States of Precarity
in UK HE Geography

Project Report

"Because geography is about attention to difference and the unevenness of power and agency... geographers are often shouting about what transpires in their sites of research, without bringing those same standards and ethics to their own places of work"

(Survey participant, 2023)

Research findings report

URL: https://www.rgs.org/research/higher-education-resources/states-of-precarity-in-uk-higher-education-geography

Data collection: A discipline wide survey (364 responses)

Report design: Jasmine Joanes

Figures: Peter Forman and Jasmine Joanes

Find out more: https://www.statesofprecarity.co.uk/

CONTENTS

Foreword

Precarity is a defining feature of academic life for many. HESA (2024) data suggest that close to one third of academics in Geography Departments in the UK are employed on fixed-term contracts. These colleagues live with the knowledge that their job or career is always in danger of being lost. But the implications are far greater than a contract or employment status. Their experience and sense of precarity shapes their professional identities and impacts a myriad of life opportunities and decisions, both professional and personal.

This report documents much needed research on the experiences and impacts of precarious working within UK University Geography Departments. It is underpinned by robust research - an in-depth survey of more than 360 respondents across the discipline, with insights from geographers at a range of career stages and institutional settings - supplemented with focus groups and community discussions.

All geographers need to read this report. It provides powerful evidence of how precarity is experienced every day, and the implications for individuals, institutions and the discipline of Geography. Precarity is not experienced evenly. It is bound up with the persistent social and cultural inequalities that affect many aspects of Geography as a discipline (including race, ethnicity, gender, class, sexuality, disability, language, and nationality).

The report also includes Action Plans - practical interventions that can help bring about change. These should be topics for discussion in all departments, and the interventions should be embedded into the everyday practices and strategies for departmental working cultures. The accompanying posters should be posted in all departments to raise awareness and give visibility to the situation of many of our colleagues. The example letters should be used to lobby members of senior management to address the factors that contribute to the negative experiences of those experiencing precarity.

This report is published amid a deepening structural funding crisis for universities across the country. Uncertainty is endemic. This is a particularly important time for all of us to think about the practices and cultures of our departments, to take the time to listen, to act where and when we can, and collectively to advocate for change.

Dr Catherine Souch, Director of Research, Education, and Professional at the Royal Geographical Society (with IBG)

CONTEXT

List of Acronyms

DTP: Doctoral Training Partnership

ECR: Early Career Researcher

EDI: Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion

FTC: Fixed Term Contract

HE: Higher Education

HEI: Higher Education Institution

HoD/HoS: Head of Department/Head of School

PGR: Postgraduate Researcher

REF: Research Excellence Framework

RGS-IBG: Royal Geographical Society (with Institute of British Geographers)

SoP: States of Precarity

UCU: University and College Union

Executive Summary

This report presents findings from *States of Precarity*, a discipline-focused research project exploring the lived realities of precarious academic work within UK Higher Education (HE) Geography. Drawing on 364 survey responses, **the report reflects on precarity in the academy, offering an in-depth account of how precarious employment practices, in particular, the use of fixed-term contracts (FTCs), structural insecurity, and institutional cultures impact and shape the professional and personal lives of UK academic Geographers.** The report concludes with a series of practical resources designed to push for structural change, including Best Practice Action Plans for Geography departments.

KEY FINDINGS

01 **Precarity is a defining feature of academic life and experiences of insecurity extend far beyond the terms of a contract.** While some participants reflected on the developmental value of short-term roles, most reported that FTCs undermined wellbeing, stability, and long-term planning. 52.6% of colleagues employed on FTCs reported being unable to plan for their future, and a further 37.6% reported FTCs limiting their abilities to plan for the future. These effects were compounded by broader sector-wide challenges, including voluntary severance schemes and redundancies linked to organisational restructuring, and growing competition for opportunities.

02 **Insecurity extends beyond FTCs. Almost half (45%) of participants on permanent contracts - regardless of career stage or age - described feeling at least somewhat precarious in their current positions.** Extended probation periods, unclear expectations, and shifting institutional priorities contributed to a climate in which stability felt conditional and temporary.

03 **The emotional and psychological costs of precarity are significant. Many participants reported stress, burnout, and mental health struggles linked to ongoing insecurity.** 49.4% of colleagues on permanent contracts reported long-lasting negative effects of FTCs on their wellbeing, while 84.9% of colleagues on FTCs reported that their contracts had negative impacts upon their wellbeing. The cumulative pressure to remain competitive - to publish, teach, apply for funding, and say "yes" to every opportunity - led to chronic overwork, self-doubt, and disillusionment. These pressures were especially pronounced among PhD researchers and colleagues on FTCs, many of whom questioned whether pursuing an academic career was compatible with a fulfilling and healthy life.

04 **Repeated relocation for jobs disrupts relationships, family life, decision making, access to healthcare, and a sense of belonging.** 48.1% of colleagues on FTCs had to move home to accept an academic job, whilst 46.1% of colleagues on permanent contracts had to relocate at least once before receiving permanent employment. The challenges of relocation were particularly acute for international colleagues navigating restrictive visa regimes; those with chronic health conditions navigating healthcare support; LGBTQ+, and working-class background participants struggling to find supportive environments in new locations. Academic precarity makes it difficult for colleagues to put down roots and feel part of a community.

05 **Precarity is not experienced evenly.** Participants highlighted uneven experiences of precarity informed and shaped by intersectional factors such as gender, race, ethnicity, disability, sexuality, class, care giving status, and visa status.

06 **Fixed-term roles were closely tied to exclusion and stalled progression, with 1 in 6 colleagues on FTCs reporting not feeling valued.** Despite making substantial contributions to teaching and research, many participants felt invisible within their institutions (e.g. excluded from committees, promotion processes, and leadership roles). Postdoctoral and teaching-only positions were frequently described as extractive, offering few real pathways to secure employment or recognition. 43.5% of all permanently employed staff who had previously worked on a FTC reported that they still experience the negative effects of FTCs on their professional lives.

07 **Experiences of precarity among early career academics are shaped by a lack of understanding from more senior colleagues.** Participants reported that senior colleagues, and those on open ended contracts, often struggled to grasp the structural and institutional challenges now facing early-career academics both within and beyond the academy.

It is clear that precarity is a significant issue affecting and shaping UK Geography departments. However, amid these challenges, **many participants still expressed a deep emotional investment in their work and care for Geography as an academic discipline and a community of scholars.** The pursuit of a PhD was often driven by passion, curiosity, and a desire to contribute to knowledge. It is not a lack of commitment that pushes people out of Higher Education (HE) Geography, but rather a system that too often fails to support them.

The findings and resources outlined in this report are not just about employment conditions - they speak to the future of the discipline itself (see). Precarious employment has widespread implications, including **compounding a lack of diversity in the discipline, the potential erosion of Geography's interdisciplinary nature, and the hollowing out of geographical labour, thought, and practice.**

Introduction

States of Precarity is a research project conducted in collaboration with the Royal Geographical Society (with the Institute for British Geographers) (RGS-IBG).

The project has **three key objectives**:

1. To better understand the immediate and long-term effects of fixed term contracts and wider experiences of precarity in UK Higher Education (HE) Geography.
2. To provide a snapshot of the far-reaching implications of different states of academic precarity (for example, FTCs) on the discipline.
3. To inform the development of best practice guidelines for UK Geography departments with the ultimate goal of enabling change.

This report presents the project findings, and identifies key actions and interventions for change, foregrounded in a series of **best practice resources** (see page 51).

For the purposes of this report, and in keeping with the findings of our research, we define academic precarity not just in contractual terms, but as:

'employment conditions that do not enable the living of a fulfilling life' **and which prevent employees from planning for the future'** (survey participant, 2023).

Background

It is well established that geographers working within HE are navigating difficult working conditions[1] - a situation often tied to their employment on FTCs, namely contracts employing staff 'for a fixed period of time or with a predetermined end date'.[2] Such labour has become a 'defining feature of HE provision':

- 2023/24 HESA data indicates that 21% of full-time academic staff and 44% of part-time academic staff were employed on FTCs.[3]
- 66% of research only colleagues are on FTCs[4].
- One third of UK researchers have been employed on FTCs for more than 10 years[5]
- There has been an increase in the use of zero hours and hourly paid contracts since 2019/20[6]
- The percentage of disabled staff on FTCs has increased since reporting began in 2019/20[7].
- There remains an 'overrepresentation of Black, Asian and minority ethnic staff on fixed-term contracts and lower-tier roles' [8].

Critical work within Geography and beyond has shed light on some of the problematic implications of FTCs. This includes impacts on fertility and family planning[9], caring responsibilities[10], mental health and well-being[11], and career and personal development[12]. The

effects of precarity are not evenly distributed, with FTCs compounding established issues related to ableism, patriarchy, racism [13], sexism, and transphobia[14].

Whilst some of the challenges experienced by those employed on FTCs are well documented, there remains a need to better understand the long-term effects of the use of FTCs across career stages (including on colleagues who subsequently secure permanent employment) and the impacts of academic precarity on the discipline as a whole. Our research addresses this, alongside generating much needed practical interventions to enact positive change in the sector.

It is important to note that much has changed in the sector since the project's survey was conducted in 2023. This report is being written at a moment when there is a wider recognition that precarity in UK HE can no longer solely be viewed through the lens of FTCs. Amid a deepening structural funding crisis, universities across the country are responding with cost-cutting measures that include department closures, school mergers, voluntary severance schemes, and redundancies. Geography, like many disciplines, is increasingly affected by these changes. Job security has become more conditional and uncertain across all career stages. It is likely, therefore, that many of the feelings of insecurity presented in this report, have only intensified since the survey was conducted, and extended to an even larger number of geographers and academics

Methods

The project involved the use of an online survey that explored discipline-wide experiences of academic precarity (participant-defined), and a series of follow-up focus groups and interviews that informed the refinement of a set of Best Practice Action Plans developed from the survey.

The Survey

The online survey explored participants definitions of precarity, their experiences, observations, and perceptions of it, its impacts, and the factors contributing to, and/or amplifying, its effects. Following a set of general questions, participants answered questions related to their career stage (PhD candidate, colleague currently employed on a FTC, colleague currently employed on a permanent contract, and colleague formerly employed in a UK Geography department). Participants were self-selecting, with the only requirement for participation being that they must currently work, or have previously worked, within a UK Geography department. Participants consequently ranged in career stage (from PhD candidate to Emeritus Professor), and also in disciplinary specialism (human, physical, interdisciplinary). The survey was hosted on SurveyMonkey and distributed via social media platforms (Twitter/X, Bluesky), mailing lists and the project's website (https://www.statesofprecarity.co.uk/the-survey). It was open for responses between July and October 2023.

364 valid responses were received, of which 42.3% (154) were academics on permanent contracts, 36.5% (133) were academics employed on fixed term contracts, 13.2% (48) were PhD candidates, and 8% (29) were colleagues who had left academia (but who had previously

worked within a UK Geography department). We estimate this sample to represent approximately 10% of all UK academic Geographers currently working in UK Geography departments, based on recent HESA figures (HESA, 2025)[15].

For further information on participants, please see the Appendix 2 of this report and further details on our project website.

Focus Groups

Online focus groups and semi-structured interviews were used to refine Best Practice Action Plans. These are designed to equip individual colleagues as well as those in key leadership and administrative roles within UK Geography departments with the tools to better support people on FTCs and facilitate conversations and action around academic precarity. Between March and May 2025, feedback on the Action Plans were gathered through seven online focus groups (Heads of Department, colleagues on FTCs, permanently employed colleagues, PhD researchers, and those who have left academia), one in person forum with PhD researchers, and three online interviews with UK HE Geographers.

KEY FINDINGS

KEY STATISTICS

STATES OF PRECARITY

States of Precarity is **a discipline-focused research project exploring the lived realities of precarious academic work within UK Higher Education (HE) Geography.**

Based on **364 survey responses**, this sample represents **approximately 10%** of all UK academic geographers currently working in UK geography departments.

Career stage of participants

- PhD
- Permanent contract
- Fixed term contract (FTC)
- Left academia

133
48
29
154
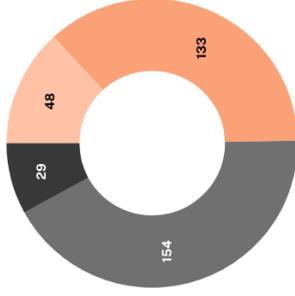
66.2%

of participants on fixed term contracts stated that they had considered leaving, with a further 15.8% stating that they sometimes consider leaving.

20% of those who had employed colleagues on FTCs reported their departments had no formal policies in place regarding the use of FTCs or how to support colleagues on these terms.

43.7%

said that if such policies did exist, they were not aware of them.

1 in 6 colleagues on FTCs reported **not feeling valued** in their current position (15.8%). A figure that rises to

6 in 10

when including staff who only **feel partially valued.**

84.9%

Colleagues on FTCs reported that their contracts had **negative impacts** upon their wellbeing.

1 in 8 colleagues on permanent contracts reported having to **move 3 or more times** before receiving permanent employment.

45%

Almost half of participants on permanent contracts - irrespective of career stage or age - described feeling at least **somewhat precarious** in their current positions.

49.4%

Almost half of permanently employed staff who had previously held one or more FTCs reported that it **continued to have negative effects on their wellbeing.**

Over two thirds of participants on permanent contracts reported they waited **3+ years** before receiving permanent employment, with **23.7% of these waiting 6+ years.**

Key Statistics Infographic

Entering the academy

Introduction

This section outlines the experiences of PhD researchers. PhD researchers made up 13.2% (48) of the sample, and of these, 58.3% (28) were either nearing completion or had completed their studies, and were now actively thinking about their next career steps.

Expectations of precarity

Participants highlighted expectations that it would take between 4 and 10 years to get a permanent position. Others felt that timescales were irrelevant and that the likelihood of 'securing a permanent academic job' were very slim. One participant noted that they expect a 'lot of applications, a lot of heartache, and the odd moment of absolute joy' before explaining:

> *'I envision at least a decade of having to be quite mobile and rely on twelve month to three year posts before I have a research portfolio large enough and the right job popping up in the destination/city/area happens to coincide with where I'm up to - if it ever does. A lot of 'if' scenarios.'*

Such factors are made all the more complicated for those who define their research as interdisciplinary. Participants expressed that the lack of a clear 'fit' with prospective departments means their expectations of securing a permanent contract are even lower.

Notwithstanding perceptions of timescale needed to secure employment, participants tended to undertake their PhDs because of a belief in the intrinsic value of the work they are doing. Many reported loving their PhD topic, considering it an opportunity for personal growth, feeling thankful to have the opportunity to work flexibly, and feeling excited to pursue a passion. When asked about what factors underpinned a desire to stay and work in academia, responses included:

- The feeling of fulfilment that an academic career could bring.
- The ability to combine a love of teaching and a passion for conducting research.
- The ability to pursue one's own interests.
- The 'liberty' and freedom of working in academia.
- The chance to contribute to the 'development and advancement of knowledge' and in doing so, 'make a mark on the world.'

For those weighing up the decision of whether or not to try and stay in academia, the positives remained but were held in balance with the challenges of limited job opportunities, assumed mobility and high workloads:

> *'At its core an academic career offers what I want, but practically I accept that what I want does not balance with what is available and what I may need moving forward. I have many pull factors drawing me to wanting to stay in academia but there are a number of push factors - precarity and lack of job opportunities being the main reasons.'*

> *'Being an academic would be the perfect career for me. I love teaching, I love doing research and communicating it to people in different ways...however, this perfect career... is being snatched away due to ridiculous overcrowding of the profession, lack of stability in the post-doc lottery, low pay, and appalling over-work.'*

> *'The high competition for jobs and the seeming requirement for constant mobility on the part of postdoctoral researchers really put me off. However, I have enjoyed my PhD and want to keep doing research. I also feel like there are not other jobs that really suit me.'*

A number of participants also described frustration navigating the job market. For some, this meant needing more information and guidance about non-academic career paths. One participant described the academic job market 'like a trap' - working towards a career perfectly suited to their skillset, but which no longer feels a viable option.

"I love the teaching element at the University level, and I love the conversations and collaborations I have with colleagues, research participants, interdisciplinary collaborators, and amongst my research group. I think these elements are only possible together in an academic career. However, my decision is constantly questioned by me when I see salaries and precarity in my future. I want to be able to purchase a home, have a family, etc., and this is not looking possible when I see current Geography job prospects (particularly in the UK).

Employment status: PhD student nearing completion
Age: Under 30
Gender: Female

Key challenges for PhD researchers

Within this complex landscape, PhD researchers identified four key challenges associated with pursuing a career in academia:

1. Job security

Job security is a significant factor shaping the career decisions of PhD researchers. Participants commented on the highly competitive job market and the prevalence of insecure contracts as factors which impeded their capacity to pursue an academic career:

> *'The precarious nature of early-career employment is the major factor in my decision not to pursue an academic career post-PhD...all I want is a stable job that will allow me to settle down and start planning my future.'*

> *'My perceptions of the academic job market post-PhD are dire. Post-doc opportunities are scarce and difficult to obtain.'*

> *'I think if I didn't have a partner to share financial burdens I would have to give up on an academic career.'*

2. Workplace cultures

Workplace cultures were identified as a key factor that negatively impacted well-being. This includes high workloads and endemic practices of overwork, competitiveness, long working hours and an absence of a healthy work-life balance.

> *'I know that the feeling of there always being something more I could be doing - another grant proposal, another conference paper, another publication - would leave me burnt out and demotivated.'*

> *'I love my studies, but I have very real worries about the working conditions in academia - especially for ECRs.'*

> *'I was once told that you have to make yourself indispensable to get a permanent job in academia...I'm not sure this is in any way true (many overworked academics also do not get a permanent job) but it always stuck with me and made me deeply uncomfortable. I think it is...one of the main reasons I wanted to leave.'*

3. Personal Life

The idea that an academic career is incompatible with a happy and balanced personal life was a common concern. Participants shared concerns about the need to repeatedly move and the inability to stay in one place, challenges around not living in close proximity to family and friends, and issues around housing, such as securing long term rentals and mortgages.

