

# Critical examination of the teaching-research nexus: academic contracts in UK universities

Report for The British Academy prepared by

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## Executive summary

This summary outlines the main findings of this study into the teaching-research nexus in Humanities and Social Science (HSS) disciplines in UK Higher Education. It indicates the issues in the relationship between teaching and research in UK higher education made apparent by analysis of trends in contracting academic work as well as providing insights into the implications these trends have on practice, according to perceptions from senior academics in 12 universities. The universities, categorised as having strengths in teaching or research or both, are in England, Scotland and Wales. This report builds on findings from the initial study conducted in 2018, which demonstrated that the enactment of the nexus is subject to competing demands at systemic and institutional level and that the type of university is a factor in the way the nexus emerges in academic practice.

The main findings of this study are:

- while contract numbers in the sector have increased between 2012/13 and 2019/20, and the vast majority still combine teaching and research, there has been a stagnation in the growth of these combined (TR) contracts since 2015/16
- there has been a notable increase in the number of teaching-only contracts in the sector and HSS since 2015/16
- HSS has become slightly more diverse, with an increase in numbers of staff who are women, who identify as being from ethnic minorities or, in gender terms, identify as 'other or unknown'
- in HSS, staff on teaching-only contracts are more likely to be women
- in HSS, the increase of staff from ethnic minorities is small in relation to total staff and the growth has been notable in teaching-only contracts
- there are signs of a decrease in fixed-term contracts in HSS
- the rise in teaching-only contracts indicates a 4-year trend to employ increasing numbers of permanent teaching-only academics, introducing concerns about the possibility for those staff to progress onto teaching and research contracts; this will disadvantage women and ethnic minorities on teaching-only contracts and exacerbate historical sectoral inequalities
- continuation of the trend in employing permanent teaching-only staff will make the nexus more difficult to enact by some academics and endanger the likelihood of the nexus to be embodied in an holistic academic
- additionally, senior academics with an overview of HSS in their institution tended to perceive teaching and research as needing to be broadly balanced across departments, faculties/schools and the wider institution rather than in the practices of individual academics
- the sector is perceived to be operating in relation to changing sectoral financial and political policy demands and some perceive that HSS may be particularly vulnerable to these demands
- the early impacts of COVID-19 are perceived differently in different kinds of universities, with only the research-strong universities reporting an increase in research output and a turn towards internationalisation of their research, broadly in line with the recent government research funding agenda.

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## 1. Introduction

This report focuses on the relationship between teaching and research in universities and critically examines its characterization as a close connection, or a *nexus*. This assumption stems from a particularly European perspective, centring on the relationship between the research-active academic and their postgraduate research students, with an assumed symbiotic relationship between the academic's research and their teaching of doctoral students in the same field. However, this Humboldtian idea is problematic to relate to the modern university environment which is subject to multiple competing demands at individual, institutional and systemic level (McKinley *et al.*, 2021). Further complicating factors arise from the fact that universities have distinct histories and traditions, meaning that generalisations about the entire sector are difficult, especially if studies overlook universities that differ as institutional types. An additional consideration is the impact of changes in governmental policy on higher education, and the Humanities and Social Sciences in particular, and the financial strains experienced by the sector following the 2008 financial collapse and, more recently, the impact of COVID-19.

This study aims to understand sector-wide trends and how these affect different universities, with a specific focus on disciplines in the Humanities and Social Sciences (HSS). Through conducting analysis of quantitative and qualitative data, this mixed-methods study will identify particular aspects of the way teaching and research, reified in academic contracts, respond to wider influences of political policy in the sector and the higher education economic landscape. In the UK, the standard academic contract purportedly allocates 40% of an academic's time to each of teaching and research, and the remaining 20% to administration. Theoretically, this equal weighting of teaching and research may be assumed to support conditions for a close connection between the two. However, recent research indicates that the *nexus* is not a clearly evidenced concept (Elken and Wollscheid, 2016) and must be thought about in relation to multiple contextual factors (McKinley *et al.*, 2018).

The objective of this study is to further explore the *nexus* through looking at how contracts relate to the enactment of teaching and research in academic practice. To do so, we analyse a longitudinal, quantitative, secondary, data set for sector-wide trends in types of contracts between 2012/13 and 2019/20. This analysis is supplemented by a new set of qualitative data, collected through interviews with senior academics. Their seniority is indicated either by their institutional role or length of service, employed at 12 universities in England, Scotland and Wales. This mixed methods approach will result in findings which demonstrate contract-awarding trends in the sector and offer insights into how these trends are understood and experienced in different universities, specifically in relation to HSS disciplines.

The current report builds on research we conducted in 2018 for the British Academy which critically analysed the teaching-research *nexus* in the Humanities and Social Sciences. The reports will be referred to throughout as either the 2018 report or the 2021, or current, report. Mention will be made of the 2018 report when aspects are relevant to findings in the current report.

While all universities fulfil both teaching and research functions, their histories and specialisms mean that these activities may be imbalanced. The 2018 report identified three 'types' of university in relation to the nexus: those that were strong in teaching, those that were research strong, and those that were strong in both, or balanced. This typology was developed using a methodology that categorised universities using published information evaluating their research and teaching. Unfortunately, the methodology cannot be replicated in the current report, due to the measure of teaching evaluation, the Teaching Excellence Framework, having been suspended since the outbreak of the pandemic in March 2020. This means there is no data available from the 2019/20 year forward. Types of university have been preserved in the current report, as outlined in the Methodology below, and some universities took part in both studies.

The report begins with a focused review of literature published between 2018 and 2021, germane to the focus of this study. The research methodology follows, before the findings and discussion are presented. Finally, a conclusion is offered.

## [2. Literature review 2018-2021](#)

The focus of this review is on the relationship between teaching and research in the Humanities and Social Science disciplines in UK universities. It is an update on research literature reviewed for the 2018 study while further attending to issues relating to contracts in UK higher education and associated issues of inequality. Studies included are relevant to these criteria, published between 2018 and 2021.

### [2.1 Building on the 2018 report](#)

The teaching-research nexus is a contested concept in research (McKenzie *et al.*, 2018), despite its tenacity to persist in the discourse of the academy. The 2018 report outlines the main factors which affect the way research and teaching are enacted. This section presents a focused literature review on relevant research produced between 2018 and 2021 to identify any evidence of change of direction or focus, rather than to revisit the aspects identified in 2018. As such, we show what is currently known about the nexus, about contracts in higher education and about inequalities.

### [2.2 The nexus – HSS in the UK](#)

Disciplinary perspectives affect the relationship between teaching and research (Mathieson, 2019). In the humanities and social sciences research has shown how the research agenda can become more compliant and risk-averse in response to government and institutional policies, driving towards cost-effectiveness (Horta & Santos, 2020) in ways that confirm the importance of finances in the sector. When considering the different types of university in the UK, we found that the nexus was perceived and enacted differently, depending on the focus,

history and mission of the institution (McKinley *et al.*, 2021). As we found in the 2018 report, universities without a strong research record are disadvantaged in the competitive marketized climate of Higher Education which, coupled with a tendency in the sector to value research more than teaching, has the effect of creating hierarchies of institutions which are differently constrained in competing for superiority (McKinley *et al.*, 2018). Additional inequalities within institutions reflect the way teaching and research pull in different directions, and present as competing demands that are more easily overcome by some than, for instance, women and ethnic minority academics to flourish (McIntosh *et al.*, 2019). The 2018 study focused largely on individual perceptions of the nexus amongst practicing academics and senior managers, working on the assumption that, because the majority of academics are contracted to teaching and research, the majority would do both. Having found that systemic and institutional forces bifurcate teaching and research, we turned our attention to contracting trends in the sector.

### 2.3 Contracts

Academic contracts can be awarded on an employee's entry to a university and, regardless of promotions or changes to the role the academic undertakes, never change. Despite this lack of specificity, the notion of contracted work brings with it understandings about responsibilities of the job, those that may be found in job descriptions, for instance and, in a marketized higher education sector, contracts have been found to regulate behaviour towards institutional priorities and, so, can act as a form of governance (Rawolle *et al.*, 2017). This is highly relevant to an analysis of the way teaching and research are enacted in universities.

