



## Precarious Employment Survey Report

April 2023

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### Executive summary

A key finding of the SLSA's Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Survey Report 2022 was that trends towards precarious employment practices in higher education are a concern for the socio-legal community and for PGRs and ECRs in particular. These trends are of concern to the SLSA Board as well. In November 2021, a Precarity Representative was appointed to the Board, signalling that the Association recognises that the use of casualised employment arrangements in the higher education sector is having a detrimental impact on the sector and on SLSA members. Furthermore, the burden of casualisation falls disproportionately on women, members of minoritized communities, and disabled staff; Covid and the cost-of-living crisis have exacerbated this disadvantage.

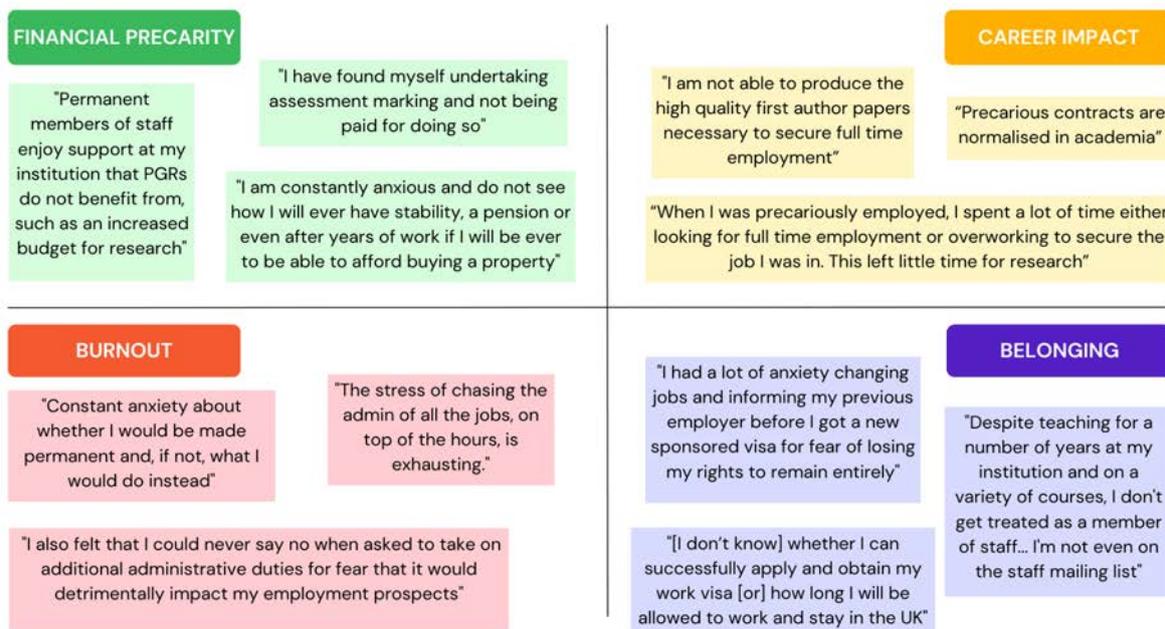
To guide our support for and work on behalf of precariously employed colleagues, the SLSA decided to collect additional data from SLSA members about their experiences of precarious

employment. To that end, we designed and conducted a Survey on Precarious Employment in late 2022. One objective of the survey was to build a picture of the challenges precariously employed colleagues face to raise awareness of these issues within the SLSA and more broadly. Another objective was to identify what interventions and support, financial or otherwise, could be advocated for or offered by the SLSA to assist precariously employed members and provide a bulwark against these worrying trends in higher education.

