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# Precarity and the pandemic: an inquiry into the impact of Covid19 on the working lives of non-permanent educators in post-compulsory education in Ireland

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## ABSTRACT

The paper analyses how educators employed on non-permanent contracts in the non-compulsory education sector in Ireland have fared during the Covid 19 pandemic. These employees were starting from a low base in relation to the terms and conditions of their employment when their places of work dramatically pivoted online in March 2020. We argue the impacts of the pandemic were disproportionate, with people reporting such things as increased workloads, exclusion from HR update communications and little supports in creating workspaces in their homes. In this sense, we foreground how participants' places of work often assumed that all employees, precarious and permanent, had the same level of access to resources. Furthermore, given the gendered nature of caring responsibilities and the high proportion of women respondents in the research, we highlight the extent to which the pandemic increased caring responsibilities and impacted on female participants' capacity to work. Overall, we demonstrate how the Covid 19 pandemic hasn't, in itself, created unsatisfactory working conditions, rather, it has both exposed and accentuated existing shortfalls and further proved, if such proof was needed, that short-term actions compound the many problems with precarity in post-compulsory education work.

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## Introduction

In March 2020, two of us published an article in this very journal on the topic of *Precarious Professionalism* (O'Neill and Fitzsimons 2020). We evidenced how many people working in Irish further education settings were more likely to be precariously employed than their counterparts in schools and contended this wasn't only detrimental for their pay cheque and professional identities, it negatively impacted the institutions they worked for. Little did we know that things were about to get worse when, that same month, all education providers suddenly closed because of Covid 19, or that

by 2022, things would be far from back to normal. Although everyone working in post-compulsory education, which in an Irish context, we interpret as Higher Education (HE) and Further Education and Training (FE), has been affected, this paper presents further proof of disproportionate negative impacts on those employed on a non-permanent basis. Our interest in this topic grew from our own experiences of working on non-permanent contracts within post-compulsory education. We also turned to this research because of a shared sense that those of us, and around us, on non-permanent contracts were faring worse during Covid 19.

In the last ten years or so there has been both a growing awareness in public and political discourse and increased scholarly activity around the casualisation of much employment within global, national and regional contexts (Jaffe 2021; Standing 2011). Much discussion centres around a fundamental incongruence between what the United Nations (UN 2015) and the International Labour Organisation (ILO 2019) frame as a right to 'decent work' vis-à-vis the values, aspirations and practices of labour markets in late capitalism (Finnegan et al. 2019; Mercille and Murphy 2015). These changing working conditions are undoubtedly linked to the broad global dominance of neoliberal policies that seek to transfer economic risk onto the shoulders of workers through flexibilization, casualisation, self-responsibility and financial insecurity (Lopes and Dewan 2018).

Ireland is no exception. In 2019, a report by Research for New Economic Policies found extensive evidence of the growth of unstable working conditions in Ireland. The researchers describe a decline in the share of 'typical' employment for employees in Ireland i.e., full-time and permanent work replaced by 'growth in the share of several at-risk categories of precarious work, including in part-time work, underemployment, marginal part-time work, part-time temporary contracts and involuntary temporary contracts' (Nugent, Pembroke, and Taft 2019, 3). Similarly, Bobek, Pembroke and Wickham (2018, 9) measured a growth in what they call 'non-standard employment' which they see as part of the 'culmination of a broader conservative offensive that began with the neoliberal turn of the 1980s'. Although much of the initial attention on casualised work focused on low-paid, low-status work that was often done by the most economically marginalised members of society, there has been increasing focus on the precarious work in so-called professional occupations such as education. Maybe not surprisingly given the research skills of the field, a lot of scholarly and union activity in the last ten years or so has reflected inwards on its own occupational spaces to explore and expose the prevalence and impact of precarious working culture and practice in higher education (Courtois and O'Keefe 2015; UCU 2016).

This study analyses the experiences of c70 educators employed across Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and Further Education and Training

(FE) providers in Ireland who, as of 12 March 2020 self-identified as being employed on a casual, occasional or temporary basis. For context, Higher Education Institutions in Ireland include universities, institutes of technology/technological universities, and private independent colleges, all of which are located within the 'tertiary' or 'third-level' Irish education system. Further Education and Training in Ireland refers to a diversity of education and training that happens after second-level schooling, which is provided by a wide variety of organisations and institutions involved in the delivery of continuing education, community education, and training for young school leavers and adults. Both HEIs and FE providers offer non-compulsory education, i.e. education (unlike primary or second-level) that is not legally mandated. In the Irish context, education is compulsory from the ages of 6 to 16, or until students have completed three years of second-level education. Therefore, employees whose experiences were analysed for this study educate students outside these demographics.