Not having specialism in contractual law, we found Ricketts' (1990) conceptualisation of the economic analysis of institutions informative for its presentation of a spectrum of contracts and for noting the non-specific nature of a contract:

An institution could be loosely thought of as "a nexus of long-term non-specific contracts" but this leaves the boundary between institutional and market relationships unclear. What we observe is a spectrum of contractual arrangements from the very short-term, highly specific ones found in spot markets to the long-term but non-specific commitments found in many institutions. (Ricketts. 1990, pp. 270-271).

Ricketts points out that the range of contract types mean that we cannot write about academic contracts as fixed and we stress that this is important to bear in mind throughout this report. Ricketts also draws our attention to the way that contracts serve to mystify the interpretation of work, leaving room for uncertainty, drift and the encroachment of non-contractually specific demands in response to market conditions. In the current marketized

state of UK higher education, where income generation is a constant and urgent agenda (Degl'Innocenti *et al.*, 2019), contracts can be deployed strategically in response to fluctuations in market conditions as well as to financial constraints. We are unaware of existing research that demonstrates how contracts are used strategically in UK universities, but our search indicated a rising number of, largely qualitative, studies that point out a range of inequalities that employment and managerial practices are beginning to establish in UK universities. The assumption we are making is that employment and managerial practices are a reflection of, or a proxy for, contractual trends and practices that this project aims to analyse.

## 2.4 Inequalities

Casualisation and precarity is generally perceived to be increasing in Higher Education, despite the view that these require high skill levels. Qualitative studies illustrate how staff perceive inequalities to foster job insecurity through zero-hours contracts (Ndzi, 2021), pointing out that casualization particularly affects those on teaching-only contracts. Additional systemic conditions differently disadvantage particular subsets of higher education employees across a range of contracts.

Inequality because of race (Arday & Mirza, 2019; Atkinson *et al.*, 2018) and gender (Bhopal, 2020) are widely recognised, with gender equality prioritised over race equality initiatives (Bhopal & Henderson, 2021). Those with disabilities have additional, invisible, labour to undertake in academic jobs (Inckle, 2018) as do early career researchers (Kinikoğlu & Can 2021). Furthermore, parents (Amsler & Mottler, 2019), or those whose possibility for parenthood relies on escaping precarity (Hughes, 2021) or returning from parental leave (Akram & Pflaeger Young, 2021) are subject to tacit pressures relating to performance measure – such as securing research funding and publishing research – have competing demands on their time, forcing them to prioritise. These issues came to further prominence when schools closed in the UK during COVID-19 and may have deepened inequalities depending on the way universities responded to this unprecedented move. Issues of gender inequality, pay gaps and precarity were perceived as problematic to such an extent in UK higher education that the situation precipitated nationwide industrial action in the sector in 2018 to challenge these inequalities (Bergfield, 2018).

The consequences of these inequalities are evident in research showing how academics perceive the sector. Those on fixed-term contracts are more likely to see success as luck, whilst attributing any failure to their own limitations (Loveday, 2018). There has also been found to be an impact on mental health, with rising numbers of academic staff referred to counselling and occupational therapy (Morrish & Priaulx, 2020). Further deterioration has been found to relate to the quality of teaching (Leathwood & Read, 2020) while steering research agendas to a more conservative course (Horta & Santos, 2020). Declining mental

health, increased inequalities and regular separation of teaching and research all have implications on the quality of research and teaching and the relationship between them.

Leathwood and Read (2020) call for factors affecting these changes to be understood over time. The analysis of contract trends addresses this call, offering a quantitative analysis of these inequalities, while the qualitative data explores the strategies that are in practice in UK universities that exacerbate or try to ameliorate them.

### 3. Methodology

A sequential, mixed methods design was adopted, using the quantitative data to identify trends and also indicate areas to further explore in the qualitative data (Leech & Ongwebuzie, 2009). The secondary data set we worked with was found to be largely complete but, due to the complex range of institutions undertaking to self-report and changes to definitions of categories over the years, some data is missing. The analysis is based on calculations of the data we had access to and does not take account of any modification that missing data may have had.

This report adopts a modified method for categorisation of university types from that used in the 2018 report. This is partly due to working with a secondary dataset and partly to disruptions in sectoral evaluations of teaching due to COVID-19. Different strategies to group universities were adopted in the quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative data enabled a break-down by Russell Group and post-1992 universities so the analysis used these groups. Scores for universities’ teaching and research impact, published in the 2021 [The Complete University Guide](#) were used to identify 3 types of university in the qualitative data.

Table One: Method of establishing university typology

Teaching strong	Balanced	Research strong
Teaching scores were greater than research scores:	Teaching scores were within 3 points of research scores:	Teaching scores were lower than research scores and/or universities were in top 10 overall
teaching: 80 to 82 research: 68 to 77	teaching: 79 to 81 research: 78 to 80	teaching: 79 to 80 research: 80 to 83

*Note - two universities had low or incomplete scores. The overall-ranking position in the Guide was used to indicate their grouping resulting in both being put in the research strong category.*



### 3.1 Research Questions:

RQ1. What are the trends in UK higher education contract awarding between 2012/13 and 2019/20?

- a) in the UK HE sector?
- b) in HSS?

RQ2. How are these trends perceived in universities of different types?

RQ3. How and in what ways do these trends have implications for the teaching-research nexus in UK HE?

We pay particular attention to trends that affect different groups of people in unequal ways, differences by type of university and to implications for the Humanities and Social Sciences against wider sectoral forces and conditions such as marketization and the strain on finances. Although the quantitative data does not capture the effects of COVID-19 on contracts, we include relevant insights that were gleaned through analysis of the qualitative data.

#### 3.2.1 Quantitative

To gain insight into general trends and changes in contracts, we used secondary quantitative data collected by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA)<sup>1</sup> from all UK universities. These data are used to support and enhance the UK higher education system (HESA, 2021). We worked with the British Academy to extract relevant data from the HESA online data dissemination tool for the HE sector: HEIDI Plus. The data allowed us to establish a subset of academic contracts in the UK for this report. HEIDI Plus categorised HSS as SHAPE: Social Sciences, Humanities and Arts for People and the Economy.

As defined by the British Academy HSS/SHAPE include the following subjects: Business & management studies, Catering & hospitality management, Geography & environmental studies, Anthropology & development studies, Politics & international studies, Economics & econometrics, Law, Social work & social policy, Sociology, Media studies, Area studies, Archaeology, Modern languages, English language & literature, History, Classics, Philosophy, Theology & religious studies, Art & design, Music, dance, drama & performing arts, Education, Continuing Education.

The HESA dataset includes information on the number of academics on (1) teaching, (2) research and (3) combined contracts across the years, from 2012/13 to 2019/20. The data covered contract types across the UK over the course of seven years from 2012/13 to 2019/20 as follows:

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<sup>1</sup> Neither the Higher Education Statistics Agency Limited nor HESA Services Limited can accept responsibility for any inferences or conclusions derived by third parties from HESA Data or other information supplied by the Higher Education Statistics Agency Limited or HESA Services Limited through Heidi Plus.

- a) Gender (male, female; from 2017/18 male, female and other)
- b) Mode of employment (full-time, part-time)
- c) Terms of employment (fixed-term, permanent)

Prior to analysis, the data were further organised into the following subsets:

- d) Region (East Midlands, East of England, London, North East, North West, Northern Ireland, Scotland, South East, South West, Yorkshire and the Humber, Wales and West Midlands)
- e) Ethnicity (Asian, Black, Mixed, White, other, unknown)
- f) Disability (Yes, No)
- g) University type (Pre-92, Post-92, Russell Group)

These categories were prepared for the whole UK HE sector in addition to SHAPE for comparative purposes. The main focus will be on SHAPE disciplines, referred to as HSS from this point onwards. Using secondary data meant that we had to work with the categories available and were not always able to manipulate the data in quite the way we wanted. For this reason and due to HESA suppression, rounding and data protection guidelines, percentages in tables included may not add up to 100%. Nonetheless, the data is adequate for identifying trends and, thus, for addressing the research questions.

### 3.2.2 Qualitative

Next, a qualitative approach was developed in order to understand how the contracting trends played out in different types of universities. We conducted remote interviews with 13 senior staff at 12 UK universities (see Table One) to gather their perceptions of contracting trends between 2012/13 to 2019/20 as well as insights into any impact the coronavirus pandemic has had on contracts awarded in the current academic year (2020-21). During the interviews, participants reflected on the relationship between teaching and research in their current institution and any relevant changes they were aware of in the awarding of academic contracts during that time, including the period from March 2020 when measures were taken to deal with the spread of coronavirus in the UK.