As discussed in more detail below, four main themes were identified in the survey data relating to: 1) financial precarity; 2) career impact; 3) burnout; and 4) belonging. In addition, common themes emerged in terms of what the SLSA can do to respond to casualisation including, making additional financial support available, raising awareness of the challenges related to precarity, advocating for precariously employed members, and helping precariously employed members feel part of a supportive community as they seek opportunities for permanent employment. The SLSA will respond to the survey by reflecting and, where appropriate, acting on these suggestions as we seek to achieve our charitable objects, which are:

*for the public benefit to advance education and learning in the field of socio legal studies and to promote research, the useful results of which shall be published for the public benefit, teaching and the dissemination of knowledge in the field.*

Advancing these goals in this context is likely to involve providing greater support to precariously employed members through initiatives to be announced in due course. If you need support or want to share your experiences as a precariously employed or unaffiliated socio-legal researcher, you can reach the SLSA Board’s Precarity Representative, Dr Arwen Joyce, at [arwen.joyce@leicester.ac.uk](mailto:arwen.joyce@leicester.ac.uk).



## **Survey team**

This report was made possible through the work of the SLSA EDI Committee and the SLSA Board of Trustees. In particular, the survey results analysis and drafting were led by Dr Arwen Joyce, Dr Philip Bremner, Lara MacLachlan, and Maddy Millar. Feedback and drafting support were provided by Dr Emma Milne, Dr Simon Flacks, Dr Clare Williams, and Professor John Harrington. This report has been shared with the help of Dr Elisabeth Griffiths, Dr Emma Jones, Dr Emma Milne, and Marie Selwood.

## **About the survey and survey methodology**

The SLSA Survey on Precarious Employment was designed and tested by the Precarity Representative with input from the SLSA EDI Committee. The survey was carried out in accordance with the ethical standards of the SLSA and received ethical approval from the University of Leicester. Responding to any or all of the questions in the survey was voluntary. Respondents had the option to complete the survey anonymously or to provide their name and email address to be contacted about sharing their experiences as a precariously employed researcher in a future Socio-Legal Newsletter or blog post. Any personal data collected through the survey was held confidentially in accordance with GDPR requirements.

The survey was open to SLSA members from 14 October to 31 December 2022 and was advertised through the SLSA website, Socio-Legal Newsletter, weekly ebulletin and Twitter account. Respondents did not need to be precariously employed to take the survey. The survey was hosted by [www.onlinesurveys.ac.uk](http://www.onlinesurveys.ac.uk), a secure platform offering a range of question types and formats with a user interface optimised for all devices. The survey contained 14 questions and was estimated to take less than 10 minutes to complete. After most multiple-choice questions, a free text box was provided to allow the respondent to elaborate on or explain their response.

A total of 76 people responded to the survey but two did not submit a response to any of the questions, leaving 74 valid responses. Given that the SLSA had a membership of 1,476 (of which 43% were PGR members) on 9 January 2023, this represents a 5% response rate. While we are not able to draw conclusions about the views or experiences of SLSA members more widely from this data set, the survey responses provide valuable insight into the experiences of members who are or have been precariously employed in higher education. Some respondents were self-funded PGRs who were not currently employed in higher education but were seeking employment opportunities in the sector during their PhDs or were anticipating seeking employment in the sector upon completion of their PhDs.

The quantitative data collected in the survey is presented in pie charts created by exporting the data to Microsoft Excel. The qualitative data provided in the survey's free-text comment boxes was exported to Microsoft Excel and analysed using an inductive thematic approach. Four main themes emerged through this process and the survey findings are presented thematically under Results Analysis. Quotes from the survey are built into the analysis presented for each theme.

## About the respondents

Most respondents identified as PGRs and ECRs (73%) and were working for one higher education institution (HEI) (74%) (see Figures 1 and 2). Eleven respondents were working for more than one HEI and eight were not currently employed (see Figure 2).

Figure 1: Which of the following categories best describes your current career status?