Their participation was via an online anonymous questionnaire and recruitment was through a variety of networked and snowballing methods. To be eligible they consented to the statement: *I confirm that I am, or was recently, employed on a casual, occasional or temporary basis by a tertiary education provider (i.e., higher education, further education, community education, training service, etc.).* thirty-six percent of 70 survey respondents work in FE and 47% in HE with a further 11% working across both sectors, one in a private language school and one who was unemployed after her open-ended, full-time contract at a HEI was terminated in July 2020. Three quarters (76%) were female, 14% were male, and the remaining 10% preferred not to say (choosing the pronoun they over she/her or he/him). In terms of their highest qualification, 24% held a doctorate, 50% a masters and 13% a post-graduate teaching qualification. Eleven percent held a degree as their highest qualification and one respondent didn't have any recognisable qualifications. The majority (56%) were not members of a trade union.

We also draw from a semi-structured focus-group interview with ten women solely employed within HE. These women were purposefully selected via email where a broad invitation was extended to all those working precariously across two education departments in a leading Irish university. Participants opted-in to participating in an open discussion about the nature of their work and the challenge they face that relate to their non-permanent status by responding to the email. Again, each was employed on an occasional/casual basis; in other words, only contracted for the hours they teach. Each has been given a pseudonym. Two held doctorates as their highest qualification, and one was in the final stages of completing a doctorate. All remaining participants held a post-graduate qualification. Many held significant employment-related experience before joining the university. For example, Joyce had worked at a senior level within the public

sector, Marie describes a background in ‘leadership and management’ and Jo describes work in the ‘corporate sector’ before joining the university. Ann, Toni and Jo all work for other education providers outside of the university and Gloria works within the social care sector as well as her work within the university. Their contractual arrangements ranged from one being granted a 3-year contract after 5+ years working precariously to situations where women had no contract at all. One shared, ‘I don’t have a contract at the moment. I hope that post-PhD I will get one again [. . .], I have more education, but almost more precarity as a result’. This sense of being more qualified than ever before but worse terms and conditions of employment wasn’t an isolated experience.

A sequential mixed-method approach was used that drew from qualitative and quantitative methods as appropriate to the way in which the study unfolded (Tashakkori and Teddie 2010). Findings were collated and analysed through a series of recursive and reflexive steps which were attentive to both the emerging themes within the data, and the externally defined research objectives (Silverman 2011). The research was grounded in the ethics of the humanist and critical reflexive and participative practices associated with adult and community education as well as guided by the ethical principles and processes of Maynooth University and that of the European Commission (EC 2018).

### The pre-pandemic context

It is difficult to estimate the full extent of casualised labour in Irish universities that the participants in this research are part of. A conservative estimate, based on Cush (2016) and Loxley (2014), would suggest that nearly half of lecturing staff and up to 80% of researchers are employed on a non-permanent basis (O’Keefe and Courtois 2019). The phrase ‘non-permanent’ is instructive here as it suggests the heterogeneous nature of precarious or casualised work in education – even within precarious work, there is a kind of hierarchy: from the occasional, paid-per session teaching staff through to those on fixed-term contracts. Furthermore, as much as there may be different degrees of precarity, it is clear that different groups have very different experiences within the world of casualised work in education. Again O’Keefe & Courtois (2019, 475) draw particular attention to the gendered dimension of precarious work in universities:

As non-citizens of the academy, precarious women are subordinated and controlled by webs of power that strip them of respect and recognition in relation to work and legal status, decision-making and social realms. They stand outside the academic family, yet this family could not function without their labour. In turn, these working conditions mean increased vulnerability to harassment in the workplace, lack of salary progression, repeated career disruptions and risk of financial dependency. The

feminization of academic precarity thus widens structural inequality and serves to ensure the university remains a site of privilege.

The challenging personal realities of precarious working conditions and cultures on women can also be found in the reflexive writings of Flynn (2019) and Whelan (2021) who reveal the prolonged and damaging psychosocial impact of their precarious academic careers. What is striking, but not unfamiliar, in Flynn's (2019) account is the sense of invisibility of precarious and casualised staff in the decision-making spaces in their own workplaces:

Precarious and hourly-paid representatives need to be at departmental meetings, union meetings, network meetings, research meetings. We can't be locked out of funding, of contributing to the organisation we play a vital role in supporting. And while departmental meetings might be boring to some, to us the invite feels like inclusion, it feels like acknowledgement, it feels like we are seen (Flynn 2019, 54)

O'Keefe and Courtois (2019) recognise the highly visible work that Irish universities have done through programmes like Athena SWAN in addressing gender inequality amongst established staff in terms of promotions and professorships. However, given the disproportionate representation of women in precarious conditions and the significant impact of such conditions on their lives in many ways, they strongly argue that 'any calls for gender inequality in the university to be addressed must start, we believe, with precarity' (475). Indeed, some participants in our own research reported feeling left-out of Equality, Diversity and Inclusion structures including Athena SWAN.

