarded. In my institute, I feel unseen and invisible -- unless I bring in big money or have media attention.”

In such working conditions, exploitation is the rule, not the exception. Respondents report working significantly more hours than they are being compensated for.²

“In this initial phase I got [paid for] 2 days per week to help this shift but once again found myself working 40+ hours per week to help out a faculty that treated me so badly ...!”

“I have now been on a PhD contract, two temporary teaching contracts, and a postdoc. I'm on a part-time contract, but work twice the hours.”

² This is in line with [previous studies](#), which already demonstrated that structural overwork in Dutch academia is rampant.

"Throughout the contracts (3 in total: one semester, one extra year and then two more years) I grew to a 0.6FTE position to afford my rent but in combination with the other job I worked as much as 60-80 hours a week. Nobody within my environment or my colleagues paid attention to this so I thought this was just part of the deal. Only after organising with fellow instructors we discovered we were working approximately 40hours a week on a 24hour contract."

"The amount of hours I had on paper never even remotely matched the amount of hours I actually spent on reading, preparing, admin, grading (!) et cetera. I had to teach new and different courses every year. Since all of my colleagues were doing the same and also did their research on the side I figured this was normal."

"Temporary staff are not typically paid for their actual work, but for a fictional number of working hours."

"Teaching units seem assigned 'FTE' points arbitrarily; I've spent three years teaching at 0.7 or 0.8 FTE with EXCELLENT reviews, but let's be honest it's actually more like 1.2 FTE. Pay is bad, overtime is common but in no way tracked."

"I made the mistake in the first year of my postdoc to work 70 percent because I thought then I would have more time with the kids, but that just wasn't the case."

Academics on flexible contracts are also not protected against potential cuts to their services, leaving them in unsustainable financial situations.

"After 9 years of guiding students with their thesis on a freelance basis, [our university] decided to cut the rates for freelancers per student by 20%. (Note that the rate has remained exactly the same in all these years. No inflation corrections. No raises. No perks. And if a student does not graduate, I receive a minimal sum but only if they manage to reach a certain deadline). As I get paid per graduated student, this means a 20% drop in income. Let that sink in. 20%! But yes, they were very satisfied with my performance, 'please come work for us again next year' (which you basically have no choice to do) and I was welcome to simply take on more students next year. I already frequently work weekends and evenings currently."

The nature of the small (part-time) employment contracts requires the combination of multiple contracts, often at different universities, in order to make ends meet. This further contributes to an unsustainable work pressure, while the structural nature of excessive overwork is framed as an individual responsibility.

"Work consumes all my time. There is a pervasive problem of overwork at Dutch universities in my experience. In my last contract, I was pressured to take on the work of a colleague who had a burnout and my next contract was replacing someone who left due to a burnout. Work pressure is relentless."

"The strategy is to individualize responsibility and failure. I was told I was not able to manage time properly even though I was working regularly on weekends. I was then told to take a personal coaching class so I could learn to manage time better. I learned to manage myself, my feelings, thoughts, etc. Obviously, none of these personal mantras will change the fact that Dutch universities are not investing in education."

The necessity to combine multiple jobs in order to make ends meet also undermines the relationships with colleagues.

“Besides, many of my colleagues who are contracted as Docent have very small contracts (0.2-0.6FTE, without research) which forces them to take on additional tasks or jobs. This is very frustrating for the relationship with colleagues.”

Relatedly, academics on flexible contracts often receive very little support from their direct colleagues and supervisors, which adds to the work pressure.

“In 2009, while I was still an MA student myself, I was asked to coordinate and teach a course at my previous university/study programme. I was hired on a 0.2 contract for 3 months. I had no training or teaching experience whatsoever at that point, but there was ridiculously little time and material for preparation: I had one meeting with the previous course coordinator, received the old syllabus, and a bunch of messy powerpoints and that was it.”

“I started as a junior teacher (Docent 4) about six years ago and from the beginning there was zero onboarding involved. It was expected of me to start off with a 0.4FTE contract to fill up maternity leaves rather last-minute.”

As these testimonials show, extended temporary contracts deny stability to teaching staff, create vulnerability to deteriorating working conditions, and do not provide any space whatsoever for educational and personal development. This is not only deleterious for precarious employees, but also for students and academic institutions more generally.

2. The role of HR and university management in preventing permanent contracts

The testimonials demonstrate universities' deliberate obstruction of permanent employment through various measures. The invention of non-existent functions, framing of structural work as incidental, and revolving-door constructions - where the employer avoids providing a permanent contract after multiple precarious contracts by rehiring the employee after a certain period of time - are experienced by many respondents.

"I have now completed my temporary contracts at the third university. After four years of passionately practicing my profession at the X, I have to look for the same job again, while my contract is filled by two (!) new teachers. There is structural work enough. The use of temporary contracts only makes sense if the work is incidental."

"I was a junior assistant professor. A function that, in retrospect, apparently does not exist at all."

"Even though I get nothing but positive feedback from my supervisor and colleagues, I still cannot stay, even though I would like to. I am told that I can join the department again after a few months (i.e. the notorious 'draaideurconstructie' [revolving door construction])."

Academics further report that they were prevented from meeting the criteria for permanent employment and discouraged from professional opportunities and development that could increase "the risk for a permanent contract".

"... the other university where I was employed, prevented me from seeking research funding. Here the argument was that according to the labour agreement, my bringing more research funding would mean that they would need to offer me a permanent research contract given I had previously conducted several years doing research at this university."

"I started as a temporary lecturer in [the university] in 2018, and was hired as a Postdoc later that year. In 2020, as the end of my contract was approaching, all of a sudden I was not allowed to teach any courses since this 'would increase the chance that they would have to give me a permanent contract'."

"At the end of my dissertation and obtaining my UTQ [University Teaching Qualification], there was a proposal to extend my contract for the third time to add a fourth year with an upgrade to university lecturer. This proposal was widely supported within the department. However, HR advised that with the new 2021 collective labor agreement rules, I quote, "the risk of a permanent contract" was too great."

