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Fixed-Term Contract Teaching

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Research Brief

What is the problem?

Fixed-term contract teaching is a growing feature of the NSW public education system. With the category of fixed-term contract teaching established in 2001, the proportion of teachers in casual work has since remained relatively stable, at about 10%, while that of temporary teachers has grown to account for approximately 20% of the workforce, and permanent roles have declined from around 85% to 70%. The category of 'temporary' teacher in NSW was established in response to growing concerns around casualisation and a need to ensure greater employment security for, in particular, women returning to the workforce after having children. Today, however, it arguably constitutes an enhanced dimension of precarity within the workforce overall.

Conceptually, in this study we drew upon ideas around job quality and scarring. According to Burgess and Connell (2019), job quality can be understood through four broad dimensions: job prospects (e.g. including job security and career progression); extrinsic job quality (e.g. pay and benefits and occupational health and safety); intrinsic job quality (e.g. work organisation, skill development/recognition and supervision and organisational support); and working time quality (e.g. work scheduling discretion and the impacts on home/family life). Precariousness has also been described as potentially having a 'scarring' effect on the future employment prospects of employees, who tend to experience less employer 'investment' in their professional development (Mooi-Reci and Wooden, 2017).

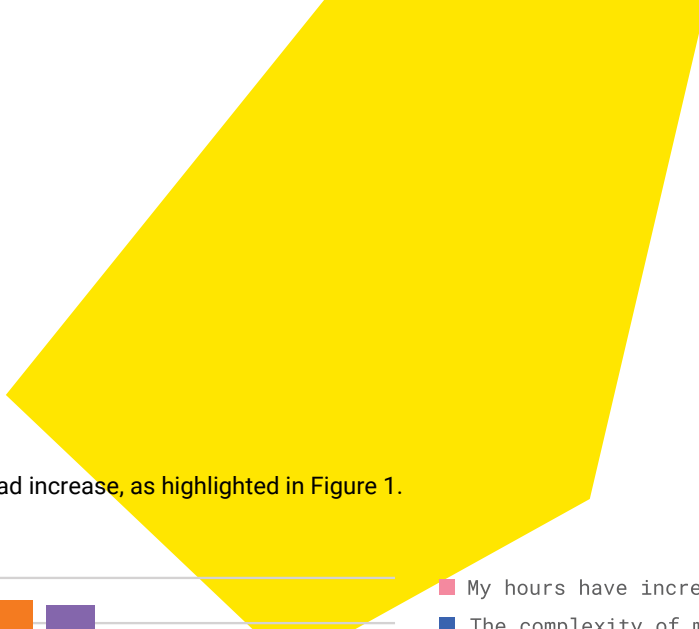
Using data from a large state-wide survey of 18,234 NSW teachers, facilitated by the NSW Teachers' Federation, we set out to explore the work and workload of those in temporary roles. We disaggregated the data collected in the survey to look specifically at the work undertaken by those in temporary roles, which made up 21% of survey respondents (n=3749). This is a very similar proportion to their membership of the union, with union membership in turn matching recent government workforce data profiles (CESE, 2018). Using data from these respondents, we were able to identify the hours of temporary teachers as well as the nature of their work compared to teachers in other roles.

Additionally, we analysed qualitative data from open-ended questions in the survey to consider how teachers described experiencing the temporary role. Although these questions did not specifically ask respondents about their employment status (instead asking about changes to work over the past five years, what would support them in their work, and for any general additional comments), respondents often chose to raise this issue, and we coded the data from those that did thematically.