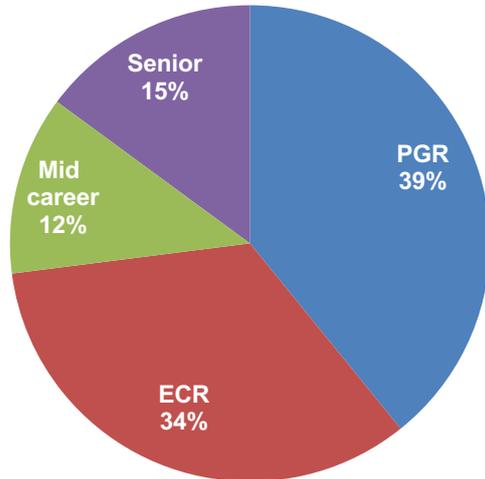
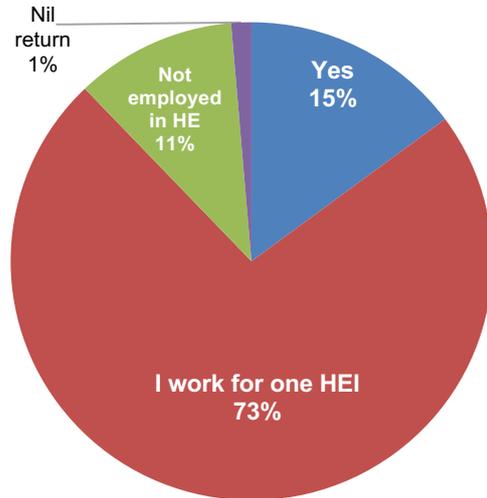


Figure 2: Are you currently working at more than one higher education institution (HEI)?



## Health impact

Almost 68% of respondents said that as a precariously employed researcher, their employment status impacted their ability to perform their role and 64% said their employment status was having an impact on their mental and/or physical health (see Figures 3 and 4). This is reflected in the free-text responses discussed under Theme 3: Burnout.

Figure 3: As a precariously employed researcher, does your employment status impact your ability to perform your role?

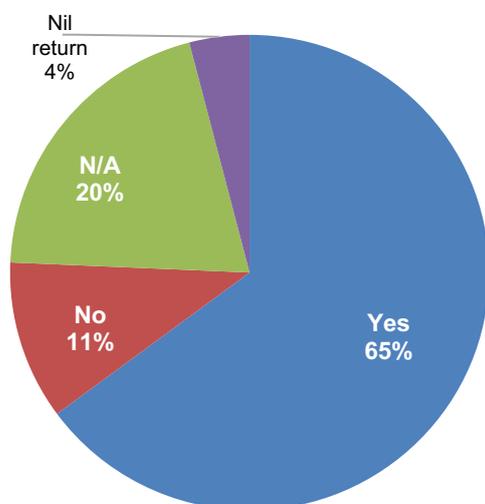
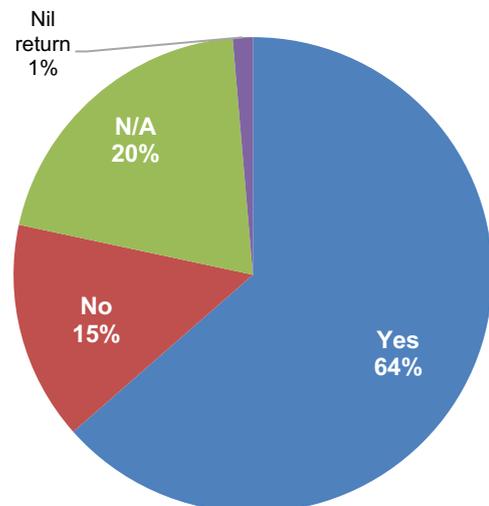


Figure 4: As a precariously employed researcher, does your employment status impact your mental and/or physical health?



## Support and integration

Just over half (51%) of the respondents felt that as a precariously employed researcher they had not received the same level of support from their employer as permanent members of staff (see Figure 5). Similarly, only 47% of respondents said they felt generally supported and integrated into the HEI(s) where they work (see Figure 6). This is reflected in the free-text responses discussed under Theme 4: Belonging.