Beyond Ireland, one UK study by Lopes and Dewan (2018) identified four key themes relating to the rights of HE staff employed on casual contracts: precarity, exploitation, lack of support, and lack of career progression. They also identified poor levels of communication between employees and their bosses. As they put it:

Respondents spoke about feeling isolated and not being part of the teaching teams in which they worked. For the most part, they were not invited to department meetings and were excluded from decision-making processes and planning of the curriculum (36).

This exclusion from the spaces of everyday power renders discussions and decision-making as only ever partially informed and, as a consequence, reduces the efficacy and quality of work by HEIs. This same study by Lopes & Dewan (2018, 33) describe disproportionate workloads between permanent and non-permanent staff as 'a highly contentious issue' and report participants feeling a sense of extreme pressure to take on work despite this concern, and a culture of workers having to 'say yes to everything' for fear of missing out on future work.

There has been some action by the Irish government to address this situation. In 2016, the *Report to the Minister for Education and Skills of the Chairperson of the Expert group on Fixed-Term and Part-Time Employment in Lecturing in Third Level Education in Ireland* (or the Cush Report, as it is more commonly known) confirmed an over-reliance on precarious, zero-hours contracts for employing lecturing staff at many HEIs. Two trade unions; the Irish Federation of University Teachers (IFUT) and the Teachers Union of Ireland (TUI) immediately welcomed the report's recommendations which included 1) a reduction in the waiting period for Contract of Indefinite Duration (CID) eligibility from three to two years, 2) that additional hours should be allocated to existing part-time lecturers, and 3) that there should be a dedicated process to address disputes relating to the recommendations of Cush.<sup>1</sup>

Although less visible in public discourse, non-permanent, unsatisfactory working conditions have been a feature of FE in Ireland for many years (Murtagh 2015, 22; O'Neill and Fitzsimons 2020). Again, government policy documents *The Green Paper: Adult Education in an Era of Learning* (Department of Education and Science 1998) and *The White Paper Learning for Life*, (Department of Education and Science 2000) both recognise significant precarity for staff. Over twenty years ago, *The Green Paper* articulated 'the sector compares poorly with the other education sectors in terms of the stability of employment, career options and structures for ongoing development of practitioners' (Department of Education and Science 1998, 109). Our most recent public FE strategy (2020–2024) again commits to addressing uneven staffing structures (SOLAS 2020, 56) but offer no pathway as to how this might be advanced.

In our research, 69% of those who responded to our online survey have been working precariously for four years or more. Of these, 23% had been employed on a casual basis for over ten years. As many as 62% were paid by the hour of which 49% were not paid if a class was cancelled. Thirty percent had no form of written contract with their employers, 39% had a contract with a fixed end date, and 10% had a contract with no end date. More than one quarter (26%) had more than one contract from more than one education provider. The majority (58%) worked part-time with 41% not paid outside of term time. Forty-two percent worked fulltime with 13% not paid outside of term time.

For focus-group participants, the longest term of service was 21 years with the same university, the shortest was one year. The average timeframe was c5-7 years. All participants had lectured on behalf of the university. Two were also engaged in research and three were involved in other non-lecturing duties that involved face-to-face time with students. The gendered dimension of precarious work most strongly emerged from these participants. Many had left full-time jobs often at a senior management level and

mostly because of care responsibilities. They then re-entered employment without the recognition of their previous work. The impacts of precarity in terms of quality of life, professional identity and job security were evident long before Covid 19 hit with many believing they were ‘not seen as staff’ - although working everywhere, they existed nowhere. Joyce’s work with the university is ‘across three departments’ meaning, in her own words ‘I’m very precarious, very stretched’. Ann describes her relationship with the university like this:

I lectured on the [names a full 5-credit module], I was also a guest lecturer with the same department on another module. I have also been a guest lecturer with [names a second department], and [names another department], and [names another department]. Gosh, I think for seven years or so. And I’m also on the [names an internal university committee].

Others too worked across a range of programmes and often with a lot of responsibility, ‘I am actually coordinating three courses myself and facilitating on them’ Jo explains, continuing ‘and there’s been a massive amount of work with the department over the last few years. I’ve rewritten courses, you know, but I still don’t feel part of the department as such, in a way, you know, which is [...] kind of strange’. Jo returns to this point later on in the research conversations to re-emphasise the point:

But I think the main issue is we don’t have a sort of, we’re not seen as staff as such. You know, we’re, we’re just occasional workers, and we come in and out. Really, we don’t really have that sort of, and I don’t really have a sense of being part of the department.

These employees were therefore starting from a low base in relation to the terms and conditions of their employment when their places of work dramatically and suddenly pivoted online in March 2020.

