



Justice4CollegeSupervisorsFAQ for graduate students

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What kind of contracts do graduate students who work as hourly-paid supervisors have right now?

Most graduate students that supervise undergraduates do not have contracts at all: rather, the Colleges categorise us as self-employed workers. But unlike most independent contractors, undergraduate supervisors are not even provided with written Terms and Conditions for the work they are doing.

The only graduate students who have contracts are international students on Tier 4 Visas. This type of visa does not allow them to work as independent contractors, so a Tier 4 student's own College will hire them on a zero-hours contract. The student's College then receives and disburses payments from all the Colleges for which the student supervises.

In both arrangements, however, graduate students have no job security: no guaranteed number of hours, no paid sick leave, no paid parental leave. We cannot anticipate a fixed number of hours of work and, therefore, regular income. The recruitment for positions is opaque and payment can be delayed for months.

What kinds of contracts are CUCU and the SU campaigning for?

We are campaigning for secure employment contracts for all hourly-paid workers, at least guaranteed minimum hour contracts, but possibly [fractional contracts](#). These contracts would address many of the common problems graduate student workers face, including:

- a provision for minimum guaranteed hours,
- a payment timeline,
- a transparent recruitment process
- employment rights, including paid sick leave as well as parental leave.

How would this work in practice?

Many other UK universities already provide contracts to graduate student teachers. The University of Edinburgh, for example, [employs](#) graduate students on guaranteed minimum hour contracts. Graduate students apply to teach on individual courses and, once hired, are guaranteed an offer of a minimum number of hours of employment over the year. Other universities, such as [Sheffield](#) and [UCL](#), have also created new positions for graduate teaching assistants.

Our campaign will allow us, as graduate student workers, to shape new terms of employment, rather than letting university and college administrators dictate the terms of employment.

Would these contractual changes negatively affect those studying on Tier 4 visas?

No -- actually, by establishing an hourly pay rate and the number of hours people must work, they would actually solve many problems of overwork in supervision teaching generated by the underestimation of preparation time.

What is so important about having contracts, anyway?

In the higher education sector, better contracts are an essential step to reduce overwork, underpayment, and job insecurity. Ultimately, by recognising the actual hours that people work and by better remunerating undergraduate supervisors, secure contracts will create more jobs from which we can actually earn a decent living. In other words, contracts are essential to reduce the pervasive casualisation of academic labour - the use of short-term, fixed-term, or zero-hour contracts rather than permanent or stable positions. Members of Cambridge UCU have been working for years to reduce the number of [casualised positions](#) at our university. The supervision campaign targets one persuasive form of casualised employment at Cambridge.

Would a contract require PhD students to commit to more time-intensive roles?

No. We are campaigning for better terms of employment for the work we already do. Right now, PhD students might supervise on a termly or annual basis, but without guarantees. We are fighting to do the same job but with better pay, secure hours, and paid training. If properly paid for the work we do, we are likely to end up working less for a higher salary.

Why do we need higher pay?

At the moment, the supervision pay rate is calculated according to a formula that remunerates 1h30 for the preparation and delivery of the supervision (independently from the number of students), plus 20 minutes of marking (per student, capped at a maximum of 4 students), at an hourly rate of 17 GBP/hour. Given that supervisions last one hour each, this rate suggests that preparing for a supervision takes only 30 minutes, including both administrative work, such as arranging a time with students, booking a room, and writing CamCORS reports, as well as academic work, including reading new material and preparing the class' structure. Many of us regularly spend much more time preparing for supervisions, especially given that graduate students often supervise on topics which are not their primary area of study. In these cases, preparing for a supervision might require reading several new monographs -- a task impossible to accomplish in just thirty minutes. If we spend more than 3 hours preparing for a 1-to-1 supervision, our actual pay falls below the National Living Wage (£ 8.91).

We have heard the argument that this unpaid preparation time is a one-off occurrence, only necessary the first time we teach on a paper, and therefore it is acceptable to only compensate graduate student workers for 30 minutes of preparation. Perhaps if graduate students had permanent contracts to supervise on the same paper year after year, such an argument might have some truth. As it stands, though, this is not how the supervision system is set up. There is no guarantee nor, even, an expectation that we will continue to teach on the same paper.

Additionally, graduate students do not set reading lists, which often change. More to the point, though, this argument rests on the idea that it is acceptable to expect hourly-paid workers to provide unpaid labour. And this is simply unacceptable.

Unfair remuneration is an urgent problem for graduate student workers. Without guaranteed hours, we rarely know how much income these jobs will provide. Many colleges take months to process payment. Graduate students live on small stipends, yet the colleges approach our employment as if the compensation is immaterial to us.

Will contracts mean I have fewer opportunities to teach and less flexibility when I do teach?

No. We want the work we already do to continue under better terms. At the moment, graduate students generally arrange their supervisory positions prior to the start of the academic year, committing themselves to these agreed hours of teaching over the course of the coming year. If the College decide to actively negotiate with us on our demands, we will seek an agreement to make sure that a portion of the contracts for undergraduate supervisions are ring-fenced for graduate students, under roles that take into account grads' need to devote most of their time to research while at the same time acquire teaching experience. Right now, we are thrown into teaching (once we understand how we get to supervise!) after a short, unpaid training. Our time spent teaching is then severely underpaid and we have no guarantee that our job will not disappear should fewer students sign up for supervisions.

With contracts, we will be able to transparently apply for teaching positions, be paid for mandatory training, and teach a secure and fairly remunerated number of hours. In the case of the campaigns at Sheffield, UCL, and Edinburgh, referenced above, student union activists negotiated new terms of work which suited the needs of graduate students at these schools. Our campaign opens up the possibility for all graduate workers to collaborate on new terms of work which will benefit us all.