'I wanted to stay in my School so had a meeting with our Research Manager. That person was like a broken record and kept constantly repeating that 'funders like when people move' and told me to look for opportunities in other universities. My supervisors were sending me job offers in vastly different parts of the UK, or even different countries (but I know they mean well!)'

'The only stress I have from the PhD is the post-PhD job market and the precarity that I will inevitably endure. I am scared to enter relationships and make roots as I know that in a few years I will need to pack my bags and move away again.'

The career prospects of partners was also a key factor:

'I do not want to move around too much because my partner has a stable job.'

'I am in my late twenties and live with my partner who has a flourishing career in engineering, with a company that he really enjoys working for…he does not envision being able to move around the country/world at the frequency which may be required by my academic work… This prevents us from settling down somewhere and renting/buying a long term home as we can only rely on his income being stable.'

For others, family planning and/or the need to prioritise children in their decision-making was important:

'If I need to/want to settle down in the UK to have proximity to my family, then I see it as less likely that I will stay in academia.'

'I don't know whether it is worth the gamble of uprooting my family multiple times for short-term, precarious contracts in pursuit of a stable job which I may never get. I am in a position where financial security has to come before my professional ambition'.

'Some post-doc opportunities are for 1 year, others for 3 years…how can you have long-term plans and have a family life in these conditions? Your child has to change schools and homes.'

4. Salary

Participants reported feeling that academic salaries are less than could be achieved elsewhere and that they do 'not reflect the quality or quantity of work' required:

'Why would I stay in academia where I'm not valued, paid what I'm worth and could be without work from one month to the next?'

'…always having to worry about money… I do consider staying in academia, but probably not in the UK. Postdoc salaries in the UK are a joke. I know so many postdocs who cannot afford to not live in a shared house because they live in more expensive cities - that's unacceptable.'

Implications

The above challenges have significant and diverse implications for PhD researchers, shaping their experiences of pursuing their degrees. Indeed, of the PhD researchers in our sample, 14.6% (7) reported not wishing to pursue a career in academia, and a further 43.8% (21) were unsure. This figure is concerning given their investments in time, the delayed income generation that comes with a PhD, and the often highly-niche nature of PhD training.

A lack of understanding and support: Participants reported a lack of understanding from permanently employed colleagues about the impacts of challenges in the sector. This was particularly true for participants from minoritised and structurally underrepresented groups along intersecting lines of race, gender, class and disability:

> *'Finding a good job as an immigrant is very difficult. It's just a very stressful time and supervisors and mentors don't understand it because they are all white and British. Or they finished their PhDs in 4-8 years. The picture of academia is different from what it was'.*

> *'It always shocks me how normalised it is that the 4th year of thesis writing goes unpaid - I will never forget my first supervision meeting when I was told this. It created a sense of unease in me for the whole of the PhD - I am a working class student who certainly can't afford to work unpaid for a year (especially after 3 years of receiving a stipend equivalent to below living wage).'*

Data indicates that Black, Asian and minority ethnic staff remain 'overrepresented' in fixed-term contracts [16]. Moreover, PhD researchers who don't have pre-existing strong connections with other academics, may lack information and a clear sense of what the PhD entails, as well as where it could lead and the wider state of the sector. As one respondent remarked, 'it seems opaque how to get a job, there is a perception that it is who you know not about your ability'.

Saying 'yes': PhD researchers consistently reported a need to 'do more' to make themselves employable on the job market. This might include 'saying yes' to marking, teaching, and unpaid work, participating in conferences, publishing and other activities that take time away from research to ensure 'marketability'. As one participant reported, it is 'not enough...to just work on your thesis'. Another described a sense of urgency to complete the PhD in order to get onto the job market as quickly as possible.

Mental health challenges: Participants reported feelings of stress, feeling sick, and questioning whether the PhD and subsequent pursuit of an academic career was worth the 'cost' across other areas of their lives. For some participants, the looming job market, prevalence of FTCs, and job scarcity felt demoralising and like a 'weight'. This, in a number of instances, was directly linked to a lack of jobs, the types of contracts available after the completion of their PhDs, and the financial implications of this. For others, simply 'trying to survive' the PhD experience amidst exhaustion and burn out was a primary concern.

"

Supervisors and mentors do not understand the pressures of being an immigrant in an increasingly hostile environment... academia is very competitive and it is even more difficult when being a non-white immigrant whose first language is not English.

For years I have been [doing] everything I can to build my CV to get a job as an immigrant. It is exhausting. I have accepted all requests to help in projects, to write papers, to give presentations. I know that as an immigrant, I have to go above and beyond. It is exhausting, I'm overwhelmed and I still don't think it will be enough...

While my supervisors are nice and mean well, I think they are grossly unable to guide me... It feels like academia is just catered to White North Atlantic people and everyone else is left to fight for their lives.

Employment status: PhD student nearing completion
Age: 30-39
Gender: Female

Conclusions

01 **Expectations of what it can take to get a permanent job** are fundamentally shaping how PhD researchers perceive the job market, and by consequence, how they experience their PhDs.

02 Whilst undertaking a PhD, *anticipating* **precarity is a key stressor** with significant implications for the PhD experience, and more broadly, for who is able to pursue an academic career. **Race, class, and visa status are important intersectional factors here,** alongside other intersections including disability.

03 The **pressures of becoming 'marketable' and saying 'yes' to additional tasks** leave PhD researchers open to potentially exploitative practices from senior colleagues with negative implications for well-being and mental health..

04 **Greater sensitivity is needed in supervisory relationships** and across the discipline in how the job market is anticipated, understood and navigated, and how this can directly affect PhD researchers.

Fixed-Term Contracts

Introduction

This section explores the experiences of participants on FTCs, which are now a common feature of academic employment, particularly for ECRs. Within our survey sample, 36.5% (133) participants were employed on FTCs - slightly higher than HESA data. This section outlines the widespread implications of FTCs and how they can profoundly shape working conditions, career progression, and everyday life for those employed on them.

Framing precarity

Within our sample, almost three quarters (74%, 114) of permanently employed staff had previously held an FTC. Some of these participants looked back at their time in fixed-term positions positively.

> *'Looking back, the five years I spent on fixed-term contracts were really important in terms of helping shape my career, hone my skills and understand my motivation. I think it's a great way for employees and employers to test each other out'.*

However, many participants reported that potential benefits around career development are undermined as FTCs become structurally embedded in a sector that prioritises flexibility for institutions at the expense of job security for staff:

> *'Precarity means not knowing if you will have a job next year or where my income will come from. This has been a constant feature of my career in HE teaching in Geog[raphy]. Also, the things that come with it include lower pay where pay is calculated hourly, and when paid hourly being treated like a second-class citizen - e.g., not part of department meetings and sometimes not given office space or even email facilities.'*

Challenges experienced by colleagues on FTCs

1. Health and well-being

Fixed-term contracts were associated with states of insecurity, where many participants struggled to plan beyond their immediate contract. Indeed, over half of colleagues on FTC contracts (52.6%,70) reported being unable to plan for their futures (Figure 1), and a further 37.6% (50) reported FTCs limiting their abilities to plan for the future. These participants expressed how this lack of long-term contractual security not only impacted professional

stability but also their personal lives and well-being (see Figures 2 and 3). A concerning 84.9% (113) of colleagues on FTCs reported that their contracts had had negative impacts upon their wellbeing, with 63.2% (84) describing these impacts as 'clear' or 'significant'.
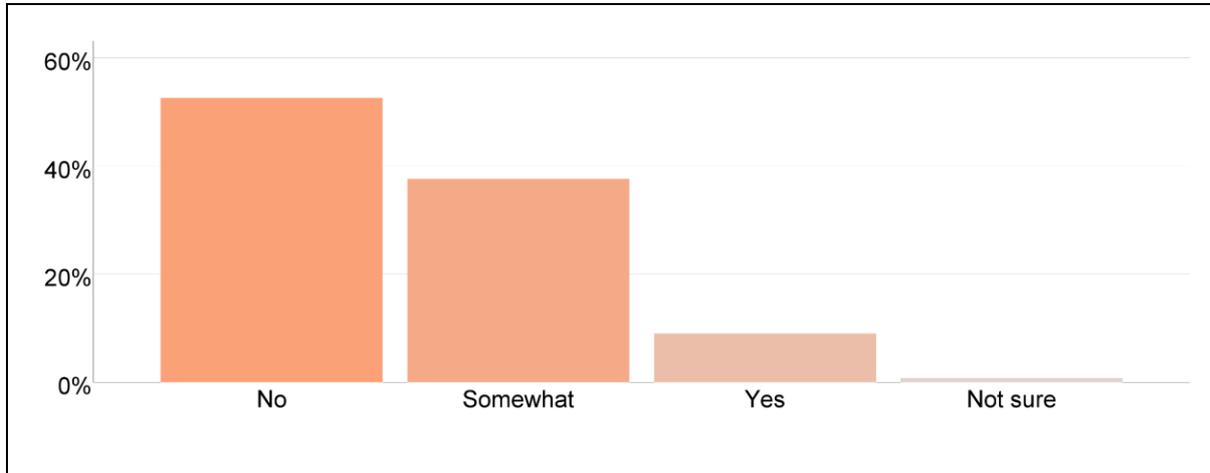

Figure 1: Do you feel able to plan for the future?
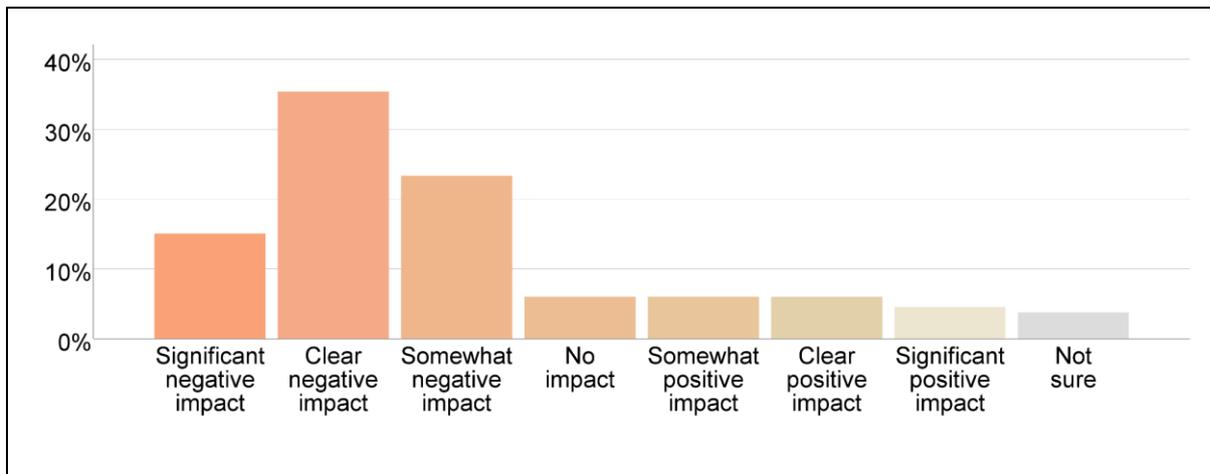
Figure 2: How does your FTC affect your professional life?
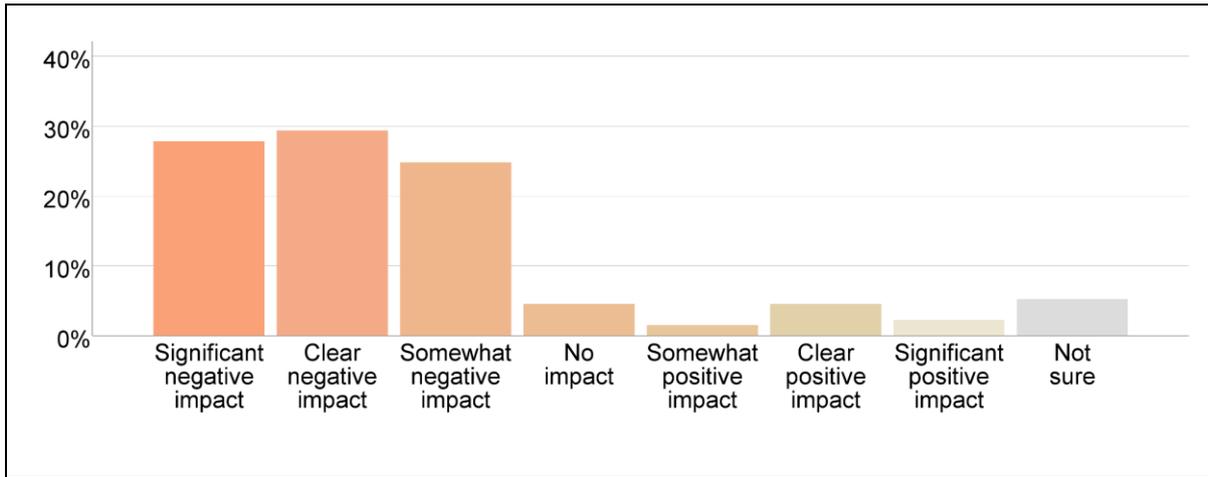
Figure 3: How does your FTC affect your personal life?
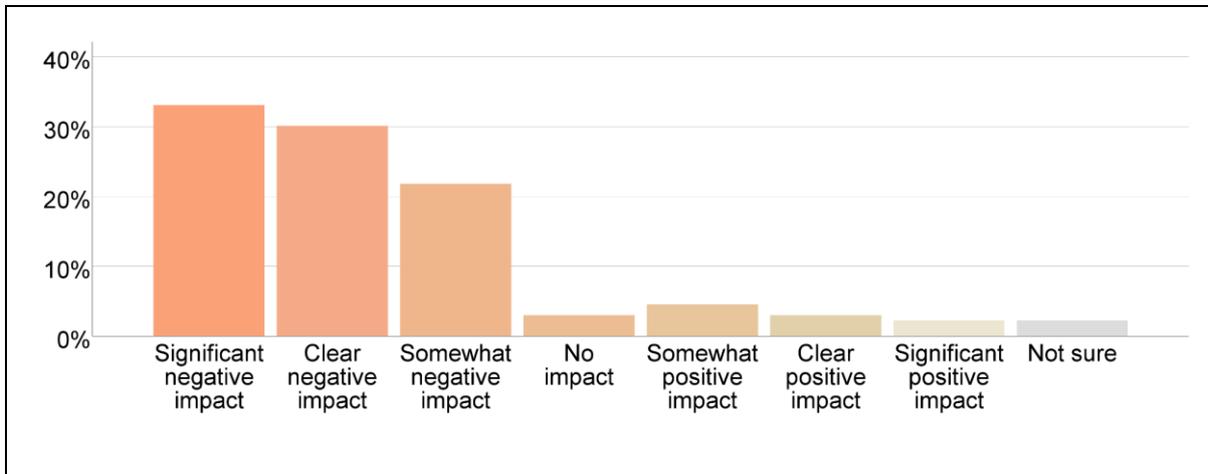
Figure 4: How does your FTC affect your wellbeing?

Participants consistently highlighted how the insecurity associated with FTCs can induce anxiety, explaining how their physical and psychological health had suffered as a direct result of these contractual terms (Figure 4). The pressure to seek the next contract, the fear of redundancy, and the competitive nature of academia was found to exacerbate stress and lead to burnout. Such pressures impacted decision-making with 85.7% of participants (112) stating that it disrupted their abilities to plan their professional lives, and 88.4% (114) reporting that it affected their abilities to plan their personal lives.

> *'Being constantly anxious and on the lookout for opportunities is wearing and puts pressure on my wellbeing and personal life. My professional life is negatively impacted as part of my brain is always working on the next thing rather than committing to the present task.'*

'Long term mental health problems have been made worse by this [FTC]'

'The stress of ending my last fixed-term contract, before I secured this five-year role, caused my hair to fall out in patches. I have been unable to commit to having a child, despite desperately wanting one, because of the nature of short-term contracts.'

FTCs, particularly those of a short duration, can contribute to a culture of overwork as colleagues attempt to prove their worth in hopes of securing the next position. This pressure leads to an erosion of boundaries between work and personal life, making it difficult to disconnect from professional responsibilities.

'[My fixed-term contract] has impacted my relationship with my husband and also my sense of self. I have felt very stressed in the past about constantly having to think "what next" "where next" and this has taken its toll on my mental health and our relationship. I am lucky because my husband is extremely supportive and works outside academia so he encourages me to switch off, but I find it very hard to switch off from being a 'fixed term' employee.'

Alongside individuated stress, the precarity of FTCs creates and embeds systemic issues within academia, influencing research output, teaching quality, and the ability to engage meaningfully with students and colleagues.

'Our jobs require us to concentrate, to be creative, to read and write, all those depend so much on how we feel, and my confidence was so shattered, especially during my fixed-term lectureship. We are not really acknowledging this. We are not machines, we are required to work with our minds, so we should care for our minds not just as a personal issue, but how our jobs (including contracts) affect us and our capacity to do our jobs.'

For many participants, the cumulative toll of uncertainty and stress had led them to question whether an academic career is viable. The majority (82.6%,109) of current FTC holders had considered leaving academia. For others, precarity has already forced them to consider alternative careers, despite their passion for research and teaching.

'I loved academia and being an academic. I loved working with students, and communicating about my research. I feel like I was driven out by the lack of permanent jobs available, which still makes me deeply sad. I was told by many well-meaning people that 'something will come along eventually'. But it got to the point that I was no longer willing to wait for something to come along so that I could start my life properly.'

"I have a long term health condition - Crohns disease. Every time I have to change doctors, change my medication address, get new rounds of tests all while stress is increased. [It is] financially challenging and you do not often get relocation packages for short term contracts. I have spent thousands moving and hundreds of hours - luckily I have a family to support me. It is harder to make a permanent home - I would even argue that precarious contracts impinge on your capacity to make home as you constantly have to move about and live in temporary spaces. Exhausting.