Figure 5: As a precariously employed researcher, do you feel you receive the same level of support from your employer as permanent members of staff?

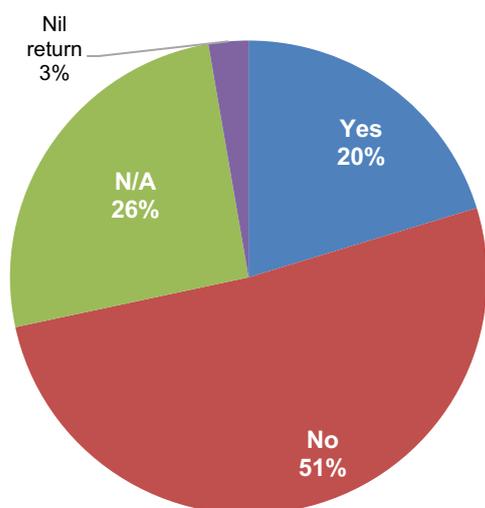
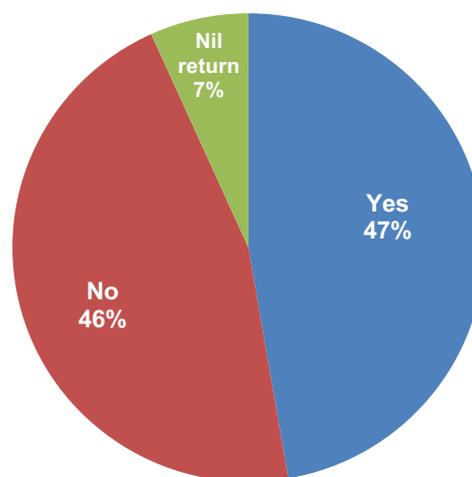


Figure 6: Do you feel generally supported by and integrated into the HEI(s) where you work?



## Hours and pay

Most respondents (53%) reported working between 20 and 49 hours per week with 18% reporting that they work more than 50 hours per week (see Figure 7). About 13% of respondents said they currently work less than 20 hours per week in paid employment (see Figure 7). A significant proportion of respondents (43%) reported that some of their working hours were unpaid or underpaid (see Figure 8). A larger proportion of respondents who identified as PGRs and ECRs (52%) reported working hours that are unpaid or underpaid, compared to 33% of respondents who identified as either mid-career or senior level. While most respondents (76%) reported that they were paid in a timely manner, almost one-fifth (19%) said they were not (see Figure 9). Responses describing the challenges associated with being unpaid, underpaid, or delays in receiving pay are discussed in more detail under Theme 1: Financial precarity.

Figure 7: How many hours do you work per week?

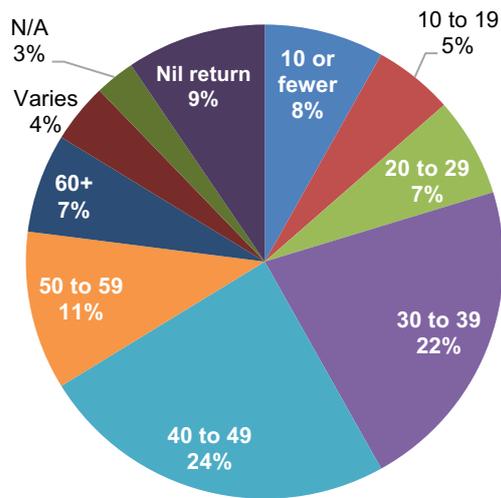


Figure 8: Are any of your working hours unpaid or underpaid?