"The target of the managers is to depress us in our performance, making sure we have no time to do any research, such that they can justify that I should be legitimately kicked out because I am not good enough (so they can replace existing personnel by "cheaper" newcomers)."

Information is often purposely kept from academics on flexible contracts, in order to hinder them from getting permanent employment. Various respondents lament poor internal communication. A number of respondents also report having been intimidated and pressured to comply with such illegitimate constructions and contracts that are detrimental to their interests.

"[T]he managers deliberately withhold information from us and just point all problems to above. While after invoking the labour union's representative in the meeting, it has been obviously clear that a permanent contract by law must be awarded to me, they started to make all kinds of excuses saying they

are busy in this and that and point again the problem to upper level in the university (which later on turned out to be not the case). And I was continuously "half threatened" to do this and that and if you don't do it we won't consider your permanent appointment etc etc, but after I complied there will always be new items popping up, depressing me even further."

"After a few months of discussions and negotiations with their HR, I was told that they could only hire me if I agreed to adding a clause to the contract in which I renounced my rights to unemployment benefits. It was this or receiving a lump sum. In the end I accepted the contract, as the project was already delayed for months because of these discussions with HR, and I wanted to start with the research, as I also felt I needed to do research and publish in order to secure a future career. After the contract had finished, the university contacted me multiple times to remind me that I had agreed to not applying for unemployment benefits. I never intended to do so, as I still had a temporary job at my own university, but I somehow experienced these reminders as the most insulting part of the construction."

These practices contribute to the exploitation of staff on flexible contracts, for instance by forcing them to renounce their rights to unemployment benefits or to comply with unacceptable working conditions.

"I was one year into my 3-yr temporary UD contract at university A, which I combined with a small lecturing contract at another university (university B). As I approached the end of my first year, the new collective labour agreement was about to be finalised. Taking no chances, the university A decided that contracts of those who were about to complete their first year of their UD/UHD contract, would not be extended. I was asked to stay on for the coordination of a core course, the university framing this in terms of maternity cover and thereby making it possible for me to stay on past my first year, without them being in any way legally obliged to grant me a permanent contract."

"Quickly instead of designing and teaching it became surviving and with many other colleagues coordinating small-group teaching we felt utterly left alone by the department, the faculty and the university for that manner. While professors had the influence to just refuse or put their foot down against teaching the same course twice in a block (yes, that was the solution... teaching two groups because none of the rooms fit more than 600 people...) there was very little that we could do."

"I have never spoken or been able to speak directly to anyone from HR. The contracts always came a month or two after I started. They came in, I got a phone call about the terms, whether I agreed to them or not. Well yes, in such a situation... I needed the money, and I needed the job. I just had to work. So I didn't have a lot of room to negotiate."

Respondents report a deliberate "race to the bottom" with universities trying to save money over the backs of their employees on flexible contracts.

"The lack of clear HR policies in an institution this size is embarrassing. There is a constant race to the bottom and struggle to obtain enough staff to work on these short contracts. Now, just this semester, I found out that junior colleagues who start teaching in the same courses as me 6 six years ago are contracted in scale 8, not scale 10 with some lousy excuse."

"I have been working at this university for six years now and never even spoke with HR ONCE - all communication is by email or not at all. Contracts are always late, erroneous ... and in my last contract as support staff they flat-out refused to have a contract negotiation conversation ("it's an extension so you already had your chance")."

“When I started teaching, there were many problems concerning my contract, which resulted in me teaching without any compensation (!!) for three months. Of course, I could decide to stop teaching at all until my contract was fixed, but I didn't want to burden my colleagues with this (also on temporary contracts), let alone the students (and let's be honest: the university thrives because of their loyal and diligent employees). So, I continued teaching for free. After many many many emails with HR and the secretariat, I managed to get paid for it in hindsight, but I'm certain this only happened because I continued the fight. If I would've given up at any point, I would not have been compensated.”

Some respondents report retaliation against them when they tried to stand up for their rights.

“It makes me feel like my employer doesn't care about my rights. And this situation with the project, honestly, makes me feel like they are deliberately denying me this because I tried to enforce my rights as an employee on another matter.”

“Still, we wanted to address this [structural overwork] with the faculty board but here it got actively obstructed by people higher-up. The message came down to: be thankful you have a job and don't you see this is part of the deal.”

In sum, these testimonials show that universities not only fail to provide safe and fair working conditions, but often also actively seek to hinder employees from obtaining more secure contracts.

3. Impact of precarious employment on the individual employee

Respondents report detrimental effects of precarious employment on three broad topics. These concern 1) their professional development and careers, 2) their personal and social lives, and 3) their mental and physical health. With regards to the first category, academics on flexible contracts often report feeling trapped.

“My professional development is almost non-existent. The [university] does not supervise junior lecturers in development, despite that we have to leave after max. 3 years. They only give a budget to spend on courses of your own choosing, but because of overworking there is little time to actually follow courses.”

Second, the precarious employment conditions significantly affect academics’ personal lives.

“I postpone having children and buying any property as I am not sure in which country I will live next in.”

“Always the insecurity whether I can support my family every few years. Insecurity if it is my fault that I can’t get a steady job. Never a sense of belonging. A sense of pointlessness of doing my best, or working hard. There is no reward in the end. Can’t plan things to do on the house, as I don’t know if we can afford it in a couple of years.”

“It is impossible to plan for the future when I have no idea if I will be working in six months’ time (when my contract ends) or where I will be working. A normal life is impossible.”

“Yes, the choice to have another child or not is influenced by it [i.e. job precarity], and yes, you can say it doesn’t matter, but in the end it does. Because I know that if I get pregnant again, I will be out of it for a while and then you can have maternity leave and then your appointment will be extended and so on, but you also get older and with a third child you just know what the year after that will be tough and then you don’t know whether it will be a healthy child or not. So it has, yes. Not that it entirely influenced the decision, but it definitely played into it.”