Employment status: FTC for 1-2 years, working towards a permanent position
Age: 30-39
Gender: Male

2. Involuntary (im)mobilities

The instability of FTCs can result in frequent relocation, sometimes across different regions or even countries. Within our sample, 48.1% (64) of colleagues on FTCs had to move home to accept an academic job, whilst 46.1% (71) of colleagues on permanent contracts said that they had had to relocate at least once before receiving permanent employment. Almost 1 in 8 colleagues on permanent contracts reported having had to move three or more times before receiving permanent employment (12.9%, 20). This disrupts professional continuity and makes building and maintaining relationships difficult. Those with caring responsibilities face additional pressures of balancing professional obligations with personal commitments. Moreover, for those with health conditions, mobility can make access to relevant and appropriate healthcare challenging.

Expectations of mobility therefore impact colleagues on FTCs in multiple ways, but the effects of these impacts are not evenly distributed. Academics from marginalised backgrounds often experience additional layers of isolation and exclusion when moving to new locations for FTCs. This was notably pronounced for those from ethnic minority and LGBTQ+ communities, who may struggle to find safe and supportive environments in unfamiliar places.

> *'I have moved a lot, and have really struggled with the isolation of being LGBT and ethnic minority as a result of all the moving I've had to do. I was in my last city for 6 years during my MSc and PhD and was finally able to build a strong community where I felt like I fit in. I had to give this up to move for this job, and have found being in the very white, very straight, very small city I currently live in extremely isolating. It has seriously affected my romantic life as well... And because I'm desperate to find the next job, it's very possible I'll end up somewhere else with the same problems.'*

The intersection of career precarity and forced mobility leaves some academics questioning whether academia can provide a viable long-term career path.

> *'I've been on fixed-term and part-time contracts for 7 years now, and it's exhausting. I'm so tired of constantly being fearful of losing my job in a year's time simply because my contract has come to an end. I just received my 4th notice of redundancy. It makes me want to cry just thinking about it. I don't know if I can keep doing this to myself or my family; I just want some stability.'*

International academics, in particular, experience heightened insecurity due to restrictive visa policies, which compound the uncertainties associated with FTCs. Many reported feeling trapped in an exhausting cycle of job applications, visa renewals, and relocations, often at great personal and financial cost. Some participants described making career choices based on visa requirements rather than academic interests, while others noted that visa sponsorship obligations made them more vulnerable to exploitative working conditions. The inability to secure stable employment in one location not only disrupts their careers but also places significant strain on their well-being:

> *'Without an employer as sponsor, I might be forced to leave the UK. That increases the pressure and stress of finding employment, accepting precarious positions'.*

'As someone who works on a visa, and who is employed on a fixed term contract, I feel like the department knows this, but as to whether I feel always able to articulate what I might be feeling in relation to that, no…How does one talk about the challenges that come with that obvious sense and reality of precarity?…Throw in the intersections of race and gender in this scenario and life gets even more interesting!'

'Luckily I've managed to stay at the same university but my partner (biologist) was told he had to move, in fact his PhD supervisor refused to employ him to 'aid' his career development. Consequently I'm now remote (I hold an independent fellowship and have for two years so far, with two and a half to go) and the university I'm at is constantly discussing the need for staff to work less remotely so I'm in a continual state of panic that my position is untenable.

Employment status: FTC for 3-5 years, working towards a permanent position
Age: 30-39
Gender: Female

3. Barriers to career progression

Many colleagues on FTCs reported feeling stuck in cycles of short-term contracts regardless of their teaching and research contributions. Some highlighted the need to constantly build their CVs, compete for grants, and engage in extra activities just to remain employable. Participants noted the contradiction between being expected to contribute significantly to their departments while simultaneously being treated as temporary staff:

> *'Fixed-term staff are not valued, they are seen as plugging gaps and the expectation is that you will move on after one to two years in your early career, even if you want to stay and develop within a department.'*

> *'They rely heavily on precarious staff to deliver teaching, one of the core functions of the dept which is a PERMANENT feature, and don't see a problem with this.'*

> *'It feels sometimes like there is a revolving door of postdocs with little interaction with the wider faculty.'*

1 in 6 colleagues on FTCs reported not feeling valued in their current position (15.8%, 21): a figure that rises to 61.7% (82) when including staff who only feel partially valued. There is also a sense that permanently employed colleagues within their departments are often unaware of colleagues on FTCs and their experiences of precarity. Only 15% (20) of colleagues on FTCs thought that their permanently employed colleagues were sufficiently aware of their experiences working on FTCs, and when asked about their knowledge of who within their departments was employed on FTCs, 39.6% (61) of staff on permanent contracts admitted being uncertain.

Participants also made links between limited opportunities for career progression and inequitable treatment within institutions, with restricted access to funding, input into decision-making, and access to professional development opportunities. Many participants reported that despite fulfilling the same responsibilities as permanent staff, they were excluded from key aspects of academic life. Over a quarter (28.5%, 38) did not feel confident speaking freely within their departments about their experiences of FTCs, whilst some described feeling invisible within their departments and expressed frustration at being treated as disposable workers:

> *'My fixed-term contract meant that I was not eligible to participate in certain committees/groups in the department, so it definitely affected my feeling of inclusion in my department.'*

> *'I have not been able to undertake long-term projects in the department because 'I don't know if I'll be here next year,' and this has impacted my personal professional development.'*

Others highlighted disparities in pay and workload allocation, where colleagues on FTCs were expected to take on significant responsibilities without equivalent recognition or career progression opportunities.

> *'In a department with a large number of teaching only, fixed-term contract colleagues, we were not included in regular 'diary' / workload measurement exercises. The result was that a large amount of teaching (and the respective balance in the department between time spent on research and teaching) was invisible to this data collection.'*

> *'I am obviously mad at my previous department: they clearly use postdoctoral roles in an extractive and destructive way - not caring about what happens next with the worker, of what is important for that person to reach stability - they tap into fixed term contracts to patch a massive workload and achieve results that boost the profiles of those already established, and they silence the needs and experiences of (precarious) workers.'*

> *'It is working twice as hard to get a permanent contract. It is not being able to say no to what teaching is asked of you. It is the constant churn, contorting oneself to fit the whim of others.'*

The reference to 'churn' and 'contorting oneself' illustrates the frustration many participants experienced about the lack of transparent pathways to permanent employment, because in some cases, despite years of contract renewals and positive performance evaluations, they remained in precarious positions. Examples of strategies and tactics to navigate these constraints were highlighted (seeking mentorship, networking, and professional development opportunities), but access to such resources often remained uneven. Colleagues on permanent contracts in more senior positions also alluded to these strategies, and explained how they would adjust their guidance and support provided to colleagues on FTCs accordingly.

> *'The focus of Personal Development Review (PDR) meetings was very much about 'value-added' activities and identifying how to augment CV within [the] context of [the] role to enhance employability (applying for small grants, quick publications, getting teaching experience).'*

> *'I can still remember the difficulties of being on short-term contracts, and now do what I can to support colleagues on fixed-term contracts. I provide support and advice for colleagues in and outside my department (for job applications, interview techniques, practice interview presentations etc.)'*

> *Unlike some people, I've actually experienced fixed-term contracts for a sustained time so I definitely try to help those on fixed terms. In my experience, those on fixed terms aren't usually from posh Home Counties backgrounds so I actually try to help them network and build social capital which is what much success in academia comes down to unfortunately.'*

While these efforts are commendable, there was consistent recognition by participants that addressing the impacts of precarity linked to FTCs requires a more coordinated response because it is a structural, rather than solely an individual, issue. Despite this, of the surveyed permanent staff who had employed colleagues on FTCs (87), over a fifth (21.8%, 19) said that their departments had no formal policies in place regarding the use of FTCs or how to support colleagues employed on them, while 43.7% (38) said that, if such policies did exist, they were not aware of them.

4. Probation and precarity

Although typically associated with permanent roles, probation emerged in the survey as a significant factor, often compounding the insecurities faced by colleagues on or transitioning from FTCs. Probation (in the context of UK academia) is a trial period during which new university employees are assessed on their teaching, research, and administrative work (as relevant to the position in question). It's a time-limited contract that must be successfully completed to secure a permanent position – in this sense, it is another form of FTC. Timescales for probation vary from under one year, to three years plus. Within our study, over a third (38.5%, 59) of respondents who are now employed on permanent contracts had experienced a probationary period in excess of three years, with 8.4% (13) of respondents experiencing a probationary period in excess of four years.

Experiences of probation varied considerably among participants. For some, probation was a manageable and structured process with institutional support, while others found it to be a source of stress, uncertainty, and exploitation. Some participants shared positive experiences, where probation provided structured guidance and was approached as a developmental process rather than an additional layer of precarity. There were also examples of institutions providing reduced teaching loads or additional support during probation:

> *'The probation period in my current role has actually been fine. I feel I had adequate support from the wider department and my teaching load wasn't too much of a burden.'*

> *'Our probation is nice because we have fewer dissertation students, less teaching, priority to PhD students and grant opportunities for internally competitive pathways. This was an advantage that I will miss after probation.'*

Notably, for others, probation felt like a performative bureaucratic exercise, with unclear expectations:

> *'Probation at my university felt very much like a tick-box exercise. My manager and I got automatic emails when we needed to do certain tasks for it, and we did them as quickly as possible, because it just felt like a bureaucratic necessity.'*

> *'Probation was challenging to complete, especially since there was little information on what 'passing' looked like (aside from asking around to get a successful example shared by a friend). The guidance from the University was minimal and not helpful.'*

For several participants, probation was extended beyond the official timeframe, leading to feelings of exploitation and a prolonged sense of insecurity:

'Probation is yet another form of unnecessary precarity. I know of few other lines of employment where it is necessary to have it for 3 years. This means that you are forced to work a lot harder for what elsewhere would be a given. I find myself having to unnecessarily apply for grants as PI [Principal Investigator], publish research which is underdeveloped, and work many weekends.'

'I was kept on probation for 5.5 years, despite it being 3 years officially. Looking back, I realize it was very exploitative, designed as a way to put pressure on early-career colleagues and extract as much output as possible, including grant income.'

Experiences of prolonged insecurity were reflected in discussions of the impact of probation on life choices, including affecting mortgage applications and long-term planning:

'Being on probation negatively affected my ability to get a mortgage, because probation in most careers is about 3 months rather than 4 years, and some mortgage providers don't distinguish types of probation.'

International academics and those on visas experienced heightened precarity during probation, as job loss could lead to visa insecurity and forced relocation.

'As a visa holder with no recourse to public funds, probation felt incredibly precarious. The ability to be fired with ease during probation (given UK labour laws) always made me question how far I could push, particularly around the strikes. As a single person during the period, I had no 'back-up' income or support if the worst happened.'

Conclusions

01   **Fixed-term contracts are a major driver of long-term insecurity** in academic careers. While a few participants found value in these roles, most described chronic stress, anxiety, and burnout as they navigated short-term contracts with little institutional support or certainty about the future.

02   The **impacts of FTCs shape colleagues' everyday lives**, influencing where and how people live, their ability to form or maintain relationships, start families, or make long-term plans. Forced mobility associated with the location of new positions compounds these issues, particularly for those with caring responsibilities or from marginalised backgrounds.

03   **International academics face added vulnerabilities due to visa restrictions**, which amplifies stress and limits their ability to plan long term.

04   For those with health conditions, expectations of mobility are a significant worry with **concerns around access to health care** and re-registering with medical services.

05   **Fixed-term contracts are closely tied to feelings of exclusion and inequity**, with many participants reporting limited access to resources, decision making forums, or career development opportunities — despite making significant contributions to teaching and research.

06   **Probation was highlighted as a site of precarity, especially for those on and transitioning from fixed-term roles.** While some found probation a supportive process, others experienced extended timelines, unclear expectations, and additional pressure to perform, prolonging the insecurity they hoped to leave behind.

07   **Many participants described questioning the viability of an academic career altogether**, with some choosing to leave the sector due to exhaustion, poor conditions, or the sense that they were seen as disposable. Calls for systemic, rather than individual, responses to precarity were consistent across responses.

08   There are **opportunities for change and the enacting of best practice**. See 'Opportunities for Action' for examples of this, derived from the survey data.

Permanent Contracts

Introduction

This section considers the experiences of colleagues on permanent contracts. Of the 154 responses, 74% (114) were from members of staff who had previously been employed on one or more FTCs, and 35.1% (54) had been employed on at least three FTCs before being made permanent. Our research shows that: 1) there are significant long-term effects on colleagues who have previously experienced FTCs and who were subsequently employed on permanent contracts, and 2) that colleagues on permanent contracts are also reporting feelings of precarity in relation to wider sectoral changes and insecurities. As highlighted in the opening of this report, these feelings are likely to have intensified in light of the current challenges facing the sector.

Figure 5: How long were you employed on FTCs before being made permanent?	**Figure 6: How many FTCs were you employed on before being made permanent?**
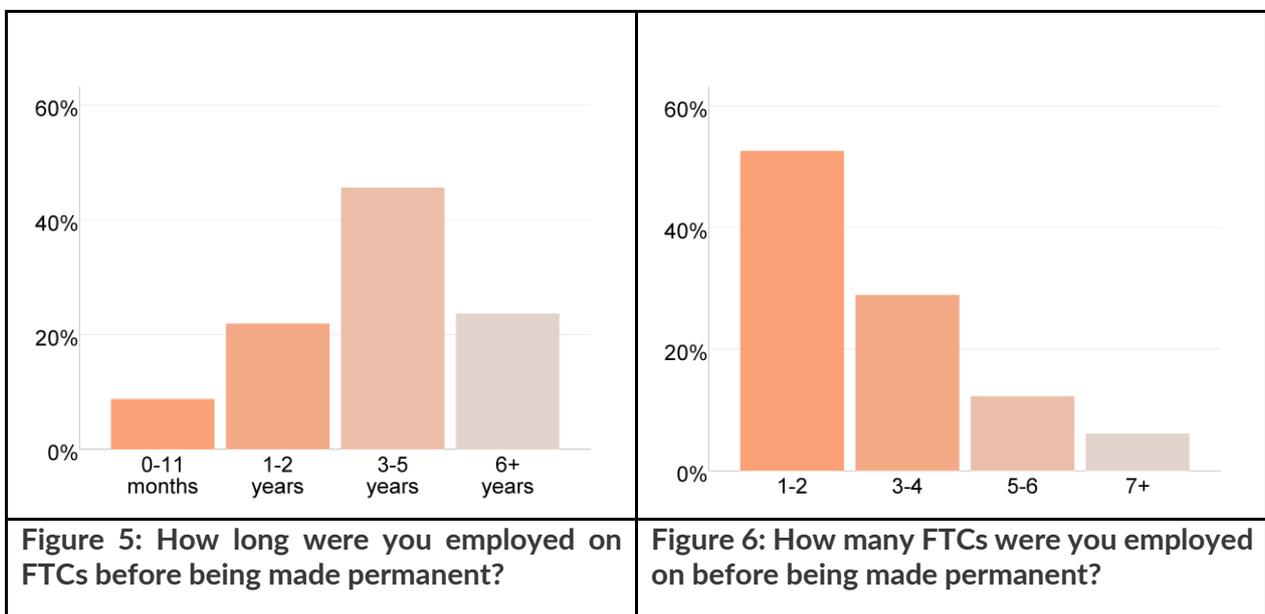
Reflecting on FTCs

Whilst expressing many challenges associated with temporary contracts, participants reflected on two key ways that their experiences of FTCs have positively facilitated their career.

Professional development: For some participants, FTCs supported their professional development. This included having the opportunity to build a research portfolio and develop specific areas of expertise, or via the attainment of 'prestigious' fellowships that both accelerated their productivity and raised their profile within academia:

'The fixed term contract allowed me to choose and learn the areas I was good at and built the portfolio for my career. It was an amazing learning experience'.

'My fixed term contract accelerated my career into permanently salaried research and I was able to achieve more than I would have done without it.'

Skills and resilience: For some participants, FTCs provided a springboard for skills development, and the building of resilience for an academic career. One participant, for example, described their FTC as an apprenticeship whilst others reported that, in hindsight, they had come to value their time on temporary contracts, and the (international) networks they provide:

'Over time I have come to value what the opportunity of that short term contract was for me...I learned a lot quickly and it shaped me in good ways as an academic'.

'It's made me very flexible in my approaches to work and very open to very different parts of the discipline.'

Whilst recognising the benefits, participants reflected on a number of longer term challenges that coincide with professional and skills development:

'I think the jobs gave me the boost I needed to get my permanent job so I am grateful and it was overall a positive experience for my family. Financially we have not recovered. This adds a great deal of stress to my life.'

'It has a positive impact on my professional life as I have several projects to drawn on now for future research, as well as several professional networks from previous colleagues. But the memories of the time I spent on a short-term contract are still very raw and affect how I operate as an academic as well e.g. it took me a long time to realise I have (some power) now.'

'The diversity of experiences, and being on a precarious contract, definitely made me a better academic. But it broke my social connections in ways that have never recovered, and exacerbated my self-esteem issues.'

Whilst FTCs were perceived to benefit career progression and personal development, they can be accompanied by long lasting effects - whether financial, social, and/or professional.

'I moved first from London to Glasgow so accommodation was much cheaper and so my housing situation improved enormously. I could walk to work. In general my standard of living in physical terms improved a lot. I also over time gained a new professional network, and I benefited from new perspectives on my research area from being in a new department and working with a new set of people. This really influenced the development of my research, in positive ways.

