

Published in *Personnel Review*, 35(2), 207-225, 2006

## **Managing temporary workers in Higher Education - still at the margin?**

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### **Abstract**

This article focuses on a form of temporary and precarious employment – hourly paid part-time teaching in the UK Higher Education sector. Whether such ‘numerical flexibility’ adds strategic value and demonstrates good practice is highly debatable. The study reported here is based on five case studies and identifies a continuum of strategies from integration into the main workforce through to ‘deepened differentiation’. Although integration is somewhat problematic when applied to a diverse group, differentiation seems predicated on a defensive, risk management approach designed to further marginalise this activity. Also, differentiation fails to address the aspirations of many employees,

creating tensions between institutional strategy and the needs of academic heads. The paper concludes that some supposed benefits of numerical flexibility might be illusory, such as the deployment of allegedly 'cheap and disposable' substitute workers which may be offset by unintentional consequences including rigidities in an organisation's human resource systems?.

**Keywords**

Numerical flexibility, temporary employment, Higher Education

Pre-Print

## **Introduction**

Tensions (Blyton and Morris, 1992) and paradoxes (Bryson and Barnes, 2000) are evident in the relationship between human resource (HR) approaches and flexible employment strategies. With a view to contributing to these debates this article examines approaches to managing part-time and temporary teachers (hereafter abbreviated to PTT) employed in the UK Higher Education (HE) system. Such 'precarious' employees are employed on short-term contracts, subject to involuntary and rapid changes to their deployment and are paid by the hour. Nonetheless, they carry out a core professional role as teachers.

This paper begins by briefly reviewing the debate concerning HRM and numerical flexibility, outlining some issues identified in the UK and in HE, before considering previous research on the management of HR in universities and its relation to PTT. The study enables exploration of strategies in use, whether these strategies are aligned with other strategic imperatives, how far they appear to suit the needs of academic heads and what their consequences are likely to be. We use a broad conception of strategy as an emergent and informal process in line with Proctor *et al.* (1994).

## **HRM and numerical flexibility**

There has been considerable debate, now largely played out, about how flexibility contributes to the concept of HRM. An unresolved point is the apparent contradiction between the rhetoric of HRM and the consequences of utilising numerical flexibility such as temporary/casual contracts. Blyton and Morris (1992) argue that this approach is an example of a defensive strategy that is the antithesis of high commitment HRM, that is an HR approach emphasising notions of shared goals, identity and integration between organisational members.

The notion of one 'best' approach to managing human resources has been challenged (Purcell, 1999) and is hardly consistent with contingency theory (emphasizing 'best fit'). Watson (1999) argues that HR practices are not determined by either approach but are the outcome of managers exercising strategic choice within constraints set by the context in which they work. The principal choice is either between direct control/low commitment and indirect control/high commitment or a dual strategy dividing "operations into core and peripheral sectors" (Watson, 1999, p.33). In contrast to earlier research which found no evidence that use of part-time/temporary employment was strategic (therefore refuting Atkinson, 1984), Mayne *et al.* (1996) found a correlation between use of such employment in organisations with the existence of strategies with an explicit HRM content.

## **Temporary and part-time employment in UK Higher Education**

In the UK 25% of all employees are part-time and 6.4% are on temporary contracts (LFS, 2003). Temporary employees are said to experience job insecurity, lower pay, limited development and promotion opportunities and exhibit weaker employment relationships than permanent staff (Purcell *et al.*,

1999). This 'precarious work', is insecure employment where risk is transferred from the employer to the employee (Allen and Henry, 1996; Beck, 2000). Although some part-time jobs may be secure and include strong organisational relationships (Purcell *et al.*, 1999), others share some negative features with temporary work such as limited development and career prospects (Tam, 1997). Especially affected are those that are both part-time *and* temporary (Purcell, 2000).

In UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) some 53% of the 134,000 academic staff are employed on temporary contracts (IRHEPC, 1999). No other UK sector employs so many professional workers in this way, although this 'casualisation' of the academy is echoed in Europe (Enders, 2000), Australia (Kimber, 2003) and the USA (Finkelstein *et al.*, 1998).

Part time and temporary teachers make up a large proportion of temporary workers in UK HE. Commentators have struggled to enumerate PTT, as they have been largely excluded from personnel records, creating an 'invisible faculty' (Husbands, 1998). Recent estimates indicate in excess of 60,000 PTT (Bryson and Barnes, 2000). Utilisation of PTT, is, however, highly variable, with some disciplines and some HEIs employing few PTT (Allen, 2001). Although PTT have at most, year long contracts, they may cover the full range of teaching roles (Bryson *et al.*, 2000).