The working conditions described above, with the permanent uncertainty about their careers, the social isolation, and frequent intimidation by HR and university management, take a significant toll on the mental and physical health of academics on flexible contracts. Respondents report continuously doubting themselves and feeling stressed all the time.

“I think the precarity affects me mostly mentally - it makes you doubt about your future, about your qualities, about the intentions of your supervisors and university, it creates competition and jealousy between colleagues and in general doesn’t do anything good for the atmosphere at a department. Colleagues talk about unequal treatment and favoritism a lot (and rightly so) but I also realized that all those conversations often make me angry and sad, which is not doing my personal life any good. I find it difficult to take charge of my career, as the future is so uncertain and continuous flexibility is required.”

“Stress, insecurity, insomnia. I think about quitting academia on a weekly basis. I am afraid to discuss it with colleagues since I do not want to be seen as a complainer.”

“The stress and uncertainty about where I will be in six months when my contract ends eats away at me.”

These effects can be exacerbated for academics who are particularly vulnerable, for instance because they have care responsibilities, are foreign and/or rely on working visas.

"It made me stressed, insecure, on edge, tired, powerless and worried. Especially when I became a parent, I constantly felt the responsibility to have an income and felt the need to say "yes" to anything my supervisor/management at university would throw at me."

"Precarity is literally painful - I grind my teeth in worry about the future at night and wake up with headaches and sore muscles. I believe that the anxiety it causes can be especially bad for those like me, who were recruited from abroad, and therefore don't have the family ties or other social resources to fall back on for support. It also seems as if I was hired in a labor category ("skilled migrant worker") which does not guarantee me a job-hunting visa or access to the social security benefits I paid into once my final contract runs out."

"To be honest, I'm angry all the time. I feel exploited and I feel as if there is no sense of meritocracy; no matter how hard I work, the university will not recognize it. No matter what I have contributed, the Dutch immigration system and social security will not necessarily recognize me - at least not without a fight, and frankly I've not got much fight left in me."

Ironically, the very working conditions that cause these detriments to academics' mental health also prevent them from accessing qualified help, as illustrated by the quote below.

"It affects everything. I don't have a romantic life. It short-circuits professional networks and the research, as so much time is spent either on applications or on re-adjusting to new situations. I have anxiety about the future. I had a depressive breakdown and am on medication since, but ironically since I am constantly moving around for jobs, I cannot enter therapy (it takes forever to organise getting help for mental health, and therapists tend to feel a year is not enough to address issues)."

Many respondents feel unseen, unheard, and ignored by their institution.

*"Over the last few years I have reported cases of harassment, intimidation, people not working, homophobic "jokes" etc. *Note that I always was a witness, not a victim in these cases. My manager, the institute's director and several board members did not do anything with it ... most of them simply did not reply to my emails. My reports were answered with radio silence."*

"There's a sense during staff meetings that I am only temporarily part of the department. My ideas and opinions therefore feel less important."

4. The impact of precarious employment on the university as a whole

As highly skilled and qualified scholars are structurally forced to leave departments, the quality of education and research invariably decreases. In addition to the work pressure that is already structural in Dutch academia, the flexible contracts are themselves a cause of increasing work pressure - not only for those on flexible contracts, but for their tenured colleagues. The refusal to grant permanent contracts to temporary staff entails that departments have to recruit new staff to do the same structural work at high frequencies. This is detrimental to educational quality, continuity of courses and programs, implementation of improvement plans, and so. In addition, the lack of opportunities for professional growth, the excessive workload and lack of appreciation contribute to quick staff turnaround. The gaps this causes are often patched up with cheap labor of student assistants instead of providing permanent contracts to qualified staff.

“As a junior teacher I often receive appreciation from students and certainly also from colleagues and managers. However, I do not always feel this appreciation in other matters ... my hard work for this and the value I create with this for the education program means nothing for my contract, salary, opportunities and further career prospects. I think it's crazy that I immediately served my contract, that a lot of value and knowledge of and for the training is lost with me and that someone starts at 0 again in my place, who will not by definition create the same value as I do.”

“After a long tug-of-war between my department and HR, I heard 2.5 months before the end of my contract that the contract extension was definitely not going ahead and that I was out on the street 2.5 months later instead of an improved contract. After I left, someone was hired through an agency to teach the course that I would otherwise teach because the vacancy was not filled on time. ... It was a great surprise to me and former colleagues that an unqualified teacher would rather be recruited for a lot of money instead of extending the contract of someone who has been doing this course for a long time.”

“Recently, there was a job opening in my department for a lecturer position for four years. Perfect for me, I thought, a great way to continue working in the department and develop my teaching skills (ignoring the precarity of this position, of course). However, it turned out I cannot even apply for this position as I need a 3 month period of not working at [the university] first, otherwise they have to offer me a permanent contract. In other words, 'bad timing' regarding my final date at [the university], and the starting date of the new position. This enrages me. For who does this system work? There's a skilled, eligible candidate available, already working in the department who knows the structure, people, students etc., and who would like to grow, but somehow cannot apply out of fears of having to give out a permanent contract? It just doesn't make any sense and is highly frustrating and discouraging.”

Employees on flexible contracts report not feeling committed to the middle- and longer-term visions and missions of the university, and they report not developing deep relationships with their colleagues.

“This is not just about individuals but about the longer-term relevance of the institution. ... As a precarious employee, I don't care about the (esp. middle/long-term) interests of the team, department, or university because I know I won't be there to benefit when my temporary contract ends. I'll then work somewhere else, with a new team, department, and organisation to care about.”

“Since teachers are coming and going with these temporary contracts, I notice not to get too close with colleagues. If I develop friendships, I will be sad when they leave... Not only is my contract temporary, but also the people I meet and the network that I develop.”