Semi-structured interviews were the chosen method of interview. This was to enable participants to have room to insert their own particular emphasis and, because these were senior academics, to avoid taking up too much time the interviews were designed to last 30-minutes. The interview schedule is in Appendix One. Interviewees were sent a copy of the schedule before the interview took place.

We established criteria to identify potential participants. These were to be senior staff who:

- Had an overview of a Humanities and/or Social Sciences Faculty or School
- Had been working in Humanities and/Social Sciences in the institute for at least three years.

These criteria kept the focus on HSS as well as ensuring insights came from experienced academics whose comments were informed from a number of years' service. The sample, therefore, was purposive but had elements of convenience as we utilised our contacts and those through the British Academy to secure interviews with 13 academics who met those criteria. We sought participants from universities of different types and which represented a geographical spread across all four UK home nations. We were able to secure participants from all nations but Northern Ireland.

Table Two: Sample universities: qualitative data

Teaching strong	Balanced (teaching = research)	Research Strong
South West 1	South 1	Scotland
South East	South West 2	Central
London 1	South 2	North West
Wales	North*	London 2

\*Our pilot was conducted at this university where we also interviewed a second person. NorthA (pilot) and NorthB are used to denote the different interviewees.

In accordance with the ethical procedures of the University of Bath and University College London, informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to interview. The project also adheres to the British Educational Research Association 2018 guidelines. Confidentiality was promised to all participants and due to the sensitive nature of the interviews and the startling frankness of the responses to our questions, some attributions of quotations have been withheld, where the identity of the university is judged to be in danger of being revealed through specific details. Furthermore, the interviews were conducted remotely, in accordance with the research team's universities' guidance on conducting research during the pandemic.

Interviews were recorded and sent for professional transcription. Transcripts were returned to the participants to be checked for accuracy. The transcripts were thematically analysed (Braun & Clarke 2006), a robust, six-stage method that acknowledges the interpretative work of the analyst in developing two or three key themes that make explicit something implicit in the data. The qualitative findings are organised around the three themes that emerged from this analysis. Participants' contributions gave valuable insights into the qualitative nature of change experienced over the period of the quantitative data and since the coronavirus pandemic hit.

#### 4. Findings

The findings of the quantitative analysis are presented, with the UK HE sector trends followed by the trends for HSS. This is followed by the findings of the qualitative analysis which includes

a section on insights about the impact of COVID-19 on HSS and ends with a summary of the findings.

#### 4.1 Quantitative findings

In this section we address the first research question (RQ1), which is *What are the trends in UK HE contract awarding between 2012/13 and 2019/20?*. First, we have a look at differences in contracts by gender, mode (full- or part-time) and terms of employment (open-ended or fixed-term) across all academic disciplines, to provide an overview of contracts in the UK HE sector over the seven years from 2012/2013. Then, we present findings of the analysis of HSS data to identify differences by: mode and terms of employment, gender, ethnicity and university type.

##### 4.1.1 Trends in the UK HE sector - growth

From 2012/13 to 2019/20, the total number of contracts grew from 181,410 to 219,625. However, there has been a stagnation in the number of TR contracts while the number of research-only and teaching-only contracts have both grown, steadily in research but more quickly in teaching. Across the sector, between 2012/13 and 2019/20, teaching-only contracts category increased by more than two-fold for part-time, permanent positions, growing from 8,160 to 18,165; and almost two-fold increase for full-time, permanent contracts going from 11,430 to 21,045.

Table Two: The number of contracts in 2012/13 and 2019/20 by type, mode and terms of employment.

Type	Mode	Terms	2012/2013	2019/20
T only	part-time	fixed-term	2,230	3,810
		permanent	8,160	18,165
	full-time	fixed-term	24,250	27,895
		permanent	11,430	21,045

Despite the stagnation, TR remains the largest contract category in the sector. However, further inspection of this data showed an increase in permanent contracts (for both modes of employment, part-time and full-time). There was quite a notable drop in the number of fixed-term contracts, especially evident in part-time mode. In 2012/13 there were 5,465 TR, part-time, fixed-term contracts, while in 2019/20 there were only 2,955 of these contracts.

Table Three: Number of TR contracts by type, mode and terms of employment (all disciplines).

Type	Mode	Terms	2012/2013	2019/20
TR	part-time	fixed-term	4,765	4,010
		permanent	70,115	76,415
	full-time	fixed-term	5,465	2,955
		permanent	12,975	14,150

#### 4.1.2 Trends in the UK HE sector - gender

Across the sector the proportion of men to women working in academia has changed to be slightly less dominated by men. In 2012/13 the ratio was 56% (100,875) of men to 44% (80,535) of women. In 2019/20 there were 53% (117,085) of men to 47% (102,195) of women. In 2012/13 men had the majority of full-time positions, regardless of the contract type (whether it was research only, teaching only or combined (TR) contracts), while women tended to have most of the part-time contracts. For example, males had 44,875 TR, full-time open-ended contracts, while females had only 25,240 of the same type of contracts. This trend still remains in 2019/20: **across full-time positions men have more contracts, while women dominate part-time positions.** The only exception is a TR, part-time, permanent type of contract because there were slightly less women (N=1,350) than men (N=1,600).

Table Four: All disciplines, proportions of the types of contracts by total 2012/13 (N = 181,410).

	Female	Male		Female	Male		Female	Male
<b>R only</b>	19,750 (11%)	22,270 (12%)	<b>Full-time</b>	14,805 (8%)	19,760 (11%)	<b>Fixed-term</b>	10,150 (6%)	13,295 (7%)
						<b>Permanent</b>	4,655 (3%)	6,465 (4%)
			<b>Part-time</b>	4,945 (3%)	2,510 (1%)	<b>Fixed-term</b>	3,085 (2%)	1,760 (1%)
						<b>Permanent</b>	1,860 (1%)	750 (<1%)
<b>R &amp; T</b>	37,025 (20%)	56,295 (31%)	<b>Full-time</b>	27,255 (15%)	47,625 (26%)	<b>Fixed-term</b>	2,015 (1%)	2,750 (2%)
						<b>Permanent</b>	25,240 (14%)	44,875 (25%)
			<b>Part-time</b>	9,770 (5%)	8,760 (5%)	<b>Fixed-term</b>	2,455 (1%)	3,010 (2%)
						<b>Permanent</b>	7,315 (4%)	5,660 (3%)
<b>T only</b>	23,760 (13%)	22,310 (12%)	<b>Full-time</b>	4,940 (3%)	5,450 (3%)	<b>Fixed-term</b>	1,115 (1%)	1,115 (1%)
						<b>Permanent</b>	3,825 (2%)	4,335 (2%)
			<b>Part-time</b>	18,820 (10%)	16,860 (9%)	<b>Fixed-term</b>	12,460 (7%)	11,790 (7%)
						<b>Permanent</b>	6,360 (4%)	5,070 (3%)

*Reminder.* Due to HESA suppression, rounding and data protection guidelines, percentages may not add up to 100%. Applies to all tables.

In general, over the years, men have dominated research only and combined (TR) contracts, while women dominated teaching only contracts (as can be seen in Table Five below).

Table five: Number of contracts in 2012/13 and 2019/20 by contract type and gender.

	2012/13			2019/20		
	Female	male	TOTAL	female	male	TOTAL
Research only	19,750 (47%)	22,270 (53%)	42,020	24,215 (48%)	26,900 (53%)	51,115
TR	37,025 (40%)	56,295 (60%)	93,320	40,800 (42%)	56,595 (58%)	97,395
Teaching only	23,760 (52%)	22,310 (48%)	46,070	37,180 (53%)	33,590 (47%)	70,770

In sum, the analysis shows a slight move in the sector towards greater gender balance, an increase in teaching-only contracts and a decrease in fixed-term contracts.

#### 4.1.3 HSS data

When comparing HSS data with the whole sector, we can see similar tendencies (Table Six). However, despite a growth in total number of HSS contracts, from 79,475 in 2012/13 to 94,355 in 2019/20 this is a slight percentage decrease over the time period by one percentage point (from 44% to 43%). There was a proportionate drop in the number of TR contracts in HSS, while there was a notable increase in the number of teaching-only positions.

