

House of Commons
Science and Technology
Committee

**SHORT-TERM
RESEARCH CONTRACTS
IN SCIENCE AND
ENGINEERING:
GOVERNMENT
RESPONSE to the
Committee's Eighth Report
of Session 2001-02**

Fourth Special Report of Session
2002–03

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FOURTH SPECIAL REPORT

The Science and Technology has agreed to the following Special Report:

**SHORT-TERM RESEARCH CONTRACTS IN SCIENCE AND
ENGINEERING: GOVERNMENT RESPONSE TO THE COMMITTEE'S
EIGHTH REPORT OF SESSION 2001-02**

1. The Science and Technology Committee reported to the House on the Short-term Research Contracts in Science and Engineering in its Eighth Report of Session 2001-02, published on 20 November 2002 as HC 1046.
2. The Government's response to the Committee's Report was received on 7 February 2003 in the form of a memorandum to the Committee. It is reproduced as an Appendix to this Special Report.
3. We publish this response without comment, so that it is publicly available.

APPENDIX

GOVERNMENT RESPONSE TO THE HOUSE OF COMMONS SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY COMMITTEE REPORT ON CONTRACT RESEARCH STAFF

The Committee has highlighted some fundamental questions for the Government to consider about the consequences for contract researchers of the way research is organised and funded in the UK and the implications of this for the UK's ability to continue to produce and grow research of international excellence.

Ultimately it is for higher education institutions, as the employers of contract research staff (CRS), to decide on their management, pay and development. This is not for the Government to dictate. However, the Government, research funders, and institutions all have a common interest in ensuring that recruitment, retention and development results in a supply of good researchers to undertake research at present and to fill the need for academics, business researchers and other types of work in future.

The Government has done much to promote this goal in recent years. The cumulative effects of the Research Careers Initiative (RCI), the implementation of the Roberts' Review via "Investing in Innovation" and the 2002 Spending Review, will improve the career development and prospects of CRS. The Government will closely monitor all these activities to ensure that the momentum of improvement is not lost. The implementation of the Fixed-Term Regulations will also go some way to improving the career management of staff working in UK universities.

However, the Committee has raised some further issues that also need attention. While it is not for Government to design new ways in which researchers should be employed and managed, Government and its agencies should not hold back innovation by unnecessarily assuming particular models in the way in which research is assessed and funded. The review of research assessment is considering how a replacement for the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) can move away from a rigid distinction between research-active academics and CRS. And the cross-departmental group set up to reform the operation of the dual support system will consider the issue of how researchers are supported in the future by the Research Councils, in the wider context of how Research Councils pay for research.

The new White Paper, "The Future of Higher Education", sets out further plans for improving the organisation and management of research. In particular, larger, better organized research units and collaborations will provide the opportunity for further improvements in the careers of research staff.

1. The proportion of researchers working on fixed-term contracts is too high. The starting point for any policy should be to reduce this proportion. (paragraph 104).

The Government believes that new regulations introduced on 1 October 2002, which implement the EC Directive on the Framework Agreement on Fixed-term Work, should go some way to improving the position of CRS. The regulations have two main aims: to protect employees engaged on fixed-term contracts from being treated less favourably than comparable employees on indefinite contracts; and to prevent the potential abuse of the continuous use of fixed-term contracts.

'Investing in Innovation' announced that the Government expects universities to create sustainable research businesses and move towards recovering the full economic costs of research from their private and public funders. Recovering full costs should ensure greater stability and also allow more accurate financial forecasting for projects, including planning

future staffing levels. It will also increase institutions' resources for staffing if, as evidence suggests, they have been pricing their research too low.

The Government is also providing £120 million per year from 2005-2006 to increase the Research Councils' contribution to indirect costs of research projects which, by increasing the resources available to institutions, should also provide more flexibility around the employment of CRS.

3. We would like a world where good researchers were successful on merit and less subject to an academic lottery (paragraph 118).

The Government agrees that career progression for researchers should be based on merit. The 1000 new academic fellowships announced in "Investing in Innovation" in July 2002, plus the Promising Researcher Fellowship Scheme announced in "The Future of Higher Education", will further enable the best researchers to pursue an academic career.