“Especially over the last months, I feel an increasing disconnection, and almost indifference, towards my job, which I used to enjoy so much. It is discouraging ... I also feel a growing indifference regarding the projects I am involved in, as I know I will leave soon.”

“Department director telling me bluntly that I shouldn't work too hard, because it didn't matter. In two years, they were going to let me go, no matter what I did. That was very bad for my motivation and self-worth, and (partly) the cause for a major burn-out.”

In addition, the competition for scarce resources leads to distrusting relationships and the relative powerlessness of employees with flexible contracts within the university hierarchy contribute to unsafe working conditions.

“Very tense working environment: tensions between temporary staff competing for better positions, awkward relationships with permanent staff because of unequal power dynamics. I avoid working at the office.”

“I felt that I could never truly trust or become friends with colleagues because we were all competing for the same rare positions.”

“I will leave my job. I do not feel safe.”

“When I told my boss that I was moving [to a different university], he said: [...] ‘If you go there, then you have to start all over again’. He obviously wanted me to work for him longer, and it also became clear that as long as I worked for him, he just kept holding out with ‘I’m going to arrange that permanent contract for you someday.’ It’s not that he made me do weird things, but there was a kind of weird power relationship, you know. And when I said: ‘Yes, in six months I will start somewhere else,’ the power dynamic was gone.”

This affects their colleagues on permanent contracts, too, as the following quote illustrates:

“The casualisation and constant turn-over make my role as faculty developer very difficult. I would love to work together with colleagues more to develop the teaching vision and community building, but everyone is constantly overworked, not included and basically nearing burnout.”

Employees who have experienced how HR and university management treats them, report becoming disillusioned and cynical, losing trust in colleagues and universities.

“They [managers] are telling lies and from the point of job advertisement they are dishonest.”

“The situation has made me cynical above all. So many people say they feel bad, some say it is not unusual in which they are correct, and that things should change. Yet nothing seems to happen. I decided to actively apply for other jobs. If I get a good offer, I will take it and withdraw from the grants I submitted. If I don't get an offer but get a grant and a tenure track in the next few months, I am probably more interested in non-academic jobs, simply because I am more motivated for that.”

"A cynical experience: I made it into the national news some time ago, which isn't everyday business in my field. My faculty was all trumpeting about 'their excellent scientist' blabla. Two days later it was clear that a large grant was rejected, my contract would end in two weeks from then and I asked for help. People at the faculty, the Dean included, didn't even reply to my requests. Not even a confirmation of receipt."

Precarious employment and the opportunistic use of human beings by HR and universities directly feeds into "[The Great Resignation](#)" observed in the higher education sector.³ The practices described above contribute to the higher education sector becoming an overall unattractive employer.

"The university administration appears fundamentally uninterested in anything other than their own reputation, and middle-managers and staff also appear to me to be deeply uninterested in anything besides their own comfort."

"... because I also don't feel appreciated in all areas, ... I notice that I am getting more and more frustrated with 'the academy'. And I mean the system and the culture. It is becoming increasingly difficult to have confidence in my employer and that my hard work will pay off. Because of this, I am currently considering looking for a job outside the academy with more salary, stability and appreciation for my value and ambitions."

"Even though I love teaching and working with students, these precarious conditions, bureaucratic struggles and structural overwork make me overthink my decision to work/stay in academia. It's a shame."

Respondents have lost their belief in the university and academia due to the opaque and nontransparent decision-making and their disregard for their employees' needs. Universities as employers are seen as untrustworthy, inhumane, and hypocritical.

"Along the way I realized that, whatever I do, even if that entails doing a lot of extra work or have perfect student evaluations, the university is not going to do me any favors. If they want to hire you, they will, but if not, they will always find a reason not to do so. Your qualities or extra work don't have anything to do with their decision to hire you or not. This makes me more vulnerable, I think. Also, it sometimes gives me a feeling of futility, like, why am I even doing my best, which reduces the joy I have in doing my job."

"This is the same university that promotes itself with wanting to deliver managers that make a positive change in society! That releases press statements indicating how inclusive they are and how sustainable their buildings are! But meanwhile, staff get exploited and no one cares."

"All in all, it feels like a highly exploitative relationship that the university maintains with its freelance / temporary staff, one which I do not expect from institutions often claiming the moral high ground."

The plight of academics on flexible contracts does not go unnoticed by their permanently employed colleagues. Solidarity is undermined because these employees suffer from excessive workloads, too, and because standing in solidarity with precariously employed colleagues makes them vulnerable to intimidation. The quote below, coming from an academic on a permanent contract who advocated for a permanent position for their colleague, illustrates this.

³ The Great Resignation is an economic trend in which employees voluntarily resigned from their jobs *en masse* in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

"I would fight this further if for no other reason than because it helps the cause collectively, but I'm tired, my mental health is falling apart, and since I'm a non-EU foreigner, I'm frankly not convinced that the Dutch legal system will protect my rights if I do go through the very expensive and stressful route of opening an official complaint. I'm also afraid that legal action will make me unemployable generally if it ends up in the press, or if it leaks out through professional networks."

The quotes above show the substantial hit universities' reputation receive from their engagement in precarious working conditions and exploitation of employees. It is worth mentioning that the working conditions described above and the deliberate exploitation of vulnerable academic staff also taints the Netherlands' reputation internationally.

"I have to say that as a foreigner, I now have a poorer perception of the Netherlands and its people than when I arrived - I have the sense that on the whole Dutch people are at once overly entitled and politically passive, that they don't care about each other's rights but only themselves, and that institutions only work for you if you are already Dutch. ... I will be forced out, and leave feeling deeply aggrieved and perhaps even a bit prejudiced. This is all, in other words, very poor cultural diplomacy."