Commentators have distinguished a number of categories of such staff (Husbands and Davies, 2000). For example, PTT may be postgraduate students, contract researchers (or others already working in the institution), those already with a job outside the organisation (including the 'portfolio worker') and former lecturers that have taken early retirement. Interwoven through these categories are many themes, for example; the voluntary or involuntary aspect of part-time or temporary employment and the degree of aspiration to be an academic; balancing private and public commitments; and the career stage dimension. There is also a broad range of contexts and circumstances that may vary at a local level. Some PTT 'dip in' for a brief period, or are at the beginning or end of their working life, while others have been PTT for many years (Allen, 2001). The nature of the discipline and its labour market, including the range of external career opportunities, are important conditioning factors.

The recent increase in PTT in the UK can be attributed to the relative absence of employment regulation and declining resources in the face of rapidly expanding student numbers (Bryson and Blackwell, 2001). Also, local managers typically have discretion to engage as many PTT as they wish, whereas frequently the employment of salaried teachers is controlled by central functions. These factors combine to encourage numerical flexibility - rapid recruitment and deployment of relatively cheap and 'disposable' employees (Bryson, 2004a).

UK researchers (e.g. Husbands and Davies, 2001, Bryson *et al.*, 2000; Allen, 2001) have been critical of the treatment of PTT. PTT have apparently been neglected in comparison with full-time and permanent colleagues in terms of HR

policy and support, encouraging feelings of being 'at the margin' (Bryson and Scurry, 2002). Studies of the USA (Leslie, 1998; D'Andrea, 2002) and Canada (Rajagopal and Lin, 1996) in relation to 'adjunct faculty' and of Australia (Bassett 1998; Kimber 2003) in relation to 'casuals', have found similar effects.

### **HRM in UK Higher Education**

One explanation for this situation is the weakness of the HR function in HE (Keep *et al.*, 1996). In the UK, the HR function has developed from administrative origins at variable rates and along different paths across the sector (Warner and Crosthwaite 1993; MacKay 1995; Jackson 2001). By 2000 the function had essentially evolved to a common state and covered a range of readily recognisable HR activities (Jackson, 2001). Keep and Sisson (1992) and Keep *et al.* (1996) argue that the condition for a progressive HR strategy is holistic management of employment relationships. In UK HE, they contend, responsibility is split between multiple levels and bodies (multi-employer bargaining bodies, representative bodies, funding councils and HEIs). There is 'a failure to own the problem', and especially to engage with and shape labour markets to plan for staffing needs. A particular example is the way in which turbulent labour markets and financial insecurity has been passed on to the work force through short and fixed term contracts, potentially undermining motivation and commitment (Keep and Sisson, 1992). Subsequent studies suggest, however, that academic labour market difficulties are limited to recruitment and retention in a few identifiable subject areas (e.g. business and IT, electrical and electronic engineering) and localities (IRHEPC, 1999), although there is some recent evidence that difficulties are becoming more widespread and acute (Thewlis, 2003; Powney *et al.*, 2002). Nevertheless, one improving aspect of support noted, even by critics of HR, is staff development (Keep and Sisson, 1992).

Some postgraduates and researchers have benefited from national initiatives on career training and the associated growth of graduate schools. Some research intensive universities now have a staff developer dedicated to this group (Garnett and Goodall, 2003). More generally in the UK, there has been a proliferation of projects and guides focussing on specific disciplines (e.g. Gibbs and Pearson, 2000; Mills, 2003; Findlay-Brookes, 2003) and case studies of local 'good practices' (Forster and Thompson, 1997; Pearson, 2002). A literature on the preparation and development of PTT has also begun to emerge (Nicol, 2000; Blackwell *et al.*, 2001). The main problems with this growing activity have been a lack of systematic co-ordination within and beyond individual institutions, the relatively random and limited nature of localised 'good practice' and evidence of low take up of what is available by PTT (Bryson and Blackwell, 2001; Bryson, 2004b). The tripartite experiment at two universities, involving co-ordinated support by the staff development function at a generic level, and subject specific input at departmental level, supported by the external subject community (through the appropriate Learning and Teaching Support Network subject centre) is an attempt to address both incoherence and the apparent desire of PTT for 'relevant', in-context development (Holland *et al.*, 2002; Davies and Mossley 2002).

In addition to the labour market pressures mentioned above, a number of other imperatives have impacted on HEIs. Amongst these have been a raft of legislative changes that have emanated from the European Union, increasingly extending the employment rights of temporary and part-time staff [1]. A concomitant has been increased institutional 'risk', especially of failures at local level, where most PTT recruitment and management has resided, compromising the 'good employer' reputation of HEIs. Second, there has been a perceived risk to quality in extended utilisation of PTT, heightened by a critical report at UK Parliament level (HMSO, 2001). Third, long running campaigns against 'casualisation' by trades unions have contributed to national guidance intended to decrease the use of PTT (e.g. JNCHES, 2002). For these reasons, some HEIs have begun to address the issues surrounding PTT in more pro-active ways.