Table Six: Contracts in HSS compared to the whole HE sector

	HSS		Entire HE sector	
	2012/13	2019/20	2012/13	2019/20
<b>R</b>	5,185 (7%)	6,675 (7%)	42,020 (23%)	51,180 (23%)
<b>TR</b>	46,100 (58%)	46,510 (50%)	93,320 (51%)	97,530 (44%)
<b>T</b>	27,890 (35%)	40,600 (43%)	46,070 (25%)	70,915 (32%)
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>79,175 (100%)</b>	<b>93,785 (100%)</b>	<b>181,410 (100%)</b>	<b>219,625 (100%)</b>

#### 4.1.4 Trends in HSS sector - growth and change

The most notable trend over time is that the number of teaching-only contracts is on the increase. Research only contracts across the different modes and terms, are either more or less the same or slightly on an increase. In the case of TR contracts we see a slight tendency to drop on the number of contracts signed - with the exception of TR, full-time, permanent contracts, as these seem to be becoming more common.

#### 4.1.5 Trends in HSS - gender

There has been a slight overall change in gender balance in HSS. In 2012/13 there were 38,080 females and 41,095 males working in HSS. The numbers have been becoming more equal over the years and were almost even in 2017/18 (44,655 females and 44,680 males). Since then, the sector has had more female employees. As of 2019/20 there were 47,590 females and 46,195 males employed in UK HE.

In 2019/20 females had more research-only and more teaching-only contracts, while males tend to have more TR contracts. The situation was exactly the same in 2012/2013, and this pattern has been consistent over the years.

Table Seven: Contracts by gender in 2019/20.

	2012/13		2019/20	
	female	male	female	male
<b>R</b>	2,770	2,415	3,825 (4%)	2,850 (3%)
<b>TR</b>	20,485	25,615	22,025 (23%)	24,485 (26%)
<b>T</b>	14,825	13,065	21,740 (23%)	18,860 (20%)

In sum, while research-only contracts remain the smallest in number in 2019/20, teaching-only contracts amongst women have almost equalled the percentage of women on TR contracts whilst men have the largest percentage of TR, and all, contract types.

In 2012/13, although there were fewer female employees, 8% more women were on fixed-term contracts (N=13,165) than men (N=12,150) (see Table Eight). Women tended to have more part-time contracts for teaching-only, research-only and TR (both, fixed-term and permanent) while males tended to have more full-time contracts. **There were more women employed on part-time permanent contracts across all contract types, modes and terms of employment.**



Table Eight: Number of contracts in 2012/13 by gender considering contract type, mode and terms of employment.

2012/13								
	female	male		female	male		female	male
R	2,770	2,415	full-time	1,690	1,705	fixed-term	1,170	1,160
						permanent	520	545
			part-time	1,080	710	fixed-term	770	530
						permanent	310	180
TR	20,485	25,615	full-time	14,690	20,420	fixed-term	875	1,020
						permanent	13,815	19,400
			part-time	5,795	5,195	fixed-term	1,570	1,725
						permanent	4,225	3,470
T	14,825	13,065	full-time	2,580	2,685	fixed-term	715	655
						permanent	1,865	2,030
			part-time	12,245	10,380	fixed-term	8,065	7,060
						permanent	4,180	3,320

At the same time, across all three contract types (R/TR/T) **there were consistently more men employed on full-time, permanent contracts in 2012/13**, regardless of the mode or terms of employment. For example, there were more men employed on TR contracts than women by 40%. The general tendencies are similar in 2019/20 as women are still more likely to be on a part-time contract (see Table Nine). This is true for all contract types considering terms of employment except for one. Only in TR, part-time, fixed-term and TR, full-time, permanent contracts there were more men than women employed by the UK universities.

Table Nine: HSS contracts by gender in 2019/20.

2019/20									
	female	male		female	male		female	male	other
R	3,825	2,850	full-time	2,385	2,000	fixed-term	1,830	1,495	5
						permanent	555	505	-
			part-time	1,440	850	fixed-term	1,110	670	5
						permanent	330	180	-
TR	22,025	24,485	full-time	17,070	20,485	fixed-term	750	825	-
						permanent	16,320	19,660	65
			part-time	4,955	4,000	fixed-term	650	720	-
						permanent	4,305	3,280	10
T	21,740	18,860	full-time	5,660	5,935	fixed-term	1,135	1,185	5
						permanent	4,525	4,750	5
			part-time	16,080	12,925	fixed-term	8,825	7,255	75
						permanent	7,255	5,670	5

In sum, the trend over time shows that there remain more men than women on the most secure TR (full-time permanent) contracts, although the gap between the genders has narrowed from almost 17 % in 2012/13 to just over 9% in 2019/20.

#### 4.1.6 Trends in HSS - Ethnicity

Over the years, from 2012/13 to 2019/20, there was an increase in employment of academics with Asian, Black, Mixed and other ethnicities. Table Ten shows that, although the increase is not statistically significant, in terms of proportionate growth, the academic population is getting more diverse over the years. The population of academics from Asian, Black or Mixed backgrounds grew by 66%, 88% and 93% respectively.

Concurrent with the growth of teaching only-contracts across HSS, teaching-only contracts also grew for ethnic minorities. Between 2012/13 and 2019/20 the increase in teaching-only contracts was by 92% for Asians, 148% for black, 126% for academics of mixed ethnicities, 99% for other & unknown, and 33% for white. Although there was an increase in those identifying as 'other or unknown' in HSS, this was largely explained by an almost two-fold increase in teaching-only contracts.

Table Ten: The number of contracts by ethnicity in 2012/136 and 2019/20 for HSS subjects.

		Asian	Black	Mixed	White	Other & unknown	TOTAL
<b>2012/13</b>	<b>R</b>	345	60	105	4,085	595	<b>5190</b>
	<b>TR</b>	2,330	715	645	38,220	4,200	<b>46,110</b>
	<b>T</b>	1,130	460	430	22,695	2,980	<b>27,695</b>
<b>TOTAL for 2012/13</b>		3,805	1,235	1,180	65,000	7,775	<b>78,995</b>
<b>2019/20</b>	<b>R</b>	560	140	245	4,715	1,025	<b>6,685</b>
	<b>TR</b>	3,535	1,045	1,070	37,260	3,670	<b>46,580</b>
	<b>T</b>	2,525	1,140	970	30,120	5,945	<b>40,700</b>
<b>TOTAL for 2019/20</b>		6,620	2,325	2,285	72,095	10,640	<b>93,965</b>

In sum, although there has been a proportionate increase over time in contracts awarded to non-White academics, this is dwarfed by the increase in those given to White people. Black and Mixed ethnicities remain represented in smaller numbers compared to those of Asian ethnicity whilst the increase in those identifying as 'other or unknown' was notable in the teaching-only contract category.

#### *4.1.7 Trends in HSS - University type (pre-92, post-92, Russell Group)*

The biggest increase in the number of all HSS contracts between 2012/13 to 2019/20 has been seen for Russell Group universities (by 45%), followed by pre-92 universities (increase by 22%), and post-92 universities (increase by 10%) (Table Eleven below). Research-only contracts have increased in pre-92 universities (by 25%) and the Russell Group (by 42%) whilst they have fallen in post-92 universities (by 2%). This suggests that teaching-strong institutions are struggling to close the research gap on older, more established universities.

The trend also shows a drop in the total number of TR contracts in post-92 universities, by 2705 - down by 11% between 2012/13 and 2019/20 - while research-only contracts remain relatively stable.

Table Eleven: Number of contracts in 2012/13 and 2019/20 by university type.

	2012/13			2019/20		
	Pre-92	Post-92	Russell	Pre-92	Post-92	Russell
R	4,405	740	3,150	5,900	725	4,475
TR	21,355	23,620	11,835	24,525	20,915	14,765
T	16,675	9,410	5,545	21,395	15,500	10,670

*Note: this analysis is based on figures that show a discrepancy compared to the totals when the data is organised by different categories. This discrepancy is currently being investigated by HESA.*

Notably, in 2012/13, post-92 universities had 2,580 academics contracted to work on combined (RT), part-time, fixed-term contracts; and in 2019/20, this number dropped markedly to 850. At the same time, the Russell Group universities maintained the same number of R&T, part-time, fixed-term contracts (N=265), with small varieties over the years.

In sum, the trend shows the biggest increase in all contracts in Russell Group universities. RT contracts have increased in Russell Group and pre-92 universities but in post-92 universities these contracts decreased, particularly RT part-time fixed term.

