

Statement from the University of Manchester UCU GTA Committee, in response to Professor Keith Brown's February Message from the Dean

Professor Brown's February update concerns the issue of precarious employment, which he claims is not a significant issue at the University of Manchester. While the majority of his message focusses on diminishing the plight of fixed-term academic staff, this statement will focus on his brief statement with regards to Teaching Assistants, whose interests we advocate for as a committee.

First, in response to Professor Brown's claim that TAs are contracted within "fair and agreed" terms: last year we conducted two university-wide surveys into GTA working conditions (with respondents coming from the Faculty of Humanities at rates of 51.25% and 43.68% respectively). By far the most common concern raised by respondents was that the number of hours paid for preparation, marking, and student contact were far below the actual number of hours worked. In one survey just 5.12% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that the amount of paid time allocated for marking is realistic. We have never been given a clear answer about how the amount of paid time allocated to marking is determined.

Professor Brown describes TA work as a way for postgraduate students to earn "additional income." This statement works on the basis that PhD students are receiving the majority of their funding from elsewhere, and while it is true that most PhD students at the University of Manchester are funded, this funding usually only lasts for 3 years, and a large percentage of students end up taking longer than that to submit, meaning that TA work is often their main source of income (67% of those surveyed said that TA income was very important or important to support their studies and research). This means that the issues reported by our members - late payment for work, receiving contracts late, being paid insufficient time for marking etc. - present a real threat to the livelihood of these employees, and should be taken seriously as such.

It is also important to note how the precarious working conditions faced by TAs are exacerbated when paired with other forms of marginalisation. The University of Manchester has large Ethnicity and Gender pay gaps, and this disparity is disheartening for those just beginning their academic careers - told that their current precarious situation is temporary, yet knowing they are much less likely to gain well-paid academic jobs than their more privileged peers. Although this university does not have significant pay gaps in pay grades 1-8, the fact that grades 9 and above have significant pay gaps because of under-representation of BAME workers points to the root of the problem. We are told that temporary contracts are a stepping stone to better and more secure jobs, yet research has shown that 11% of white academics are likely to be given professorial roles, compared to 3% of BAME academics. When this is coupled with the fact that Black academics are paid approximately 12% less than white academics of similar age and education, as shown by a recent UCEA report, dismissive comments about precarious contracts as a precursor to a fruitful and secure academic career are extremely unhelpful.

The precarious working conditions of TAs are also particularly difficult for those with caring responsibilities, for whom the meagre stipend received by PhD students is likely to be greatly insufficient (the UKRI minimum stipend for 2019/20 is £15,009). In addition, most PhD stipends provide very limited paid leave for illness, meaning

that disabled and chronically/seriously ill TAs are more likely to go beyond their funded period, and end up relying on TA work as a major source of income.

TAs are a valuable and vital part of the teaching done at this University, and yet are treated as an afterthought (as in Professor Brown's statement) not worthy of the same employment rights as our colleagues. We are members of staff like any other, with the same needs and personal responsibilities as more senior colleagues, and deserve the same level of respect shown to others. Therefore, we will continue the fight to improve the working conditions which shape the beginning of our academic careers, rather than merely accepting them as a stepping stone into an increasingly hostile sector.