Employment status: Permanent contract for 15+ years, FTC for 3-5 years prior to this.
Age: 50-59
Gender: Female

Key challenges: The long-lasting effects of FTCs

As illustrated below, nearly three quarters (71.7%, 81) of all permanently employed staff who had previously held a FTC reported still experiencing effects of their FTCs. 43.5% (37) reported still experiencing their negative impacts upon their professional lives, 48.2% (41) reported their continuing impacts on their personal lives, and 49.4% (40) reported that their previous FTCs continued to have impacts on their wellbeing.
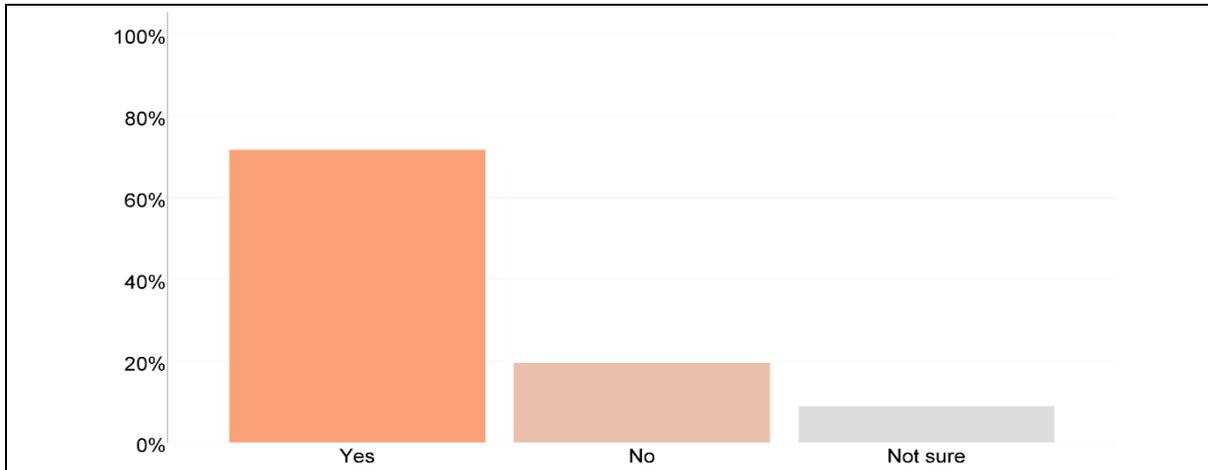
Figure 7: Now that you are permanently employed, do you feel any effects of your previous fixed term contract(s)?
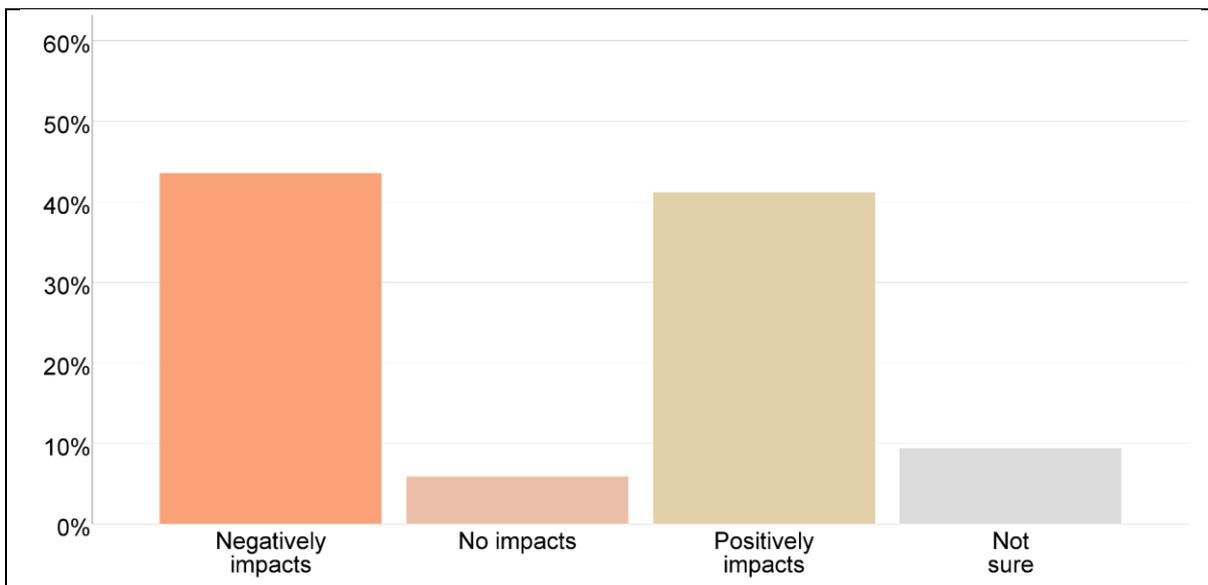
Figure 8: Do you feel any effects of your previous fixed term contract(s) on your professional life?
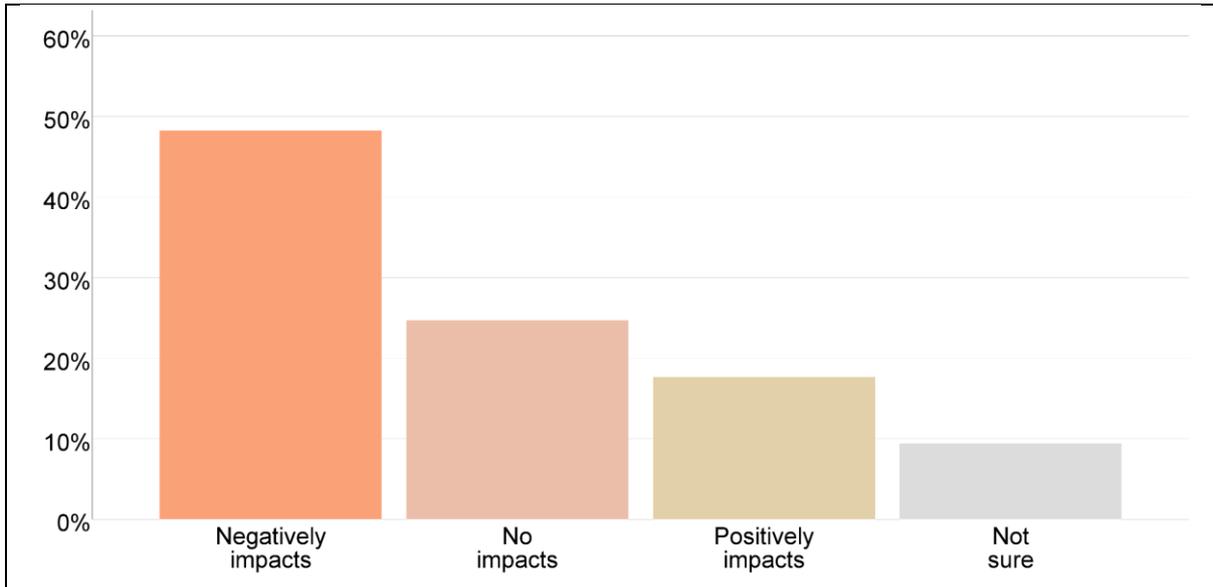
Figure 9: Do you feel any effects of your previous fixed term contract(s) on your personal life?
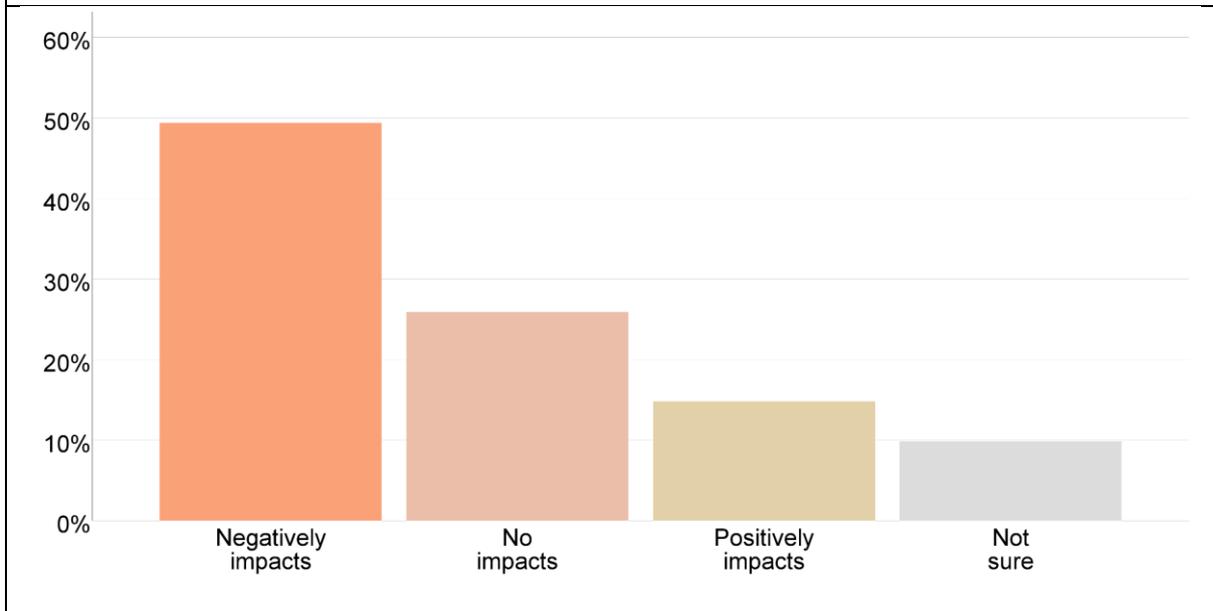
Figure 10: Do you feel any effects of your previous fixed term contract(s) on your wellbeing?

45.5% (70) of participants on permanent contracts reported feeling at least somewhat precarious in their current contracts, despite their stated contractual permanency. Needless to say, these feelings are exacerbated sector wide voluntary severance schemes, redundancies, mergers, and cutbacks across the UK. As participants reported:

> *'We live in an HE sector that requires insecurity to function. So I am very aware that it wouldn't take much for the permanent post to become a terminated one...That sense of insecurity in all respects therefore persists.'*

'Only when faced with redundancy did colleagues genuinely understand how terrifying the prospect of not having an income several months down the line was. I felt that was the first time they had truly understood what it was like and I really wish they had not had to experience that feeling.'

Notwithstanding current wider sectoral challenges, the long term effects of FTCs are a key driver of feelings of precarity and insecurity. 71.7% (81) of participants reported feeling at least somewhat affected by their previous time on a FTC. Participants reported long term effects across five key fronts:

1. Mental Health and Well-Being

FTCs can have long lasting detrimental effects on mental health. Almost half (49.4%, 40) of permanently employed staff who had previously held one or more FTCs reported that it continued to have effects on their wellbeing. One participant, for example, reported that it took two to three years for their anxiety—developed whilst on FTCs—to diminish. Another, who had been on 3-4 FTCs and relocated each time, described their mental health as 'atrocious' despite having been on a permanent contract for four years. Others reported carrying mental health issues forward with one participant going as far to say that FTCs had ruined their life. At times, these effects manifest as an inability to relax due to a protracted 'sense of unease'.

'I have been diagnosed with a chronic condition brought on by stress – this certainly wasn't helped by precarious contracts.'

'I could write you a book. It made me feel more insecure, anxious, and unconfident. I am inherently a less happy person.'

'The patterns of behaviour...established while in short term contracts have continued to impact my mental health negatively.'

2. Continued feelings of precarity

Alongside acknowledging the implications of a sector in crisis, participants reported lingering and 'lasting' feelings of job insecurity that resulted from their time on FTCs, despite holding a permanent position.

'It left me with a fear of losing my job and being in a position where I cannot support my family.'

'It's like a hangover. It is hard to believe that 'permanent means permanent.'

'I always feel anxious about job permanence.'

These feelings were, at times, exacerbated by excessive probationary periods and for those on visas, the effects are particularly profound. The costly visa process itself prohibits participation in the academy for many but it can also be accompanied by a lingering sense that something might go wrong, resulting in job loss or 'being kicked out of the country'.

> "If you do not have approx £10k to cover all expenses...you are basically unable to accept the job. The social mobility barriers are pretty limiting and with the new visa regulations it will become even more difficult to move to the UK... I am at the end of my probation period, and I am slightly worried something unexpected will happen and I might not get the permanent position although I delivered everything I was supposed to. I think living as an international always makes you think about all the potential scenarios, and it feels like the current socio-political landscape... might be challenging to navigate.

Employment status: Permanent contract (less than year), formerly worked outside of academia.
Age: 30-39
Gender: Female

3. Slower career progression

Participants reported that their career progression and promotion prospects had been slowed, and that the long-tail of formerly being on a FTC can make it more difficult to feel 'established' in the longer term. This predominantly concerned colleagues who had been on teaching-only posts prior to securing a permanent contract, or who had experienced sequential post-doc's and found it difficult to demonstrate specific subject expertise as a result:

> *'I'm undoubtedly 'behind' where I could have been if I'd had a permanent contract earlier, because there have been career development things I couldn't do while on a fixed term contract.'*

> *'Having been on teaching-only posts for seven years…I had an incredibly under-developed research CV… promotion prospects have been heavily impacted by this.'*

> *'I feel like years of precarious employment have not been conducive to good ideas. They made me feel pressured to focus on 'topical', 'buzz worthy' issues…and they diverted…weeks of writing and thinking time toward applications.'*

4. Relationship to academia

For some participants, the experience of formerly being on a FTC prior to securing a permanent job continued to impact their relationships with work and academic life. This manifested in many ways, including feelings of guilt at having a job and being hypercompetitive.

> *'It fundamentally broke my connection to the career…in an irreparable way. I am currently remaining in academia for entirely selfish reasons.'*

> *'I routinely still feel a lot of guilt around securing a permanent post when so many people I know have not been able to, even though they are brilliant scholars.'*

> *'I remain hyper competitive academically.'*

5. Personal life

More than a third of permanently employed participants who had previously held FTCs (35.9%, 41) described how these contracts continued to have long-lasting negative impacts on their personal lives. These impacts include effects on family planning, finances (including pensions), maintaining a health-full work/life balance, establishing and maintaining relationships (both romantic and social), and the delaying of other key decisions (such as property purchase).

> *'I was unable to start a family when I planned…I postponed having children into my 40s.'*

> *'Few friendships really survive the long-distance moves….it also contributed to difficulties in forming and maintaining long term romantic relationships.'*

'I limited my family size. I stopped practicing hobbies...I was only settled enough to purchase a property in my 40s...It's been difficult to repair relationships, especially because the stress of a long period of precarity made me very career focused.'

''I carry over a money-focused mindset to my personal life.'

Conclusions

01 With the benefit of hindsight, **FTCs were seen by some participants as important to career development**, skills building, and the development of resilience.

02 It is clear that **FTCs can leave a profound and lasting mark on academic careers and personal lives**, even when a permanent contract has been secured. The established challenges associated with being on an FTC do not simply cease to exist.

03 **Precarity associated with FTCs must thus be understood and addressed on a much longer timescale, beyond contract length**.

04 **Feelings of precarity for colleagues holding permanent contracts must also be understood within the context of wider challenges within HE**. It is likely that feelings of insecurity and precarity have emerged and intensified in recent years due to wider challenges in the sector.

CONCLUSIONS

What does this mean for the future of Geography in the UK?

10 KEY FINDINGS

01   **Uncertain career paths:** The report highlights that the current academic job market is highly competitive and insecure, with many Geographers on FTCs cycling through short-term roles that offer little job security.

02   **Structural challenges:** Precarity is framed and understood not only as an individual problem but as a structural one. Our findings show that institutional priorities often favour workforce flexibility over long-term stability, leading to a reliance on temporary contracts to meet teaching and research demands, which further entrenches precarity.

03   **PhD researchers and anticipated precarity:** Many PhD participants disclosed that their experience of undertaking a PhD was shaped by the looming insecurity of the academic job market, available contract types, and expectations of mobility.

04   **Social difference and identity:** Colleagues from marginalised groups, such as racialised minorities, colleagues with disabilities, migrants, the LGBTQ+ community, and those from working-class backgrounds, experience precarity in compounding ways. Universities are often not equipped or willing to understand and address the intersectional pressures these colleagues face. It is essential to approach precarity through an intersectional lens, recognising how overlapping social identities, such as race, class, and gender, shape the challenges faced by colleagues within the academic job market.

05   **Mobility and instability:** Colleagues anticipate moving frequently between short-term contracts and different geographical locations, adding to feelings of insecurity and rootlessness. This constant uncertainty, especially for those with caring commitments or health issues, make long-term personal planning difficult, if not impossible.

06 **Health and wellbeing:** Colleagues reported feelings of anxiety, stress, and burnout due to job insecurity combined with the pressure to perform under difficult conditions. This strain is especially pronounced for those on FTCs and ECRs seeking to enter the academy. Colleagues are under pressure to stay competitive by taking on additional work, which detracts from their ability to focus key components of their job and/or sustain a meaningful life outside of work.

07 **Probation and prolonged insecurity:** Colleagues described the probation process as an additional source of precarity. In several cases, probation was extended beyond official timelines, contributing to a continued sense of insecurity and pressure.

08 **Exploitation and undervaluation:** ECRs and PhD researchers are often expected and feel pressured to engage in unpaid or undervalued tasks to stay 'competitive' in the academic job market. This contributes to a sense of being disposable in institutions prioritising flexibility and cost-cutting over employee well-being.

09 **Compromised career development:** Geographers on FTCs feel stuck in a cycle of temporary positions that offer limited opportunities for professional growth. This undermines the ability of colleagues to develop a clear career trajectory or pursue long-term academic projects.

10 **Permanent contracts do not guarantee security:** It is vital that attention on academic precarity spans career stages. Sector-wide redundancies, organisational restructuring, and funding cuts have left many Geographers on permanent contracts reporting a sense of precarity in their current positions across career stages.

Set against this context, many participants indicated that they would leave the profession. Of those on fixed term contracts, **two thirds (66.2%, 88) of participants stated that they had considered leaving, with a further 15.8% (21) stating that they sometimes consider leaving**. One participant stated that they think about leaving 'all of the time' whilst another explained that they had recently taken up a job offer in the Civil Service. They added that 'most' of their 'peers have left academia'. Alongside highlighting potential reasons for this throughout the report, we also urge that such states of precarity have profound consequences for the discipline:

> *'A lot of very capable, smart and competent people leave academia because they are stuck with fixed contracts, poor prospects for a decent quality of life…and continual mobility driven by a lack of opportunities in their surroundings.'*

> *'(The use of fixed term contracts) fails to value the broader collective ambition of doing Geography.'*

For participants who have already left academia, a lack of available jobs, more attractive job prospects outside of higher education, and unacceptable working cultures were among the most frequently cited reasons.

Several participants wanted to stay in academia and highlighted how difficult it is to re-enter the academy. This was in part due to the hypercompetitive nature of the job market but also because of very practical constraints. At many institutions, for example, access to networks, library resources, journals, and an institutional email address cease to exist the moment a contract ends, with significant implications for if or how academics are able to participate in the discipline and keep their job prospects open.