### **The Empirical Study**

This study sought to adopt a focussed approach to gathering evidence about emergent strategies on PTT. Our research questions address:

- To what extent are differing human resourcing approaches to PTT being proposed and adopted?
- What drivers and rationales do managers identify behind their thinking and choices?
- What are the current outcomes and likely future consequences of these approaches?

In order to gain sufficient breadth and detail about managers' perspectives and take account of local context, we opted for a case study approach at the level of the individual HEI. Previous research (e.g. Husbands and Davies, 2000) demonstrated that few HE institutions have engaged in any management activity in this sphere. Accordingly, institutions were selected using a purposive approach. HEIs using proactive approaches to PTT issues were sought and identified through formal network contacts, such as HE personnel managers. At the same time we wished to represent both the diversity of UK HE and areas of heavy PTT utilisation. Hence, five cases were selected for study - two HE colleges, one large specialist HE college, an 'old' or pre-1992 university and a 'new' or post-1992 university. Each was visited on one or more occasions between March and August 2003. Semi-structured interviews were conducted, recorded and each case was fully written up. Material is presented here in such a way as to protect anonymity of interviewees and organisations.

The interviewees in each case consisted of 'strategy makers' and academic heads of departments or schools. The scope deliberately focussed on strategies and precluded evidence from PTT themselves, although we can rely on other studies for this voice (including previous studies by the authors). Interviewees always included the Director of HR or equivalent, an individual at Director/Pro-Vice Chancellor level responsible for academic matters and the person responsible for academic staff development, although this latter role was not always at a strategic level, hereafter referred to as the 'strategists'. At least three heads of academic department/school were interviewed in each HEI (hereafter 'academic heads'). In addition, we scrutinised formal strategy and policy documents.

## Findings

Table 1 introduces the case studies presented in this paper. Northern HE College and Southern HE College claimed mainly to employ PTT as practitioner/teachers (i.e. such staff are practicing their profession outside HE) and to provide specialist expertise not available among existing staff. Large Specialist HE College also employed many professional practitioners but was distinguished by the breadth of the roles undertaken by PTT including academic management and contributions to research. Post 1992 University employed a wide range of PTT. Pre 1992 University had a large number of postgraduates and contract researchers available (neither group is included in the table as managers did not consider them to be PTT – expected to teach “as a condition of grant or contract”), and also drew on practicing external professionals to provide inputs to vocational disciplines (such as law and education).

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### TAKE IN TABLE I

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Two of the case organisations were engaged in major strategic initiatives. The post 1992 University was mid-way through an attempt to grow its research, consultancy and, income generation activities. The role of academic staff was being re-profiled to ensure that every individual was contributing to teaching *and* at least one of these additional activities. Northern HE College was seeking to ‘transform its culture’ away from traditional teaching methods to more independent, open learning with the intention to ‘free up’ academic staff to engage in more research and income generation activity.

## Human Resource Approaches to PTT

Only in Large Specialist HE College was there specific reference to PTT in formal strategy documents. The HR strategy there acknowledged the key contribution of PTT and detailed areas for investment. There was brief mention in the HR strategy of Southern HE College of the need to ensure equitable treatment of PTT and to seek their views. Strategists in the other cases justified the omission of PTT from formal strategies in rather different ways. In Northern HE College, inclusion for all staff was upheld as a reason for not singling out any particular group (although other groups of staff are referred to). Post-1992 University reported that at the time the strategies were formulated PTT were not considered a high priority. In Pre 1992 University PTT were regarded as ‘non-core’ and did not require strategic attention. In all the cases, strategists, particularly HR directors, were able to articulate clear statements of how they wished to respond to external and internal pressures with regard to PTT. These were often backed up by comprehensive policies (e.g. in the Post 1992 University).