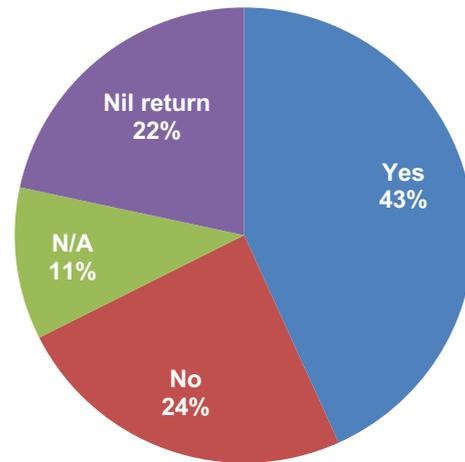
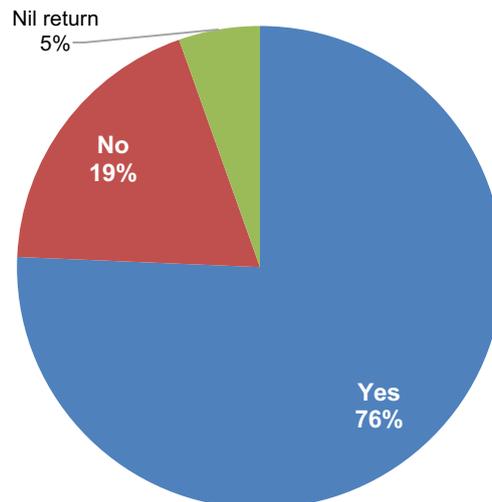


Figure 9: Does your employer generally pay you on time and/or in a timely manner?



The amount of research allowance available to respondents from their employers varied widely. Almost half of respondents (46%) who received a research allowance from their employer or funder in addition to their salary or stipend, reported receiving (or being allowed to claim) between £500 and £6,000 per year for research-related expenses and activities (see Figure 10). But a significant percentage of respondents (32%) reported that they do not have access to research funding, either because they are not currently employed by an HEI, or they are employed on terms (ad hoc, hourly) that do not include access to research funding (see Figure 10). Notably, research funding often does not cover the cost of membership in learned societies like the SLSA (see Figure 11). The impact on some respondents of not having access to an institutional research allowance is discussed in more detail under Theme 1: Financial precarity.

Figure 10: How much do you receive in research allowance annually?

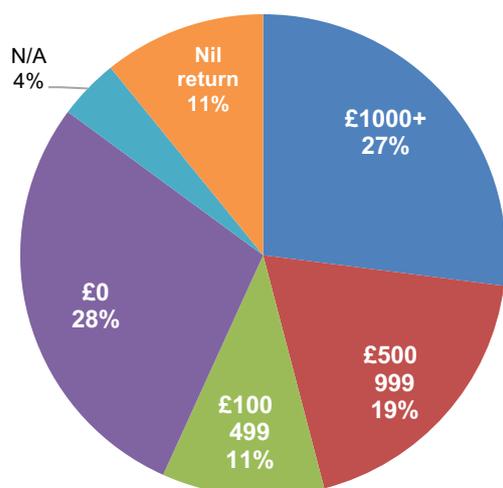
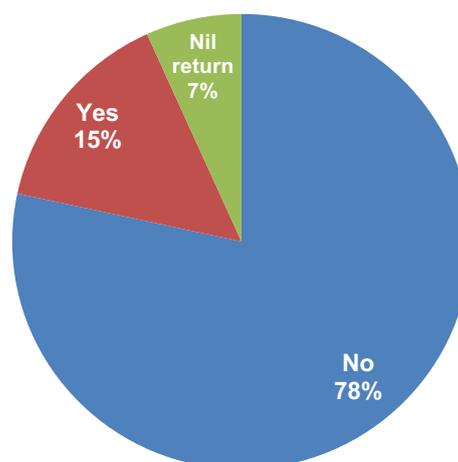


Figure 11: Does your employer (or funding body) pay your annual SLSA membership fee?