The Concordat and the RCI

2. It reflects poorly on all concerned that the problems caused by the increasing number of Contract Research Staff were identified many years ago but so few of them have been solved (paragraph 113).

4. The Concordat and the Research Careers Initiative have focused on managing the problem rather than solving it (paragraph 44).

5. It seems that some universities will do little positive to address the issue of CRS unless forced by law or financial penalty. Unless those failing to comply with the Research Careers Initiative are named and shamed, it will continue to lack the teeth it needs to make a real difference (paragraph 45).

6. Any new body set up to tackle the issue of research careers must include the contract researchers themselves. The group must not be divorced from the reality of their situation (paragraph 46).

7. Any new Concordat must build on the best aspects of the first but it must not be simply a funders' charter. Its signatories must come from all the key players, including government, unions, the funding councils and the researchers themselves, and its fine words must be backed up with a clear implementation strategy to make sure things really do change this time (paragraph 47).

The Government commends the work of the Research Careers Initiative (RCI); indeed, since the Concordat was agreed and the RCI established to monitor progress in contract research staff development, there has been a steady improvement in the conditions and terms of CRS employment. The major achievement of the RCI has been through changing the culture surrounding staff employment in universities. It has played a key role in raising awareness of their particular needs, promoting change in the management culture and has provided the means by which institutions have been able to take forward these improvements. Examples of good practice arising from RCI include joint training programmes for CRS managers and plans to introduce an accredited programme leading to a Certificate in Research Management. The RCI objectives will be reinforced by HEFCE's human resource management initiative which provides dedicated funds for institutions that have satisfactory human resource strategies in place. Acceptable strategies will need to include appropriate plans in respect of staff employed on a fixed-term basis.

These developments will accelerate the process of change and place short-term contract staff on a new footing.

The Government has backed the RCI approach through the 2000 White Paper: “Excellence and Opportunity” and, more recently, through its response to the “Roberts’ Review: SET for success” in the Government’s strategy for science, engineering and technology, “Investing in Innovation”.

The Government understands that the final report of the RCI will recommend that there should be a new group to take over the responsibility for the work of the RCI, operating under the funders’ forum, identified by “Investing in Innovation”. The need for a new Concordat should also be the consideration for such a group.

The introduction of the Fixed-Term Regulations that came into force on 1 October 2002 will impact on both the status of CRS, and the rate at which this will continue to change. The Universities and Colleges Employers’ Association (UCEA) and the Association of University Teachers (AUT) have developed and agreed guidelines to facilitate its effective implementation. The Government believes these Regulations will provide the element of compulsion needed to act alongside the work of the RCI.

Universities

8. Universities will have to make financial provision for redundancy payments and this must be taken into account by both public and private funders of research (paragraph 60).

As outlined in the response to recommendation 1 above, universities need to move towards creating transparently sustainable research businesses and recovering the full economic costs of their research. They will need to reflect their overall staffing costs in the pricing of research to public and private funders.

9. Universities must not see Employment Regulations 2002 as an excuse to refuse to renew existing contracts or to award a researcher a new one so that the four-year limit is not reached (paragraph 62).

The Government expects universities, like all employers, to act within the requirements of the new Employment Regulations. In the future the use of successive fixed-term contracts will be limited.

10. If the Model Statute has been an obstacle to reducing the number of CRS, it begs the question as to why universities have made no attempt to reform it before (paragraph 66).

Revision of the Model Statute entails a lengthy process of reaching a consensus of opinion on a wide range of issues.

11. We find it hard to take seriously universities’ claims that they cannot afford to reduce their use of short-term contracts, if they have not even calculated how much it would cost (paragraph 79).

12. In the commercial world businesses have to make predictions about their future income and productivity, and plan accordingly. Universities reserve the right to look no further than the end of the current research grant and place the entire burden of

risk onto researchers. CRS can be thankful that the Employment Regulations are forcing universities to act (paragraph 81).

As the Committee underlines, just as commercial concerns need to plan their future income and productivity, universities need to think hard about balancing their income and staffing levels. There is scope for different models rather than CRS being hired on contracts which last no longer than each project. However, the academic specialism of researchers does make it more difficult than it would be in many business sectors to ensure staff a smooth transition from research project to research project within one institution.