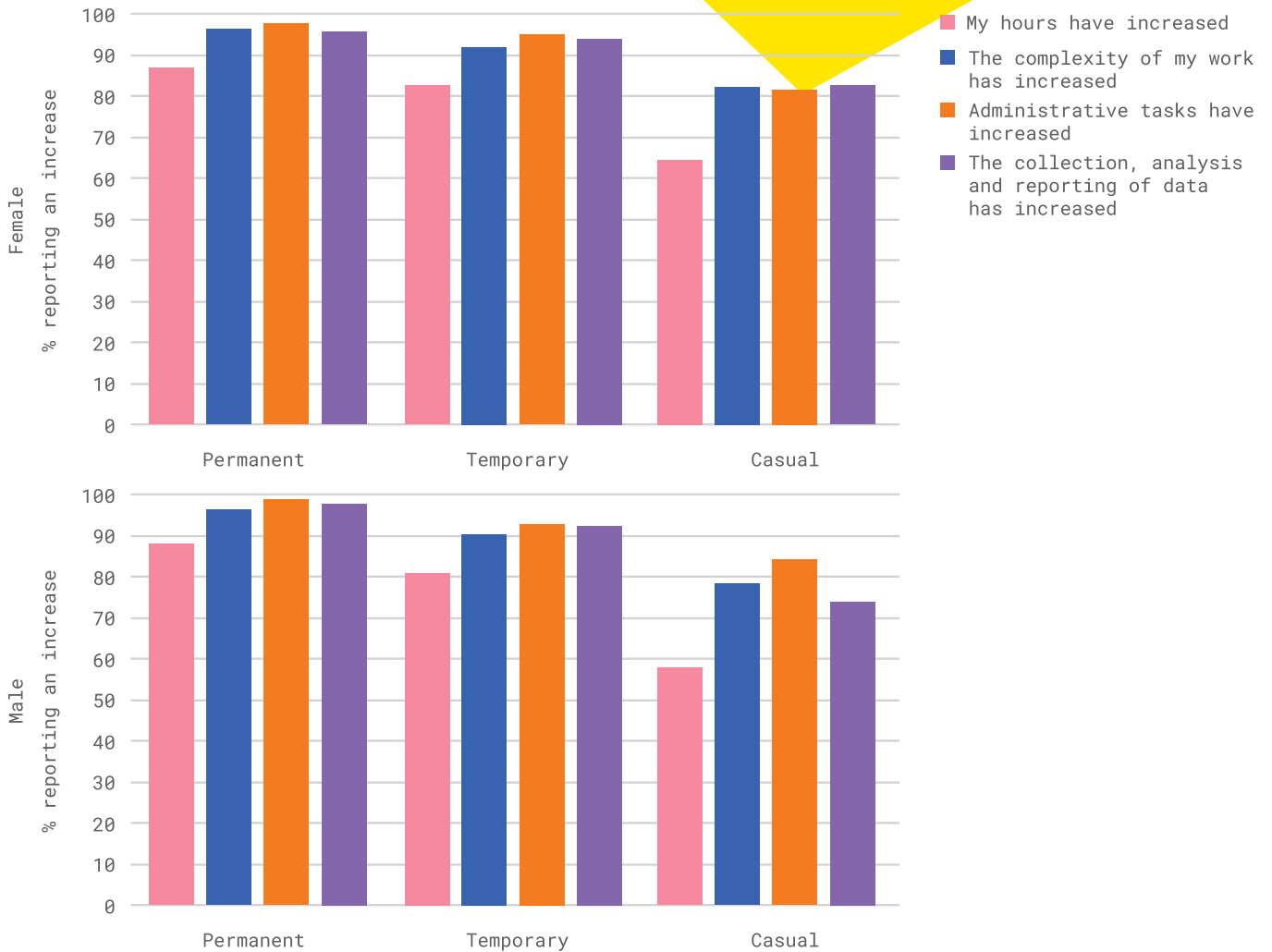
What we found

We found that, on the whole, temporary teachers undertake very similar amounts of work to those in permanent roles, both of which are much higher than those working as casuals. Temporary teachers work an average of 56 hours per week, compared to 57 for those in permanent roles and 40 for those employed in casual positions. Table 1 gives an indication of the kinds of patterns we found, which repeated across different kinds of work demands.

		Permanent %	Temporary %	Casual %
Does your work require you to work or think very quickly?	Never	0	0	0
	Rarely	0	0	1
	Sometimes	4	4	5
	Often	30	28	33
	Always	66	68	61
Does your work require you to work very hard?	Never	0	0	0
	Rarely	0	0	1
	Sometimes	3	3	7
	Often	26	26	34
	Always	72	70	58
Does your work require too great an effort on your part?	Never	0	0	1
	Rarely	2	3	6
	Sometimes	25	25	39
	Often	36	35	28
	Always	36	37	27
Do you have enough time to complete your work tasks?	Never	24	20	9
	Rarely	42	42	31
	Sometimes	28	31	37
	Often	4	6	18
	Always	1	1	5
Does your work impose contradictory requirements on you?	Never	3	4	7
	Rarely	8	12	10
	Sometimes	44	46	47
	Often	33	28	25
	Always	12	10	10



These patterns were also evident in reports of workload increase, as highlighted in Figure 1.



Graph 1 Changes to work and employment status - past 5 years.

Teachers in temporary roles also do similar, although slightly different kinds of work to those in permanent positions. For instance, temporary teachers are more likely to run extra-curricular activities, while those in permanent roles are more likely to liaise with external agencies.

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Interestingly, although temporary teachers do similar work to permanent teachers (and overall, usually a little less), they often feel as though they actually work harder, a theme that came through clearly in the qualitative data: “I work as hard if not harder than many permanent teachers”.

One reason why temporary teachers feel they work harder than permanent staff members is that there is a perceived need to ‘do more’ in order to keep their jobs, with contracts lasting only between four weeks and a year.

