

Laura Schwartz (who works as a lecturer at the University of Warwick, and is involved in organising around issues facing casualised staff in particular) gave a brief overview of changes to Higher Education in Britain, and how this has reshaped the University as a workplace.

Fees were initially introduced in the late 90s, raised slightly into a graduate tax in the early 2000, but the significant shift occurred in October 2012, when students were expected to pay £9000 a year. In my experience, students a much to see themselves as consumers and often invoke the £9000 fees when arguing for a better 'service' from their teacher. The introduction of the higher fees did not solve the problem funding problem in UK Higher Education – there is a very widespread sense that there is a shortage of permanent jobs with a rising workload for those who do have a permanent post.

It is now common practice for University teachers to spend at least two years in hourly paid/short term contract work before acquiring a permanent post. However, many 'Postdocs' spend far longer (possibly indefinitely) in casual posts. A two tier workforce (Permanent versus casualised) has now been structured in to higher education. At the University of Warwick, for example, 30% of teaching is done by hourly paid staff. The staff are not only cheaper than permanent staff, but they are flexible. At Warwick, for example, hourly paid tutors are only told a couple of weeks before the beginning of time whether they will have work or not, so that academic year. This is because the University does not know until the last minute, which courses the new intake of student-consumers will choose. They therefore increasingly depend upon hourly paid tutors as a reserve army of labour which can respond rapidly to student consumer choice.

During the recent wave of industrial action over pay and pensions in the University and Colleges Union, it was still fairly common for summer senior academics to claim that they were Artisans rather than workers on the basis that they had autonomous control over their 'product' (their research). I strongly disagree with such an analysis. Not only is Higher Education becoming increasingly proletarianised (e.g. the increase of low pay and precarity), but any supposed autonomy that academics used to have over their Labour is being rapidly and deliberately undermined by systems brought in to measure and quantify our research output (e.g. systems like the Research Excellence Framework which requires us to produce a certain amount of publications each year, 'impact' which attempts to quantify the influence our work has on the public sphere). Knowledge and research is increasingly fashioned as a commodity which can then be circulated within a global market of Higher Education.