

Associate Lecturers at Brookes

The UCU position

Background

As members will be aware, Oxford Brookes University has employed a large number of staff on Associate Lecturer contracts over many years. In some areas, particularly those where the management have argued with the need for 'professional' or practice in-put, the use of ALs to undertake teaching and assessment seems to be the default position when new academic staff are required. The UCU's national stance is that whilst there is a recognition that a small number of ALs may have a place in universities for genuinely pedagogic reasons, say where there is a need to bring in expertise for one off lectures or workshops, the employer should always seek to employ all academic staff on what are called 'established' contracts – ie as full-time or fractional appointments.

The reasons for this are obvious: ALs posts are insecure, even when they are permanent, there is no guarantee from one year to the next about the number of hours the employer is committing to; ALs are paid less, on the whole, than staff doing similar jobs; and unless an AL transfers to a more established contract, they can only progress one increment up the pay scale (currently equivalent to a Grade 8, where lecturers start a grade above, on 9, and in theory can progress to Senior Lecturer automatically).

We have colleagues at Brookes who have been on AL contracts for many, many years, with little prospect of any improvement in their terms and conditions, except when a case has been made – usually with the support of the union – for transfer to a better contract. ALs tell us that they remain on such contracts because they are often scared that if they make a fuss they will lose what hourly paid work they have.

Historically, a culture of casualization seems to have developed in some parts of Brookes, where management have felt it acceptable to employ large numbers of ALs. They have argued that this is to accommodate uncertainties in terms of student recruitment. We do not believe, except in very exceptional circumstances, this holds much water, particularly given the number of examples we have come across of staff who have had essentially the same number of hours, teaching the same modules, with the same size classes over a number of years.

In addition, we are also aware that in the past ALs have sometimes been required to act as Module Leaders, and undertake other duties which would normally (and should only, according to the relevant role profiles) be undertaken by staff paid several grades higher than Grade 8.

Whether through lack of oversight on the part of the management, or too great a delegation of employment responsibility to middle managers charged with balancing the books, but with inadequate training or guidance in agreed HR policies, a culture seems to have developed at Brookes

where many ALs have been used to undertake work that they should have been doing on established contracts.

Moreover, there has been a significant lack of transparency or clarity in terms of rates of pay for AL work, and a number of 'Informal practices' seem to have developed in some parts of the university where some ALs have been paid extra for duties they should not have been doing, or paid at no agreed rate for additional marking etc.

This situation is clearly intolerable, and in line with the National position to persuade employers to end casualization in the academic workforce, UCU locally have been working with the management to develop a policy which will begin to see the end of such practices here.

The AL policy

(The policy can be viewed by following this link: http://www.brookes.ac.uk/services/hr/handbook/short_term_temp_contracts/associate-lecturer-policy.html)

UCU officers – including the Regional Official - have been involved in discussions with the management over the introduction of a new AL policy to attempt to regularise this irregular situation – specifically in terms of reducing the use of ALs as a whole, transferring existing ALs to established contracts, and introducing greater certainty and transparency in the hourly rate.

These discussions began eighteen months ago, and a draft policy was developed and put to the Executive Board, who approved this, and which has been implemented by the management from the beginning of this academic year. There will be a series of further meetings as part of an ongoing review process. It should be stressed that the union has not ratified this policy, and will not seek ratification of it until a number of outstanding issues are resolved.

Throughout our discussions with the management we have been at pains to express our support for the initiative, particularly given that we hope it represents a genuine desire to end casualization and to ensure that staff are stated equitably, and given the best terms and conditions possible for the work they do.

However, the key issues we see as standing in the way of ratification are the following:

1. The requirement for all current ALs to wait a further 18 months before they are considered for transfer to an established contract. Our position is that in the case of those ALs who have been employed for a number of years on an excessive number of AL hours (for the sake of argument, 200+), they should immediately be given the opportunity for transfer to an appropriate grade and an appropriate fractionality.
2. We have been made aware at Branch meetings and outside of these, of a number of members whose pay has been significantly cut as a consequence of the new policy –

presumably as a result of certain parts of the university negotiating or offering ad hoc payments for specific duties not clearly specified under the previous policy regime. As a union whilst we do not support the use of 'Informal practices', there seems to be a legacy of something like this that needs to be sensibly dealt with.

3. There are a number of 'get out' clause in the policy which risk meaning that the default position in some subject areas, may mean that the management will continue to employ ALs more extensively than is in the spirit of the agreement.
4. There remains a question mark over the possible exclusion of one set of employees – those in Oxford Brookes International – from the policy altogether (again based on the argument that because student numbers are unpredictable, there is a need to retain the flexibility that AL contracts provide).
5. There appear to be inconsistencies between hourly allowances for assessment between what is given to ALs (ie they are lower) than to other academic staff – that is, the tariffs for this activity are in practice very different.

We are due to meet with the management early in February to go over these issues, and will keep members informed of progress. In the meantime, any AL who feels that they should be on a different contract and at a higher grade, should contact one of the Branch Officers via Claire the Branch Administrator, for advice.