Whilst efforts have been made to map out privilege within academia (see, for example, Elsherif et al's (2022) 'Wheel of Privilege' below), we argue that there needs to be a greater awareness of how contractual terms fit into such a mapping. Introducing a new contract status 'spoke' to the Wheel (Figure 11) would highlight this as a key factor shaping privilege within the academy. It would also help to illustrate that contract status interacts with a range of intersectional factors to produce experiences of precarity.

Reproduced under CC-BY Attribution 4.0 International from Elsherif, M. M., Middleton, S. L., Phan, J. M., Azevedo, F., Iley, B. J., Grose-Hodge, M., Tyler, S., Kapp, S. K., Gourdon-Kanhukamwe, A., Grafton-Clarke, D., Yeung, S. K., Shaw, J. J., Hartmann, H., & Dokovova, M. (2022). Bridging Neurodiversity and Open Scholarship: How Shared Values Can Guide Best Practices for Research Integrity, Social Justice, and Principled Education. MetaArXiv https://doi.org/10.31222/osf.io/k7a9p
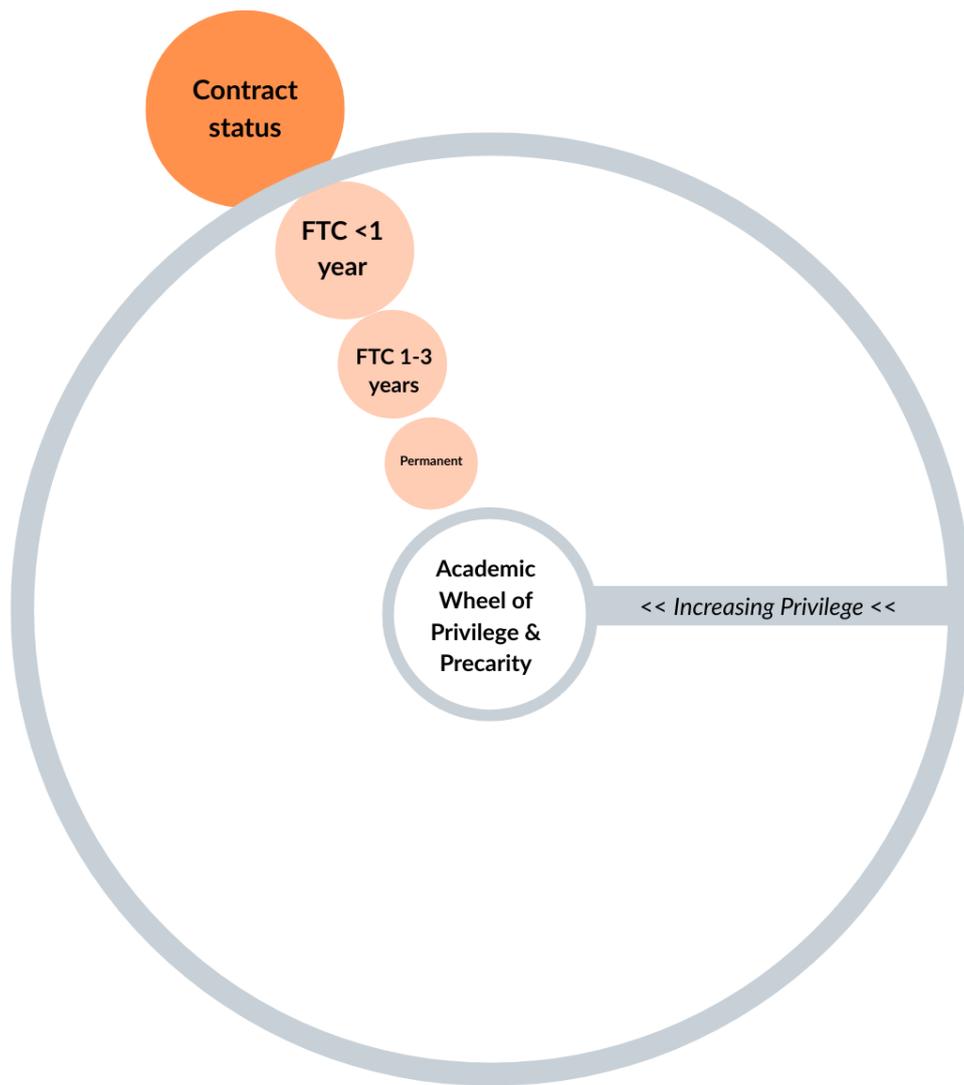
Figure 11: Academic wheel of privilege and precarity with a new contract status 'spoke'

Disciplinary implications

It is clear that FTCs have profound long-term effects that exceed the contracts themselves. This is the case at a range of scales – from individual wellbeing and career progression, through to how Geography as a discipline evolves, and the knowledges that become incorporated into the disciplinary canon. The short- and long-term implications of FTCs are far reaching. Alongside shaping the working cultures and experiences of permanent staff, they also impact how PhD researchers perceive and imagine their futures, and result in colleagues leaving the discipline. This is not to mention the impacts on the disciplinary pipeline of undergraduate and postgraduate taught students, with participants noting that constant staffing changes hinder consistency in teaching and supervision. Participants noted how this precarity both negatively affects the fostering of a meaningful research culture, and can actively exclude many on FTCs from participating in this process.

Looking ahead, we anticipate five key consequences of these 'states of precarity' for the discipline of Geography.

01   **Continued precarity, especially for those from under-represented backgrounds, may discourage individuals without the financial or social support to enter, withstand or remain in uncertain academic careers.**

This could contribute to a "brain drain" from academia, while also unevenly impacting individuals from minority and other disadvantaged backgrounds.

02   **Current states of precarity will compound a lack of diversity in Geography.**

Precarity disproportionately impacts colleagues from minority groups, including colleagues requiring a visa to work in the UK, those with health conditions, and those from LGBTQ+ backgrounds. Engaging directly with precarity at an individual as well as sectoral scale is thus key to ensuring a more diverse and equitable discipline.

03   **The current context will result in a narrowing of geographical thought and practice.**

The pressure to secure jobs in a precarious environment may push geographers to focus on "safe" research areas that are more likely to attract funding or attention, potentially stifling innovation and the pursuit of more radical or open-ended research questions.

04   **Redundancies, School/Department mergers, and budget cuts are creating a heightened sense of insecurity among all staff.**

The increased competition for resources within shrinking budgets could exacerbate inequalities in the discipline. Well-established scholars may have an advantage in securing funding and job opportunities, while early-career geographers or those from marginalised backgrounds struggle to break through. Moreover, core aspects of the discipline, such as fieldwork, are often perceived as "expensive" in discussions about 'cost savings' and may be cut from teaching programmes as a result of financial pressures, which would fundamentally diminish the quality of geographical education.

05   **It is possible the subject's interdisciplinary nature could be eroded during mergers and restructuring.**

There is a risk that the social sciences and humanities dimension of Geography could be separated from the natural sciences, undermining the integration that is foundational to the discipline. This separation would weaken what makes Geography distinct as a field of study.

Opportunities for Action

Alongside exploring the short- and long-term effects of FTCs and academic precarity, our research has identified a number of opportunities for action for individuals, departments, and institutions. These opportunities range from simple awareness raising activities, to enacting best practice in departments and institutions. The resources below (Best Practice Action Plans, awareness raising posters, template letters) are directly informed and underpinned by participant survey responses and follow on focus groups. The resources are designed to:

1. **Raise awareness** of the key issues facing colleagues on FTCs and facilitate broader conversations about academic precarity in the context of a changing sector

2. **Suggest routes through which to raise key issues** to (senior) management

3. **Equip individuals, departments, and institutions** to enact meaningful change in relation to the widespread use of FTCs and increasingly normalised academic precarity.

Best Practice Action Plans

Below are a series of action plans outlining best practice guidelines for raising awareness about, supporting, and advocating for people experiencing precarity, in particular those on FTCs. **Action plans are provided for: Institutions, Departments/ Schools, Heads of Department/ School and Administrators, Colleagues of precariously employed staff, and PhD supervisors/Postgraduate leadership**. Each action plan contains clear action points to be achieved across the immediate, medium, and longer term. The proposed actions are not intended to substitute for meaningful structural change, nor to individualise the responsibility for the effects of a network of structural issues that characterise the neoliberal academy. They do, however, point toward actionable interventions that can be taken by all geographers across career stages to create a more equitable discipline. The full Action Plans can be found in Appendix 1 or the links below.

1. **Institution** Action Plan

2. **Heads of Department / School and administrators** Action Plan

3. **Departmental / School** Action Plan

4. **Colleagues of precariously employed staff** Action Plan

5. **PhD supervisors and Postgraduate leadership** Action Plan

Template letters

Lobbying for change is key to creating a more equitable academy. The letters below speak to three key issues raised by participants that disenfranchise colleagues on FTCs, but which can be addressed (at times) with minimal cost.

1. Access to institutional emails: This letter calls on institutions to enable access to institutional emails and other institutional accounts for three months after the end of an FTC. Our research found that the immediate removal of such access after the end of a contract can hamper career progression and shut colleagues out of key systems (e.g. libraries, journal publishing).

2. Minimum contract lengths: This letter calls on HoDs (or equivalent) and institutions to ensure that contracts for FTCs are a minimum of 12 months. Our research found that shorter contracts have significant negative implications on the working and personal lives of colleagues.

3. Proportional probation: This letter calls on universities to institute probation lengths that are proportional to contract lengths. Our research found that some colleagues are on probation for the entirety of their FTCs, or even on sequential probations when a new contract is issued at the same institution. This exacerbates feelings of precarity.

Awareness raising posters

A key challenge experienced by those on FTCs is a lack of understanding from permanently employed/senior colleagues about the challenges of precarious contract terms. These posters (linked below and attached overleaf) are designed to be displayed in departments to raise the visibility of colleagues on FTCs and to highlight key challenges colleagues may be experiencing.

1. Recognising the challenges of FTCs: This poster highlights some of the key challenges resulting from being employed on an FTC.

2. Supporting colleagues on FTCs: This poster highlights how permanently employed/senior colleagues can support colleagues on FTCs.

3. Identity and difference: This poster explores the additional challenges FTCs pose to a range of identities, including carers, those on visas, and those with health conditions.

STATES OF PRECARITY

THE CHALLENGES OF FIXED-TERM CONTRACTS

ROOTLESSNESS

Fixed-term contracts often require relocation. Being unable to put down roots can be debilitating and impact social, familial, and romantic relationships, as well as the ability to feel at home.

FINANCIAL INSECURITY

Financial insecurity is common. This impacts the ability of colleagues to plan for the future in their personal lives. This is particularly problematic for colleagues on visas, due to costly visa processes.

FEELING DISPOSABLE

Fixed-term contracts can often leave colleagues feeling worthless and undervalued. This hinders their ability to raise issues and participate fully in departmental life.

SOCIAL ISOLATION

Building friendships and a sense of community takes time, which some fixed-term contracts do not allow. This can be exacerbated by issues like workload, commuting times, and caring responsibilities.

Over one third[1] of academic staff are employed on fixed-term contracts, which can present many challenges.

Your colleagues may be experiencing any number of these challenges as a direct result of uncertain working conditions.

ILL-HEALTH

Many colleagues on fixed-term contracts report high levels of anxiety and depression alongside symptoms of stress and burnout. Relocation can also impact access to specialist healthcare.

DIFFICULTY SAYING "NO"

The often precarious nature of fixed-term contracts means that it can be very difficult for colleagues to say 'no' to tasks and requests. This intensifies already high workloads.

LACK OF CAREER PROGRESSION

Contract length and timelines for academic progression can be incompatible. It can be harder to apply for grants, to gain promotion, to supervise students, and to allocate time to research activities.

PUTTING LIFE ON HOLD

Major life decisions (such as buying a home, starting a family, or beginning new relationships) are often disrupted or put on hold because of a lack of certainty about the future.

OVERWORK

Unmanageable workloads are commonplace. Additional tasks are often automatically allocated to colleagues on fixed-term contracts, leading to concerns around exploitation.

Royal Geographical Society with IBG

States of Precarity

The challenges of Fixed Term Contracts poster

Supporting colleagues on Fixed Term Contracts poster

IDENTITY AND DIFFERENCE: FIXED-TERM CONTRACTS

The challenges of fixed-term contracts are not experienced equally or evenly. They vary depending on identity factors including race, gender, sexuality, disability status, and more - intersections of identity may mean experiences are compounded.

RESIDENCY AND VISA STATUS

For colleagues working on a visa, the stresses of a fixed-term contract may be felt more acutely. This might include increased anxiety about probation and career planning, concerns about travel, social isolation, and costly visa processes.

"For years I have been doing everything I can to build my CV to get a job as an immigrant. It is exhausting... I know that as an immigrant I have to go above and beyond... I'm overwhelmed and I still don't think it will be enough."

Participant

PARENTS AND CARERS

Factors including financial insecurity and high workloads make juggling fixed-term positions and caring responsibilities extremely difficult. Moving away from social support systems adds additional complexity.

FINANCIAL BACKGROUND

Many institutions do not provide relocation costs for short term contracts. Moreover, there can be a need to cover gaps in employment between contracts. This disproportionately impacts those from low income backgrounds.

RACE

Colleagues from Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic backgrounds must navigate an overtly white discipline. This includes the effects of institutional racism, a lack of appropriate mentorship, and feeling isolated.

"Race is a big issue in geography... Many Black Geographers are on fixed contracts as it is a very white discipline and they are gatekeepers to this field who have permanent contracts."

Participant

GENDER

Gender may affect how roles get allocated (women, for example, often bear more pastoral responsibilities), and fixed-term contracts can have a negative impact upon experiences of fertility and family planning.

LGBTQI+

Relocating for a new job can have specific impacts on LGBTQI+ people. This may include concerns about coming out to new colleagues, and the loss of community and support with each move.

DISABILITIES & HEALTH CONDITIONS

The pressures of a fixed-term contract are exacerbated by health conditions and disabilities. Colleagues may fear disclosing a condition, and moving healthcare providers can be challenging. Ableist norms may also hinder career opportunities.

"Being neurodivergent, I always worry that I am just not capable of producing work at a rate, and to a standard that will allow me to secure a permanent position."

Participant

FIND OUT MORE ABOUT THE STATES OF PRECARITY PROJECT HERE

Identity and difference on Fixed Term Contracts poster

Acknowledgements

About The Team

Johanne Bruun: Johanne is an Assistant Professor in Environmental Geography at the University of Birmingham. Her work focuses on the intersection between scientific practice, material politics, and spatialised governance with a particular focus on questions of terrain and territory in places dominated by ice.

Rachel Colls: Rachel is an Associate Professor of Human Geography at Durham University. She is a leading feminist geographer whose research focuses on geographies of the body, and developing critical approaches to 'obesity'. She is currently developing work on weight stigma in health care settings.

James Esson: James is a Professor of Geography at Queen Mary University of London. His research focuses on black populations located in the 'conspicuous margins', a term that he uses to describe people and places that, despite their importance and visibility, often exist on the periphery or outskirts of mainstream attention or discourse. He works to explore these conspicuous margins and reveal their hidden narratives.

Peter Forman: Peter is an Assistant Professor at Northumbria University. He is a political geographer interested in the intersections between energy, infrastructural politics, and urban governance. His current research explores the societal implications of the nascent hydrogen transition.

Anna Jackman: Anna is an Associate Professor in Human Geography at the University of Reading. A feminist political geographer, Anna's current work is interested in how robotic and digital technologies impact both everyday urban (air)space and life, and aerial bombardment in contexts of (military) conflict.

Jasmine Joanes: Jasmine is a PhD researcher based in the Department of Geography at Royal Holloway University of London. Her PhD research utilises feminist political geography and intimate geopolitics to explore menstrual justice activism in the UK.

Rachael Squire: Rachael is an Associate Professor in Human Geography at Royal Holloway University of London. Her research draws on feminist geopolitical approaches to explore questions related to Earth futures through a number of key lenses. Rachael's research has a particular focus on oceans with a broader interest in practices of experiment during the Cold War.

APPENDIX 1: Action Plans

Action Plans for creating more equitable working conditions for colleagues on fixed term contracts

Using the Action Plans
Each action plan has specific action points (listed and numbered on the left-hand side) with the action in bold text. These points can be realised in different ways, across different timescales:

A. First steps: Initial changes that can be made with little resource and over a short period of time.
B. Building momentum: Opportunities to build on initial changes to change working cultures and practices
C. Maintaining lasting change: The tools for longer term change.

While seeking to outline good practice, we recognise the role of sectoral, institutional and departmental dynamics in impacting and informing precarious employment. Equally, intersectional factors as outlined in the States of Precarity report will shape individual capacities for action and individual vulnerabilities. These Action Plans offer general guidance and are designed to be adapted as relevant to different institutional and individual contexts with different structures of accountability and power. They are designed to support wide-spread collective action and resistance across different areas and scales of influence.

Embedding the Action Plans

The Action Plans can be used as departmental discussion points or can be embedded into institutional and departmental working cultures in a number of ways, including:

- EDI committees
- Athena Swan action plans
- Statements on research culture for assessments (e.g. REF)
- RACE Equality Charter action plans
- Stonewall action plans and inclusion activities
- Supervisory meetings
- Performance reviews

Each Action Plan is accompanied by a short blurb explaining who it is written for, including a list of potential job/role titles that we suggest should consult each resource. We recognise that people occupy multiple and, at times, conflicting roles and may identify with more than one of the groups targeted in these plans. While separate resources, more than one Action Plan may thus be relevant to you.