13. We believe that the awarding of academic fellowships should be based on a commitment from the host institution, where possible, to provide permanent positions (paragraph 87).

The details of the new academic fellowships announced in 'Investing in Innovation' are still under consideration, but they will provide further opportunities for CRS to develop their skills and experience and will help fellows to make the transition to full academic posts.

The Government

14. Ultimately the responsibility for funding the researchers in universities lies with Government (paragraph 100).

Universities are independent bodies that rely on a number of funding sources, though it is true to say that public funds provide the majority of their income. Third parties (such as charities, industry and the EU) are now responsible for over 40% of university research funding compared to 25% in 1988-1989. Universities, as the employers of researchers within their institutions, are themselves responsible for the working conditions and career development of their research staff. However, the Government accepts that its funding mechanisms should promote, and not hinder, good management in institutions.

15. We recommend that the Government monitor the effect of the revised Model Statute and consider the use of safeguards to prevent its abuse (paragraph 67).

The Government expects employers and trade unions of the institutions concerned to monitor the effect of any revised Model Statute approved by the Privy Council and to agree on good practices and procedures which would prevent its abuse in their institutions.

16. The Spending Review and the Strategy for Science contain some commitments to positive action to address the problems of contract researchers. We will monitor their effectiveness with interest (paragraph 71).

The Government thanks the Committee for acknowledging the efforts that are being made to address the issues surrounding the employment of CRS.

17. The number of written submissions to the inquiry and the strong views held by contract researchers who appeared before us demonstrates that initiatives have failed to solve the problem. The announcements in Spending Review 2002, the new Employment Regulations, the JNCHES guidance and the prospect of a revised Model Statute all give us hope that a resolution to the issue of CRS is possible. Nevertheless, we feel that more positive action is needed (paragraph 72).

The measures the Committee have mentioned will greatly improve career development and prospects for CRS as they are rolled out over the next few years, together with the work of the Research Careers Initiative. We will, of course, pay close attention to the effects of these policies and actively consider potential improvements.

18. We await the higher education review, more in the hope than in the expectation that it will provide some original and innovative thinking which tackles the management of research in universities (paragraph 117).

The Higher Education White Paper sets out a portfolio of measures to improve the quality and management of research: extra funding for research in larger, better managed units; investing more in our very best research institutions; recognising the very best departments; increased support for emerging and improving departments and investment in developing and rewarding talented researchers. These steps will enable institutions to improve the prospects of CRS.

19. The current crisis in science and engineering research careers has arisen in part because the Government has failed to recognise that the way in which it funds research in universities impacts on the employment of contract researchers. The situation demands an urgent rebalancing of the dual support system (paragraph 116).

20. Research Council funding, regardless of the level of overheads it pays, is directed and gives universities little room to manoeuvre in the way it employs its staff. The anticipated higher education budget must provide more money for research and at least start to rebalance the dual support system (paragraph 101).

Several steps announced by the Government as a result of the 2002 Spending Review will help to improve the situation. There will be a £270 million increase in HEFCE research funding by 2005-2006 (compared with original plans for 2002-2003). This will substantially increase the flexible funding available to institutions.

Recurrent grant allocations for the intervening years have recently been announced in the HEFCE grant letter - £80million extra in 2003-04 and £107million in 2004-05. When the £120 million increase in the Research Councils' contribution to indirect research costs in universities comes on-stream in 2005-2006, this will also improve institutions' research finances.

21. The salary increases for researchers announced in the Spending Review are welcome, but the Government must realise that unless it funds measures to give CRS a rewarding and secure career, a mere pay rise will not be enough stop Britain's best researchers turning their backs on science and engineering or on the UK (paragraph 102).

The Research Careers Initiative (RCI), implementing "Investing in Innovation" and the significant extra resources from the 2002 Spending Review, will improve the career development and prospects of contract research staff (CRS). The level of researchers' salaries is an important factor in their recruitment and retention. The average £4,000 salary increase by 2005-06 will ensure that Research Council-funded post-doctoral research is an attractive option to recent PhD graduates. Salaries will be varied to reflect labour market pressures and maximize the impact of the funding available. In addition, the Government will have invested a total of £330 million by 2003-04 and a total of £167 million extra in 2004-05 to 2005-06 to underpin human resources strategies in higher education institutions.

