

BETTER SUPPORTING RESEARCH STAFF AT THE UNIVERSITY OF WESTERN AUSTRALIA

Background and context

A key issue for research-intensive universities today is the employment environment for research staff who are either on postdoctoral fellowships, fellowships funded by major grants bodies such as ARC/NHMRC, or who are employed on a grant, funded by the University or other sources, and held by a Chief Investigator (CI). As universities endeavour both to increase their research productivity, and to recruit a new generation of high quality academics, the relative satisfaction and commitment of research staff has become a key success factor.

However, reports and reviews in Australia and overseas continue to highlight concerns of research staff about the manner in which their professional lives are managed and supported. An important initiative in the United Kingdom, the *Concordat* on the career management of 'research only' staff in universities and colleges, signed by key British institutions and their principal research funders in 1996, set the framework for ongoing dialogue in the United Kingdom on this issue. A range of reports on the implementation of the *Concordat* across the higher education sector, and the identification of many examples of good practice, are available from the Universities UK website [<http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/activities/rci.asp>].

In 2003 the Higher Education Funding Council for the England commissioned its own review of practices adopted to improve the situation of research staff in English universities. The Executive Summary of this report, included as Attachment 1 of this paper, brings together most of the major issues that inform discussion on this topic. In so doing, this summary reflects most of the key issues

raised in reports on the status of research staff at The University of Western Australia in recent years. These include:

- *Report on the Working Party on Research Staff* [The Lake Report, 2000]
- *Researchers: Supporting their Development Needs* [OSDS, 2004]
- *Project for the Advancement of Research Careers* [PARC Report, 2005]

all of which are available on the Researchers Association homepage on the UWA website at

[http://www.research.uwa.edu.au/welcome/for_researchers/resources_for_research_staff]

Of particular note in the *HEFC 2003* report was the list of constraints confronting research staff, most of which pertain to the Australian environment. These included external, institution, and individual constraints. In terms of *external constraints* within Australia, current funding conditions, particularly those related to the funding of NHMRC projects, continue to cause significant problems both for researchers and for the grant holders, as the gap between the funds provided by the NHMRC through its PSPs (in full?), and the salaries at individual universities, continues to widen. The University of Western Australia has made representation to the NHMRC on this matter, and will continue to do so. There is an enhanced opportunity to have some impact on this issue now that the Vice Chancellor is Chair of the Group of Eight, all universities for which NHMRC funding is crucially important. Furthermore, the resumption by the Minister for Science of responsibility for Research enhances the possibility of an effective dialogue on this issue.

Recommendation 1: that the Vice Chancellor takes up with colleagues in the Group of Eight the issue of the NHMRC funding gaps, with a view to presenting a position to the new Minister for Science.

In terms of the *institutional* constraints noted in the HEFC report, the issue of obvious, visible careers paths is noted, as is a concern about levels of support from supervisors and heads of school. In the Australian context, in the current funding climate, opportunities for long-term careers as 'research only' staff are limited. However, there is a strong employment climate emerging for good researchers who can also take on teaching roles, and this is something addressed further within this paper, as is the issue of overall management of research staff.

The HEFC paper notes, under *individual* constraints, concerns about lack of development opportunities for research staff, lack of status and recognition, and general insecurity for staff due to the short term nature of contracts. These issues have arisen in discussions at UWA, and are also addressed in this paper.

Issues for discussion and decision

As a research-intensive institution, we are looking to strengthen the employment environment for our research staff, leading to a position of competitive advantage. The major issues confronting the working situation of research staff may be summarised and dealt with under the general headings:

- Career Development
- Management Development for Supervisors
- Contract of Employment
- Conditions of Employment

1.0 Career Management

In his report for the British Government on "The Supply of Science and Engineering Skills in the UK" (the Roberts Report, 2002), Sir Gareth Roberts noted the following:

The problems affecting postdoctoral and other contract research staff (CRS) are:

- *lack of a clear career structure and uncertain career prospects associated with work on a short-term contractual basis is a major barrier to the recruitment and development of postdoctoral researchers;*
- *unsatisfactory training in the skills required either in an academic career or in a business research environment means that CRS are poorly prepared for potential careers; and*
- *increasingly uncompetitive salaries act as a disincentive to work as a contract researcher.*