Analysis of the case evidence supports the development of a notional continuum between two opposing strategic approaches to the management of PTT, either a tendency towards *integration* or towards sharper *differentiation* between PTT and salaried academic teachers. Each case had their own variant of these approaches

and all displayed some elements that were apparently inconsistent with the chosen direction. However each case exhibited evidence of a tendency to move towards one or other end of the continuum. Strategists at Northern HE College, Post 1992 University and Pre 1992 University espoused a differentiation approach:

*To keep clear blue water between the [PTT] concept and [academic] role. [Post 1992 University strategist]*

This involved restricting the PTT role. Curriculum development, pastoral care, and scholarship were specifically excluded. A Northern HE College strategist described the future role of PTT as ‘instructors, not teachers’ – providing ‘one-off, short-term cover’ with no responsibilities for student progression. The number of PTT deployed would be reduced and replaced by salaried staff (some of who would be on fixed term contracts). In these cases strategists stressed that this was not intended to mean inferior treatment for PTT. They wished to harmonise terms and conditions for all staff and to be inclusive. In Pre 1992 University the situation was expressed as continuing a long established approach where roles of PTT have always been restricted:

*[PTT] are not core because their main employment is external. The responsibility for their career development and progression lies with that external role and employer, not us. Of course they know that. [Pre 1992 University strategist]*

The alternative approach of integration was exemplified by the Large Specialist HE College. This did not apply in equal measure to all PTT. There was an intention to segment the PTT workforce into four groups on the basis of number of hours worked. Reaching a particular annual hours threshold entitled PTT to more support but also entailed more obligation e.g. to attend and complete accredited development programmes. The HEI intended to offer probation, review and appraisal processes to most PTT, and more secure employment. In exchange, there would be tighter criteria for re-engagement, and staff would be expected to show commitment. PTT with ‘larger/more significant’ roles would be transferred to pro-rata lecturing contracts.

The approach in Southern HE College was also towards integration and PTT were offered support on a parity basis. One strategist emphasised that there should be little difference between PTT or salaried staff in much of the provision – a narrower range of duties and obligations would apply for PTT and no career progression but if PTT wished to progress it would be straightforward to transfer to a salaried contract.

*[PTT] must be included in everything that we are doing. [Southern HE College strategist]*

Table 2 elaborates on how the HEIs intended to back up their strategies by offering both support to, and investment in, PTT.

#### \_\_\_\_\_ TAKE IN TABLE II

Differentiators viewed PTT as responsible for their own career development. Employee resourcing support (appraisal, mentoring, peer observation of teaching) was minimal and PTT were expected to develop themselves in their own time:

*Continuous professional development is their responsibility not ours. [Northern HE College strategist]*



PTT could apply for a salaried academic post but were subject to open competition. Post 1992 University offered more inclusive support policies but, as the strategists acknowledge although PTT were entitled to similar support as salaried colleagues, few actually received it. Post 1992 University did, however, pay PTT for staff development activity, as it was considered to be:

*Very important for maintaining the psychological contract, .[Post 1992 University Strategist]*

The institutions espousing an integration strategy offered more investment in staff resourcing and took greater responsibility for career development. Transfer to a salaried post did not require open competition so long as PTT met the criteria.

### **Justifications for strategic approaches**

Northern HE College strategists offered risk management as their rationale for a differentiation approach. From an HR perspective, the imperative to minimise risk was based on legal exposure, and from the academic perspective, was based on threats to quality. The power of the 'centre' permitted an opportunity to employ regulatory measures to ensure that the differentiation strategy was achieved. The strategists contended that this differentiation strategy would meet the requirement of the incoming legislation to end the use of serial fixed term contracts because as employers, they had no intention to renew the contracts of individual PTT. PTT (or other staff) had not been consulted about this approach.

Post 1992 University strategy was predicated on balancing "unreasonableness of treatment" with the "essential flexibility PTT bring". To ensure 'maintenance and consistency of good practice' and that staff were treated fairly, Personnel conducted reviews every few years. However as per Northern HE College, PTT had not been consulted about the strategy.

In Pre 1992 University, the approach seemed to be based on values. The overall approach to HR was to:

*...have confidence in our ability to right size and to make adjustments as and when necessary. [Pre 1992 University strategist]*

Formal prescription was kept to a minimum to encourage autonomy and responsibility among staff. The centre sought to avoid direction and encouraged local managers to be aware of good HE/HR practices, the role of shared values, and to behave responsibly. Strategists argued that the core/periphery distinction was part of the culture and was well understood by all staff. It was believed that the PTT were content with the situation (although the basis for this belief was not clear). Overall, strategists felt this configuration could accommodate external pressures including any legal changes.

Even those institutions adopting a more integrating strategy expressed differing justifications that reflected their rather different contexts. There had been wide consultation about the Large Specialist HE College strategy including considerable input from PTT themselves. Despite the cost of the integrative approach the strategists argued that it was long overdue to:

*Recognise in employment terms what they were delivering in reality in pedagogical terms, and to our mission. [Large Specialist HE College strategist]*

In this institution the contribution of PTT was so substantial, in both individual and collective terms that it was considered that the employer needed to reward PTT. The intended goal was high commitment – to be achieved by offering improved support and employment conditions to PTT in exchange for more commitment to professional development as academic staff.