#### 4.2 Qualitative findings

In this section we refer to the data in response to the second research question (RQ2): *How are these trends perceived in universities of different types?* and the third research question (RQ3): *How and in what ways do these trends have implications for the teaching-research nexus in UK HE?*

Analysis of the interviews with managers brought to our attention three pertinent themes which we present in turn. Starting with financial and policy demands in relation to contracts, we move to illustrate the implications on the nexus in HSS within the complexities of the field. These findings are concluded with relevant insights about the demands placed on the nexus due to COVID-19. Where attributed, quotes indicate the geographical location of participants' university (set out in Table One).

#### 4.2.1 Sectoral conditions and institutional policy demands

Across the interviewees the assumption is that the 'standard' academic contract balances research and teaching by giving them equal proportions:

*...we have 40/40/20 in our workload, so 20 percent administration...40 percent teaching and then 40 percent research. (South 2)*

However, policy and declining finances were perceived to have an impact on recruitment and contract types. Although all universities had a range of TR contracts as well as teaching-only and research-only, the perception was that open-ended, fixed term, part-time and permanent were permutations that could be deployed strategically in response to sector-wide conditions and changes of policy. Contracts could be combined in different ways to prioritise teaching, research or administration (South East), and zero-hours and hourly-paid contracts were deployed for staff who were described as "peripatetic" (London 1) such as "TAs and language assistants" (South 2). Although finances and policy are presented separately below, in practice these demands are part of the complex simultaneous forces universities work within, as we address under 'Complexity and flexibility'.

##### 4.2.1a Finances

Every interviewee, from all types of university, talked about contracts in relation to finances:

*Finances play the only part that I can see, really. (South 1)*

This awareness created a sense of "less money, more pressure" (North B) in individuals whilst some institutions in England, Scotland and Wales were engaged on money-saving drives. These included "a freeze on posts" (South East) in several places. Other practices in more than one university included removing expensive staff (professors) (South 2) or, if these staff were replaced, it was with more junior posts:

*...all new appointments, lecturer, [they] will be entry grade unless a case is made by [the Head of Department] (London 1)*

Financial stability varied. Some felt their university was currently in a relatively stable financial position (South West 2; South East), one of the teaching strong universities was described as being:

*...on the edge of a financial crisis that led to a "fairly hard-nosed VES [voluntary exit strategy]. And of course, the deal is that we couldn't replace people. (withheld).*

However, financial uncertainty as a result of the pandemic was largely denied, with all three types of university giving examples of pre-COVID staffing strategies in line with their mission, be that anti-casualisation (three balanced and one research-strong), growing the research profile (two of the teaching strong universities) or internationalisation (two of the research strong universities). This would suggest two things: firstly, that the financial and political

impact of COVID-19 is not yet clear; and secondly, that universities were engaged in ways to work with less money prior to COVID-19.

#### **4.2.1b Policy priorities**

Governmental policy is closely related to finances and recent changes were perceived to have made an impact on contracts and hiring strategies. The cutting of Overseas Development Agency funds (South West 1) in 2021 was one example, while specific implications for HSS were perceived by two teaching-strong universities, one which noted:

*We're quite arts and humanities, quite creative-industries focused, and potential government policy won't serve us well here (South East)*

More specifically, there was evidence that some HSS disciplines were perceived to be more vulnerable than others under current sector drivers:

*I was talking with a lot of English Literature and Creative Writing colleagues recently and it does occur to me that there's quite a lot more translation needed to make what some of them do into something that's fundable...there are imbalances there...between colleagues who think okay, well it's expected that I get funding...and colleagues who say this is what I do, it doesn't get funded. Tough. (Wales)*

This is complicated to unpick but closely ties in with the prevalence of quality measurements in the sector.. On the one hand there is recognition that these disciplines may struggle to get funded and on the other that there may be a certain recalcitrance to engage with the marketized evaluations perceived as driving research in the current climate.

One frequently mentioned evaluation policy is the Research Excellence Framework (REF) and the redefinition in 2016 of the “poisonous” (North B) accountability measurement in particular. These requirements stipulated that every active researcher had to have at least one item of their research output submitted as part of an institutional return to REF 2021. There were accounts of this leading to redundancies of “un-REF-able staff” (North A) while some academics’ contracts were changed to teaching-only:

*...because they couldn't be submitted to the REF. I think they had some publications but maybe one or two star. (Wales)*

Star ratings are applied to research outputs, such as publications, but only the two highest ratings (3 and 4) attract any government funding, in effect making them more valuable financially to universities and devaluing the lower ratings. Despite the focus on income generated through the REF, one interview argued that research income forms a very small part of university finances, with the majority coming from student fees:

*...80% of the cost for staff salaries out of these, out of students' [fees] income, the 20% is the REF income. (London 2)*

This respondent, from a research-strong institution, was arguing that, because the majority of an academic's salary comes from student fees, teaching should be seen as having greater value than it currently does. In one research-strong university, there was a keen awareness of a need to repair reputational damage by communicating the student experience more successfully (withheld). This view was upheld by several of the interviewees, some of whom had personally worked for greater parity, as reflected by this participant:

*...we've been making a big effort to reduce that gulf between the superior research and the inferior teaching, that a lot of universities traditionally had, and I find that a really painful and very old-fashioned view. (Scotland)*

The struggle for teaching to escape its poor relation status was a finding from the 2018 study (p 27) and has been noted to create some stress for individuals working to keep the two together when structural conditions separate them (McKinley *et al.*, 2021), in addition to creating inequalities for those groups of people who are disadvantaged in the race for research prominence (McIntosh *et al.*, 2019).

Underpinning the research-teaching hierarchy is acknowledgement of the greater implicit value in a TR contract over a teaching-only contract:

*Another area of inequality [is that] I don't know anybody who is on a fixed-term [TR] contract, they seem to be permanent only. (South 2)*

The implication is that permanence is awarded to those who teach *and* research and allows those academics to do both, increasing the chance of a symbiotic nexus. Should the stagnation of TR contracts and the rise of teaching-only contracts demonstrated in the quantitative data continue, the numbers of those able to teach and research would fall, jeopardising the nexus.

#### *4.2.3 Gender and other inequalities*

Institutional policy generated conditions, from internal reviews for instance, that demonstrated that specific groups of employees were facing inequalities:

*...we started to become aware of other inequalities, so race, ethnicity is an issue...and you have to keep coming back to thinking about how - do you really have policies...[so] that everybody really genuinely does have a pathway through that fits them (South West 2)*

Other groups were identified as being disadvantaged: casualised and/or fixed-term contracts, women, those on teaching-only contracts and early career researchers (ECRs):

*I've been line managing someone who was initially on a six-month contract and at the same time I was doing their probationary meetings, I was also required by HR [Human Resources] to be managing their exit strategy. (Wales)*

However, contract disadvantage was not perceived to be new feature of the sector:

*I see a lot of, I mean the same amount of precarity as there was before (North 2)*

Women were identified as disadvantaged by many interviewees, across all types of universities:

*...there are huge and obvious gender disparities across all the contracts and academic ranks. (South 2)*

Furthermore, women were perceived as more likely to sign particular contracts:

*By and large if you are on a teaching-only contract, you are a woman (South 1)*

Given the kudos associated with research, the “trap” (North A) is that having a teaching-only contract does not allow for research time; and a particular problem for those on teaching-only part-time contracts:

*...a teaching-only departmental lecturer [on] 50%, because that’s literally what the teaching hours are, you then don’t have time for research. Well. Not paid time for research. (Central)*

In HSS, teaching-only staff and part-time staff are more likely to be women than men (see Table Nine, in section 4.1.5 above). These employees are faced with the choice of conducting research in their own time (see McKinley *et al.*, 2018, p 29) if they want to get a TR contract and may have that time taken up with caring responsibilities and so be doubly disadvantaged. This is a clear set of constraints that staff on non-TR contracts work within, although one participant noted that this may be an assumption that is made without grounds:

*Other people are constructing what those people on those contracts feel without actually asking the people themselves. (North East)*

In the 2018 report, systemic inequalities creating barriers to progression were found to relate to career-stages and an emphasis on teaching (McKinley *et al.*, pp 29-30). Now, focusing on contracts, there is evidence that contractual barriers exist to prevent teaching-only staff from doing research (North B) or applying for research funding (South 2) as well as some questionable practices demonstrated by this response to a woman announcing her pregnancy:

*She’s actually going to be on maternity leave, and I say congratulations on the baby, but this is your opportunity to write. (North A)*

Although this may have been advice given to encourage the woman academic to publish and progress, seeing maternity leave as a golden opportunity to do so points to the prioritisation of research at all costs. This makes for an “in-built messaging system”, according to one academic who also queried the report from senior management at the research strong university that there was no gender disparity (Central). Certainly, this is the only remark that would suggest any parity across genders.