## Results Analysis

### Theme 1: Financial precarity

The financial impact of precarity was a prominent theme throughout the responses. This theme manifested in a number of ways, firstly, the **financial pressure** associated with precarity. Participants expressed how they were hyper-conscious of money and unable to engage in certain activities due to financial constraints. Respondents noted how the unpredictable nature of both the work itself and the amount they would be paid was a difficult challenge. R37 noted, “it is never certain whether demonstrator hours are available and sometimes there is a competition to gain them. In addition, I have found myself undertaking assessment marking and not being paid for doing so.” In the short term, many found the process of getting paid challenging: “As an hourly paid teacher we had to remember to ask for our pay every month (which is very ableist to those of us with issues like ADHD, dyslexia or other health issues that make time and energy a scarce resource). ...payment can sometimes take months to arrive in accounts” (R43).

This financial pressure also impacted the respondent's long-term financial situation. Some of the financial benefits associated with long term stable employment such as the ability to secure loans, mortgages and pensions felt out of reach for participants as illustrated by R26's comments, “I am constantly anxious and do not see how I will ever have stability, a pension or even after years of work if I will be ever to be able to afford buying a property.” In addition, respondents noted the risks associated with precarious employment arrangements:

I don't have an employment contract... [so] things like not having NI covered (which will affect my state pension long-term) or being able to pay for insurance for ill health (I am not sure I would be covered by the uni unless they use their discretion) mean that it does feel particularly risky. It's a bit like being in a house of cards. If something goes wrong.... (R76)

A further sub-theme identified was **low rates of pay**. Participants noted that often the paid hours they were allocated were insufficient to complete the necessary work, which led to low

rates of pay. Low pay resulted in many respondents feeling the need to take on additional work to support themselves. Sometimes this meant part-time work outside of their HEI:

I'm on a .5 fixed term contract. For me this means I struggle financially as it's not enough to live on, but whilst I am completing my PhD my university prevents us from undertaking more hours. As a result, I have to work outside of [higher education] in order to pay my bills. (R27)

Respondents noted that a further financial difficulty associated with precarity was the **lack of research funding available**, which made funding crucial parts of academic work such as disseminating research or conference attendance difficult or impossible. Participants noted how these tensions are amplified by certain types of employment contracts: "Funder believes academic/personal development is responsibility of university, but then I don't get a personal research allowance as I'm on a research contract!" (R62) Significant discrepancies in the amount of research funding available for securely employed staff compared with precariously employed staff was also noted by respondents: "Permanent members of staff enjoy support at my institution that PGRs do not benefit from, such as an increased budget for research." (R52)

The variety of ways in which this theme emerged highlights how the financial pressures associated with precarity are complex and multidimensional. Precarity impacts people's financial realities in their personal and professional lives, and in both the short and long term.

### ***Theme 2: Career impact***

A key sub-theme that emerged was the **disruption of the constant job hunt** which manifested in particular in the **inability to engage in career planning** and the **erosion of research time**. A number of respondents commented on how disruptive it was to devote so much energy to job hunting at the expense of being able to make stable plans in relation to their career. What is more, respondents stressed that already limited research time was particularly vulnerable to disruption especially in light of the tendency of research to take a back seat compared to teaching. R10, for example, commented that "when I was precariously employed, I spent a lot of time either looking for full time employment or overworking to secure the job I was in. This left little time for research." This resonates with comments made by various respondents around the lack of guidance on career planning, the anxiety caused by the inability to make medium-term and long-term career plans and the inevitable impact this has on research. R47 concisely states the stark consequence of this: "I am not able to produce the high quality first author papers necessary to secure full time employment".

A second sub-theme that had particular traction among respondents was the **need for pathways out of precarity** with a particular focus on **mentoring** and the **resistance of casualization**. As R6 noted, one of the biggest issues relating to precarity for the sector is "the extent to which precarious contracts are normalised in academia". In the words of R27 it is, therefore, necessary to "advocate for permanent positions where possible" and "to look to switch to permanent roles where at all possible". While noting this clear intention to move towards more stable employment, respondents also highlighted the need for practical support in this regard in the form of training, mentoring and career support. R77, for example, suggests that "a comprehensive and coherent preemployment training program will be most useful for precariously employed researchers." This could complement a system of

“mentoring about getting onto a permanent contract (interview techniques, networking, publications etc)” (R 2). At the very least, there is the need for parity between colleagues on different employment contracts with precariously employed colleagues having “access to schemes open to permanent [staff] members” (R 5).