Southern HE College had also consulted widely with staff, facilitated by its small size. Key drivers of PTT strategy were inclusion, harmonisation and “avoiding casualisation”. Integration was designed to improve attractiveness as an employer and was perceived to be likely to improve motivation and retention.

### **Alignment of PTT strategies with other imperatives**

In this study there was no discordance between strategists concerning PTT issues within the same institution. There were, however, differences in the level at which these issues were given most consideration. In Large Specialist HE College and Southern HE College employment policies were being driven forward by top management (and they had been involved in policy development), whereas at Post 1992 University and Northern HE College, this role fell to the HR manager. At Pre 1992 University, there was no new institutional employment initiative.

At Southern HE College academic heads were fully in accord with strategists And local trade union officers also endorsed the strategy. There was a mutual desire to minimise the use of PTT because of a shared view that was antipathetic to casualisation. One academic head was seeking to place all PTT on fractional contracts:

*If you need to make a pay claim every month you are less part of an institution than if you get a salary cheque....This will close the loop.[Academic head, Southern HE College]*

Another head had transferred some PTT but retained others where the situation was preferred by both parties:

*[Whatever the type of staff] we try to give them the best deal we possibly can. [Academic head, Southern HE College]*

In Southern HE College not only did academic heads feel that they were fully involved in strategy development but also that when they wished to do something a little different, that they were fully supported.

Devolution in Pre 1992 University allowed departments to address their contextual issues. Academic heads had considerable discretion within the regulatory framework to establish local pay rates and HR approaches. This minimised tensions with the centre. One Faculty, a high user of PTT, found that contractual issues created onerous management opportunity costs, and had, therefore, created posts that were more substantial in role and duration.

In all other cases, there was evidence of some criticism of ‘over regulation’ by academic heads, independent of the strategy chosen. Academic heads and trade unions in Large Specialist HE College were broadly in tune with the

(integrationist) PTT strategy. Academic heads were wary of the policies that involved giving longer term commitments and increasing administrative burdens. They worried that PTT would leave due to their perception of being 'over-regulated' and that their ability to 'refresh' the labour supply would be reduced. This aspect and additional costs now accruing from PTT employment was said to encourage one respondent to reduce PTT numbers. Another respondent head disagreed saying he already had 'home-grown' versions of many of the institutional policies in place, reducing any potential new burdens that may have resulted from the the integrationist PTT strategy.

There appeared to be more tension between HEI policies and approaches preferred by academic heads in Post 1992 University. Departments had considerable discretion and demonstrated differing approaches. One head had slightly increased PTT deployment by asking existing PTT to increase their hours. Another head had substantially increased headcount of PTT. This head wished to introduce a new category of fixed term teaching only staff:

*The transaction costs of managing [PTT] are phenomenal because we need 80 to do 30 jobs – this triples the cost. [academic head, Post 1992 University]*

Strategists (e.g. HR) were opposed to this approach. In this case both academic heads stated that there was a mismatch between formal and informal policies. The strategic intention to limit PTT's role clashed with academic heads need for 'essential flexibility'. One head found it 'farcical' not to use PTT who had long academic experience in wider roles.

Academic heads in Northern HE College had also found difficulties with their institutional strategy (differentiation). Some heads wanted more PTT rather than less and resented the restriction of roles 'because PTT provide flexibility.' There was a strong feeling that the centre was over-prescriptive and regulatory:

*...it's a sledgehammer to crack nuts. [academic head, Northern HE College]*

### **Progress on implementing strategies**

At the time of the fieldwork some organisations had just begun implementation. Pre 1992 University had not introduced change *per se*, however, there continued to be a push to enhance staff development for PTT.

Northern HE College had made progress in reducing the number of PTT employed (by 40% in the last year) and in introducing more consistent regulation. The intention to reduce all forms of temporary contract seemed to be constrained by the desire of academic heads desire to maintain a pool of flexible labour. Progress on improving the infrastructure for PTT was inhibited by competing priorities. Southern HE College, where integration of PTT already appeared to be strong, seemed to be working steadily towards its goals.

Post 1992 University was still embroiled in major changes to academic provision. PTT were not neglected in formal policy, but there appeared to be a gap between policy and practice, and heads were reluctant to embrace institutional PTT

strategy. Large Specialist HE College had embarked on ambitious change. It had completed a comprehensive review and started implementation. The consultation and implementation process had amended the strategy from one of overall integration to distinguishing between two types of PTT – those who deliver one-off inputs and those who deliver regular all-round inputs. Investment (and drive for more integration) was focussed mainly on the latter group. Some departments had already implemented several of these provisions.