Institutions will need to continue to develop and implement their human resources strategies and to take steps to actively identify, retain and reward high calibre staff. Support for CRS will explicitly feature in human resource strategies in future.

Researchers

22. Contract researchers are taken for granted and badly treated but too many seem to embark on a career and hope for the best. They need to look ahead and evaluate their prospects. Ultimately, researchers must take responsibility for their own careers (paragraph 74).

23. While we have sympathy with academics who have a passion for their subject and simply want to do research, the truth is that they have a managerial responsibility to the researchers in their team. Too many, it seems, take the view that if they survived so can everyone else. Times have changed (paragraph 77).

The Government agrees with the conclusions of Sir Gareth Roberts' review that it is important for post-doctoral researchers to be able to develop individual career paths, reflecting the different career destinations - industrial, academic and research associate - open to them, and that funding arrangements reflect the development of these career paths. The review concluded that enabling the individual to establish a clear career path, and a development plan to take them along it, is critical to improving the attractiveness of post-doctoral research. To address this issue the Government has provided funding in the 2002 Spending Review to improve the training opportunities available. We are providing additional funding to the Research Councils to deliver additional training for contract researchers and will work with RCUK and HEFCE to ensure that this is put into practice. We have asked HEFCE to make clear that support for post-doctoral and other researchers will be expected to feature in institutions' human resources strategies. This will help ensure that researchers are prepared for future careers in academia or industry.

24. We are amazed that so little attention has been given by universities to the disproportionately high level of women CRS relative to permanent academic staff (paragraph 88).

Research Councils and Funding Councils

26. We welcome the Athena Project and the Higher Education Funding Council for England's investigation into women in higher education and recommend that they address the disproportionately high number of women researchers working on short-term contracts (paragraph 88).

The Government would like to remind the Committee of the Promoting Science, Engineering and Technology for Women (PSETW) unit, which has been part of OST since 1995. This unit was set up to tackle women's under-representation in the science, engineering and technology (SET) community. The Unit's aim is to improve the recruitment, retention and progression of women throughout SET education and employment and to increase their involvement in shaping SET policy. In September 2002 the DTI launched new pilot programmes aimed at SET returners, the bulk of whom are women. This should increase the number of women who can maintain their SET careers and are able to return after a career break.

The Government also welcomes the Athena Project and the HEFCE initiative and does wish to see more women participating in science (particularly physical science) and engineering. That is why the Government last year asked Baroness Greenfield to look at

issues around women in SET. The Government is currently considering its response to that review's recommendations.

25. Although, some of the Research Councils have good policies in some areas, these are not enough. We recommend that Research Councils UK identify best practice among the Research Councils and harmonise their policies towards contract research staff (paragraph 115).

The Government understands that, where possible, RCUK has indeed harmonised its policies towards contract research staff. However, further work may be needed and this will be explored by the cross-departmental group taking forward 'Investing in Innovation' recommendations affecting the dual-support system.

27. We recommend that the Funding Councils and the Research Councils work together to establish the ethnic profile of contract researchers and to take action to tackle any bias or discrimination (paragraph 89).

28. We are encouraged that the Funding Councils are considering mechanisms to reward universities with good employment practice (paragraph 90).

Together with other funding and representative bodies, HEFCE previously co-sponsored a report by the Policy Studies Institute called 'Ethnicity and Employment in Higher Education'. The Government is taking steps to improve data available on the achievement and participation of ethnic minority groups in science and engineering. Implementation of a number of the Roberts Review recommendations, coupled with existing initiatives such as the Science and Engineering Ambassadors' programme, will encourage participation and achievement in science and engineering by ethnic minority pupils.