“I feel there is an unspoken pressure for temp teachers to ‘do more’ in order to heighten their chances to get work for the next year. This results in temp teachers to take on extra workload and may result in being overworked and stressed.”

Analysis of qualitative data suggested this may be related to a fracturing of relationships between temporary teachers and other staff, especially the principal – who was seen as in control of their fates: temporary teachers “cannot say no” when asked to undertake a task, as “principals have ultimate power”.

Teachers’ careers were felt to be “at the whim of principals who pick and choose according to who toes the line ... jumping through hoops to retain their position and add to their CV in order to gain permanency”.

Finally, it is worth noting that those in temporary roles tended to be less experienced, as highlighted in Table 2.

		Permanent	Temporary	Casual	Total
Years working as a teacher, consultant or other position at this school or workplace	Mean	12	6	11	12
	Median	10	4	5	10
	Range	57	48	50	57
Years working as a teacher, consultant or other position related to education in total	Mean	17	9	17	17
	Median	16	6	11	16
	Never	57	50	52	57

Table 2 Employment status and years of teaching experience

Temporary teachers, in our data, were also more likely to be women. Women teachers were additionally more likely to stay in temporary roles for longer than men. Substantial proportions of temporary women teachers, in our data, sat within the 40-60 year age bracket, while temporary employment for men shows a drop-off in this older age group.

This suggests a potential scarring effect, as men may move into permanent roles more quickly than women do. Indeed, teaching is known to feature gender inequality, with OECD (2019) data noting that the percentage of women who are principals in Australia (40%) is not proportional to those employed as teachers (62%).

And yet, although temporary teachers are disproportionately women and those new to the profession, these teachers are essentially doing the same work as permanent staff, just without the same security. Given that temporary teachers experience most of the dimensions of job quality negatively, this indicates that some groups experience negative employment dimensions more so than others.

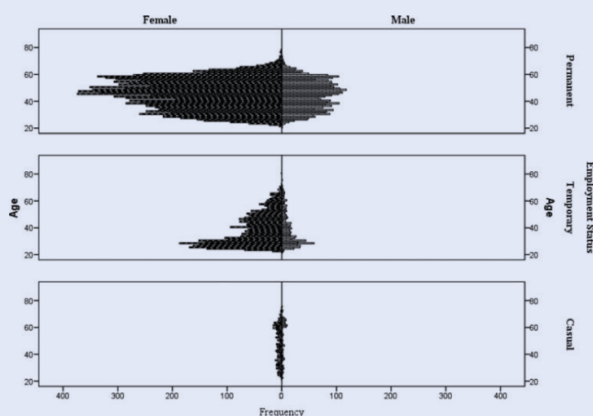


Figure 2 Employment status, gender and age.

Why it matters?

While there may well be a need for more flexible staff roles, there is no need for these to be filled predominantly by women and teachers with less experience who need support as they enter the profession. In our data, only 27% of temporary teachers were in these roles by choice, and yet these teachers are essentially doing the same work as those with the greater employment security of permanency. And of course, all of these teachers are the ones who show up every day to be in classrooms working with our children. Surely it is important to make sure that all of these staff members feel valued and supported in the important work that they do. Our data would suggest that the current staffing settlement is getting in the way of this, so it's something that we need to address.

About the Researchers



Meghan Stacey

Dr Meghan Stacey is a Senior Lecturer in the UNSW School of Education, researching in the fields of the Sociology of Education and Education Policy. Taking a particular interest in teachers, her research considers how teachers' work is framed by policy, as well as the effects of such policy for those who work with, within and against it. Meghan completed her PhD with the University of Sydney in 2018. Before this, she worked for a number of years as an English and Drama teacher in public secondary schools in NSW, in particular in the Riverina region.



About the Researchers



Scott Fitzgerald

Scott Fitzgerald is an Associate Professor in the School of Management and Marketing at Curtin Business School, Curtin University. His research interests are located in the broad areas of industrial relations, human resource management, organisational behaviour and organisation studies.



Rachel Wilson

Rachel Wilson is Associate Professor in the School of Education at the University of Sydney. She has particular expertise in educational assessment, research methods and programme evaluation, with broad interests across educational evidence, policy and practice.



Susan McGrath-Champ

Susan McGrath-Champ is Professor of Work and Employment Relations (Honorary) in the University of Sydney Business School. Susan's research extends perspectives on education studies to understand schools as workplaces as well as learning places, in addition to research on global mobility and crisis management, and the labour and spatial dimensions of global production networks.



Mihajla Gavin

Mihajla Gavin is a lecturer at UTS Business School. Her PhD, completed in 2019, examined how teacher trade unions have responded to neoliberal education reform. Her current research focuses on the restructuring of teachers' work and conditions of work, worker voice, and women and employment relations.



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