## **Discussion**

The case study evidence indicates that the strategists in all the case organisations had devised at least some form of HR approach to employing and managing PTT. In each case there were features that seemed to indicate a preference for integration or differentiation of PTT although there was variance. Among differentiators there were different attitudes and practices to some aspects, for example, staff development. Amongst integrators it was sometimes thought appropriate to differentiate between groups of PTT.

There were other, more subtle dimensions also. In the two integrator cases, integrationist *philosophy* was espoused strongly by top strategists, equivalent to at least deputy chief executive level. These individuals were enthusiastic about including PTT more in the ‘life of the institution’ and had encouraged the HR specialists to develop appropriate approaches. A key component was to be consultative in relation to other managers and the staff. In contrast, where cases had a differentiation orientation, the issue of PTT was not considered of much importance by the most senior managers, as they tended to refer this to the HR managers to deal with. There was less consultation of other managers and none with PTT.

In general, PTT issues were given greater priority by all strategists in the integrator cases. In fairness to some of the other cases, two of them were engaged in major strategic change across the breadth of their academic provision. Not only had this diminished the priority of PTT issues but created competing tensions which militated against the achievement of the HR approach to PTT. Ironically, despite the intention of the strategists, in relation to both these cases, to decrease their reliance on PTT, the ‘bigger’ strategic imperatives, which were to reprofile the roles of their salaried academic staff, actually increased pressure on departmental heads to deploy more PTT.

Although we found evidence to support the notion of strategic choice exercised by managers (Watson, 1999), we also found that the choice between differentiation and integration was constrained by context and influenced by which strategists exercised choice. In the cases where the strategic choice is left or passed to HR managers, they appear to more frequently opt for the differentiation approach.

Regulatory changes have created the need for HE institutions to address how they manage part-time and temporary employment and there appears to be some association in the choice of approach with responsiveness and proactivity. A

responsive approach concerns risk management, that is doing the minimum that is necessary to avoid exposure to these 'external' threats. The HR function is usually responsible for this role. Differentiation can be seen as a defensive strategy, designed to reduce risk. In contrast, the integrationist approach can be seen as proactive and involves the introduction of a whole series of policy initiatives. A good illustration of the contrast is shown by comparing the views of strategists at the HE colleges which employed the highest proportion of PTT. Northern HE College strategists sought to drastically reduce PTT numbers because they were seen as a threat to quality and a challenge to manage whereas strategists at Large Specialist HE College considered their PTT one of their greatest assets and were keen to retain and enhance their contribution. It is worth noting that managers assumed that integration approaches would be very expensive (because of the investment and additional support for PTT required) but only Large Specialist HE College managers were sufficiently proactive to calculate the actual costs of this approach. The assumption by others was that differentiation would be cheaper. Nollen and Axel (1996) have shown that this assumption is often incorrect with regard to temporary versus permanent workers.

In the cases reported here, strategists appeared unaware that departmental heads found that although pay costs might be less, the volume, contract maintenance and turnover of PTT gave rise to substantial costs. The thorough review by Large Specialist HE College had allowed the adoption of a proactive but affordable strategy which went much further than just minimum legal compliance.

Integration and differentiation can be matched with the concept of single and dual HR strategies (Watson, 1999). For example, the integrators had a clear orientation towards a single and universal approach whereas the differentiation approach demonstrated similar features to the dual HR strategy with PTT firmly located in the segment of direct control/low commitment. These features are demonstrated by the restriction and fragmentation of roles and controlled by contract renewal, minimum investment in support and piece rate pay.

These points inform a discussion about the likely effectiveness and consequences of the HR approaches that have been discussed in terms of managing risk, delivering flexibility and influencing the employment relationship. We have identified two sources of risk or exposure. Legislative changes offer PTT the right to claim equal value and parity of terms as well as the prospect of a permanent contract. The response of differentiation is designed to ensure that PTT cannot compare themselves with salaried lecturers because their roles are different, an 'objective justification'. However, there seemed to be some lack of clarity concerning how permanent hourly paid contracts would operate. In one sense, the integrators have exposed themselves to greater risk, by allowing PTT to much more easily claim parity with salaried lecturers. This may mean that they have to go somewhat further than they thought (or perhaps intended) in ensuring terms and conditions are on a par.

The other source of risk is quality. Differentiators might argue that by not permitting PTT to undertake work that is most likely to give rise to complaint,

such as assessment, they both minimise the risk and obviate the need to train PTT. Integrators, who intended to increase not restrict roles, acknowledged that the way to address risk to quality was through major investment in improving the support infrastructure. This may be challenging to achieve in practice.