### **The impact of Covid 19**

Whilst the global pandemic has affected the working conditions of all employees, research by Matilla-Santander et al. (2021) has shown that, worldwide, workers trapped in precarious employment are amongst those most affected. Their research predicts things will only get worse for these workers as their jobs become more unstable. Many will be laid off without being officially made redundant, will be exposed to serious stressors and even that precarious work may contribute to the ongoing spread of the virus because, as Matilla-Santander, et al. put it, ‘without paid sick leave, they will be forced to work while sick to avoid losing income or a job’ (227). Overall, women are 1.8 times more likely to lose their job during the pandemic (Madgavkar et al. 2020) and many of those on the frontline of education also



shouldered additional domestic chores such as home-schooling and care-work.

Given the starting point outlined thus far, it is not difficult to comprehend that the working realities for precarious educators have not been enhanced since the advent of the Covid 19 pandemic. The research that is emerging, again, draws attention to the gendered nature of this inequality. In her autoethnographic account of being precarious in the pandemic, Whelan (2021) draws attention, with full ironic awareness, to the constant flow of communication laced in the language of care from her university as the reality of working in Covid settled in. Such care-laden communications consoled staff on the difficulties of working in such ‘uncertain’ conditions:

[...] there is an irony in this acknowledgement of uncertainty too. For the precariously employed researcher or academic, uncertainty is part and parcel of existence and has merely been exacerbated by the pandemic. My personal uncertainty has been grinding, burrowing inward, tempering and infecting all my experiences, my small triumphs, my bigger successes and my failures too. This is because precarity itself feels like failure. I feel I have failed by still being precarious. Sometimes this takes the form of feeling undervalued, on other occasions it is simply a case of feeling that I must not be ‘good enough’ to warrant security. My precarity, therefore, is something I am always aware of, yet it did begin to become more pronounced and raise new questions in the wake of ... COVID-19 (581).

In our study, two people lost their job because of the pandemic. More broadly, employment patterns remained relatively consistent although there was a slight shift towards part-time employment. Examined sectorally, there was greater disruption to the working lives for those working across more than one HE, or those working in both HE and FE contexts and, especially, for those working exclusively in FE settings. One respondent sets the scene as how they experienced the sudden shift online.

There was a ‘business as usual’ approach that I found very unhelpful. I think a message that it is not business as usual would have been most welcomed. I found a continued pressure and increased pressure to get work done regardless of the situation people found themselves in. The programme I worked on was targeting the most hard to reach, disadvantaged communities and many of these communities were and are high risk categories in terms of health. I feel it was almost unethical to be approaching them, in the early months of the pandemic, about educational prospects when they and their communities were facing such a huge and unprecedented health threat.

Institutional attempts to perform ‘normality’ was also expressed in several participants’ concerns over what would have happened to their positions or their pay if they had gotten sick over the course of their duties. Several respondents commented about the sudden transition to working from home, and the challenges and possibilities that this brought. One explains ‘this shift to working from home took quite some time to get used to and personally I would prefer to do at least some of my work in the building.’

Fifty-five percent had very little contact with other employees and 42% reported having no dedicated workspace in their home with 18% without a suitable computer. Some people worried at the prospect of losing their job based on internet and laptop access issues. To give some examples, one person working in FE shared the anguish when their personal laptop and tablet both broke during the pandemic, but that they could not afford to replace either given the money they lost because of the closures. They wrote of how they became ‘really anxious’ about this, especially around whether their job would be at risk: ‘if I didn’t have the up-to-date equipment. I felt like another tutor would be preferred over me if I didn’t have access to an up-to-date laptop, a printer etc’. In another example,

I am not set up properly to work at home and do not have available resources to create a suitable office with updated equipment (computer tech, office furniture, etc.). As a result, I have been making do with a very old laptop and non-ergonomic equipment. This is not an ideal and not sustainable long term.

Overall 37% worked (and often continue to work) with poor internet access.

The questionnaire prompted respondents to respond to the following statement ‘Since the Covid 19 pandemic began, I have been kept up to date with changes at my workplace(s) through regular communications from my employers.’ Fifty-one percent agreed (with 20% strongly agreeing), 32% disagreed (with 20% strongly disagreeing) and 17% were not sure. With a small number of exceptions, there was an almost unanimous frustration with, and even anger towards, Human Resource departments, with many respondents describing their relationship with them as non-existent at best, and hostile and fearful at worst (owed largely to poor communication, cultures of surveillance, changes in contractual terms and conditions, and dismissiveness towards the idea of union membership, among other points). For focus group participants, overall, there was a sense that there was little or no supports for people who fell outside of the realm of having a fixed-term or permanent contract with the university. Instead, there is a sense that a deficit model prevailed despite these workers often being in the front line in terms of the student experience. There was little hope that this would change. Or as Jo puts it ‘Education is so precarious and it’s so hard to get a permanent position. Or is there such a thing anymore? And all the years you have to do before you get to CID and all of that. So? Yeah, I think it’s very difficult’. This takes its toll on people. Sandra’s point, echoed by other participants, stresses the dehumanising dynamic of institutions’ treatment of non-permanent workers:

They need to be aware of the impact that the legalistic approach to treating people is having on us. And work from a resource and benefit model and not a deficit model. maybe just focused on the HR department it seems to me like, you know, that they’re

very powerful within the university. They're not there for the employees at all, they're there for the legalistic outcomes.