In contrast to the financially motivated strategies around contracts, two research strong (Scotland; North West), three balanced (South 1; South 2; South West 2) and two teaching-strong (Wales, South West 1) institutions described how their own internal policies were focused on driving down casualisation:

*...most [fixed-term employees] will be on 12 months, and we don't do ten months. We do 12 months wherever we possibly can. We don't tend to just take people on for the teaching semester and then dump them (Scotland)*

Anti-casualisation may perhaps have been a response to EU employment law (North B) which entitles workers to permanency after three years, though severance before that point is a practice that one academic was familiar with (South 2). Post-Brexit employment conditions are yet to make an impact, with no interviewees identifying this as a factor, but this remains another major policy which may have an impact on the teaching-research nexus in practice. The introduction of national equality and diversity policies, such as Athena Swan for gender, and the Race Equality Charter (South West 1) may further propel this promising direction toward reducing some inequalities in the sector.

In sum, institutional interpretations of policy, governmental and organizational, in relation to sector-wide conditions, has an impact on how academics are contracted to teach and research:

*...with a lot of things that drive academia, including REF, there's quite a lot of pressure, responsibility that lies with the policy-makers within an institution and also the line managers and team leaders in an institution to humanize it and to make it work in a collegial way. (Wales)*

However, this reliance on individuals' values introduces a power element which, depending on what agendas are being pushed, may not always be as positive as, for example, those driving for recognition of teaching as a valued part of the job (e.g. North B; South West 1; London 2; South West 2) or those mentioned above who are driving out casualization. Clearly, many forces, systemic and individual, are at play in the enactment of teaching and research, something we present in the next theme.

#### *4.2.4 Complexity and flexibility*

Contracts are legal documents that require a degree of specialism to fully understand, even if they are kept brief:

*...our contracts are not very detailed ones. It's something that actually, we know we've got some work to do on these for the future, but our contracts, generally, are not very detailed ones. (Scotland).*

In terms of contracts, complexity translates into a lack of clarity about details in the contracts that academics sign:

*I'm not entirely sure people...fully understand what the contract means. (Central)*

Additionally, the contract is not always clearly linked to the job description (South 2; South West 1; Wales) or to the activity academics undertake in relation to teaching and research, particularly when someone's job has changed over time:

*...an academic career is a long and messy old thing...we're not just one thing forever. (Wales)*

This may lead to a gap between institutional strategy and actuality:

*...although that was the official discourse, in fact nothing much followed. (South East)*

However, the standard academic contract covers the majority of academic work in the UK and the flexibility can at times support a nexus. Some universities note the importance of flexibility for individual progress:

*...if you do strengthen your research muscles, you'll get [research] hours. (London 1)*

More formal procedures aiming to foster a connection between teaching and research were described through flexible, institutional systems:

*As a line manager, for every PDR [Professional Development Review] we have to have a conversation that says do you still feel that you are on the right pathway? And we have to tick a little box that says no I want to be considered for another pathway. So they are trying to encourage a fluidity between research and teaching. (Wales)*

On one hand, this flexibility may facilitate academics who want to move from a teaching-only track or address promotion issues for those whose work no longer reflects their practice or have had a career that develops in ways that mean their "research took a bit of a back seat" (South West 2). It may also address the research teaching hierarchy by trying to promote the value of teaching whilst inadvertently creating a greater gap. With reference to those on teaching pathways, whose focus is on education (the 'e' in e-focused):

*...e-focused colleagues are so e-focused and so keen to do everything they can for the students and have the time in their workload to do that that they sometimes forget that other people are still also trying to finish a book. So, I'm just a wee bit worried about the balance shifting to e-work all being done by e-contract people. So, I don't want our two tracks to reinforce or reintroduce that gulf between research and teaching. (Scotland)*

On the other hand, some of the inequalities described in this report may be further entrenched by some aspects of the 'flexibility' and complexity of the contracting of academic work. An academic career, universities and the wider landscape of higher education and policy are complex and evolving processes that contracts, as single-point documents, cannot adequately represent. Workload models, responses to government policy, changing

accountability procedures and financial constraints all play a part in shaping the way teaching and research are practiced but these are translated in institutionally-specific ways.

#### 4.2.5 *The perceived position of HSS in UK HE*

It was noted above that governmental policies and the research environment were perceived as hostile to HSS subjects by some interviewees. The interviewees did not add anything further explicitly in relation to HSS though it is worth noting that they showed tacit awareness. Disciplinary-specific funding was collapsed into one central body United Kingdom Research and Innovation (UKRI) in April 2018. UKRI is a non-departmental public body sponsored by the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy with funding opportunities emphasising international, interdisciplinary, large-scale, impact-driven research (UKRI, 2021). Indications are that a new nexus, between research and enterprise, is emerging (McKinley *et al.*, 2021). Meanwhile, HSS departmental closures, enacted or proposed, between April 2020 and June 2021 in 18 universities, many of them post-92, and the pivot towards medical sciences because of COVID-19, raise concern that HSS is in danger of being marginalised in comparison to other aspects of the sector.

Having said that, one interviewee from a teaching-strong university, injected an optimistic note:

*It is quite helpful having a lean research environment and one that isn't very infrastructure intensive. We don't have a medical school, we don't have heavy engineering. We're more in the social sciences, arts and humanities...we don't feel the burden of the slings and arrows in quite the same way. We're able to adapt and flex a bit more than some institutions which are much more about research but when things go pear-shaped, it really hits them hard. (London 1)*

In the context of likely financial consequences of COVID-19, it is not yet clear to interviewees how the funding changes will affect HSS.

#### 4.2.6 *COVID insights relating to contracts and the nexus*

In March 2020, in response to measures taken to prevent the spread of the coronavirus, UK universities closed their campuses to most students and rapidly moved to devise ways to continue teaching. While we asked interviewees to reflect on contract changes since then, most denied changes in response to COVID. In the course of analysis, some insights were given into the ongoing struggles and the exacerbation of some underlying tensions in the enactment of the nexus.

##### **4.2.6a Focus on teaching**

The first impact of COVID-19 that most interviewees mentioned was the need to prioritise teaching as they redesigned their degree programmes for remote provision. This was expressed by all three types of university and this is typical of the response:

*...all research leave was cancelled...so all hands needed to be on deck for teaching (South East)*

Despite this necessity, accountability measures that separate teaching and research were perceived to be exacerbated under COVID, with competing discourses about making allowances whilst retaining the pre-COVID targets:

*...there was an email that I think possibly is regretted in retrospect, coming round saying we know you're going to have to focus on your teaching, not your research at the moment. But then, of course, the targets remained the same for research. (Wales)*

When COVID-19 hit the UK, the final stages of preparing returns for the REF were well underway, making it possible for teaching to be prioritised in a way that was unprecedented.

#### **4.2.6b Continuing gender inequalities in research**

However, the dominance of research in the sector prevailed and some were more able than others to continue with this aspect of their work.

*Reports from the Pro-[Vice Chancellor of] Research that [this university] has done a huge amount of research and grants have gone through the roof...[and] there has been no gender impact on research outputs during the pandemic. I don't understand how that can be true. (Central)*

The impact of having to have children at home while the schools were closed was mentioned by several as severely affecting some women academics:

*[I know a female colleague] who really suffered having children at home all day and having to work and teach and do research. I don't know how she did it. (South East)*

Reports that home-schooling fell more to women in academia were commonly perceived and served to reinforce historic inequalities (North East), some of which we touched on above. Meanwhile others managed to be "quite productive" (South East). This impression was reinforced by an interview at a different teaching-strong university:

*There are those who have thrived working from home, not commuting, have found more time to generate more funding applications. We've got outputs up. On balance, I guess, the message we're hearing is that research has taken a hit. (London 1)*

The ingrained practice of maintaining the priority of research over teaching during the pandemic reflects the perpetuation of the gap between those who do and those who do not have the capacity to put their own time into research.