These responses highlight not only the negative career impact of precarious employment but also the difficulty of making steps towards more secure employment. There is, therefore, an evident need for greater institutional support for precariously employed colleagues particularly around securing more stable employment.

### ***Theme 3: Burnout***

Another important theme constructed from respondents’ answers was that of burnout. A number of respondents highlighted the impact that being precariously employed, or precarity in general, had on their **mental health**. For instance, R13 acknowledged that: “working on a fixed term contract ... creates on-going anxiety... [c]ombined with significant carer responsibilities, my mental health requires careful tending.” R39 said that during their last fixed term contract they “suffered severe mental health problems including sleeping disorders”. R9 added: “When I was precariously employed...the mental strain of uncertainty made it difficult to do any research.” R31 reported having “constant anxiety about whether I would be made permanent and, if not, what I would do instead.”

**Excessive workloads** were also emphasised as an effect of precarity in higher education. For instance, R35 mentioned that: “fixed term teaching-only posts [have] excessive amounts of teaching”. R34 shared: “you end up spending more time than you are paid for in ensuring that you go above and beyond for your students”. In addition, respondents commented on the additional admin required when working on multiple contracts or for multiple institutions. R16 noted: “The stress of chasing the admin of all the jobs, on top of the hours, is exhausting.”

Respondents also noted the experience of **juggling multiple roles**. This was acknowledged in several important contexts. For instance, R29 acknowledged not wanting to refuse to take on additional roles for fear of this having a detrimental impact on their career: “I constantly got assigned new courses - including courses that had never been taught before - meaning I spent a lot of time building courses instead of ultimately becoming an expert in my teaching area. I also felt that I could never say no when asked to take on additional administrative duties for fear that it would detrimentally impact my employment prospects either with my current employer - should a position arise - or a future employer (due to the risk of an unfavourable reference).”

These responses illustrate how taxing precarious employment in academia can be. For some precariously employed academics, the combination of overwork, employment uncertainty, and financial pressure can lead to extreme stress, anxiety, and burnout. Both preventing and addressing burnout should be a high priority for the sector.

#### **Theme 4: Belonging**

A final theme that emerged from the survey responses was a desire for belonging. A number of respondents highlighted that as a precariously employed researcher, or an unpaid researcher completing a PhD, they felt **undervalued or excluded** from their university. R12 said simply, “I feel separate”; R17 said they feel “out of the loop” and R67 said “I feel like an outsider”. R16 explained,

Despite teaching for a number of years at my institution and on a variety of courses, I don't get treated as a member of staff... I'm not even on the staff mailing list (despite requesting to be put on it a number of times). Many colleagues treat me as an equal and with respect, but others treat me as if I am a naive student. Similarly some colleagues go above and beyond in order to support me with teaching while others barely acknowledge that I am teaching on their module.

R22 shared, “Most of my time as a PGR has been blighted due to feeling as though I don't belong in academia. And unless I am paid to be here, nothing will change those feelings of unbelonging.”

Another way this theme emerged was on the topic of **immigration status**, which is an aspect of precarity and unbelonging non-citizens face. R21 shared, “I...felt like I was stuck in a job I was unhappy with due to the costs and difficulty of changing jobs” and “I had a lot of anxiety changing jobs and informing my previous employer before I got a new sponsored visa for fear of losing my rights to remain entirely.” R77 said, “[I don't know] whether I can successfully apply and obtain my work visa [or] how long I will be allowed to work and stay in the UK.”

Finally, the desire to be part of a **community**, or the recognition that being precariously employed made it much more difficult to establish a sense of community, was a recurring sub-theme. R26 noted, “I don't feel I can make long lasting connections”. R24 reported feelings of “isolation [and] not feeling as part of the academic community”. R46 noted, “A strong academic network of PGRs and ECRs...would be helpful.”