It is the area of flexibility that presents a severe challenge to the differentiators. Interviewees presented a clear case that the reason they deployed PTT was for flexibility- a form of functional flexibility which is tailored to the extreme specialism in much of academic provision when the input of a permanent or full time staff member could not be justified. Even more so the differentiator strategy permitted numerical flexibility – coping with the peaks and troughs of unpredictable student demand – and financial flexibility through restricting cost. These latter two forms allowed them to use PTT as *substitutes* for salaried staff. Regulation, through a more consistent HR approach, placed some restriction on this flexibility but academic heads were willing to tolerate at least some regulation as they needed to manage risk also. However, the prescribed role restriction of the differentiation approach was the antithesis of what the academic heads wanted and at the time of interview was creating tensions with existing institutional strategies. Hence, it seemed likely that they may eventually be ignored or circumvented. Integration strategies also created a tension for academic heads of a different nature, but one that could be addressed by providing extra resources to meet requirements for more support of PTT.

The argument that integrationist approaches are more likely to offer the flexibility sought by managers has much in common with previous research (Bryson and Barnes, 2000, Ward *et al*, 2001). For example, researchers have called for “more effective HR management through more integration of these [temporary] workers into the mainstream of the organization’s existence” by ensuring that the full range of HR practices e.g. performance management, career development, apply to them too (Field, 1996, p.6). Even more salient to this debate is the finding by Bryson *et al*. (2000) that when comparing PTT and salaried colleagues, academic heads argued that they were able to deploy salaried staff in much more flexible ways than PTT. Not only were salaried staff likely to be more experienced and possess a full range of skills, but also managers were confident that they could trust salaried staff to undertake the role to a high level of professional competence because they were *committed*.

A recurring theme in the literature about temporary and precarious work is its impact on employment relationships. In our study managers acknowledged that they could not expect commitment from PTT when they, or ‘the organisation’ did not offer any in return. Indeed a central part of the integrationist approach was a raft of measures which demonstrated that PTT mattered and if PTT offered commitment this would be reciprocated and rewarded. A few differentiator strategists seemed to think that commitment could be gained via control devices despite the contention of Blyton and Morris (1992) that commitment cannot be *secured* by management – it must be mutual. Most differentiators appeared to settle for a transactional employment relationship believing that this would be satisfactory to all parties. Some academic heads in these institutions were aware

that this assumption was problematic. In line with previous discussion, these managers found it useful (and in some instances, essential) to be able to rely on PTT exhibiting strong professional commitment. However, neither the organisational strategy, culture, nor the infrastructure was designed to engender commitment.

The dual HR approach of differentiators appears likely to exacerbate the divide in treatment and status of PTT and salaried academics. There may be wider consequences also as researchers have identified particular problems arising when permanent and temporary workforces work in proximity, including a lowering of the commitment of permanent staff to the organisation (Geary, 1992; Filipczak, 1997). It is possible though that this is less pronounced in HE where many staff work more as individuals.

Up to this point an important consideration has been glossed over. This is the heterogeneity and diversity of PTT roles and PTT themselves. Other research has demonstrated that even though temporary workers may be treated in a transactional<sup>2</sup> way some of them neither find this desirable or necessarily reciprocate that behaviour. Mallon and Duberley (2000) found a whole range of employment relationships in their study of contingent (temporary contract) professionals. The notion that an individual would either exhibit a transactional or a relational orientation and that this would depend on their contract and treatment was found to be overly simplistic. The heterogeneity of PTT and their diverse motivations and aspirations (Bryson and Scurry, 2002; Abbas and McLean, 2001) is likely to have profound implication for their response to HR approaches.

Allen (2001) demonstrates how frustrated many PTT are with their lack of career opportunities. Few of the managers in our cases appeared to take this consideration into account. The strategists who advocated differentiation had not consulted PTT and appeared to hold a stereotypical view of them. This was another source of tension to the departmental managers who tended to have a better grasp of the diversity of PTT. Pre 1992 University showed an exception to this in some departments because *all* the PTT were professional practitioners who did not appear to seek more commitment from the institution (although we cannot confirm what the PTT would have said). Integrationists had consulted PTT and intended that their policies were more appropriate to addressing their diverse expectations. Indeed, it was the PTT who desired a more transactional relationship, who were least likely to favour more integrationist approaches. The approach of Southern HE College offered a balanced approach by allowing PTT to choose their form of contractual and employment relationship. Large Specialist HE College, which exhibited the most features of a high commitment HR strategy, did not intend to offer this choice and academic heads acknowledged they were likely to lose a number of PTT who would not favour increased obligations because they did not seek what the employer was now offering in return – the group of “just come in, teach and go”. Although losses were likely to be small in numbers these were some of their ‘stars’ in terms of practitioner prestige. Moreover, transactional arrangements did appear to suit some individual PTT circumstances (largely professional practitioners) in particular academic

disciplines. Some managers saw this as no loss, in exchange for a staff culture of greater equity and participation.