ACTION PLAN: INSTITUTIONS

Institutional policies and processes are amongst the biggest factors in producing the conditions for precarious working. This action plan collates **institutional changes** *that our research suggests are needed to facilitate and ensure better working conditions for precarious staff. This action plan is intended to inspire a collective push for change, whilst calling on leadership to act.*

Examples of positions relevant to this action plan: **Individuals in leadership positions at Departmental/School level and higher up, Union members and leadership, RGS working groups.**

ACTION PLAN: INSTITUTIONS			
ACTION	**A. FIRST STEPS**	**B. BUILDING MOMENTUM**	**C. MAINTAINING LASTING CHANGE**
① Improve contract terms	*Make probation proportionate to the length of the contract* Fixed term colleagues are often kept on lengthy, repeated and/or endless cycles of probation, leading to increased feelings of precarity and insecurity.	*Implement minimum contract lengths of at least 12 months* Contracts shorter than 12 months pose significant challenges in terms of housing and securing continuous work. These contracts should be avoided where possible. *Incorporate time for research, writing, mentoring, professional development, and/or grant applications in all contracts* Applying for grants and academic	*Develop policies that ensure paid parental leave for all regardless of contract type* Not all HE institutions have specific policies in place for postdoc or other FTC parental leave. This means that depending on contract type or funding body, some people are denied parental leave as documented in our survey. *Reduce dependency on short-term teaching-only contracts*

ACTION PLAN: INSTITUTIONS

ACTION		A. FIRST STEPS	B. BUILDING MOMENTUM	C. MAINTAINING LASTING CHANGE
			publishing are a time consuming yet essential part of academic labour and progression. Fixed term colleagues often struggle to balance these needs against heavy workloads, yet universities frequently benefit from the resultant outputs. ***Secure funding for visa and relocation costs for all new colleagues, regardless of contract type*** Relocation and visa costs pose significant barriers for people to take up fixed term positions. This can unevenly affect some colleagues (e.g. with caring responsibilities, disabilities, financial difficulties, and/or people from minority ethnic backgrounds).	Prioritise phasing out short-term teaching-only contracts and replace them with longer contracts that allow for meaningful career development and longer-term departmental flexibility.
②	**Mentoring support**	***Make existing mentoring schemes visible to new employees*** Mentoring support is essential to career development and mentors play a crucial role in making precarious	***Set up voluntary cross-departmental mentoring schemes for FTC staff*** Mentoring schemes beyond a School or Department can play a significant role in building cross-institutional	***Implement new mentoring scheme ensuring mindful pairing of mentors/mentees*** Consider pairing mentors and mentees based on factors beyond

ACTION PLAN: INSTITUTIONS

ACTION		A. FIRST STEPS	B. BUILDING MOMENTUM	C. MAINTAINING LASTING CHANGE
		colleagues feel supported. Consider how and where mentoring is offered and supported within your institution. Consider how and where mentoring is advertised and ensure that all colleagues know what to expect from the process.	knowledge and exploring different career paths or avenues for collaboration. Promote and support the creation of cross-departmental mentoring schemes for FTC staff.	academic interest - e.g. people seeking mentoring on work/life balance, navigating academia and caring responsibilities, or identity-based challenges.
③	Training for mentors	*Make training opportunities for mentors visible* There are inconsistent levels of mentoring support. Quality training to develop skills in professional mentoring plays a key role in addressing this. These opportunities should be clearly advertised.	*Make mentoring training mandatory* To ensure consistently good mentoring, make mentor training a requirement. This can be offered internally, or through external bodies like the RGS. Mentoring and mentoring training should be accounted for in workload models.	*Develop and roll out mentoring training schemes addressing the challenges of precarity* There is a lack of awareness of the experiences of precarious employment amongst many permanent and senior members of staff. Ensuring awareness among staff, and especially mentors, of the broad challenges of fixed term and precarious working is important to create a better work environment for precarious colleagues. The

ACTION PLAN: INSTITUTIONS

ACTION		A. FIRST STEPS	B. BUILDING MOMENTUM	C. MAINTAINING LASTING CHANGE
				States of Precarity project report and wider resources are valuable tools to support awareness building.
④	Programmes for career development	*Make career development programmes accessible and visible to all staff* Training and skills development is important for securing a permanent post. Provide fixed term colleagues with time to pursue relevant training. This might include grant writing and impact training.	*Set up peer support networks for fixed term colleagues* Peer support is important to strategic career development and mental health. Set up semi-structured peer support networks whilst recognisingthe time commitment needed to do this work.	*Adapt existing career development programmes to account for the specifics of fixed term work* Like mentoring, career development programmes need to reflect the challenges associated with fixed term and precarious work.
⑤	Access to internal grants and funding	*Build knowledge and awareness* Ensure that existing funding opportunities and support systems for developing quality funding applications are clearly signposted and advertised, and that eligibility criteria are listed at the top of emails and documents to avoid wasted time.	*Make fixed term colleagues eligible to apply for internal grants, travel bursaries, and other funding* Colleagues on FTCs are often excluded from internal funding opportunities. This can make it difficult to access funds for essential career development activities such as research, conferences, and workshops.	*Establish earmarked funding opportunities for fixed term colleagues* Recognising the specific challenges associated with fixed term employment, small pots of money to support activities like conference attendance and research seed funding can go a long way.

ACTION PLAN: INSTITUTIONS

ACTION		A. FIRST STEPS	B. BUILDING MOMENTUM	C. MAINTAINING LASTING CHANGE
⑥	Positive leaving	*Recognition and avenues of support* Consider sending an email that explicitly outlines the leaver's contribution to the department. Quotes from such letters can be extremely useful for future job applications. Consider outlining any ongoing institutional and career support that might be available. Offer advice on next steps, e.g. managing email access and other accounts.	*Secure access to email, library resources, and career support for three months after the end of a contract* Immediately losing access to email, IT, library and career services can have detrimental effects on people's career development. This is true for PhD candidates as well.	*Invest in interview training for fixed term colleagues and postgraduates* Provide access to professional services or opportunities in departments to give mock interviews and presentation feedback. This ensures that fixed term colleagues feel supported in their efforts to move on to their next position.
⑦	Building knowledge and active engagement with precarious working in HE	*Monitor the use of fixed term contracts across the institution* Collate information about the extent and use of different types of fixed term contracts. Use this data to inform strategic discussions on the use of fixed term contracts at an institutional scale. *Engage with AdvanceHE reports on themes relevant to academic precarity* Build knowledge about where the	*Embed use of fixed term contracts in strategic discussions* Table precarity as a topic of discussion in relevant committees such as EDI committees. Use this to identify core areas that need improvement and develop strategies on how to address issues. Raise whether dedicating a specific role, such as 'fixed term reps' would aid in supporting such knowledge building and activities/ actions in response.	*Implement suggestions* Engage with suggestions from EDI committees and secure meaningful implementation of ideas. *Secure and provide funding to address EDI issues exacerbated by precarity* The effects of precarity are not evenly felt. Internal funding is needed to support fixed term colleagues with practical

ACTION PLAN: INSTITUTIONS

ACTION		A. FIRST STEPS	B. BUILDING MOMENTUM	C. MAINTAINING LASTING CHANGE
		university sits in relation to national trends on the use of fixed term contracts. This exercise could also contribute to Athena Swan actions/planning.		considerations (e.g. visa and relocation costs which can be prohibitive for them taking up new positions). Institutions could also consider supporting further research into understanding the impacts of precarity in HEI (e.g. through internal funding or supporting externally funded project applications).
⑧	Pathways to permanence	***Identify pathways to permanency*** Identify what pathways to permanency currently exist within your institution. Identify different UK HEI models supporting permanency (e.g. Nottingham Fellowship).	***Strategise*** Develop appropriate models to support pathways to permanency that suit your institution. Consult with fixed term colleagues to get feedback on these proposed pathways. Consider the collection and monitoring of data on the use of FTCs across Departments/Schools to inform discussions about institutional hiring trends.	***Implement pathways to permanency*** Support and promote the implementation of further pathways to permanency as identified through strategic discussions, as well as consultations with fixed term colleagues.

ACTION PLAN: INSTITUTIONS

ACTION		A. FIRST STEPS	B. BUILDING MOMENTUM	C. MAINTAINING LASTING CHANGE
⑨	Postgraduate support	**Ensure representation** Ensure postgraduate representation at strategic meetings.	**Listen and identify needs** Precarity is experienced by people across career stages, including postgraduate students. Representation at strategic meetings should include giving meaningful voice to postgraduates.	**Employment opportunities** Employment opportunities are needed for postgraduate students with decent pay and contracts, such as paid teaching experience. Secure equal access to such opportunities across the institution. **Extensions of stipends** Funded PhD candidates are often required to complete a fourth year of unpaid work. Consider options for stipend extensions at your institution.

ACTION PLAN: HEAD OF DEPARTMENT/SCHOOL AND ADMINISTRATORS

*This plan is targeted at **Heads of Departments/Schools and administrators**, with the expectation that they will facilitate and push for action to work towards better working conditions for fixed term staff. Some of these actions may be carried out by the Head of Department/School themselves or be delegated to relevant staff within the Department/School.*

*Examples of positions relevant to this action plan: **Heads of Department, Heads of School or Faculty, Deputy Heads of Department/School, colleagues with College level roles, School administrators and Operations Managers.***

ACTION PLAN: HEADS OF DEPARTMENT / SCHOOL AND ADMINISTRATORS			
ACTION	**A. FIRST STEPS**	**B. BUILDING MOMENTUM**	**C. MAINTAINING LASTING CHANGE**
① Ensuring positive integration of new staff	*Set clear and realistic expectations for new FTC staff* Before arrival, facilitate transparent conversation about contract length and expectations (e.g. what are the realistic chances of contract renewal and extension?). *Prepare for arrival of new staff* Consider putting new starters in contact with colleagues pre-arrival to provide practical advice on relocation (e.g. good areas to live in, childcare and schooling options	*Develop a departmental handbook with resources for new staff* This could include things such as lists of acronyms, key points of contact, key committees, a short glossary of leadership roles and accompanying responsibilities, key services, essential 'how to' guides, support for navigating internal online systems used in education and research, links to key processes (e.g. expense claims). *Lobby for relocation and visa costs*	*Secure funding for visa and relocation costs for all new colleagues* Relocation and visa costs pose significant barriers for people to take up fixed term positions and can increase their vulnerability to exploitative management practices. This disproportionately affects people with caring responsibilities and people from minority ethnic backgrounds. Work to secure funding for all new colleagues.

ACTION PLAN: HEADS OF DEPARTMENT / SCHOOL AND ADMINISTRATORS

ACTION	A. FIRST STEPS	B. BUILDING MOMENTUM	C. MAINTAINING LASTING CHANGE
	etc). Ensure that all new staff, including FTC staff, are allocated an appropriate workspace and added to relevant mailing lists. To support the integration of new staff, introduce them to the Department/ School via email or in person. Where appropriate, make fixed term colleagues aware of opportunities to have a staff profile on departmental websites to facilitate making wider connections. Facilitate meaningful conversation about specific needs (e.g. adjustments, disability accommodations) as well as aspirations for career development (see Mentoring support below).	Lobby your institution to secure funding to cover relocation and visa costs for new colleagues. ***Promote inclusive line management*** While HoDs/HoSs often hold line management roles for FTC staff, this can also be overseen by a range of other staff, including PIs. Share any relevant line management guidance with line managers when new FTC staff join. Consider making training for line managers compulsory. Make sure that FTC staff have more than one point of contact with core academic staff to reduce their vulnerability to poor or exploitative management.	

ACTION PLAN: HEADS OF DEPARTMENT / SCHOOL AND ADMINISTRATORS

	ACTION	A. FIRST STEPS	B. BUILDING MOMENTUM	C. MAINTAINING LASTING CHANGE
②	Mentoring support	*Establish mentoring needs of new staff* Facilitate a conversation about specific mentoring needs and assign a mentor based on this. Some people may have specific needs based on career aspirations and personal circumstances. When relevant, specific conversations should be had about the challenges of FTCs. *Assign appropriate mentor(s)* All FTC staff need appropriate mentorship, regardless of contract type. For some, mentorship is tied to the role of PIs. When possible, assign a second mentor (internal or external to the Department/School) to grow the professional networks of FTC staff and to reduce their vulnerability to poor management.	*Build capacity within the Department/School* Create awareness of institution-wide support schemes. Ensure that mentors, including PIs, receive mentoring training, for example through RGS and RGS research groups or through internal university schemes. Mentors should be aware of the challenges of FTCs.	*Maintain effort and collect/implement feedback for ongoing improvement* Ensure that both mentors and mentees have opportunities to provide feedback on the process on an ongoing basis.

ACTION PLAN: HEADS OF DEPARTMENT / SCHOOL AND ADMINISTRATORS

	ACTION	A. FIRST STEPS	B. BUILDING MOMENTUM	C. MAINTAINING LASTING CHANGE
③	Foster a culture of open communication	*Create visibility about FTCs* Make resources about FTCs and the challenges associated with precarious work available to all staff. Clearly display States of Precarity posters in your department.	*Learn from FTC colleagues* Foster a culture of disclosure by having explicit conversations about the needs of FTC staff. Build this into initial meetings. Consider 'mentoring up' schemes where fixed term colleagues get an opportunity to share their experience with people in senior management positions.	*Implement suggestions* Collate suggestions and issues raised by FTC colleagues and ensure meaningful implementation. This will require ongoing feedback.
④	Job/ task allocation	*Support strategic task allocation* Actively consider how the allocation of departmental tasks, including admin jobs and ad hoc teaching, may benefit or negatively affect the career development of FTC colleagues.	*Monitor and adjust workload* Ensure that FTC staff, who may struggle to say no, are not overworked. Formal workload models often do not account for the many small tasks that are allocated on an ad hoc basis to fixed term colleagues. Where no model exists, this can be exacerbated. Monitoring workload may mean strategic conversations with FTC colleagues which include guidance on how to balance commitments and when to say no.	*Incorporate time in all contracts for research, academic writing and grant applications* Applying for grants or academic positions and academic publishing are time consuming. Fixed term colleagues often struggle to balance these needs against heavy workloads, yet universities benefit from their outputs.

ACTION PLAN: HEADS OF DEPARTMENT / SCHOOL AND ADMINISTRATORS

ACTION	A. FIRST STEPS	B. BUILDING MOMENTUM	C. MAINTAINING LASTING CHANGE
		Creating new teaching material is time consuming. Be mindful that fixed term staff should be allowed adequate preparation time.	
⑤ Representation, visibility and value	*Make visible and promote the work of precariously employed colleagues* Make work visible though Department/School newsletters. Encourage colleagues to put FTC names forward for recognition. Do this on their behalf where appropriate. Include FTC colleagues in departmental conversations and have FTC representation on committees as appropriate. This should be factored into workload.	*Include FTC colleagues in departmental processes* This means giving FTC colleagues an active voice at departmental meetings as well as including them in processes like the REF. For example, where REF mentorship is offered, this should be extended to FTC colleagues to build understanding and experience of the process. *Ensure access to internal funding* Making internal funding in the form of small pots of money (e.g. for conference attendance) available to FTCs supports them practically in terms of their career development and contributes to making people feel valued in the Department/School.	*Maintain effort* Ensuring visibility and value is not a one-off activity. It must be embedded in long-term changes to departmental culture.

ACTION PLAN: HEADS OF DEPARTMENT / SCHOOL AND ADMINISTRATORS

	ACTION	A. FIRST STEPS	B. BUILDING MOMENTUM	C. MAINTAINING LASTING CHANGE
⑥	**Making leaving more positive**	*Mark the event* Use Department/School meetings to recognise the contributions made by the person who is leaving. Send a letter recognising individual contributions made by the person leaving. This can be valuable for future job applications and cover letters. *Carry out meaningful exit interviews* Use exit interviews to gain insights into what the Department/School can do better to support FTC staff.	*Lobby for access to email account for at least three months after leaving* Losing access to professional email accounts negatively impacts people who change institutions often. This also affects PhD students. This small change can make a big difference. *Consider honorary fellow status* Offering such status to leavers can show appreciation and support leavers in extending access to key resources such as email accounts, IT and library services.	*Implement changes from exit interview data* Implement, where possible, insights and suggestions from FTC colleagues who have left/are leaving.
⑦	**Collating and sharing materials**	*Identify and consult existing resources to build knowledge* Identify institutional resources that reference precarity and fixed-term contracts (e.g. policy, Athena Swan action plans, EDI networks or plans, REF statements). Consult wider	*Collate materials* Collate these institutional resources to build a knowledge base and identify examples of good practice (e.g. responses and interventions). Share these collated resources and best practices with relevant	*Share materials and building networks* Consider how/where examples of good practice can be shared (e.g. between institutions to build networks) and/or with external organisations/ bodies (e.g. learned

ACTION PLAN: HEADS OF DEPARTMENT / SCHOOL AND ADMINISTRATORS			
ACTION	A. FIRST STEPS	B. BUILDING MOMENTUM	C. MAINTAINING LASTING CHANGE
	external resources (e.g. UCU reports).	Committees (e.g. Athena Swan, EDI).	societies, UCU) to build community resources.
⑧ Pathways to permanency	*Identify pathways to permanency* Identify what pathways to permanency presently exist within your institution. Identify different UK HEI models supporting permanency (e.g. Nottingham Fellowship).	*Lobby for pathways to permanency* Lobby for improving pathways to permanency at your institution (e.g. through collective representation to management, posing questions at open meetings).	*Implement pathways to permanency* Support the implementation of further pathways to permanency.