5. Impact on academic freedom

Finally, academic freedom is compromised in unacceptable ways by precariousness. Academic freedom is the principle that staff and academic institutions are free to perform their scientific research, disclose their findings and teach (see [KNAW](#)). As such, it is one of the pillars of excellence in teaching and research. Casualised contracts undermine academic freedom - an observation that is also [supported by the Joint Committee of Experts of UNESCO and the International Labour Organization](#). Indeed, employees on flexible contracts report feeling so unsafe that they do not dare to speak up or express different opinions.

"... the more precarious your position is, the more limited your academic freedom becomes."

"I find it harder to speak up, to share my opinion, when I feel that that opinion goes against the opinions of people in the department in more powerful positions."

"... precarious researchers in particular hardly have any academic freedom, not least because their research time is often unpaid. If academic freedom exists at all, it exists only with senior staff or in the weekends."

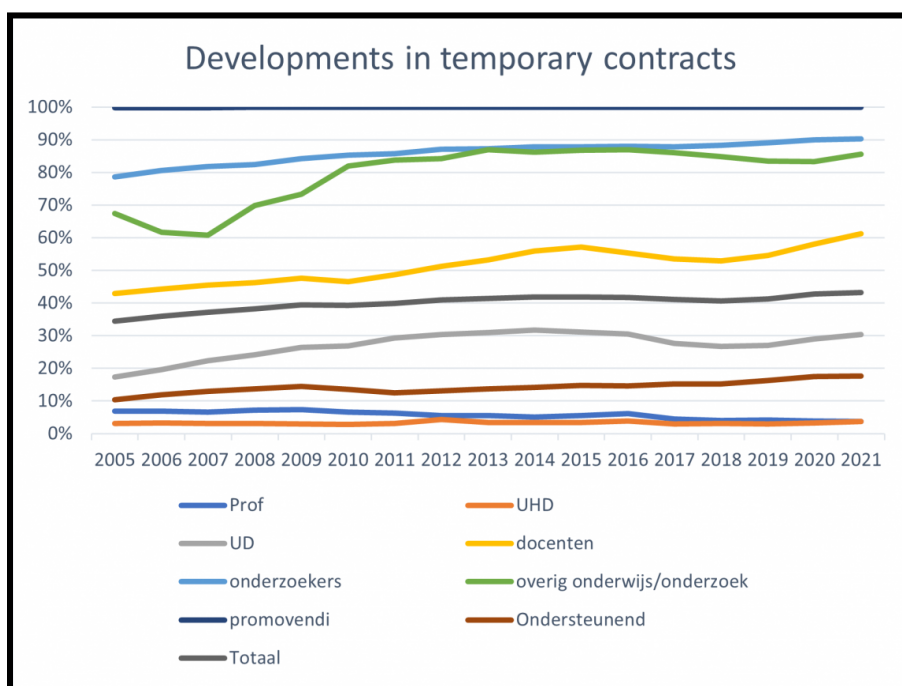
"How can you criticise the work of a current or possible future senior colleague if they have the power over your future employment?"

"It chokes me."

"Working precariously directly translates to constant feelings of not wanting to burden your colleagues/supervisor, accepting overwork, not wanting to complain, not asking too critical questions, etc. All out of fear that your contract might not be renewed."