## **Conclusions**

There is a growing body of research that indicates that the widespread use of numerical flexibility through temporary contracts gives rise to contradictions and uncertain outcomes for managers. Walby (1989) and others (Geary, 1992) contend that many forms of so-called flexibility, including temporary contracts, actually create rigidities, the opposite of the rationale for why they are used in the first place. Ward *et al.* (2001) conclude that there are so many problems arising out of such approaches that they are unsustainable except as a short term measure.

HE employers in the UK are very high users of temporary contracts and these contracts are in place for almost half of those delivering the core activity of teaching. Our case study evidence has indicated that managers in some HE institutions appear to be developing more coherent strategies to address the management and deployment of these staff, even if it is in response to external regulatory pressures. It is ironic that the consequence of the legislation, the roots of which lie in a desire for equity, reducing abuse and improving security, may end up serving the opposite outcome to some of these workers in HE. This results from the defensive approach adopted by managers who worry more about legal risks than addressing arguably more important considerations. The authors' previous knowledge of the sector indicates that this may indeed be the most common approach adopted.

Nollen and Axel (1996) argue that the only way to enhance productivity and quality from temporary workers is to improve motivation. They contend that the scope for improving the employment relationship is restricted by the very limited commitment offered (via the contract) by the employer. There is, therefore, a need to compensate this limitation by offering as much equity as possible, particularly in pay and through opportunity to transfer to 'regular employment'.

The strategies of differentiation we have observed do not serve this end at all. It creates an even bigger gulf from the permanent staff and more marginalisation. This may not discomfit all the part-time teachers but will further frustrate many of them and weaken opportunities for job satisfaction. Even within the integration strategy, there is the prospect of creating a cadre of 'permanent hourly paid' staff. This group may have enhanced job security but still appear to have several features of being an academic underclass.

The differentiation strategy does not appear to meet the needs for flexibility required by the operational managers. Most of them seek a flexible resource of substitute teachers and the consequences of differentiation will weaken this – which given current organisational structures (where much management is devolved) - will mean that they ignore or subvert the strategy. This could result in yet more casualisation. There may be unintended consequences for the integrators also. If they are genuinely serious about treating staff with parity and achieving a



relational employment relationship, they may end up transferring all staff to salaried contracts who deliver more than one-off brief inputs, i.e. the notion of permanent hourly paid staff might be short-lived. The application of a high commitment HRM model to all staff is likely to mean a severe reduction in attracting and retaining those whose orientation and commitment lies mainly elsewhere from HE work.

HR strategists may believe that they can mould and control this type of numerical flexibility but this is likely to be an illusion. The risk management approach does not seem to have taken account of all the risks. Too frequently the strategists do not take account of the nature, diversity and aspirations of the staff group and equally important, they do not take account of the needs and beliefs of their operational managers (the academic heads). This leaves a large number of staff 'at the margin' with all that entails. Finally, we did find some instances where there was a much greater attempt to avoid marginalisation. The consequence of this appears to be a move away from using temporary and precarious contracts as a way of achieving either flexibility or broader organisational aims.

### **Acknowledgements**

This article draws on work undertaken for the Learning and Teaching Support Network, a subject-based enhancement initiative ([www.ltsn.ac.uk](http://www.ltsn.ac.uk)) and a constituent part of the new Higher Education Academy in the UK. The analysis and views expressed, however, are those of the authors alone and not those of organisations for which they worked or work.

### **Endnote**

1. There is now a legal obligation to offer parity of terms and conditions between full-time and part-time staff [Part-time Regulations, 2000] and between fixed term and permanent staff [Fixed Term Regulations, 2002]. Employers must produce an 'objective justification' to vary from parity of treatment (yet to be tested). The ability to employ the same individual on a series of fixed term contracts is curtailed after July 2006. Furthermore, rights stemming from equal opportunities legislation permit individuals to claim equal pay for work of equal value and place pressure on employers to avoid discrimination through having different practices applying to groups of staff. It not clear how these legislative change are impacting on the overall numbers of PTT (as no statistics have yet been gathered). There is evidence from trade unions that some HEIs have reduced numbers by not renewing contracts, others have transferred some PTT to fractional salaried appointments and most have not yet done anything.
2. In this context, transactional infers a relationship or 'psychological contract' (Rousseau, 1995) with the employer where the employee carries out a task for financial gain. This notion is also derived from the concept of the 'wage-effort' bargain.

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