Another participant describes how Covid 19 had a direct impact on her capacity to create the publications required to seek a more permanent academic job. She elaborates 'that pivotal online learning has taken up so much time, and I have gotten myself in a situation where I get lots of teaching work, but it leaves me no time at all.'

Overall, the greatest impact reported was an increase in workload (60%). This occurred for a variety of reasons including how the increased demands on their time were directly related to the time-consuming and multifaceted nature of health and safety protocols expected of staff in the context of face-to-face teaching: 'There are so many new challenges since the Covid 19 pandemic – mask wearing; ensuring that learners clean their work area; motivating learners who are scared.' This latter point on responding to the emotional well-being of students was identified as a contributing factor to increased workload by another respondent: 'students constantly needing and wanting feedback and support online . . . ended up working extra hours and at weekends . . . at times felt some burn out'. Similar experiences were echoed by others with one writing of how they 'felt more pressured to "push" students through the module. Those who didn't have access to technology were disadvantaged and ignored. Emails from work and students were sent outside of work hours'. The need to be constantly 'on' in supporting students was echoed by others also. One participant recalled:

As the lockdown progressed into April and May, my workload continued to be heavier than before, as I found myself preparing additional resources and activities . . . for those students who couldn't make synchronous classes. The number of emails I received from students seeking assurance/clarification around course material also increased at an unanticipated rate at that time.

Significantly, some who spoke of the increase in student demand also referred to the lack of supports that they availed of, or received, in completing this work: 'A difference was that we were expected to extend our care of students. I felt concerned that students may be unable to participate fully from home, but I did not have contact with pastoral staff.' One directly attributed this increase to part-time tutors having to remedy the shortcomings of their permanent colleagues' engagements with students in the context of Covid 19:

But ever since the pandemic, the workload has increased too much. Students email out of working time and I try to ignore them when they email after 5 or during the weekends but then they accumulate for another moment . . . Not enough instructions are given to students so they are lost and contact me with basic questions that should have been solved earlier. Some senior teachers/lecturers are not taking much responsibility in the work. In my experience, they send simple emails trying to answer

people's questions but still unclear and tutors have to deal with much of the workload. They are also not adapting the lectures to these new dynamics which is irresponsible and lazy.

Inequalities in the distribution of work between non-permanent and permanent staff was repeated in another comment:

Very bad decision to leave the live interaction with students to PhD students and teaching assistants. This includes online and on-campus. Faculty in my department are not (as far as I am aware) required to go on campus at any stage of the semester. Effectively, faculty will not be exposed to Covid while we, PhD students and teaching assistants, potentially will be.

One respondent wrote of the negative effects extra work has had on their health: 'I feel overwhelmed by the amount of preparation that's involved in these online classes. I haven't felt like this since my first year as a secondary school teacher 22 years ago. My weekends are taken up by preparation and I feel physically ill because of the stress of the past number of weeks.' Other participants spoke of the time-consuming challenge of adapting their pedagogical practices to online contexts, claiming that online learning depends on a more 'traditional' approach at odds with the kinds of resources and materials they have used in the past:

A disproportionately large amount of my time has been spent planning online sessions and preparing new materials (PowerPoint presentations, finding images, finding videos, scanning reading material etc) to teach subjects that I've facilitated in interactive, activity-based ways in groups. If I was a lecturer who traditionally presented information and readings I'd have all of this from before. Unfortunately, my methods are not suitable for online delivery, so I have to change everything to another, more traditional method. The extra workload has meant I've no time for my other work.

The time-consuming nature of adapting previous classroom practices to virtual forms 'due to the altered state of class delivery' was noted by another participant in the study, alongside observations around the blurring of roles between non-permanent teaching staff and other colleagues:

There was a significant increase in staff meetings (remote) and expectation of contact with students. This checking in with and information gathering from students would normally have been the administrator's job.

Forty-two percent were denied access to their workplace and what is perhaps most significant here is how the closure of physical workspaces exposed, for this respondent, the already contingent nature of their working conditions: their capacity to conduct their work was largely reliant on the benevolence of others. The same respondent expanded on this further, writing of how their dependence on the 'generosity of others' workspaces

brought to the fore their marginal status across the various institutions for which they worked:

I no longer want to impose on colleagues and feel like my only safe space would end up being in my car, I feel like an outsider. I have had to turn down work as a result and it will have a major financial impact on me this year. It has made my situation worse rather than improved anything. More generally, the pandemic has exposed the systems that we reluctantly accept and get by with under normal circumstances; lack of basic terms and conditions, lack of office spaces, etc. It has also driven home the fact that I am not a full staff member of any place I work. I feel very insecure and disposable.