#### **4.2.6c Financial reactions**

There were quite contradictory responses to the requirement for more teaching that related to the perceived financial impact that COVID-19 was going to have. This ranged from the

longer to the very short-term solutions. This university appointed, then kept on in 2020/21, many of the staff on short-term, teaching only contracts as a means of relieving pressure on full-time staff:

*...we have appointed quite a lot of entry-level, associate lecturer level [teaching-only] contracts, and that is to help schools cope with the extra work, and they are temporary contracts, and they are to allow us to see how things pan out and just give us a bit of breathing space. (Scotland)*

Meanwhile, a balanced university made a “knee jerk reaction” (South 2) to cut most temporary contracts although many of these were then reinstated prior to the start of the 2020/21 academic year. Above, the voluntary exit scheme outlined by one teaching-strong university is in contrast to three research-strong universities avoiding redundancies. One of these felt that there was a hesitation to commit to any new posts because of financial uncertainty (South West 2).

#### **4.2.6d Implications for Early-career researchers (ECRs)**

Those beginning an academic career widely have to undertake a probation programme with a set of criteria related to research, teaching and administration/management/service. If they wish to progress they need to show evidence of being able to do both. Two teaching-strong universities expressed concern that ECRs having to prioritise teaching may find that their research suffers (Wales) or, to avoid that, their probation period would be altered:

*...if you haven't met your targets by the end of three years before permanency [the contract is] to be extended to four years. It doesn't allow them to get a mortgage and things like that. So personally, I think the targets should have been changed, if you said you'd do two research articles, then you need to do one. (South East)*

It is evident that the reasonable allowances suggested here do not extend to a complete relaxation of the pressure in this university. By contrast, NorthB reported that some ECRs would probably be made permanent, as was the plan in the Scottish university.

In sum, there was a variety of responses to COVID-19 that may end up affecting different groups of people unequally, bringing advantages for some, and may or may not see lasting change to the way universities teach and research. One interviewee said that, although the only effect in his (teaching-strong) university was a slowing of the institutional strategy to increase number of TR contracts, he predicted universities will ‘double down on the teaching-research nexus after ‘staring online provision in the face’ (South West 1).

#### **4.3 Summary of findings**

We are now able to state some of these findings in relation to the research questions.

#### **RQ1. What are the trends in UK HE contract awarding between 2012/13 and 2019/20**

##### **a) in the UK HE sector? and**

## **b) in HSS?**

Over the period under analysis, there have been increases in the numbers of contracts awarded, cross-sector and within HSS, although the total number of HSS contracts has slightly decreased. Similarly, while TR contracts have stagnated over the past four years, there has been a marked rise in teaching-only contracts. In HSS, there has been a slight move, since 2017/18, towards greater parity in the numbers of women and men employed and, over the entire period, an increase in the proportion of ethnic minorities, though this latter remains small in comparison to the number of White academics. Women remain more likely to be employed on part-time contracts (fixed-term or permanent) across teaching-only, TR and research-only, than men. Fixed-term contracts have reduced reflecting what is perceived by most, but not all, interviewees.

### **RQ2. How are these trends played out in universities of different types?**

All university types have seen an increase in teaching-only contracts, whereas TR contracts, which is where there might be assumed to be a good chance of bringing teaching and research together, have seen differences in university types. Though TR contracts have increased in Russell Group and pre-92 universities, they have decreased in post-92 universities. Post-92 universities are also the only one of the three types not to have seen a rise in research-only contracts, down 2% compared to a rise of 25% and 42% in pre-92 and Russell Group universities respectively.

Across all types of university there are concerns for long-term equality of women and minority ethnicities in the sector, whose contracts are more likely to be teaching-only and thus, limit paid time to develop their own research and progress to permanent contracts. COVID-19 brought some of these inequalities to the fore.

It is difficult to say what different university types are doing in relation to these trend, However, balanced universities, and two of the research-strong ones, are working to end casualisation, while developing a research profile was an expressed concern of two of the teaching strong universities, one sought to balance teaching and research, while the fourth was deeply concerned with the institution's financial health. Two research-strong universities specified that internationalisation was their priority and may closely reflect the sector's funding developments outlined above in relation to UKRI.

### **RQ3. How and in what ways do these trends have implications for the teaching-research nexus in UK HE?**

The headline dominance of TR contracts masks underlying trends to increasingly separate teaching and research by contract. The stagnation of the TR contract numbers while the sector contract numbers increase is explained by the rise in teaching-only contracts. There is a trend towards decreasing fixed-term contracts, particularly for teaching-only academics, suggesting that some of the changes are planned to be permanent. The implications of COVID-

19 responses to prioritise teaching may further fuel the growth in teaching-only contracts and prove a significant driver to separate teaching from research and jeopardise the nexus.

## 5. Discussion

In the 2018 report, we found the concept of the ‘holistic academic’ reflected the complexity of academic life. The concept went beyond contract type into how they are interpreted: “...it is not just about contract type, but how it is interpreted is influenced by institutional and systemic conditions” (McKinley *et al.*, 2018, p 1), noting that these influences either support or oppose a teaching- research nexus. In this 2021 study, we delved into HSS academic contracts as a way of exploring these influences and interpretations, quantifying trends since 2012 and speaking with a range of academic staff at a variety of university types in England, Scotland, and Wales. Taking into consideration the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic along with other factors such as career stage, race, and gender, we found that trends in awarding academic contracts provide evidence for a bifurcation of teaching and research, particularly with the increase of permanent teaching-only contracts. This finding was not consistently reflected in the understanding of academic contracts in interviews. This has led us to further reconceptualise the idea of a teaching-research nexus in UK higher education.

### 5.1 Teaching-research tensions in academic contracts

HSS academic contract awarding trends identified over the past decade show that there are fewer fixed-term contracts in favour of more permanent contracts. These permanent contracts are both standard and teaching-only, with a higher proportion of teaching-only contracts found since 2015. These teaching-only contracts are disproportionately awarded to women. These contracts, although some do require research output, ultimately create bigger tensions for a teaching-research nexus. In the 2018 report, we noted that there were no observable differences based on contract type, gender, or career stage (McKinley *et al.*, 2018, p 27). However, this was a snapshot at the time. The analysis of trends since 2012 suggest a different story that may better reflect the influence of policy priorities on awarding contracts. Decades ago, Ricketts (1990) described what we understood to be the manipulation of contracts and workload models to meet changing policy priorities and sector demands. While standard academic contracts may have at one time been understood as encompassing a holistic endeavour of teaching and research, it seems varying interpretations of these contracts, particularly those prioritising research, may have led to an increase in teaching-only contracts to ensure teaching is covered.

The varying interpretations of standard academic contracts were a contentious but significant point of the 2021 study. In our qualitative data, workload models were sometimes more concrete, such as the 40/40/20 model, or the understanding that as 80% of the pay for a standard academic contract comes from tuition fees, that much should be allocated to teaching efforts. However, in general, contract interpretations and workload models were discussed more broadly. This may be part of the ideas explained by Rawolle *et al.* (2017) as contracts can be conflated with job descriptions and progression criteria to create conditions

of governance, so individuals comply with institutional goals. This was seen in part when interviewees showed awareness of competing discourses during the pandemic, of making allowances whilst also making it impossible for those allowances to be made. Ricketts' (1990) point, that the lack of clarity between the contract and the market, can make space for confusion which can be exploited for the advantage of some (individuals and universities) and the disadvantage of others.

Concerning the pandemic, our interview data showed that it ultimately had little impact on contract awarding. Some did report an increase in permanent contracts in response to the pandemic, however others made the point that such increases were part of a trend already underway. Considering contract interpretation, some did point out that teaching took priority over research (at an institutional level) in recognition that a great deal of effort was needed to shift to emergency remote teaching and provide online support for students that did not previously exist in the same capacity. While those at the institutions in our study reported successful management of the situation through an increase in teaching efforts, there were some important concerns raised regarding the way this shift in effort may have affected different people. In particular women (see Bhopal, 2020), those with young children (see Amsler & Mottler, 2019) and those who are early career researchers (see Kınikoğlu & Can, 2021), adding further to gender inequalities.

## 5.2 Inequalities

In the 2018 report, we found a major challenge to the idea of a teaching-research nexus was systemic inequality. At that time, participants reported progression barriers based on such inequality for which career stage and an emphasis on teaching presented the greatest challenges (McKinley *et al.*, pp 29-30). Through our investigation of the impact of academic contracts on a teaching-research nexus, we found three points that would benefit from further investigation: the impact of the rising proportion of teaching-only contracts, the impact of gender and race on interpretations of academic contracts, and the impact of stress brought on by the pandemic.