[Roberts Report, p.143]

He goes on to propose a range of career trajectories and clear career structures for those employed as contract researchers, which he summarises as:

- *Academic* trajectory in which the contract researchers with potential to become academics are identified, developed, and retained. “Better appraisals and career advice early on in a researcher’s career should be aimed at identifying those with the potential for an academic career”.
[Roberts, p.150]

- *Industrial* trajectory, in which the contract researchers moved into industry (or in Western Australia’s case, other institutions such as CSIRO or the Health Department) after a brief spell in academia. “The industrial trajectory would require awareness-raising by institutions and potential employers, and extra training in skills relevant to potential employers, including the provision of supervisory and managerial experience.”
[Roberts, p.149]

- *Research* trajectory, for those choosing to remain long term in academic research. “There are a group of contract researchers who want to continue with a research career and do not want to pursue an academic career. This track would principally apply to those who have developed specialist knowledge of specific research equipment or methodologies (e.g. mass spectrometry or NMR) and provide an ongoing support/enabling function within a research group of groups.Here the emphasis would be on the provision of permanent contracts underwritten by research contracts being held by university departments, which could in some cases assign individuals to other research projects if a particular line of funding were to cease.” [Roberts, p.150] In addition to the group of specialist technical workers described by Roberts, there are other full-time researchers whose career aspirations are to remain in research, funded through Fellowships, career development awards, and the like.

Roberts makes the comment that “Contract research should not become a permanent career option, but a preparation for a range of careers that reflect the skills possessed by contract researchers” [p.150]

These observations are equally relevant for research staff in the Australian system and there are a number of actions this University can take to provide greater clarity and certainty for research staff.

First of all, research staff should be informed very clearly about the expectations they can have about their career in the University. A research career in the Australian environment is highly competitive, tough, and can be insecure, although the measures outlined in this paper seek to mitigate some of that insecurity. Induction for new research staff should clarify that:

- The University recognises the extremely competitive nature of a research career;
- The University is putting in place a range of measures to support such careers, as outlined in this paper; and

Secondly, at the beginning of the appointment and again within the period of the first contract, research staff should be counselled about their career aspirations and offered appropriate training and development. This discussion should occur as part of the Professional Development Review that takes place annually, as well as through regular discussions with the supervisor. The Prof Vice Chancellor (Research & Research Training) and Pro Vice Chancellor (Research Initiatives) will be responsible for establishing mentoring programs for all early career staff. Some staff will be interested in a standard academic career and may undertake training to develop their teaching skills, for example. Others may have an interest in employment outside the higher education sector and need appropriate training for that direction. For those who wish to remain in a University research environment, the University supports those aspirations, and will provide the career support as outlined in this paper. However, it is recognised that not all staff will be able to meet their aspirations and it is important that the University ensures that those staff have clarity about their prospects and that they are also assisted to position themselves for other options.

In the *Report of the Working Party on Research Staff to the Teaching & Research Nexus Working Party (Lake Report, UWA, 2002)* it was noted that “Research staff should have the same support as all other staff as they represent a large and permanent, rather than transient, component of staff...” [p.28] and a number of strategies were put forward to assist in implementing this, including staff development, regular feedback from the supervisor, and encouragement to attend career development programmes. Feedback from the PARC Report suggests that implementation of this approach has been somewhat patchy on the campus. Therefore, to assist research staff with career management issues the

University has appointed a Postdoctoral Co-ordinator to work with the Deputy Vice Chancellor (Research & Innovation) and OSDS in achieving better outcomes.

However, while University-wide training and mentoring programs can be established to support research staff in their career development, the most important factor here will be the ongoing advice and counselling of their line managers. Attachment 2 contains a responsibility matrix, adapted for UWA purposes from originals obtained from the University of Leeds, (with the permission of Leeds), which set out very clearly the relevant responsibilities in this regard. While UWA currently provides supervisor training for Deans, heads of school and heads of section, a new departure would be the training of Chief Investigators in the role of a supervisor for staff development purposes. The Chief Investigators will be expected to undertake the PDR review with their research staff and should all therefore have undertaken the relevant training.