This was also true for those who had to transition to a blend of online and face-to-face work, with full-time and permanent staff being granted priority over part-time colleagues in relation to limited classroom space:

Since covid we have become invisible, considered part-timers (working 22 hours) we were not invited back for the first day of school. It is now October and we have been told there's no room for us as classes rooms have been allocated to other courses. It feels like despite all we worked over the years now we are an inconvenience. We do not have hours or courses.

Another respondent, working in FE, wrote of the specific anxieties they experienced with regard to issues like these:

Initially working from home until the ten-week contracts I was on all finished. None were renewed and I missed out on income from summer programmes and other classes that would have run. I had to replace a laptop battery to continue to work because I couldn't afford to replace the laptop. I was never offered a device to work on from the ETB [Education Training Board]. I had to pray the internet was working so I could teach remotely.

In this sense, the change in workspace conditions brought about by the Covid 19 pandemic can be seen as rendering visible inequities already at play in tertiary education, though perhaps not explicitly recognised. Several spoke of the financial toll online working has had, both in terms of the financial hit caused by the cancellation of summer programmes, as well as in terms of the cost of internet access and access to appropriate technologies like laptops.

Another respondent commented that 'There was no recognition of our homes being used as our workplaces – happened to everyone but I really think that it's kind of different when you are not on a salary.' This latter point on the discrepancies in treatment between permanent and precariously employed staff in terms of working online was repeated by another study participant: 'I think there should have been an assessment of how set up people were to work from home. We were allowed to take chairs/screens etc, but I had no desk/chair/printer.' The financial implications of this inequity were reiterated by a third respondent in relation to part-time workers:

HEIs also made no allowances for costs associated [with working from home]. I have had to upgrade my broadband, buy a desk, chair and AV equipment in order to pivot. Fulltime staff were offered laptops/access to their offices to collect equipment, no such arrangements were made for PT [part-time] staff. Furthermore, [Named university] has made Microsoft Office access online only from September 2020 for PT staff, which again levies an extra unexpected cost . . .

As one participant, also working in HE made clear:

The expectation is that I have access to the necessary technology (and know how) to run tutorials from home. I have had to buy a webcam because I use a large TV screen as a monitor and the TV has no camera. I have also bought noise cancelling earphones as a neighbour is building and it would be impossible to conduct online tutorial with the noise. Somebody from the university should have been in touch to ensure I had both the technology, know how, and physical space to run the tutorials. There should be a link person to contact in case of problems.

This respondent's comments about cost implications of going online were echoed by others although a small number of respondents spoke of how their place of work recompensed them for the financial cost of working from home. This varied from a once-off, ten-euro contribution to broadband bills, to an additional twelve hours' pay. People also absorbed costs incurred by the inequities experienced by students, with some respondents paying for additional resources out of their own pocket like this FE educator who commented that 'I had to post work to students who couldn't access or use digital or online materials and so was down money because of this as I couldn't access petty cash'.

Despite clearly having more work to do, 46% of survey respondents reported a reduction in their pay which they attributed to the pandemic. Indeed, many respondents wrote about the invisible labour that often comes with teaching precariously in higher and further education, from session planning during non-term times, to not being able to claim for certain social welfare supports (like the pandemic unemployment payment) despite their minimal hours. Moreover, fresh expectations on part-time staff to attend training around online learning emerged without getting paid for this attendance. One respondent working in FE wrote about their mixed, but intensive, experiences of completing online CPD:

THE AMOUNT of webinars was outrageous. The Teaching Council [Irish registry of teachers] ran webinar of particularly low quality of content or usefulness. Ahead [disability rights organisation] had some excellent content and NALA [adult literacy organisation] were hit and miss. I felt pressure to educate myself on pedagogy for teaching online and completed a 20+ hour Open University course. We also had to attend ETB-run CPD using [Microsoft] TEAMS.

And while some participants valued this kind of input ('I have learned so much about technology through a lot of CPD during the summer'), it is also

clear that the majority felt it should have been recompensed. The following observation from a HE educator is incisive in this regard:

It is not only the prep of pre-recorded materials, but the need to do more in terms of engagement is not being recompensed. Additional pay should have been offered for casual teaching. I have asked [University A] for additional pay but haven't received a response. Training for casual staff remains a significant problem. [University B] for example have an incredibly complex system of instructional videos (as do University C) with the assumption that ALL users of their systems are full time staff members who have the time to watch 20 x 20 minute videos to work out how to do one task.

