

A Slow Death: The Ills of the Casual Academic

By [Dr. Binoy Kampmark](#)

Theme: [History](#)

Global Research, June 20, 2019

Any sentient being should be offended. Eventually, the casualisation of the academic workforce was bound to find lazy enthusiasts who neither teach, nor understand the value of a tenured position dedicated to that musty, soon-to-be-forgotten vocation of the pedagogue. It shows in the designs of certain universities who confuse frothy trendiness with tangible depth: the pedagogue banished from the podium, with rooms lacking a centre, or a focal point for the instructor. Not chic, not cool, we are told, often by learning and teaching committees that perform neither task. Keep it modern; do not sound too bright and hide the learning: we are all equal in the classroom, inspiringly even and scrubbed of knowledge. The result is what was always to be expected: profound laziness on the part of instructors and students, dedicated mediocrity, and a rejection of all things intellectually taxing.

Casualisation, a word that says much in of itself, is seen as analogue of broader outsourcing initiatives. Militaries do it, governments do it, and the university does it. Services long held to be the domain of the state, itself an animation of the social contract, the spirit of the people, have now become the incentive of the corporate mind, and, it follows, its associated vices. The entire scope of what has come to be known as outsourcing is itself a creature of propaganda, cheered on as an opportunity drawing benefits rather than an ill encouraging a brutish, tenuous life.

One such text is Douglas Brown and Scott Wilson's [The Black Book of Outsourcing](#). Plaudits for it resemble worshippers at a shrine planning kisses upon icons and holy relics. "Brown & Wilson deliver on the best, most innovative, new practices all aimed at helping one and all survive, manage and lead in this new economy," [praises](#) Joann Martin, Vice President of Pitney Bowes Management Services. Brown and Wilson take aim at a fundamental "myth": that "Outsourcing is bad for America." They cite work sponsored by the Information Technology Association of America (of course) that "the practice of outsourcing is good for the US economy and its workers."

Practitioners and policy makers within the education industry have become devotees of the amoral dictates of supply and demand, underpinned by an insatiable management class. Central to their program of university mismanagement is the casual academic, a creature both embraced and maligned in the tertiary sectors of the globe.

The casual academic is meant to be an underpaid miracle worker, whose divining acts rescue often lax academics from discharging their duties. (These duties are outlined in that deceptive and unreliable document known as a "workplan", as tedious as it is fictional.) The casual academic grades papers, lectures, tutors and coordinates subjects. The casual provides cover, a shield, and an excuse for a certain class of academic manager who prefers the calling of pretence to the realities of work.

Often, these casual academics are students undertaking a postgraduate degree and subject to inordinate degrees of stress in an environment of perennial uncertainty. The stresses associated with such students are documented in the [Guardian's Academics Anonymous](#) series and have also been the subject of [research](#) in the journal *Research Policy*. A representative sample of PhD students studying in Flanders, Belgium found that one in two experienced psychological distress, with one in three at risk of a common psychiatric disorder. Mental health problems tended to be higher in PhD students “than in the highly educated general population, highly education employees and higher education students.”

This is hardly helped by the prospects faced by those PhDs for future permanent employment, given what the authors of the *Research Policy* article [describe](#) as the “unfavourable shift in the labour-supply demand balance, a growing popularity of short-term contracts, budget cuts and increased competition for research sources”.

There have been a few pompom holders encouraging the casualisation mania, suggesting that it is good for the academic sector. The explanations are never more than structural: a casual workforce, for instance, copes with fluctuating enrolments and reduces labour costs. “Using casual academics brings benefits and challenges,” we find Dorothy Wardale, Julia Richardson and Yuliani Suseno [telling us](#) in *The Conversation*. This, in truth, is much like suggesting that syphilis and irritable bowel syndrome is necessary to keep you on your toes, sharp and streamlined. The mindset of the academic-administrator is to assume that such things are such (casualisation, the authors insist, is not going way, so embrace) and adopt a prostrate position in the face of funding cuts from the public purse.

Casualisation can be seen alongside a host of other ills. If the instructor is disposable and vulnerable, then so are the manifestations of learning. Libraries and research collections, for instance, are being regarded as deadening, inanimate burdens on the modern, vibrant university environment. Some institutions make a regular habit of culling their supply of texts and references: we are all e-people now, bound to prefer screens to paper, the bleary-eyed session of online engagement to the tactile session with a book.

The casual, sessional academic also has, for company, the “hot-desk”, a spot for temporary, and all too fleeting occupation. The hot-desk has replaced the work desk; the partitions of the office are giving way to the intrusions of the open plan. The hot-desker, like coitus, is temporary and brief. The casual academic epitomises that unstable reality; there is little need to give such workers more than temporary, precarious space. As a result, confidentiality is impaired, and privacy all but negated. Despite [extensive research](#) showing the negative costs of “hot-desking” and open plan settings, university management remains crusade bound to implement such daft ideas in the name of efficiency.

Casualisation also compounds fraudulence in the academy. It supplies the bejewelled short cut route, the bypass, the evasion of the rigorous things in learning. Academics may reek like piddling middle class spongers avoiding the issues while pretending to deal with them, but the good ones at least make some effort to teach their brood decently and marshal their thoughts in a way that resembles, at the very least, a sound whiff of knowledge. This ancient code, tested and tried, is worth keeping, but it is something that modern management types, along with their parasitic cognates, ignore. In Australia, this is particularly problematic, given [suggestions](#) that up to 80 percent of undergraduate courses in certain higher learning institutions are taught by casual academics.

The union between the spread sheet manager and the uninterested academic who sees promotion through the management channel rather than scholarship, throws up a terrible hybrid, one vicious enough to degrade all in its pathway. This sort of hybrid hack resorts to skiving and getting casuals to do the work he or she ought to be doing. Such people coordinate courses but make sure they get the wallahs and helpers desperate for cash to do it. Manipulation is guaranteed, exploitation is assured.

The economy of desperation is cashed in like a reliable blue-chip stock: the skiver with an ongoing position knows that a casual academic desperate to earn some cash cannot dissent, will do little to rock the misdirected boat, and will have to go along with utterly dotty notions. There are no additional benefits from work, no ongoing income, no insurance, and, importantly, inflated hours that rarely take into account the amount of preparation required for the task.

The ultimate nature of the casualisation catastrophe is its diminution of the entire academic sector. Casuals suffer, but so do students. The result is not mere sloth but misrepresentation of the worst kind: the university keen to advertise a particular service it cannot provide sufficiently. This, in time, is normalised: what would students, who in many instances may not even know the grader of their paper, expect? The remunerated, secure academic-manager, being in the castle, can raise the drawbridge and throw the casuals to the vengeful crowd, an employment environment made safe for hypocrisy.

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Dr. Binoy Kampmark was a Commonwealth Scholar at Selwyn College, Cambridge. He lectures at RMIT University, Melbourne. He is a frequent contributor to Global Research and Asia-Pacific Research. Email: bkampmark@gmail.com

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