March 2026

UCEA Briefing for 'Employment contracts in HE' infographics

The Contract Types Reference Group's suite of contract types resources for the sector aim to inform and shape HEIs' contracting arrangements to meet organisational needs and enhance the EX. This briefing supports the new infographics examining 'Employment contracts in HE' with notes to limit text-heavy explanations within the infographics themselves. The infographics, seeking to clarify facts and figures behind a key issue for HE sector employment, use information from the latest (2023-24) available HESA data. They present accessible information of sector level data showing the use of different contract types for both academic and professional services employees.

While this data dates to 2023-24, UCEA members have been clear that they continue to seek updated facts, figures, and infographics and for such information to be utilised locally. Hopefully local level work will mirror UCEA's ongoing proposals to continue work with the sector trade unions. Specifically, this work explores existing practice and develops principles for future practice in relation to fixed-term, variable hours and zero hours contracts.

Within the Terms of Reference, these contracts are defined as below:

- *Fixed-term contracts* are contracts of employment that are not open-ended/permanent, depending on the circumstances/business requirements. Fixed-term contracts may be used for work on a particular task/project or to work for a specified length of time. Fixed-term contracts are defined using the HESA field 'Terms of employment'.
- *Variable hours contracts* do not have a specified pattern of working hours, and hours may vary from year to year or term to term, for example. Such contracts have a minimum number of hours (for example, on an annual, monthly or weekly basis). Variable hours contracts are defined using the HESA field 'Hourly paid marker'.
- *Zero hours contracts* are a form of variable hours contracts where there is no minimum number of guaranteed hours. These may also be casual contracts between an organisation and an individual with worker status. Zero hours contracts are defined using the HESA field 'Zero hours contract'.

We aim to develop additional contract types infographics and will soon be uploading new Pay Gaps infographics. All infographics are available as individual jpeg attachments on the UCEA website and we encourage their use. Feedback, suggestions and examples used at local level will always be well received, and we hope the information below is useful:

What types of contracts are used in HE? shows the different types of contracts that are used in HE and the proportions of each contract type. This shows that the majority of the contracts in HE are permanent and salaried, while fixed-term contracts, variable hours and zero hours contracts are the minority of cases. The diagram shows that contracts have both a term (permanent/fixed-term) and a working pattern (salaried/variable hours/zero hours). This shows that contracts can be permanent while having variable hours or fixed-term but salaried. This infographic uses HESA data from 2023-24, reporting on both academic and professional services staff – atypical staff are excluded, however. HESA also refer to permanent contracts as 'open-ended'.

'How have permanent contracts in HE changed over time?' considers the use of permanent contracts in the sector. In 2017-18, 76% of all staff in the sector were employed on

permanent contracts. In 2023-24, the proportion of staff employed in this way increased to 78%, an increase of 2%.

'How have zero hours contracts changed over time?' considers the use of zero hours contracts in the sector. In the first year that HESA collected data on these contracts (2017-18), 3% of all staff in HE were employed on this basis. The proportion of staff employed on a zero hours contract has decreased to 1%. HESA divided contracts in the sector into zero hours contracts and non-zero hours contracts i.e. those with a guaranteed number of hours.

Data from the ONS Labour Force Survey shows that 3.5% of the UK workforce were on a zero hour contract between October and December 2023. The proportion of staff on zero hour contracts has increased in the wider economy from 2.8%, the rate reported between October and December 2017. These dates are matched with the census dates of the HESA staff return from 2017-18 and 2023-24.

'How does the use of contracts vary across genders in HE?' shows that the proportion of men and women HE staff is similar when comparing employment contracts. This is based on HESA data reporting the biological sex of staff, not their gender identity.

'How does the use of contracts in HE vary by ethnicity?' considers the proportion of HE staff on permanent contracts across five ethnicity groups. While 82% of white staff in HE, the proportion of staff on permanent contracts is lower for Asian staff (66%), black staff (73%), mixed ethnicity staff (72%), and staff from other ethnicity groups (66%). The proportion of men and women