Precariously employed academics feel undervalued and excluded in big and small ways, whether that is being worried about the cost and uncertainty of obtaining visa sponsorship or being excluded from staff email lists. The survey responses indicate an understandable desire to feel respected, valued, and included.

#### **Reflections and next steps**

The SLSA cannot solve the issues related to an increased reliance on precariously employed staff in higher education on its own, but the survey respondents provided some suggestions of actions the SLSA can take to better support precariously employed members.

- **Financial precarity:** The SLSA can make additional financial support available for precariously employed members, for example, by ring-fencing funds in its existing funding schemes for precariously employed applicants.

- **Career impact:** The SLSA can provide mentoring opportunities and encourage securely employed members who are applying to the SLSA's funding schemes to include precariously employed colleagues in their plans/applications.
- **Burnout:** The SLSA can raise awareness of the challenges related to precarity and advocate for precariously employed members with HEIs, funding bodies and other stakeholders.
- **Belonging:** The SLSA can help precariously employed members feel part of a supportive community as they seek opportunities for permanent employment, for example by administering an informal buddy scheme or mentoring scheme at the SLSA annual conference and/or on a longer-term basis.

The SLSA will strive to respond to the survey by acting on these suggestions to provide greater support to precariously employed members.

## Appendix: Survey questions

1. Which of the following categories best describes your current career status? PGR, ECR, Mid-career, Senior
2. Are you currently working at more than one higher education institution (HEI)? Yes, I work for more than one HEI; No, I only work for one HEI; I am not currently employed by an HEI
  - 2.a. If you answered "Yes", describe the duration and type of these employment arrangements (ad hoc? hourly? fixed term?).
3. As a precariously employed researcher, do (or did) you feel your employment status impacts (or impacted) your ability to perform your role? Yes, No, Not applicable
  - 3.a. You can elaborate on your response here.
4. As a precariously employed researcher, do (or did) you feel your employment status impacts (or impacted) your mental and/or physical health? Yes, No, Not applicable
  - 4.a. You can elaborate on your response here.
5. As a precariously employed researcher, do (or did) you feel you receive(d) the same level of support (e.g., in terms of training or admin support) from your employer as permanent members of staff? Yes, No, Not applicable
  - 5.a. You can elaborate on your response here.
6. Do you feel generally supported by and integrated into the HEI(s) where you work? Yes, No
  - 6.a. You can elaborate on your response here.
7. How many hours do you usually work per week?
  - 7.a. Are any of these hours unpaid or not fairly compensated?
8. Does your employer generally pay you on time and/or in a timely manner? Yes, No
  - 8.a. You can elaborate on your response here.
9. How much (£) research allowance, if any, do you receive from your employer (or funding body) on an annual basis (in addition to your salary/stipend) to support e.g. the purchase of research-related materials and/or activities like field work and conference attendance?
  - 9.a. You can elaborate on your response here.
10. Does your employer (or funding body) pay your annual SLSA membership fee? No, I pay the membership fee out of my own pocket; Yes, I spend part of my allocated research

allowance on learned society membership fees; Yes, my employer or funder pays my fees directly to the SLSA; Yes, my employer or funder reimburses me for this expense.

11. What additional support, financial or otherwise, do you think would be most useful for precariously employed researchers?

12. What do you think are the biggest issues relating to precarity for the sector and how might the SLSA help to address these?

13. Would you find it useful to be paired with another SLSA member (for example, someone who is researching in a similar topic area to you or using similar methods)? This could take the form of a mentoring scheme or a more informal 'buddy system'. Yes, No.

13.a. You can elaborate on your response here.

14. Would you be willing to write about (or be interviewed about) your experiences as a precariously employed researcher for a future SLSA newsletter or blog post? This could be published anonymously.

14.a. If you answered "Yes", please share your name and email address.