

## **PG teaching staff at St Andrews- state of play (22.10.20)**

The challenge for PG teaching staff at St Andrews during the COVID-19 pandemic has been much the same as it was before the pandemic—while being largely forgotten, our precarity has been exploited. This is nothing new. We faced the same problem before the pandemic, although it has taken new forms given the challenges of the current semester.

PG teaching staff are forgotten about in large part because, being simultaneously students and staff, we do not fall cleanly into anyone's remit. When an email about teaching goes out to our school's all staff list, who is responsible for forwarding it to us? Our Director of Teaching, our Director of Postgraduate Studies, or some other line manager? The same problem exists among university administration. Are we teaching staff and therefore under the remit of the VP of Education or are we postgrads and therefore under the remit of the Provost?

PG teaching staff are exploited because we are cheap, we need the money, and we need teaching experience. A school's PhDs can cover dozens of tutorial groups for the same cost as a single lectureship. Because jobs are scarce and full funding for PhDs is far from universal at the University of St Andrews, PhDs scramble for any opportunity that provides both income and a bump to their CV.

## **PG teachers during COVID-19**

Put together, these two longstanding issues of PG teaching at St Andrews—falling through the cracks and precarity—have led to particularly harmful and undignified treatment of St Andrews' casual teaching staff during the COVID-19 pandemic. One way this has manifested itself is the lack of communication about our own health and safety. Vital health and safety information was either not communicated to us until after the start of the semester or not told to us at all. While the university attempted to communicate some health and safety information to PG teaching staff during week 0, the email only went to PhDs who had taught in the spring. In my role as a tutor, I was forwarded an out-of-date version of the Using University Buildings Safely document only after I had agreed to teach for the semester. I know another PG tutor who, after the finish of the second week of the term, had not yet been told they could appeal to Occupational Health to get an exception of in-person teaching for health reasons.

The longstanding challenges for PG teaching staff at St Andrews have also meant that COVID-19 related policy has missed problems unique to PG teaching staff. Learning to use in-room tech and strategizing about how to use it effectively takes significant time and energy, but since it has never been an issue before, there is no policy requiring schools to pay us for it. Logistical support was not made available to us during the online-only portion of the semester. We were not given access to university teaching tech funds, and very few PhDs currently have access to permanent offices. This meant that PG teaching staff who have low-quality webcams and inadequate internet or commuters scheduled to teach in-person and online on the same day struggled to teach their online classes.

A large portion of PG teaching staff are also ineligible for sick pay during the pandemic. Many PG teaching staff only get paid 2-6 hours a week at £14.59, which puts them below the required £120 per week for Statutory Sick Pay. Our contracts also explicitly say we are not eligible for the university sick pay scheme. This means many PG teachers are going to work with the expectation that if they catch COVID-19 while teaching or while commuting to work, they will not get paid for time they are too sick to teach. Even those who earn £120 a week and are eligible for Statutory Sick Pay must choose between it and a pay cut, since Statutory Sick Pay only provides £95.85 per week.

All this has happened while PG teaching staff, continuing their tradition of providing excellent teaching in laboratory and small group settings and forming the backbone of many schools' subhonours teaching, have disproportionately taught in-person. Classes under 35 were encouraged by university administration to stay in-person, and so the subhonours tutorials and labs that PhD tutors and PhD demonstrators would have taught anyway remained in person while lectures, typically covered by permanently employed colleagues, were moved online. Consequently, in some teaching units a majority of in-person teaching is being done by PhDs. Now that in-person teaching has been phased in, I am teaching on a module where 100% of the in-person teaching is being done by PhDs on zero hours contracts and 100% of the online teaching—all lectures—is being done by permanent and fixed term colleagues.

### **Wardens Staff**

Teaching is not the only way in which the university relies on the labour of precarious PhDs. The university's halls of residence could not function without assistant wardens—live-in PhDs and former PhDs who manage students' pastoral care and out-of-hour operation of halls in exchange for rent, utilities, and meals at a dining hall.

Assistant wardens face identical problems with communication that they face as PhDs and PG teaching staff. Immediately after the first lockdown was called in March, they were only given around 3 days' notice to relocate to shared flats in David Russell Apartments or to find private accommodation on their own. At the start of this semester, assistant wardens were not briefed on COVID-related measures in halls until the Friday afternoon before international students were scheduled to move in on Monday. As the semester has progressed, assistant wardens have been informed of some policy changes at the same time as the students living in their halls.

Assistant wardens, many of whom cannot afford to not be assistant wardens, have seen their jobs transformed by COVID-19. Usually a job that focuses primarily on pastoral care and building community spirit, assistant wardens have seen their responsibilities shift towards being the front line of defence in halls against COVID outbreaks, and they are now expected to police student compliance of both University and ScotGov regulations. Assistant wardens—in their own homes—are regularly tasked with approaching students who are not wearing masks in common spaces as well as in narrow, poorly ventilated corridors where they are often unable to maintain 2m spacing. When security is not available, assistant wardens are also now tasked with breaking up parties, which can involve multiple households of unmasked students or students breaking quarantine and self-isolation. In some halls, PPE for assistant wardens was not delivered until week 3 of teaching.

### **What UCU St Andrews is doing**

UCU St Andrews has worked to spot and fix the ways in which PG teaching staff have fallen through the cracks during the COVID-19 pandemic. We raised the issue of a large proportion of PG teaching staff not being eligible for sick pay, and the university is now working to fix this for all casual teachers. We learned some schools were not paying PG tutors for mandatory training, and we have been supporting efforts by local PGRs to get paid for their time. To improve information flow to PhDs who teach, we put out a [PG and casual teacher fact sheet](#) designed to educate PGs about their rights and relevant university policy. By putting links to university health and safety docs, UCU guidance on COVID-19, university casual teaching policy, and worker's rights explanations in one place, we aimed to put as much relevant information into the hands of PG teachers in 2 pages as possible.