Recommendation 2: That UWA adopts the Leeds model for implementation, together with development of a training program for CIs

The Lake Report also presented survey responses from UWA researchers in relation to teaching, both in terms of whether or not they undertook teaching, and whether they were paid for any teaching. It transpired that 69% of staff were involved in undergraduate teaching, and 71% in postgraduate supervision. However there were issues over (i) lack of formal recognition of teaching/supervision, and (ii) lack of pay, or low rates of pay in comparison with postgraduate students. The Report recommended that the contribution of research staff to teaching be incorporated into School workloads, and that measures be put into place to prevent exploitation of research staff. Clearly, for many research staff, teaching is an activity in which they wish to be involved, for its own sake and for their career development. Anecdotally, it appears that there

are still inconsistencies across the campus in terms of the way this issue is managed.

Recommendation 3: That the DVC(RI), PVC (R&RT), DVC(Ed) and PVC (T&L), with support from Human Resources jointly develop guidelines that govern the most appropriate means of involvement by research staff in teaching, including issues of payment, workload, and levels of responsibility accorded by the courseco-ordinators.

For researchers who wish ultimately to work outside the University sector, the University should seek, depending on numbers, either to establish annual workshops between researchers and industry bodies, or secondment programs for those researchers wishing to pursue career in industry. These could be pursued under the auspices of the Office of Industry & Innovation or incorporated into the future development of the Mobility Program.

For staff anticipating a career as a researcher at UWA, the potential to achieve this goal should be discussed realistically with them. For some research technicians, such as those operating sophisticated research equipment, long-term careers on ongoing contracts may be possible. It might also be possible to establish a 'pool' of staff who do the same or similar work, or where their skills are interchangeable, within and across disciplines and job types. However, while this possibility has been canvassed in British universities, and at UWA, concerns have been expressed about the importance of maintaining 'new blood' and avoiding sclerotic workforces. In the sciences, in particular, this option has not been well received. UWA will consider establishing a candidate register to trial the appropriateness of such an approach for our University.

Recommendation 4: That the DVC(RI), PVC(R&T), Director Research Services, and future PVC (RIn), with support from HR, review the options for creating a research appointments pool.

The University will continue to support those staff who are able to generate their own salaries through research grants, and it is hoped that the improved conditions outlined further in this paper will contribute to their successful careers at the University. However, the University has limited capacity to support staff who are not funded through a grant over a term longer than that applying to the Safety Net Scheme (see below).

2.0 Management Development for Supervisors

Many CIs at UWA see themselves as the employer of their research staff. Technically this is not the case as the University is the employer of all staff. Nonetheless, when an academic wins a grant he/she takes on the responsibility of supervising research staff as well as the budget. This is more complicated than many think and ideally all Chief Investigators should undertake some basic management training to assist them in this role. For first-time CIs a formal training program is now available through the Future Research Leaders Program. The module, Managing People in a Research Context, specifically explores the issues relating to supervising research staff. It augments the existing programs already available in terms of grant management to embrace training as a supervisor. Other workshops such as the supervisor training offered by OSDS as part of the Performance Development Review process are also relevant.

For experienced CIs there is still a need to ensure that effective staff management is taking place. Rather than establish mandatory training, it may be more effective to involve the experienced CIs in the PDR training of the new CIs and, in so doing, hone their own supervisory skills.

Recommendation 5: That OSDS be requested to develop a training program for new CIs along the lines of the current PDR training and which will involve experienced CIs as both attendees and mentors.

3.0 Contracts of Employment

3.1 The use of fixed-term contracts for research staff

Most research staff at The University of Western Australia are employed on fixed term contracts. One of the key issues is to look at how our research staff are employed 'in practice' – in other words, are our policies being adhered to in all parts of the institution? The PARC Report commented as follows:

The use of short term contracts where there is funding available for longer term contracts creates unnecessary insecurity for research staff as well as resulting in poorer employment conditions (e.g. restricting access to superannuation and severance payouts). As a result, good researchers may be discouraged from applying for positions at the University, or may be attracted to other work sectors by more stable conditions of employment. Almost four out of five research staff have indicated that short term funded positions are a barrier to their career progression at The University of Western Australia compared to one in five teaching-and-researcher staff (2003 Working Life Survey).