ACTION PLAN: DEPARTMENT / SCHOOL

*This plan is targeted at **Departments/Schools** as collectives and communities with a vested interest in securing the best possible working environment for all. This is a call to collective action at the Departmental/School level. Precarity cannot be solved at the scale of the Department/School, but mutual care and community building are powerful tools of resistance.*

*Examples of positions relevant to this action plan: **Staff in research leadership roles, staff in teaching leadership roles, staff in Departmental/School leadership roles (e.g. EDI leads).***

ACTION PLAN: DEPARTMENT / SCHOOL				
	ACTION	**A. FIRST STEPS**	**B. BUILDING MOMENTUM**	**C. MAINTAINING LASTING CHANGE**
①	Evaluate departmental hiring practices and contractual terms	*Consider how implicit biases around mobility impact shortlisting or hiring* At the point of shortlisting or hiring, be mindful that the capacity to relocate is determined by a range of factors, including but not limited to finances, health or caring responsibilities. Mobility should be proactively discussed as a source of implicit bias against candidates who have remained at the same institution or in a particular region for a prolonged period of time.	*Implement minimum contract lengths of at least 12 months* Contracts shorter than 12 months pose significant challenges in terms of housing and securing continuous work. These contracts should be avoided wherever possible. When designing grant applications, try to allocate for longer-term PDRA positions, with 12 months being a minimum duration.	*Continue to evaluate hiring practices and use of FTCs* Strategic discussions around the use of short term contracts need to be ongoing. This includes both the length and the substance of contracts offered. *Incorporate time for research, writing, mentoring, professional development, and/or grant applications in all contracts* Applying for grants and academic

ACTION PLAN: DEPARTMENT / SCHOOL

	ACTION	A. FIRST STEPS	B. BUILDING MOMENTUM	C. MAINTAINING LASTING CHANGE
				publishing are a time consuming yet essential part of academic labour. Fixed term colleagues often struggle to balance these needs against heavy workloads, yet Departments frequently benefit from the resultant outputs.
②	Foster a culture of open communication	*Do not normalise overwork* Explicitly or implicitly normalising work beyond contracted hours leads to exploitation and devaluation of academic labour. The same is true of overwork in general. This hurts everyone. Consider avoiding emailing outside of standard work hours or include a statement within them, recognising that out of hours replies are not expected; and/or encourage the use of the scheduled email function so emails arrive during standard work hours irrespective of when they are sent. Taking up a new position is time	*Create visibility* Make resources about FTC and the challenges associated with precarious work available to all staff (see States of Precarity website). *Learn from fixed term colleagues* Foster a culture of disclosure by having explicit conversations about FTC needs at a departmental level. Consider 'mentoring up' schemes where fixed term colleagues get an opportunity to share their	*Implement suggestions* Collate suggestions and issues raised by FTC colleagues and ensure meaningful implementation. This will require ongoing feedback.

ACTION PLAN: DEPARTMENT / SCHOOL			
	ACTION	**A. FIRST STEPS**	**B. BUILDING MOMENTUM**	**C. MAINTAINING LASTING CHANGE**
		consuming. Make sure to allow adequate preparation time for fixed term colleagues to ideally avoid or at least reduce the risk of overwork. ***Account for mentoring in workload models*** Mentoring is valuable for both individuals and the development of the institution. However, it can be time consuming, and this important labour must be formally accounted for.	experience with people in senior management positions.	
③	**Support representation and visibility**	***Embed FTC colleagues in research culture*** Ask colleagues on FTCs if they would like to contribute to the departmental research culture by, for example, organising research group meetings or internal workshops alongside permanent colleagues. Such invitations should be extended to colleagues on teaching focused contracts. Avoid framing this as an expectation.	***Embed FTC colleagues in departmental management*** Issue a call asking for and/or nominate colleagues to act as representatives to support fixed term colleagues at key departmental meetings and provide a point of contact for raising concerns anonymously. Where workload models are in place, such roles should be included and captured.	***Maintain efforts*** Representation needs to be thought of as an ongoing process. Maintain efforts by ensuring that outgoing FTC representatives are replaced and actively encourage participation in research culture when new staff joins. EDI Committees and leads should be resourced to develop Departmental / School-level goals and actions related to precarity.

	ACTION	A. FIRST STEPS	B. BUILDING MOMENTUM	C. MAINTAINING LASTING CHANGE
			Precarity and EDI EDI Committees and leads should build understanding about how precarity impacts the Departmental/ School. This may include data-gathering and/or events (e.g. holding workshops bringing together FTCs, amending staff surveys to include questions about precarity, resourcing external speakers to share tips on solidarity building). Events should be hybrid where possible, to maximise participation. Raise whether dedicating a specific role, such as a 'precarity rep' at Departmental/School level would aid in supporting knowledge building and actions in response.	This could form part of Athena Swan initiative work. Alongside gender, such actions should be intersectional and attentive to diverse struggles precarious staff face (e.g. related to sexuality, disability, nationality, caring responsibilities).

ACTION PLAN: DEPARTMENT / SCHOOL

	ACTION	A. FIRST STEPS	B. BUILDING MOMENTUM	C. MAINTAINING LASTING CHANGE
④	**Building departmental knowledge and active engagement with precarity**	*Engage with AdvanceHE reports* Build knowledge about where your department/school sits in relation to national trends on the use of fixed term contracts. Consult websites such as the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) and AdvanceHE to obtain relevant data and resources.	*Embed precarity in strategic discussions* Include precarity as a core issue of discussion across relevant committees (e.g. departmental meetings, Athena Swan, and departmental EDI committees). Consider including precarity as a subject of data collection that feeds Athena Swan applications. Raise issues identified at the departmental level in cross-institutional EDI meetings as a way of lobbying for wider change.	*Implement suggestions* Collate suggestions from committees and departmental data and form an implementation strategy based on the needs identified.

ACTION PLAN: COLLEAGUES OF PRECARIOUSLY EMPLOYED STAFF

This plan is targeted at **colleagues** in a Department/School and includes actions designed to facilitate and encourage all staff, across career stages, to support colleagues experiencing precarity.

Examples of positions relevant to this action plan: **All staff on permanent and open-ended contracts, including academic (teaching and research), technician and professional services staff.**

ACTION PLAN: COLLEAGUES OF PRECARIOUSLY EMPLOYED STAFF			
ACTION	A. FIRST STEPS	B. BUILDING MOMENTUM	C. MAINTAINING LASTING CHANGE
① Listening and cultivating empathy	*Listen and facilitate conversation* Make time to discuss the effects of fixed term contracts and precarity with your colleagues. Check in periodically. This might be over coffee or lunch or extending invitations to social activities. *Do not normalise overwork* When possible, model and promote good work-life balance - e.g. by not sending emails out of working hours where possible. Consider including a statement in emails that you do not expect out of hours replies.	*Support community building* Support the creation of opportunities and spaces for colleagues on fixed term contracts and ECRs to come together to build a community (e.g. early career meetings or research seminar series). If appropriate, attend and show support for these meetings. Encourage (but do not expect) FTCs and ECRs to attend departmental research activities and meetings.	*Maintain efforts* Consider precarity beyond the contract and stay in touch with colleagues on fixed-term contracts after departure. Think about how community building for fixed-term and ECR colleagues could be formalised (e.g. through the formation, resourcing and promotion of an ECR network).

ACTION PLAN: COLLEAGUES OF PRECARIOUSLY EMPLOYED STAFF

ACTION		A. FIRST STEPS	B. BUILDING MOMENTUM	C. MAINTAINING LASTING CHANGE
②	Recognition	*Facilitate and support opportunities* Make a point to recognise and show up for fixed-term and early career colleagues, for example by facilitating opportunities and supporting colleagues presenting at internal research seminars.	*Make FTC colleagues visible and promote their work* Fixed-term colleagues report not feeling valued by their departments and/or institutions. Play a role in responding to and countering these feelings by making visible and promoting the work of FTC colleagues, e.g. in emails, newsletters, websites, and meetings.	*Recognition through reward* Nominate fixed-term colleagues for internal prizes and rewards, e.g. discretionary awards. Encourage fixed-term colleagues to apply for internal and external awards, e.g. share opportunities, offer to write a reference letter.
③	Building understanding and inclusion	*Facilitate inclusion* Talk to colleagues on fixed-term contracts to better understand how their working conditions can impact their roles and lives. Support the inclusion of colleagues on fixed term contracts through inviting them to Departmental/School events, and requesting invites be extended where appropriate.	*Extend inclusion* Raise the issue of precarity, including fixed-term contracts, as an issue for discussion in relevant Departmental and School meetings and committees (e.g. departmental management meetings; EDI Committees; Athena Swan meetings). Ask for an outline of what measures are taken to listen to, and support, precarious colleagues. *Be an ally*	*Embed inclusion* While remaining mindful of the workload of fixed-term colleagues, identify opportunities to integrate the views and experiences of fixed-term colleagues, e.g. through ECR Committee positions. Adapt staff/culture surveys to include questions about fixed-term contracts and precarious

ACTION PLAN: COLLEAGUES OF PRECARIOUSLY EMPLOYED STAFF

ACTION		A. FIRST STEPS	B. BUILDING MOMENTUM	C. MAINTAINING LASTING CHANGE
			If you see or hear of instances where colleagues behave in inappropriate, disrespectful or exploitative ways towards those on FTCs, challenge this behaviour (e.g. active bystander allyship), share concerns with leadership (e.g. HoD/ HoS), and, if necessary, report via institutional tools (e.g. Report + Support, to which many UK Universities subscribe).	working and engage with these issues in the context of Athena Swan activities. Suggest and request the implementation of such positions and actions, with accounting in workload as appropriate.
④	Supporting career development while considerate of workload	*Advocate for fixed-term colleagues* Advocating for the workload of fixed-term colleagues includes supporting the setting of boundaries while prioritising responsibilities most useful to career development, and speaking up where actions/tasks are allocated to fixed-term colleagues and may be more appropriate for a permanent member of staff. Share opportunities for career development and further	*Build career development opportunities* Consider opportunities to invite fixed-term colleagues to collaborate, e.g. internal/external grants; papers, workshops. Connect colleagues with relevant contacts in your network who may support wider career development opportunities, e.g. grant applications, visiting researcher roles.	*Ongoing support* Consider how you might continue to offer support by keeping in touch with fixed-term colleagues, e.g. continue to share opportunities and offer to write reference letters. Develop and embed Department or School-level initiatives to support fixed-term colleagues, e.g. events on fellowships, CV

ACTION PLAN: COLLEAGUES OF PRECARIOUSLY EMPLOYED STAFF			
ACTION	A. FIRST STEPS	B. BUILDING MOMENTUM	C. MAINTAINING LASTING CHANGE
	employment, e.g. funding schemes, fellowships, job adverts. Offer to review career progression materials, e.g. papers, grant applications.	Ask fixed-term colleagues about their experiences of being mentored. Offer formal or informal support, e.g. guidance on next steps and navigating the job market.	writing, and navigating the job market.
⑤ Lobbying for change	*Advocate for continued employment* Voice support for the renewal of fixed-term contracts. Advocate for longer contract terms and for fixed-term colleagues to be made permanent, e.g. in Departmental/School meetings, in discussions about operational planning.	*Call for change* Request and collate information about Department, School, and/or institutional practice in relation to processes that can adversely impact fixed-term colleagues, e.g. contract length, probation length. Raise these processes for discussion, e.g. at departmental meetings, in School committees such as EDI, Athena Swan, to develop propositions in response.	*Lobby for change at the institutional level and beyond* Lobby your institution with propositions responding to processes adversely impacting fixed-term and precariously employed colleagues. This includes internal actions (e.g. sending letters (see templates), questions to University level committees), and external actions (e.g. engagement with Union activities and resources around casualisation in HE).

ACTION PLAN: PhD SUPERVISORS AND POSTGRADUATE LEADERSHIP

*This plan is targeted at **PhD supervisors** who face the challenge of providing PhD candidates with an honest introduction to the job market without normalising unhealthy work cultures, as well as those holding Departmental/School **Postgraduate leadership roles**, who can support in consistently embedding such changes across their Department/School. Not all PhD supervisors are on permanent contracts, which may impact their capacity to deliver on some of these points, though not their capability for effective and considerate guidance.*

*Examples of positions relevant to this action plan: **Academic staff supervising PhD candidates, Department/School Postgraduate Directors/leads.***

<table>
<tr>
<th colspan="3">ACTION PLAN: PHD SUPERVISORS AND
DEPARTMENT / SCHOOL POSTGRADUATE LEADERSHIP</th>
</tr>
<tr>
<th colspan="2">ACTION</th>
<th>A. FIRST STEPS</th>
<th>B. BUILDING MOMENTUM</th>
<th>C. MAINTAINING LASTING CHANGE</th>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>①</td>
<td>Career mentoring</td>
<td>***Flag job and career development opportunities***

From the outset, facilitate discussions about career development. Share relevant opportunities and highlight where to find these (e.g. University doctoral training, temporary job banks, teaching/ demonstrating; funding body and DTP-provided training and placements, teacher training and qualifications (e.g. AdvanceHE)).

Share opportunities for employment</td>
<td>***Highlight a range of career paths***

Provide guidance on relevant funding bodies and schemes suitable for career-stage. Share examples of funding applications.

Facilitate conversations about transferable skills and opportunities beyond academia (e.g. non-HE research institutions, policy, industry). Facilitate introductions to relevant contacts.</td>
<td>***Co-develop research ideas***

Where appropriate, co-develop grant proposals and research ideas with and costing in PhD candidates as they near completion of their degree.

Facilitate introductions to relevant research contacts and networks.</td>
</tr>
</table>

ACTION PLAN: PHD SUPERVISORS AND DEPARTMENT / SCHOOL POSTGRADUATE LEADERSHIP

ACTION	A. FIRST STEPS	B. BUILDING MOMENTUM	C. MAINTAINING LASTING CHANGE
	and provide advice on where to look for these (e.g. Jobs.ac.uk; University careers services). Provide feedback on job applications and CVs. Share templates/examples. Provide guidance on activities supporting career development (e.g. publications and publishing strategies).	Organise events to highlight different career pathways (e.g. PhD alumni panel; external speakers from industry and policy). Recognise that PhD students take diverse journeys (e.g. careers beforehand) and have different identities and experiences (e.g. visas can exclude PhD candidates from some opportunities). Tailor advice as appropriate.	
② Support career development while remaining considerate of workload	***Consider workload issues*** Support PhD candidates in setting boundaries and prioritising commitments that are most useful to their career development. Discuss career development in relation to PhD timelines, supporting PhD candidates to reflect on the 'when' of career development opportunities. Ensure that PhD candidates are aware	***Build career development opportunities*** Consider opportunities for PhD candidates to get meaningful and CV-building work experience in relation to your work and the work of Departmental/ School research groups. This may include developing/ sharing teaching opportunities, workshop	***Ongoing support*** Maintain contact with PhD candidates following completion. Provide ongoing opportunities for feedback on applications and, where appropriate, share insights into hiring processes. Recognise that post-PhD experiences vary and PhD candidates face different barriers

	ACTION PLAN: PHD SUPERVISORS AND DEPARTMENT / SCHOOL POSTGRADUATE LEADERSHIP		
ACTION	A. FIRST STEPS	B. BUILDING MOMENTUM	C. MAINTAINING LASTING CHANGE
	of the need to maintain a healthy work/life balance. Highlight policies relevant to leave (e.g. in PGR handbooks), and support PhD candidates to take leave. Think intersectionally - PhD candidates have different commitments (e.g. caring responsibilities) and diverse identities which can impact their experience in ways you may not directly understand or be familiar with.	organisation roles, and small-scale research opportunities. Be clear on what opportunities involve, time commitment and remuneration. Recognise potential financial barriers around career development opportunities (e.g. conferences). Signpost to internal and external funding pots.	as they navigate the job market (e.g. challenges international applicants face in trying to secure sponsorship).
③ Building cultures of open and honest communication	*Listen and facilitate conversation* From the outset, take time for open conversations about how PhD candidates are doing and concerns they may have (e.g. finances; the job market). Listen and recognise that PhD candidates may have a clearer picture of recent developments. Where applicable, make yourself familiar with	*Encourage reflection and manage expectations* Facilitate critical conversations about the value of labour and the diversity of both ways of being an academic and experiencing academia (e.g. recognise intersectional challenges and barriers), rather than normalising an	*Maintain efforts* Facilitate regular check-ins to normalise honest and open communication. Treat such conversations as ongoing.

ACTION PLAN: PHD SUPERVISORS AND DEPARTMENT / SCHOOL POSTGRADUATE LEADERSHIP			
ACTION	A. FIRST STEPS	B. BUILDING MOMENTUM	C. MAINTAINING LASTING CHANGE
	how PhD stipends work. Talk openly about aspirations and goals. *Facilitate community building* For many, PhDs can be isolating. Consider how you can support PhD candidates in building community (e.g. facilitate introductions to other PhD students and early career researchers in the Department/School, signpost to PGR Committee representatives who can share details of social activities, signpost to University-wide PGR networks).	'idealised academic', overwork and self-exploitation as a necessary part of academic life.	
④ Lobbying for better conditions	*Build solidarity* Meaningful structural change often takes time. Meanwhile, supervisors and postgraduate leadership can take steps to foster and build solidarity across career stages. Make it clear that	*Opportunities for paid work* Lobby for opportunities for PhD candidates to get relevant teaching and research experience alongside their doctoral degree. Such work should be fairly compensated and	*Extensions of stipends* Funded PhD candidates are often required to complete a fourth year of unpaid work. Consider lobbying for options for stipend extensions at your institution and from

ACTION PLAN: PHD SUPERVISORS AND DEPARTMENT / SCHOOL POSTGRADUATE LEADERSHIP			
ACTION	**A. FIRST STEPS**	**B. BUILDING MOMENTUM**	**C. MAINTAINING LASTING CHANGE**
	voicing opinions, proactively seeking better conditions, and advocating for the right to a better working life now and in the future is legitimate and welcome.	accompanied by a clear contract. Conversely, work to protect them from exploitative teaching workloads. Recognise that PhD candidates can occupy dual positions as students and staff. Be clear on roles and expectations. Share relevant feedback (e.g. module evaluations) to support career development and logging/ evidencing achievements.	funding bodies.

APPENDIX 2: Demographic Data

Details on survey participants:

- **_Disciplinary Area._** 57% of participants identified as human geographers, 24.5% identified as physical geographers, and 18.4% identified as interdisciplinary scholars.

- **_Contract Type._** All contract types were represented. Full demographic breakdowns for each employment category (FTC, Permanent, PhD, and Left Academia) can be found in the report's appendix.

- **_Gender._** 56.9% of participants identified as female, of the sample. 39% identified as male, and 2.5% of participants identified as 'Non-Binary or Self Defined' represented 2.5%. Six participants preferred not to describe their gender.

- **_Age._** A wide range of ages (30 to 65+) are represented by the sample.
    - Participants in their 30s: 38.5%
    - Participants in their 40s: 26.4%
    - Participants in their 50s: 14.8%
    - Participants in their 60s (60-64): 2.7%
    - Over retirement age (65) 2.2%
    - Preferred not to say: 15.4%

- **_Disability._** A higher proportion of the sample than the national average identified as being disabled. HESA data (2023-2024) indicates that 6.9% of colleagues working within the UK university sector have disclosed a disability to their employers. Within this survey, 10.9% (40) of participants identified as being disabled, 83.2% (N=303) identified as being able bodied, and (21) preferred not to say.