Discussion

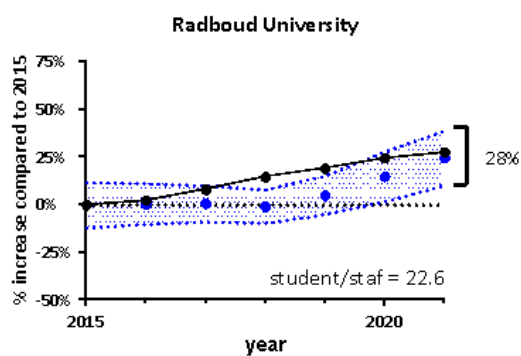
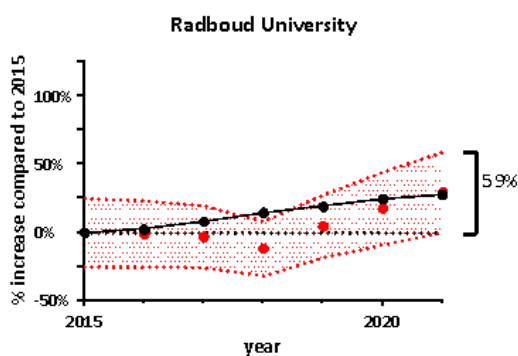
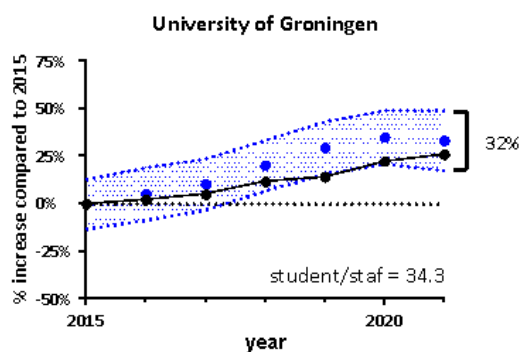
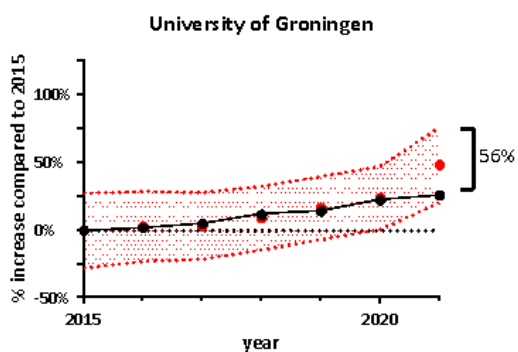
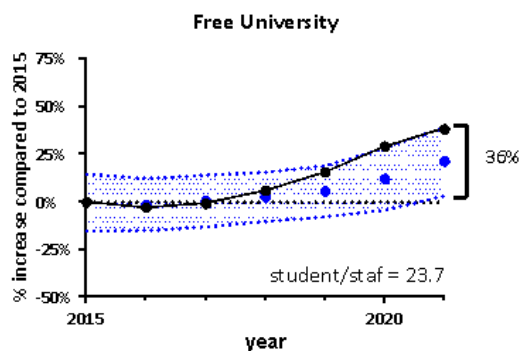
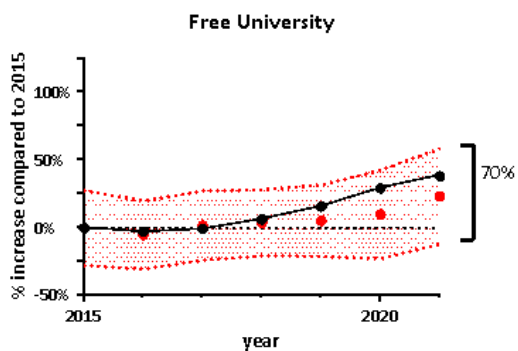
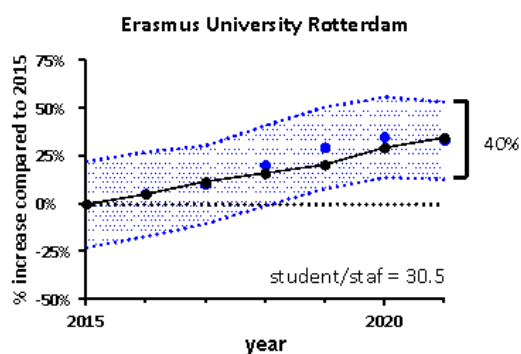
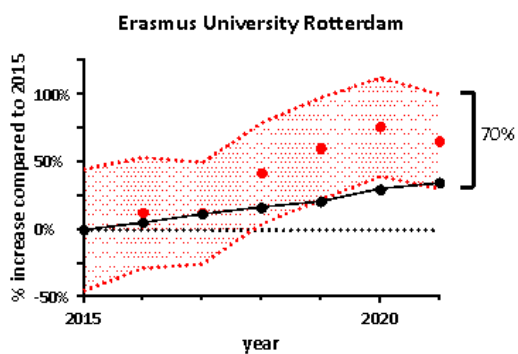
While the testimonials presented in this report are based on personal anecdotes, it is important to emphasize that they are symptomatic of a broader, structural issue. Temporary contracts are widespread among university staff in the Netherlands. Despite efforts to reduce the so-called ‘flexible layer’, the number of temporary contracts [continues to rise](#). The rise in temporary contracts is not spread evenly across university staff. While Professors and Associate Professors are [barely affected](#) by this trend, job insecurity is widespread among Assistant Professors and lecturers. Indeed, as shown in the graph below, the increase in temporary contracts primarily affects teaching staff without research duties (i.e. lecturers or *docenten*). In 2021, 61 percent of lecturers were employed on a temporary contract, compared to 43 percent in 2005.

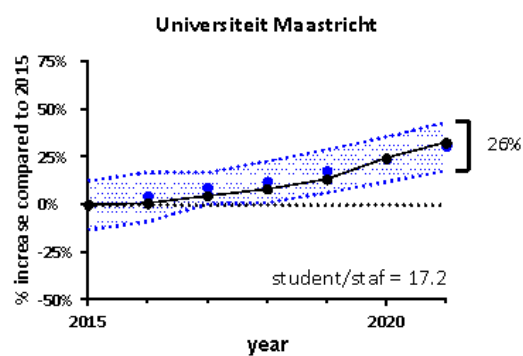
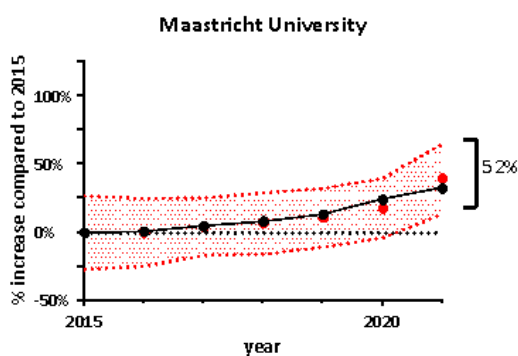
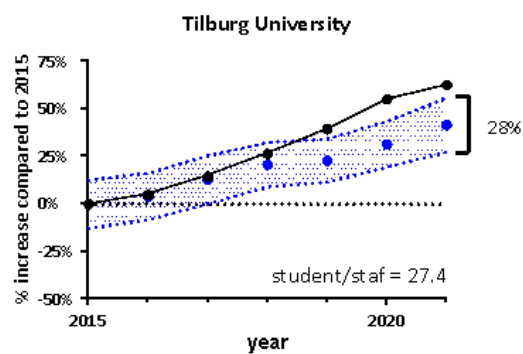
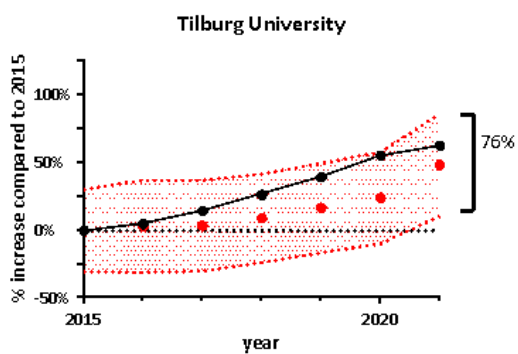
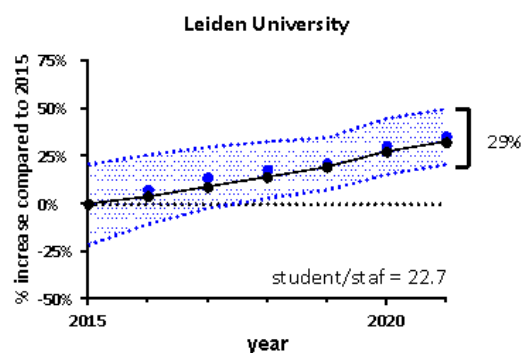
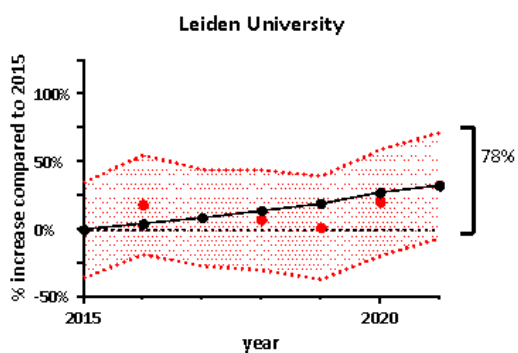
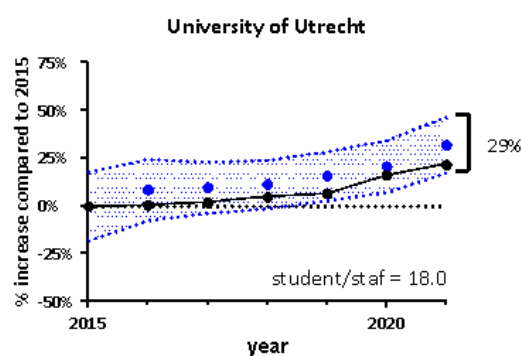
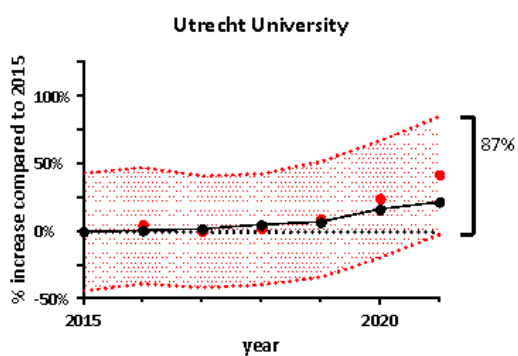