With trends showing the increased proportion of permanent teaching-only contracts, this could be viewed at an institutional level as a positive development, since zero-hours casual contracts, which are often teaching-only, may be less desirable (Ndzi, 2021). However, the situation seems to be complex and there are differing opinions. According to our qualitative data, permanent, teaching-only contracts are perceived as detrimental for career progression, some even indicating that junior academics taking permanent teaching-only contracts may have diminished their chances of developing a research profile on the path toward academic promotion. Conversely, others described these contracts as great opportunities (with one senior manager describing them as highly desirable), highlighting the lack of research pressure in such contracts, and allowances for other life choices (see Hughes, 2021, on entering parenthood once on a permanent contract).



Individual personal factors ultimately play a substantial, if unwritten, role in academic contract interpretations and workloads. Race has been highlighted as a substantial factor (Arday & Mirza, 2019; Atkinson *et al.*, 2018) as has gender (Bhopal, 2020). Our findings reflected a keen understanding of the inequalities faced by women in particular and, whilst acknowledging that some work was underway to address these, as with the Athena Swan initiative, fewer senior staff focused on racial inequalities, although there was some awareness of this, possibly having come to the fore during the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020. This unequal prioritisation of disadvantaged groups in the sector has recently been discussed (Bhopal & Henderson, 2021). Initiatives like the Race Equality Charter were mentioned as being implemented in some universities, but it is notable that all but one of the interviewees in this study were white and the majority were male. The lack of opportunities for black academics, and particularly black women, to progress to professorial level is an abiding issue in higher education (Rollock, 2021) which contracting trends reflect, with growth in numbers of ethnic minorities being notable in teaching-only contracts. The numbers remain very small in HSS, as a proportion of the wider-HSS section of HE and white sanction (Miller 2016) continues to be relied on for those academics to progress.

Finally, stress is a factor that is in much greater need of consideration regarding contract interpretation and workload. It seems to be overlooked or misunderstood. We refer here, as an example, to stress related to parenthood. While one senior manager suggested maternity leave could provide an opportunity to write, women who had childcare responsibilities during school closures because of COVID were perceived by some senior academics as having suffered, struggling to keep up with their research under the increased workload of teaching whilst trying to supervise children. O'Neill (2021, p 175) explains, "The uncertain temporalities of 'flexible' 'precarious' academic contracts wreak havoc with biographical trajectories..." but also points out that while the pandemic has brought much of this precarity and stress to the surface, it has been there for some time as part of the competitive nature of neoliberal higher education, even relying on that stress to help fuel competition.

### 5.3 (Re)conceptualising a teaching-research nexus in 2021

The idea of a teaching-research nexus as an integrated endeavour is one that is contested (McKenzie *et al.*, 2018; McKinley *et al.*, 2021) and as this study has shown, challenged by varying interpretations of academic contracts. The idea that there is a *standard* academic contract in the UK does not seem to be widely understood. The varied understanding has previously been explained based on disciplinary differences (Mathieson, 2019), with those in the humanities and social sciences, such as Horta and Santos (2020) drawing on examples of constrained research in the face of cost-effectiveness pressures. Based on the data collected for this study, it seems academic contracts may be part of that constraint, exacerbating an already tense relationship between teaching and research.

In conceptualising a teaching-research nexus, the quantitative data trends show the increased proportion of permanent part-time teaching-only contracts, who are more likely to be women, may be part of the shifting understanding of what it means to be an academic (see Macfarlane, 2021). With more teaching-only contracts, for which there may still be research requirements, a teaching-research nexus is strained as it is left to those on standard academic contracts to inhabit a balance of teaching and research. A nexus is also ultimately more achievable for those on standard academic contracts in terms of career progression. However, based on our qualitative data, it seems the main problem with conceptualising the teaching-research nexus is trying to do so at an individual level, rather than at a departmental or faculty/school level. Sector conditions, it seems, ultimately do not support an individual-level teaching-research nexus, but there are important discussions needed as to how a nexus can be acknowledged in individual academics if there is ever to be any future for the holistic academic.

#### 6. Conclusion: implications for the teaching-research nexus in the HSS in UK HE.

The outdated Humboldtian idea of a close connection between individual academics' research and teaching has been found to be problematic, with limited usefulness for representing post-war, modern university practice. However, the nexus is a potent concept that exists in discourse and is reified in standard academic contracts, helping define academics in relation to their practice. In this respect, the nexus can be a helpful analytical tool to explore the messy realities of academic work.

Analysis of contracts has shown how the sector has responded to shifts in governmental policy, in ways that have brought problems for some HSS disciplines that are in danger of being marginalised by government policy or left behind as the research and innovation focus intensifies. The qualitative data gave plentiful examples of the unquestioning acceptance of the nexus as an ideal, and as many examples of how and why this was difficult in practice.

We also found that there were serious implications for some groups of people within HSS, in a system where contract interpretation is not fixed and those in power are able to advance particular individual agendas. Nonetheless, there are positives when an individual is equitably-minded and we heard from managers who were working to remove casualised labour from academia. Although precarity may be decreasing, it still exists and is an issue for ECRs. While research remains the dominant marker of academic quality, those working on the rising numbers of teaching-only contracts will be disadvantaged. That women and ethnic minorities are disproportionately represented in teaching-only contracts indicates likely continuation of inequalities experienced by these groups.

COVID-19 served to further emphasise some of the financial strains that universities have been labouring under as well as highlighting these continuing inequalities. These are early indicators, however, with several universities seeing the pandemic as a disruption to existing institutional strategies rather than causing a directional pivot.

The findings of this study need to be read with its limitations in mind. These include the limitations of working with a secondary quantitative data set and modifications to the categorisation of the types of university that had to be made from the methodology we used in the 2018 study. The timing of the work, conducted at the end of the academic year, meant that there were fewer academics available to take part in the qualitative phase than there may have been at other times of the year. This, and the short time scale, prevented us securing a participant from Northern Ireland or conducting more than a pilot of an experimental workshop.

This may be a timely moment to reflect on the dependency on student fees in funding the sector and query the old-fashioned prominence given to research, especially since only 20% comes from the REF and 80% is from student fees. Since financial pressures may ensue following COVID, universities' initial prioritisation of teaching over research may precipitate a new attention to the nexus so that teaching gains greater prominence. However, prevalent discourse perpetuating assumptions about the 40/40/20 standard academic contract and the symbiotic relationship between research and teaching must be critically examined in future research.

Efforts to systematise aspects of higher education, whether external, such as the REF star-ratings, or internal, like workload model deployment, can be used as tools by those in power, exploited strategically towards perceived advantages or away from perceived threats in the sector in ways that threaten to bifurcate teaching and research. Contractual and sectoral complexity obfuscates in ways that may enable academics or politicians in positions of power to affect how research and teaching play out, ultimately having implications for the nexus.

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## Teaching-research nexus in Higher Education: Academic Contracts

### Senior Manager Interview Questions

British Academy Funded Project, June 2021

1. What is your role in the university and how long have you been here?
2. Do you think your university explicitly champions a close relationship between teaching and research? In what ways? If not explicitly, does it do so implicitly?

**Now, can you focus on how contracts might support or limit the nexus in practice.**

3. What kind of academic contracts are you aware of at your university?
4. How and in what ways do you think the nexus is affected by those different contract types? Do any support a close connection? Do any limit the closeness of connection?
5. How would you describe trends in contract awarding since you have been here, but prior to March 2020? What do you think influenced these trends  
*Prompts: preparation for REF? TEF? finances? strikes? global rankings?*

**Now, think about the period of time since COVID-19.**

6. Can you reflect on any changes in contract awarding practice since March 2020. Did any fixed-term (teaching or research) contracts become permanent, or vice versa? If so, why?  
*Prompts: were the influences e.g. planned redundancies at the end of 2019/20; REF, BREXIT and/or COVID?*
7. Do you have any concerns about how the changes you identify might have an impact on the nexus? Are there any advantages? How permanent do you think these changes might be?
8. If concerns about the nexus in Q7, follow with:  
How and in what ways do you think different\* groups of people have been differently affected? (\*Different by contract or in other ways; for instance, by gender).  
*Prompts: differences by gender, ethnicity, seniority, age, (dis)ability, nationality?*
9. Does your university already have promotion pathways for staff who are on teaching or research-only contracts as well as on traditional contracts?  
How might recent changes in contracting might affect promotion prospects for people on different contract types?
10. Is there anything further you would like to reflect on regarding contracts in your university?

Thank you for your time.