In another example,

I believe that equipment or some sort of fee towards all my additional costs outside of the hourly rate should have been provided to me by all these public sector bodies. Also, time for all the additional training - there was no allowance for learning to use MS Teams or zoom by any of the establishments except for one. (Working across both HE and FE)

Other impacts of the pandemic were also felt with 22% reporting being unwell and 34% managing additional care burdens. Respondents spoke about teaching whilst children were often in the same room. At the same time, however, some identified positive changes. One participant, for instance, wrote of how working from home provided a greater work/life balance, particularly in relation to the demands of commuting and child-care: 'I have a child and much prefer to work at home. I am personally much happier and have a better work/life balance. I am more productive and less tired from commuting.' This sentiment was echoed by a second respondent who wrote of how they expended 'far fewer resources overall when working remotely (e.g., time, travel, etc.). I was already very familiar with remote working/teaching platforms so the shift online wasn't too difficult overall.' A third participant also saw dimensions of their online working life as valuable, claiming that the pandemic 'helped me to recalculate my work/life balance while working from home.' One part-time tutor who was also completing a PhD saw reductions in their teaching hours due to Covid-related shifts as opportunities for reducing their workload, therefore allowing them to devote more time to their studies. Another wrote of how they 'felt supported and treated well in some areas in terms of extra pay and extra time to get courses ready online', while others embraced the reduced class sizes that physical distancing necessitated in face-to-face spaces: 'They have reduced class sizes to meet social distancing criteria. This is allowing some good, focused work to happen in small groups.' These varied experiences point to the complex, and at times conflicting, dynamics at play in relation to precarity and the pandemic. In what follows, we signal how this ambiguity has also played out for our respondents during the pandemic in the context of their workplace relationships.

## Discussion

Higher education and further education institutions not only benefit hugely from the dedication and efforts of the many staff they have who are employed under the terms and conditions described throughout this study, they fundamentally rely on these workers if they are to deliver the programmes they advertise. Yet non-compulsory education providers repeatedly avoid embracing these benefits or renumeration people as they should. Instead, they relegate these employees to a continual cycle of uncertainty and to significant stressors that have very real impacts on a person's capacity to earn a decent wage, engage in meaningful professional development, borrow money to pay for their housing and transport, and other essential features of everyday life (Bobek, Pembroke, and Wickham 2018; Courtois and O'Keefe 2015; Cush 2016; Lopes and Dewan 2018; Nugent, Pembroke, and Taft 2019; O'Keefe and Courtois 2019; O'Neill and Fitzsimons 2020; Pembroke 2018; UCU 2016; Whelan 2021). Significantly, the impact of Covid 19 has revealed the unequal working conditions already experienced by non-permanent staff prior to the pandemic.

Indeed, what is striking when we look across the data of the many experienced and highly qualified participants involved in this research is that Covid did not, in any great sense, create new problems for non-permanent workers in higher and further education. Instead, what is disturbingly clear is how the pandemic has served to expose and accentuate long-standing inequalities in the working lives of educators who are at the centre of the teaching and research activity of Irish universities and centres of adult and further education. Given the gendered nature of caring responsibilities and the high proportion of women respondents in the research, it may be no surprise that our research highlights the extent to which the pandemic increased caring responsibilities and impacted on participants' capacity to work. Moving forward, more in-depth study is needed on the specifically gendered nature of precarity among educators in non-compulsory education, both in Ireland and further afield. In particular, an intersectional approach (i.e. one that pays attention to the complex ways in which experiences across matrices of gender, race, sexual orientation, socio-economic class, disability, etc. cross-cut and compound one another) would be helpful to such scholarship in offering a more layered and multi-faceted perspective on precarity and its relationship to the Covid 19 pandemic.

Reflecting on this study, it is also hard to ignore just how invisible and unrecognised many precarious staff felt during the early days and how this was exacerbated by poor communications between HE institutions, in particular, and these staff. This failure to keep employees in the loop compounded an inequitable reality where not only is their current work



often unseen, but also aggravated the sense to which their prior experience, qualifications and skills are airbrushed out of the consciousness of their employers. Isolation didn't emerge so strongly with those working in FE. This could be because of strong industry-based relationships and an established employment pathway from industry into FE. Although, this absence in the findings may also be located in the methodological as this sense of isolation and invisibility emerged very strongly from the HE-only focus group dialogues. Further dialogue-based inquiry with FE practitioners would be important to explore the prevalence of such alienating working cultures in that sector. More broadly there is a sense of disconnectedness from institutional communications systems and, in particular, planning and evaluation processes associated directly with their work. As well as feeling 'out of the loop' in terms of evolving institutional and departmental policies and responses to the pandemic, many workers in our research also felt isolated from their peers and colleagues on a more social level which, at times, was distressing for them. Although there were instances of individual kindness and humanity from some managerial staff, the system remains unfair and damaging to the health, well-being and career prospects of non-permanent educators. Future research, then, would benefit from engaging constructively with the challenge of building inclusive educational communities in a post-pandemic context. Engagements with the experiences of students, precariously employed administrators, support, cleaning and catering staff, as well as those on permanent contracts, would be valuable in shedding light on some possibilities in this regard.