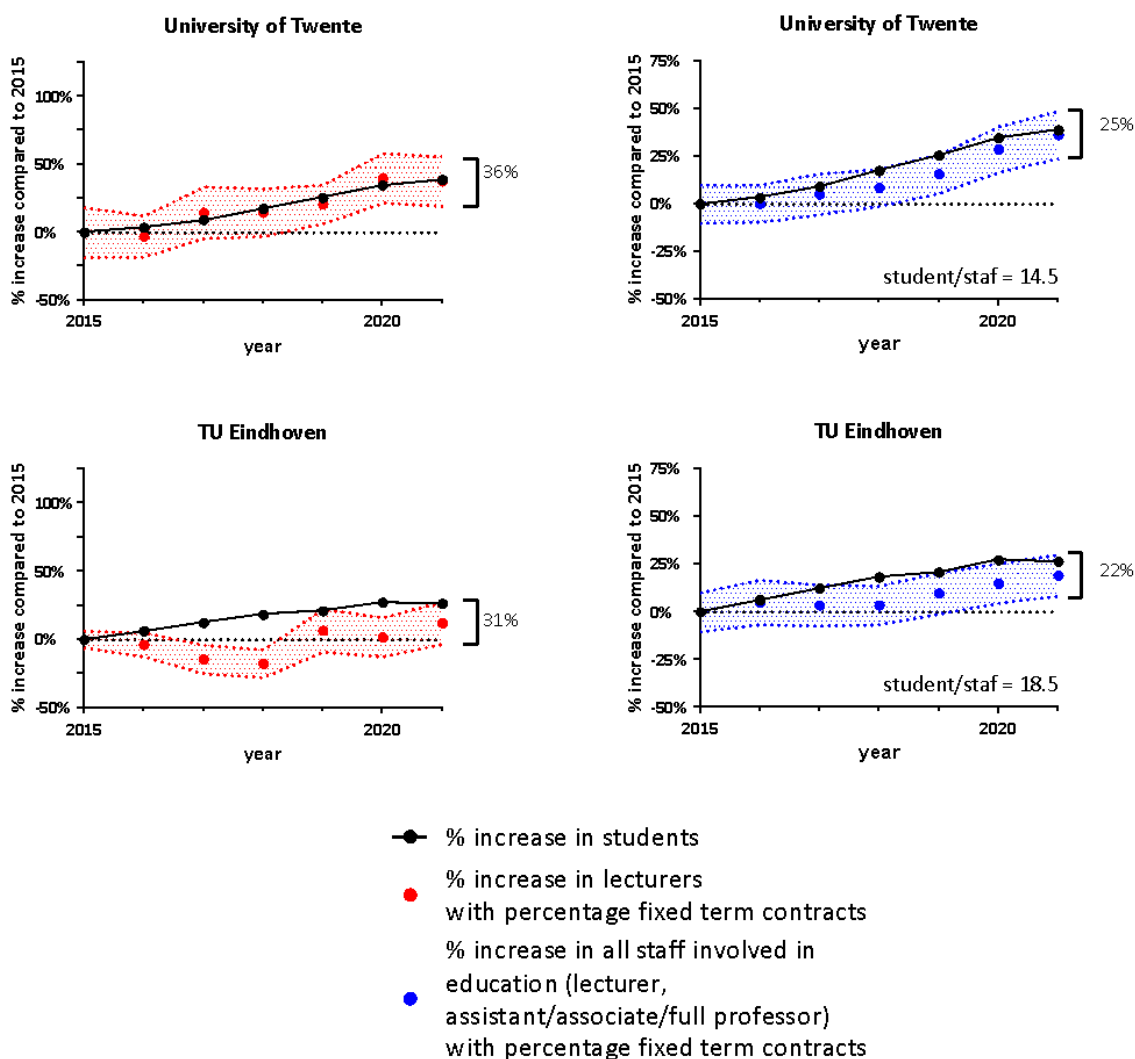
©HOP. Source: [Universities of the Netherlands](#) (data excl. the healthcare sector).