- **_Caring Responsibilities._** A high proportion of participants reported having caring responsibilities (31.9%). National figures on caring responsibilities within the university sector are limited, however the most recent estimate from Carers UK is that 1 in 7 (14.3%) of the UK workforce has caring responsibilities. An internal survey by Queen's University Belfast in 2022[17] also found that 19.5% of their workforce held caring responsibilities. Nearly 1 in 3 participants within our sample reported either having caring responsibilities or being a carer.

- **_Ethnicity._** White: 89%; Asian/Asian British: 3%, Black/Black British: 0.8%; Hispanic: 0.8%; Multiple Ethnic Backgrounds: 3.6%; Other: 1.1%; Prefer not to say: 0.8%

- **_Nationality._** British: 69.2%, Continental European: 10.4%; North American: 3.3%; Australia and New Zealand: 0.8%. Other parts of the world: 3.8%; prefer not to say: 10.7%.
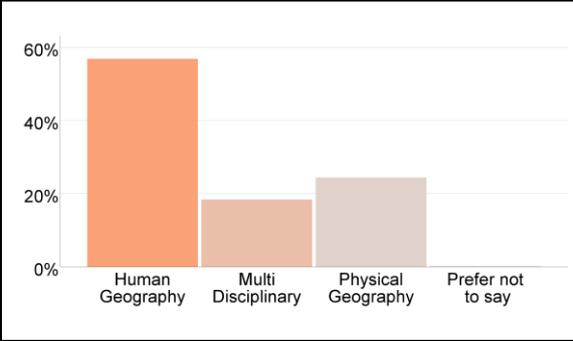
Figure 12: Disciplinary Area
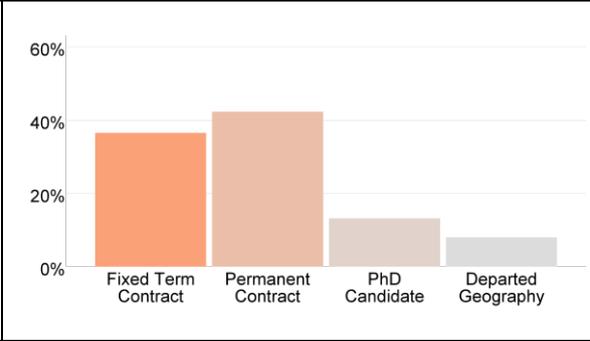
Figure 13: Contract Type
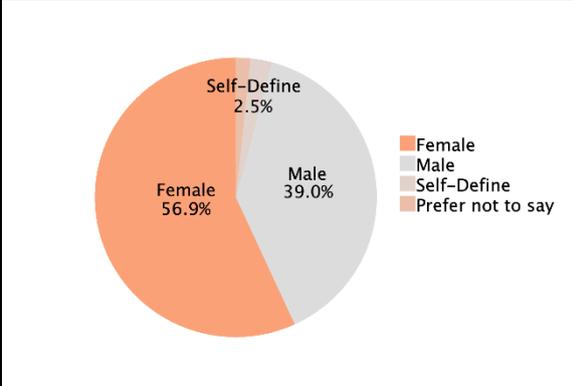
Figure 14: Gender
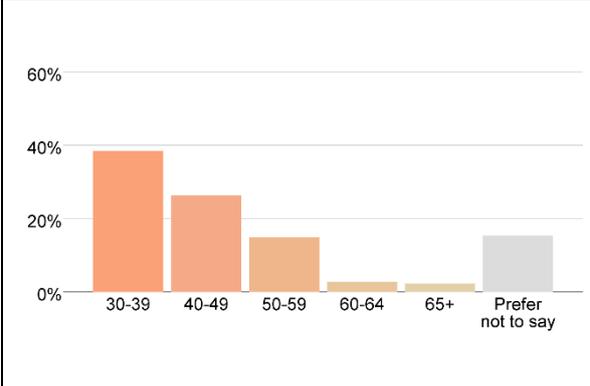
Figure 15: Age
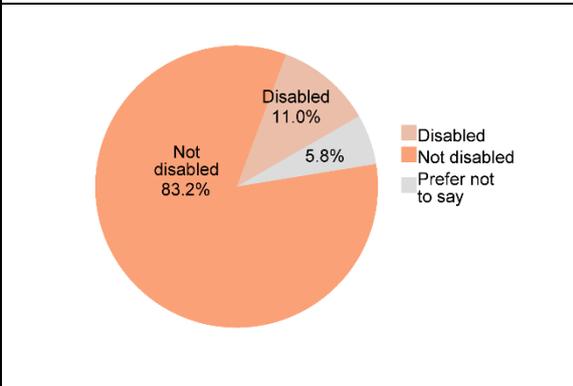
Figure 16: Disability
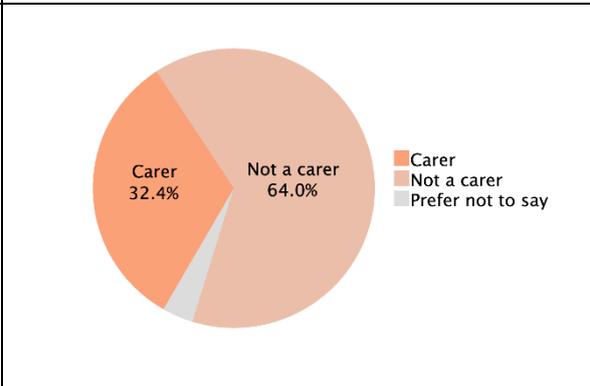
Figure 17: Caring responsibilities
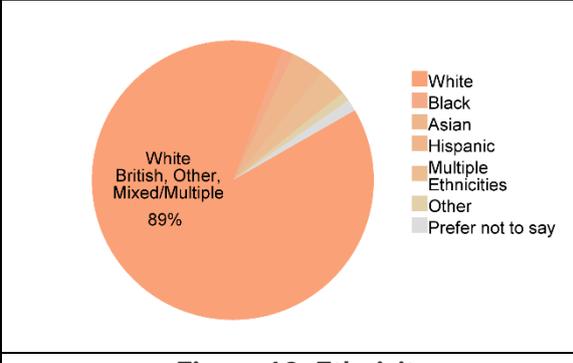
Figure 18: Ethnicity
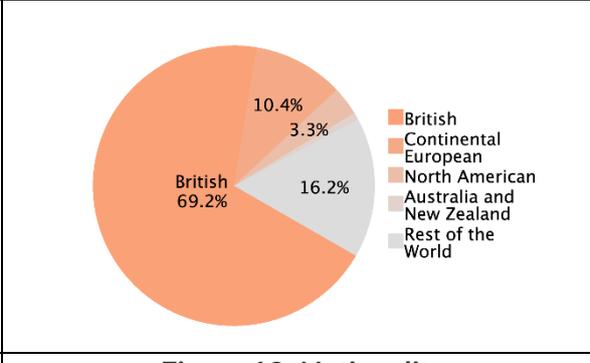
Figure 19: Nationality

PhD Candidates

Total responses: 48

PhD Stage			Age		
Early	6.3%	(3)	30-39	33.3%	(16)
Mid	35.4%	(17)	40-49	4.2%	(2)
Late	52%	(25)	50-59	4.2%	(2)
Post-Submission	6.3%	(3)	60-64	0.%	(0)
			65+	0.%	(0)
			Prefer not to say	58.3%	(28)

Disciplinary Area			Gender		
Human Geography	68.8%	(33)	Male	20.8%	(10)
Physical Geography	16.7%	(8)	Female	68.8%	(33)
Interdisciplinary	14.6%	(7)	Non-Binary/Self-Define	8.3%	(4)
Prefer not to say	0%	(0)	Prefer not to say	2.1%	(1)

Caring Responsibilities			Disability		
Yes	16.7%	(8)	Yes	14.6%	(7)
No	79.2%	(38)	No	72.9%	(35)
Prefer not to say	4.2%	(2)	Prefer not to say	12.5%	(6)

Ethnicity			International (Visa Required)		
White	79.2%	(38)	Yes	22.9%	(11)
Asian	10.4%	(5)	No	77.1%	(37)
Black	0.%	(0)	Prefer not to say	0%	(0)
Hispanic	2.1%	(1)			
Multiple	4.2%	(2)			
Other	2.1%	(1)			
Prefer not to say	2.1%	(1)			

Fixed Term Contracts

Total responses: 133

First FTC?			Age		
Yes	23.3%	(31)	30-39	47.4%	(63)
No	75.9%	(101)	40-49	21.8%	(29)
Prefer not to say	0.8%	(1)	50-59	7.5%	(10)
Yes	23.3%	(31)	60-64	3.8%	(5)
			65+	2.3%	(3)
			Prefer not to say	17.3%	(23)

Number of years on FTCs		
Less than 1 year	9.8%	(13)
1-2 years	20.3%	(27)
3-5 years	38.3%	(51)
6 or more years	31.6%	(42)

Disciplinary Area			Gender		
Human Geography	54.1%	(72)	Male	33.8%	(45)
Physical Geography	24.1%	(32)	Female	62.4%	(83)
Interdisciplinary	21.1%	(28)	Non-Binary/Self-Define	1.5%	(2)
Prefer not to say	0.8%	(1)	Prefer not to say	2.3%	(3)

Caring Responsibilities			Disability		
Yes	25.6%	(34)	Yes	9%	(12)
No	68.4%	(91)	No	86.4%	(115)
Prefer not to say	6%	(8)	Prefer not to say	4.5%	(6)

Ethnicity			International (Visa Required)		
White	86.5%	(115)	Yes	15%	(20)
Asian	2.3%	(3)	No	84.2%	(112)
Black	3%	(4)	Prefer not to say	0.8%	(1)
Hispanic	1.5%	(2)			
Multiple	3.8%	(5)			
Other	1.5%	(2)			
Prefer not to say	1.5%	(2)			

Permanent Colleagues

Total responses: 154

Time Since Made Permanent			Age		
Less than 5 years	43.5%	(67)	30-39	31.8%	(49)
Between 6 and 15 years	26.6%	(41)	40-49	37.3%	(58)
More than 15 years	29.9%	(46)	50-59	24%	(37)
			60-64	2.6%	(4)
			65+	1.9%	(3)
			Prefer not to say	1.9%	(3)

Disciplinary Area			Gender		
Human Geography	55.2%	(85)	Male	48.7%	(75)
Physical Geography	28.6%	(44)	Female	48.7%	(75)
Interdisciplinary	16.2%	(25)	Non-Binary/Self-Define	1.3%	(2)
Prefer not to say	0%	(0)	Prefer not to say	1.3%	(2)

Caring Responsibilities			Disability		
Yes	43.5%	(67)	Yes	11%	(17)
No	55.2%	(85)	No	83.8%	(129)
Prefer not to say	1.3%	(2)	Prefer not to say	5.2%	(8)

Ethnicity			International (Visa Required)		
White	93.5%	(144)	Yes	7.8%	(12)
Asian	1.9%	(3)	No	91.6%	(141)
Black	0.6%	(1)	Prefer not to say	0.6%	(1)
Hispanic	0%	(0)			
Multiple	1.9%	(3)			
Other	0.6%	(1)			
Prefer not to say	1.3%	(2)			

Left Academia

Total responses: 29

Disciplinary Area			Age		
Human Geography	58.6%	(17)	30-39	3.4%	(1)
Physical Geography	17.2%	(5)	40-49	41.4%	(12)
Interdisciplinary	24.1%	(7)	50-59	24.1%	(7)
Prefer not to say	0%	(0)	60-64	17.2%	(5)
			65+	3.4%	(1)
			Prefer not to say	6.9%	(2)

Caring Responsibilities			Gender		
Yes	31%	(9)	Male	41.4%	(12)
No	65.5%	(19)	Female	55.2%	(16)
Prefer not to say	3.4%	(1)	Non-Binary/Self-Define	3.4%	(1)
			Prefer not to say	0%	(0)

Disability			Ethnicity		
Yes	13.8%	(4)	White	93.1%	(27)
No	82.8%	(24)	Asian	0%	(0)
Prefer not to say	3.4%	(1)	Black	0%	(0)
			Hispanic	0%	(0)
			Multiple	6.9%	(2)
			Other	0%	(0)
			Prefer not to say	0%	(0)

REFERENCES

[1] Mason, O., & Megoran, N. (2021). Precarity and dehumanisation in higher education. Learning and Teaching, 14(1), 35-59.

[2] Advance HE (2024) Equality in higher education - Staff statistical report 2024 https://s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/assets.creode.advancehe-document-manager/documents/advance-he/Equality_in_HE_Stats_report_2024_Staff_final_1731490510.pdf

[3] HESA (2025) Higher Education Staff statistics and data 2023/24 https://www.hesa.ac.uk/news/28-01-2025/sb270-higher-education-staff-statistics

[4] UCU (2024) New report exposes 'gig-economy' reality of prestigious university research departments. https://www.ucu.org.uk/article/13444/New-report-exposes-gig-economy-reality-of-prestigious-university-research-departments

[5] Menard and Shinton 2022

[6] UCU (2023) Precarious working higher education, August 2023 update, available here: https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/14007/Precarious-work-in-higher-education--update-August-2023/pdf/UCU_-

[7] UCU (2023) Precarious working higher education, August 2023 update, available here: https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/14007/Precarious-work-in-higher-education--update-August-2023/pdf/UCU_-

[8] Advance HE (2024) Equality in Higher Education: Staff statistical report 2024 https://s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/assets.creode.advancehe-document-manager/documents/advance-he/Equality_in_HE_Stats_report_2024_Staff_final_1731490510.pdf

[9] Hughes, S. M. (2021). "Wait for a permanent contract": The temporal politics of (in) fertility as an early career researcher. *Environment and Planning C: Politics and Space*, *39*(8), 1725-1736.

[10] Ivancheva et al.'s 2018

[11] Loveday 2018, Berg et al. 2016, Hawkins 2019

[12] Burton and Bowman 2022, Zielke et al. 2023

[13] Arday, J. (2022). 'More to prove and more to lose': race, racism and precarious employment in higher education. British Journal of Sociology of Education, 43(4), 513-533; Bonner-Thompson et al. 20121; Myers, M. (2022). Racism, zero-hours contracts and complicity in higher education. British Journal of sociology of Education, 43(4), 584-602.

[14] Bonner-Thompson, C., Mearns, G. W., & Hopkins, P. (2021). Transgender negotiations of precarity: Contested spaces of higher education. The Geographical Journal, 187(3), 227-239.

[15] The HESA lists 3,155 staff as being employed within UK higher education Geography and Environmental Science departments in 2023/24 (HESA, 2025). Excluding participants who have left academia, our sample represents 10.62% of this figure. However, due to the way that the HESA's data has been aggregated, the total number of academic geographers employed within these departments may be lower, whilst some academic geographers may be based within departments that fall within the HESA's 'Earth, Marine, and Environmental Sciences' category.

[16] Advance HE (2024) Equality in higher education: Staff statistical report 2024 https://s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/assets.creode.advancehe-document-manager/documents/advance-he/Equality_in_HE_Stats_report_2024_Staff_final_1731490510.pdf

[17] QUB (2022) "Carers" Available at: https://www.qub.ac.uk/directorates/HumanResources/diversity-and-inclusion/carers/ [Last Accessed: 6th August 2025]

10 KEY FINDINGS

1 UNCERTAIN CAREER PATHS

The current academic job market is **highly competitive and insecure,** with many Geographers on FTCs cycling through short-term roles that offer **little job security.**

2 STRUCTURAL CHALLENGES

Our findings show that institutional priorities often favour workforce flexibility over long-term stability, leading to a reliance on temporary contracts to meet teaching and research demands, which further entrenches precarity.

3 PHD STUDENTS AND ANTICIPATED PRECARITY

Many disclosed that their experience of undertaking a PhD was shaped by the **looming insecurity of the academic job market.**

4 SOCIAL DIFFERENCE AND IDENTITY

Colleagues from marginalised groups experience precarity in compounding ways. Universities are often not equipped or willing to understand and address the intersectional pressures these colleagues face. It is **essential to approach precarity through an intersectional lens,** recognising how overlapping social identities, such as race, class, gender, disability, and sexuality shape the challenges faced by colleagues within the academic job market.

5 MOBILITY AND INSTABILITY

Colleagues anticipate moving frequently between short-term contracts and different geographical locations, adding to feelings of insecurity and rootlessness. This **constant uncertainty,** especially for those with caring commitments or health issues, is found to make **long-term personal planning difficult,** if not impossible.

6 HEALTH AND WELLBEING

Colleagues reported feelings of anxiety, stress, and burnout due to job insecurity combined with the pressure to perform under difficult conditions. This strain is especially pronounced for those on FTCs and ECRs seeking to enter the academy. Colleagues are under pressure to stay competitive by taking on additional work, which detracts from their ability to focus on research and/or sustain a meaningful life outside of work.

7 PROBATION AND PROLONGED INSECURITY

Colleagues described the probation process as an additional source of precarity. In several cases, probation was extended beyond official timelines, contributing to a continued sense of insecurity and pressure.

8 EXPLOITATION AND UNDERVALUATION

ECRs and PhD students are often **expected and feel pressured to engage in unpaid or undervalued tasks to stay 'competitive'** in the academic job market. This contributes to a sense of being disposable in institutions prioritising flexibility and cost-cutting over employee well-being.

9 COMPROMISED CAREER DEVELOPMENT

Geographers on FTCs feel **stuck in a cycle of temporary positions** that offer limited opportunities for professional growth. This undermines the ability of colleagues to **develop a clear career trajectory or pursue long-term academic projects.**

10 PERMANENT CONTRACTS DO NOT GUARANTEE SECURITY

Attention on academic precarity must span career stages. **Sector-wide redundancies, organisational restructuring, and funding cuts** have left many Geographers on permanent contracts reporting a sense of precarity in their current positions.

10 Key Findings Poster