[PARC Report, p.14]

In this context, it is timely to remember that research staff are employed by the University, not the research group or the CI/PI, and the University therefore has a responsibility for ensuring that the employment conditions of all staff adhere to guidelines.

Recommendation 6: That wherever possible, research staff should be appointed for the full duration of the available funding. Shorter appointments must be approved by the Dean.

Given that academic research staff are also an important recruitment pool for future teaching and research appointments it is important that, where appropriate, candidates are given appropriate appointments. Research Officers ('general' staff) play a different role in a research team than Research Associates or Research Fellows (academic staff). Research Officers may have a PhD but work mainly in a technical role and do not wish to influence the direction of the research. Whether staff are classified as 'academic' or 'general' should not depend on whether the person has a PhD, but upon their role. Nonetheless, the new proposed academic structure and proposed single industrial agreement provide the opportunity of harmonising positions and appointments more effectively so as to allow for determination by role rather than qualifications.

Recommendation 7: That we revise our guidelines for the designation of academic versus general staff appointments for research staff in the light of the proposed new academic structure and proposed single industrial agreement.

3.2 Moving from contract to ongoing appointments

A number of universities overseas are looking at models whereby, after a certain period of employment on fixed-term contracts, a research staff member may be placed on an ongoing contract.

Oxford University, for example, has established a model where long term research staff on open-ended externally-funded contracts or on rolling program grants are given ongoing contracts. Whilst indicating that the position is only funded for the duration of the available funds for x years on the specific project, they nonetheless provide an ongoing contract and a commitment to endeavour to retain the services of the staff member where possible and appropriate.

At the University of Leeds, consideration is being given to providing ongoing contracts to postdoctoral fellows after two 3- year contracts, subject to funding being available.

At Southampton, where a contract research staff member has had 4 or more years service and another appointment is sought, permanency of contract will be assumed.

At Glasgow, long-term fixed-term employees will be converted to ongoing appointments.

Regardless of type of contract, however, all universities are clear that, first and foremost, the nature of the contract must be made very clear to research staff when they are appointed. This includes:

- the duration of the contract;
- what the potential will be for offering further employment should grant funding cease;
- the commitment to career development; and
- the scope for ultimate redundancy.

The University of Glasgow has developed extensive guidelines for staff who manage research staff, to assist in the ongoing clarification of the employment situation for those staff (see [Attachment 3](#)).

Looking at the issue of moving research staff from contract to ongoing appointment requires consideration of a number of sometimes competing priorities. These include the differing career aspirations of research staff, the financial stability of the Schools or centres in which they work and the ongoing teaching and research needs of those Schools or centres. In consideration of these issues, it is proposed that the University moves forward as follows,

Recommendation 8

Where a research staff member on contract:

- **is .5 FTE or more; and**
- **has a PhD or relevant higher degree qualification; and**
- **has been funded through at least two grants; and**
- **been employed by UWA for a period of 6 years or more, or is on their second Fellowship; and**
- **has met the definition of 'research active' as it applies in their Faculty.**

Then either:

- 1. they win a grant which covers their salary, and then move onto an ongoing research contract; or**
- 2. they do not win a grant to cover their salary, whereby they go onto the Safety Net scheme for 1 year, during which time they undertake teaching and research within their School or a cognate School, after which they either:**
 - 3. win a grant covering their salary and go onto an ongoing contract; or**
 - 4. they leave the University's employ.**

For those staff moving onto ongoing contracts, success in the competitive grant process will be seen as the equivalent of a competitive application process for a position. However, should a research staff member wish to transfer to a teaching and research position, then a competitive process will be instituted, equivalent to that utilized for all teaching and research staff.