According to recent figures provided by the [Universiteiten van Nederland](#) (Universities of the Netherlands or UNL), Dutch universities have experienced a steady annual increase of students and staff of about 5% from 2015-2021. The increase in student numbers stands in stark contrast with the increase in the number of temporary appointments, which has increased disproportionately. Indeed, as shown below, the *proportion* of temporary appointments has increased sharply between 2015 to 2021. Accordingly, the ‘flexible layer’ has grown far beyond its intended purpose - that is: to cover for so-called ‘sick and peak’ loads (i.e. to replace permanent workers who are ill and to cover peaks in economic activity).⁴

⁴ These figures do not yet account for the effects of the Collective Labor Agreement (CAO) that was signed in 2021 and went into force in January 2022, which sought to reduce the number of temporary contracts among Assistant Professors, Associate Professors, Full Professors as well as support and management staff by stipulating that they can only be offered a temporary employment contract for a maximum of twelve months. Crucially, however, this CAO-regulation did not include university lecturers.







The graphs depicted above show the increase in students (shown in black), which are *first* compared to the increase in lecturers with temporary (i.e. fixed-term) contracts (in red) and *then* compared to the total increase in educational staff (in blue). The latter category comprises all staff with teaching obligations, including lecturers *as well as* Assistant Professors, Associate Professors and Full Professors. Taken together, the figures show that from 2015 to 2021, the number of temporary appointments has increased disproportionately in comparison to the increase in student numbers.

While this trend is visible across all universities, there are some noteworthy differences between universities. For instance, the highest percentage of temporary (i.e. fixed-term) contracts amongst lecturers (*docenten*) can be found at the University of Utrecht, Leiden University and Tilburg University. The highest percentage of temporary contracts among teaching staff more generally (i.e. lecturers, Assistant Professors, Associate Professors and Full Professors) can be found at Erasmus University Rotterdam, the *Vrije Universiteit* Amsterdam and the University of Groningen.

Conclusion

This report has provided ample evidence that precarious contracts and casualisation negatively affect academics' personal and professional lives. Some of the respondents who participated in our survey reported that their insecure contract made it difficult for them to make long-term (financial and family) plans, while others explained that their mental health had been damaged. Many respondents also reported evidence of HR and university management deliberately preventing employees from meeting the criteria for permanent contracts, thereby effectively obstructing the retention of talented personnel. This trend seems particularly alarming given that it can undermine employees' trust in their leaders and institutions more generally.

In line with [previous research](#), our report has shown that casualisation has a dehumanizing impact on staff: it makes them feel invisible; it makes them vulnerable to abuse and exploitation; it affects their agency to push for change; it undermines academic freedom; and it makes it difficult for them to project into the future. More generally, these testimonials show the extent of exploitation, unsafe working conditions and obstruction of careers that academics on flexible contracts have to endure, and the deliberation with which universities keep academics from getting permanent contracts. The impact on academics' personal lives is substantial. Beyond undermining individual employees' mental and physical health, precarious employment also negatively affects their life choices and professional development.

The employment practice of flexible contracts not only affects employees' personal lives; it is also deeply deleterious to the quality of education offered at universities. For instance, since lecturers are often primarily concerned with making ends meet, it undermines innovation and compromises the overall quality of education. In other words, the casualisation of educational work has damaging effects on the entire higher education sector. As such, it also damages the reputation of Dutch universities by decreasing their attractiveness as employers, thereby tainting the Netherlands' reputation internationally.

Taken together, these testimonials demonstrate that - while having a debilitating effect on everyone affected - vulnerabilities associated with precarious work are exacerbated by other factors such as having care responsibilities, being foreign, or being dependent on visas. The intersectional aspects of precariousness cannot be ignored, as they might amount to institutional racism and discrimination.

Of course, casualisation in higher education is not a uniquely Dutch problem. In the United Kingdom, for instance, [stories](#) of university lecturers living in extreme precarity made the news in recent years. Similarly, in 2021, staff at German universities [reported](#) their experiences with temporary contracts in academia under the #IchbinHanna ("I am Hanna") hashtag. The growth in casualised contracts in higher education is one of the key challenges the academy is currently facing; it results in a 'brain drain' and ultimately undermines academic freedom. We can and must do better. Putting a stop on the excessive and unnecessary use of fixed-term and exploitative contracts will not only grant academic personnel the job security and human dignity they need and deserve to stay in the sector, but also improve the overall quality of teaching and research, thereby serving the higher education sector more generally.

These findings are in line with recommendations put forward by the Social and Economic Council (SER), which advises the Dutch Government and Parliament on social and economic policy. In July 2021, the SER presented an [advisory report](#) with recommendations for labour market reform. One of the key recommendations put forward in this report was that flexible work must be strictly regulated, and that

permanent jobs must become the norm in order to combat uncertainty and inequality: 'Many people in the Netherlands have a sense of losing control of their future and living environment. Insecure jobs and flexible employment contracts are a major factor in this, as a result of which employees experience loss of security and perspective'. Yet, in contrast to this advice set out by the SER, flexible work and temporary contracts are still rampant in Dutch higher education.

In line with this observation, we call on our universities to end casualisation, end structural overwork and ensure a safe working environment for all staff. To achieve these goals, we ask that universities:

- offer permanent contracts as a default (in line with Article 2.2. of the CLA).
- reduce the levels of casualisation in the higher education sector to a bare minimum to cover for 'sick and peak' loads. be honest and transparent about the extent of casualisation in Dutch higher education.
- actively invest in de-casualisation efforts.
- enforce better monitoring mechanisms and HR-regulations to collect information about and report on exploitative, temporary contracts.
- stop offering exploitative parttime and temporary teaching-only contracts without granting any support or compensation for research time and/or professionalization.
- ensure adequate, fair, open and transparent, as well as accessible procedures for reporting misconduct.