One of the many logistical challenges of precarious working lives is not having the access to dedicated space, technology or training. There was, it seems, in institutional responses to the pandemic, almost a presumption that all staff were permanent – or, at least, enjoyed the resource privileges of permanent and secure work. But many, if not most, non-permanent workers use their own computers, find (or fight for) their own spaces to work and are, very often, excluded from any communication on training not directly related to their teaching or research duties. When they were included, this was often without remuneration and occurred with an existing culture where non-permanent staff feel obliged to say yes to everything they are asked to do (Lopes and Dewan 2018, 33). As such, while permanent staff were supported in their transition to a remote working context, our research seems to confirm that there was very little institutional support provided for non-permanent staff. Although there were aspects relating to flexibility that suited some participants, the pandemic has deepened that sense of non-permanent workers' invisibility. The positive aspects of new working arrangements will benefit permanent or the least precarious workers who are being given institutional support to work remotely. The poor nature of institutional relationships is apparent as most participants report, at best,

unhelpful or poor relationships with the human resources department of their institutions. In terms of progressing research on academic precarity, it would be valuable to gauge a more in-depth understanding of the relationship between university infrastructure and the precariously employed, in particular the factors that erode the conditions for fruitful relationships between precarious educators and the human resource departments of their institutions. The above point on ICT access also points to the need for greater self-reflexivity on the part of research teams conducting research with precariously employed educators. Indeed, our own study assumed potential participants had access to the internet in order to engage in the online survey. While this was, to a point, unavoidable in the context of local lockdowns and social distancing measures, this is certainly something future researchers should be cognisant of in making ethical choices around research design and other methodological considerations.

The government commissioned Cush report offers a pathway for improved employment for higher education workers and internally, unions continue to push for greater use of university tutor contracts (Cush 2016). Furthermore, the evolution of a professional, and high-quality further education system with clear pathways into higher education has, increasingly, accumulated political and policy priority (DES 2020; DFHERIS & HEA 2021). There is much to applaud in such policy developments and promises. However, without an unambiguous commitment to the development of a sustainable HE and FE workforce which are at the forefront of researching, developing and delivering programmes and pathways, the evolution of an interconnected, high quality further and higher education will remain as just that – a political promise.

It is striking to see the low levels of union membership and it is unclear, from this research, why membership is so low. Everyone has the right to join a trade union and each union has a right to engage in collective bargaining, as protected in *The Universal Declaration on Human Rights* (Article 23.4). The reality however is that precariously employed staff often fall outside of collective bargaining agreements and, for those working in further education where trade union membership is underdeveloped. Trade union membership numbers may also be influenced by the lack of institutional communication - isolation from colleagues does not enhance opportunities for information and conversations around the benefits of union membership to occur. It may be that the many workers who don't feel part of the institutional culture where they work carry this sense of alienation into thoughts about union membership – that they don't see that the unions are there for them. We must also acknowledge some criticisms of trade unions themselves and there is no denying trade union membership has shrunk across the board more broadly. Kieran Allen (2013, 134–136) cites a gap between ordinary trade union members and union officials and is critical of a bureaucratisation of

unions that has left officials out of touch with the realities of its members and co-opted by the lure of social partnership arrangements that ultimately failed to deliver for most workers. There is, it seems, work to be done in and across unions in working out how best to serve the most marginal and invisible of educators in the country. For a start, there may be alliances that could be forged with unions that represent similarly exploited workers in the early childhood education sector. Further scholarship on how such alliances could be forged in ways that are cognisant of worker needs and sustainable on a long-term basis would be valuable.

We believe institutions and departments should create opportunities for meaningful awareness-raising of the work of non-permanent educators and must examine their communication, evaluation and planning processes and ensure that such processes do not exclude, explicitly or implicitly, non-permanent staff who contribute to their programmes. They should also ensure equity in visibility on their internal and public-facing platforms for staff (permanent or non-permanent) who are responsible for contributing to the work of that institution/department and allocate resources and supports to teaching and research staff without discrimination on contractual status. We also think trade unions should collaborate to ensure the fragmented community of non-permanent workers identified in this research can be represented by a coherent and holistic pan-union movement. Non-permanent educators working across institutions and sectors should be supported in building communities of practitioners which would allow for the development of networks for professional and career opportunities as well as creating an authentic space for emotional and occupational support and identity. More broadly, permanent members of academic and teaching staff must turn the mirror on their own behaviour in perpetuating the prevalence of precarity in both HE and FE contexts. Staff must familiarise themselves with the agreed terms of Cush (or its equivalent in other jurisdictions) and ensure that their own practice in engaging non-permanent staff is in line with the report's guidelines. Unionised permanent educators working in non-compulsory settings should stand up for their colleagues who may not be protected by collective agreement or are non-union and fight for better working conditions for those they teach alongside (Jaffe 2021, 117–118). The personal, educational and systemic damage caused by precarious working conditions and cultures that have been exacerbated by the pandemic need to be confronted by collective and sustained action across the post-compulsory workforce.

## Note

1. IFUT have been particularly proactive in advancing workers entitlements through Cush and have settled several cases through this process.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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