Research staff on Fellowships will automatically access the Safety Net scheme, subject to the approval of the Deputy Vice Chancellor (Research & Innovation), and with support from their School. (The University has operated a Safety Net Scheme for some years, with the purpose of providing bridging support to fund the salary of key personnel (Level 8 and above) normally supported by external research grant income but where an individual or group has failed to obtain

continued funding for the position. The funding is provided for one year only up to a maximum of \$40,000 per person, contingent upon matching funds on a dollar for dollar basis from the Faculty and/or School. Funding is also conditional upon the individual or group seeking external research funding to support the salary of the key staff member in the next available funding round.)

In the case of a research staff member on an ongoing contract, as a result of the proposal listed above, whose external funding ultimately ceases, a decision on their continuing employment will be made in the same way as that confronting any staff member(s) where income to their School is insufficient to meet the salary bill.

3.3 Dealing with salary shortfalls

The PARC Report raised the issue of potential shortfalls between a salary amount paid by a grant funding body and the actual payroll cost to the University for the particular staff member(s). University policy has been to use central funds to eliminate the gap between the amounts provided for fellowship salaries from NHMRC and ARC, and the equivalent UWA salary levels, while Faculties have funded those gaps created through academic promotion. This practice will be continued. Funding of shortfalls for fellowships awarded by other major funding agencies will be decided by the Deputy Vice Chancellor (Research & Innovation) if every attempt to obtain the necessary gap funding from the agency has failed.

The University does not supplement salaries of staff funded on external grants other than fellowships, unless a Collective Agreement increase exceeds 5% in a year, in which case the University may consider a small, one-off supplementation. The PARC Report recommended project management training as one means of addressing problems arising with gaps between funding income and salaries; such training is addressed in section 2 above

4.0 Conditions of Employment

One of the priorities the Vice Chancellor has proposed for the University is to reduce barriers and differentiations between staff as much as possible. Encapsulated by the term 'one-staff, one university', this means provision of equality of opportunity, of security of employment, and of access to career and personal development opportunities for all staff, within the context of the effective performance and sound financial management.

In the context of conditions of employment, there are several key areas where fixed-term research staff do not currently enjoy the same conditions as ongoing staff. These are discussed below. However, this section should be presaged with a reminder that all attempts should be made to provide appropriate on-cost funding from external granting bodies.

4.1 Severance and Redundancy

These are currently governed by the UWA Collective Staff Agreements 2006. Given the difference in redundancy payment for ongoing general and academic staff and with the move to a one-staff agreement there will be a need to consider if a standardised arrangement should be introduced.

4.2 Superannuation:

Currently it is UWA policy to make superannuation (with the 17% University contribution) available to staff on an appointment of two years or more. In a change from existing practice, it is proposed that, where short term contracts are extended, the full 17% will be paid after two years' continuous service at UWA. CIs will be responsible for ensuring that their funding applications include this within the budgets.

Recommendation 9: That, where a research staff member has been continuously employed at the University for two years or more, they will receive the full 17% employer contribution in their superannuation, regardless of the length of each individual contract.

4.3 Professional Leave

Research staff do not receive the study leave provision available to teaching and research staff (at a rate of six months for each three years or 12 months after six years). On the other hand, members of the teaching and research staff who move into research-only roles do not, on their return to a teaching and research position, carry forward any study leave credits accumulated prior to their research-only activities. Whereas study leave tends to be seen as a break from teaching and administrative duties for teaching and research staff, in order to pursue research or scholarship, research staff could benefit from ability to attend conferences or secondments into other compatible workplaces, and this should be encouraged by their supervisors.

4.4 Annual/Sick/Long Service Leave

Research staff are entitled to the same leave conditions as other academic staff. Managers are expected to manage their leave requirements in accordance with policy. The formerly different conditions between academic and general research staff have largely been harmonised as a result of the changes brought in through the *Work Choices* legislation. The current Collective Agreement negotiations will be used to address a few minor differences that still exist.

Summary

The proposals contained within this paper are based on the premise that, as a research intensive university, The University of Western Australia needs to continue to enhance the working conditions of research staff, such that the institution is regarded as an attractive place to work by high quality researchers, either on a relatively short-term basis as career researchers or potential industry employees, or on a longer-term basis as potential members of the teaching and research staff or as technical support staff for research teams.

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