After the year 2000 spending review, universities were required to provide HEFCE with human resource strategies setting out how they would recruit, retain and develop their staff while adhering to clear equal opportunities policies. We have made clear that support for post-doctoral and other researchers will be expected to feature in institutions' human resources strategies in future and have underlined the obligation on institutions to secure equal opportunities for all staff. The higher education sector's Equality Challenge Unit is advising the Joint Negotiating Committee for Higher Education Staff (JNCHES) on role analysis and equal pay for work of equal value and the Funding Council on universities' human resources strategies covering all staff.

HEFCE is also funding a project, led by Sheffield University and reporting in the Autumn, to provide a code of practice for how contract researchers should be managed in terms of appraisal, skills experience and career paths

29. The current review of higher education research assessment must ensure that whatever follows the Research Assessment Exercise does not disadvantage contract researchers (paragraph 91).

The RAE in its current form may reinforce a particular division of roles between academics and contract researchers. Under the current rules, contract research staff can only be submitted as full 'research active' members of staff in exceptional cases - for example, when they are the principal investigator on a research grant. This means that the 'research products', such as publications submitted by institutions, tend to be work carried out or led by academic staff. The Funding Councils' joint review of research assessment is examining how the system can be made more flexible in the way staff are included in the assessment process, without denying institutions the ability to highlight their strengths or creating

pressure for teaching staff to prove themselves in research. The review report will be published as a consultation document in early Summer 2003.

30. Funding Councils should consider using the proportion of researchers on fixed-term contracts in a department as a basis for calculating the university block grant (paragraph 92).

HEFCE is actively considering proposals to use its funding policy to encourage institutions to improve employment practice in its fundamental review of strategy to 2008.

31. We welcome the training grants for Research Council-funded CRS announced in the Spending Review but there is more that the Research Councils should be doing. It is not clear to us why the Research Councils cannot treat their grants as much as investments in people as in research. Their insistence on passing the buck to the universities is shameful (paragraph 95).

One of the strategic aims of each of the Research Councils is to produce highly-trained, highly-skilled people. The cross-departmental group implementing dual-support system reform is working towards improving the system so as to provide both the funders and employers of researchers the ability to further improve their career development.

32. The idea of a training voucher system for postdocs has merit and should be pursued (paragraph 96).

The Government understands that the EPSRC has assessed its training voucher scheme pilot, and is now actively developing a career development training package for university staff. The Government hopes that other Research Councils will consider a similar scheme.

33. To prevent contract researchers, particularly the more senior ones, from applying for Research Council grants is demeaning and stifles good ideas. If one Research Council can allow this then they all can. We recommend that all the Research Councils allow contract researchers to apply for their grants without delay (paragraph 97).

The group examining dual-support system reform will consider this issue and how it is addressed in the future. The implementation of the Fixed-Term Regulations may also have an impact, as the numbers of researchers on short-term contracts should reduce.

34. The continued excellence of the science base requires that we fund the best people available for the duration of a grant. We recommend that the Research Councils reassess their practices to ensure that their grants fund the best people available and not the cheapest (paragraph 98).

The Government expects the Research Councils to fund excellence in research, and understands that this is the case when each grant application is considered, for both the science and researchers. The Government understands that each Research Council will consider funding 'more expensive' researchers, where this has been justified in the grant application.

Management

35. We must end the damaging distinction between permanently employed academics and CRS. We must aim for security for all higher education staff even if this means that none is entitled to a job for life (paragraph 106).

36. This inquiry is focused on the problems created by huge numbers of contract researchers but it is clear to us that a resolution must embrace all academic staff employed in higher education (paragraph 108).

It is for higher education institutions to determine how they structure and manage their staffing. However, the Government agrees that, where possible, external mechanisms should not reinforce inflexible distinctions between academics and CRS. As mentioned in the response to recommendation 29 above, the review of research assessment is considering whether a future mechanism for funding and quality assessment could reduce the distinction between permanently employed academics and CRS.

The Fixed-Term Employees Regulations 2002 mean that fixed-term employees should receive no less favourable treatment than comparable permanent employees. Within the framework of the Joint Negotiating Committee for Higher Education Staff (JNCHES), the Universities and Colleges Employers Association has agreed, with the higher education unions, guidance for universities on fixed-term and casual employment. The guidance aims to achieve the right balance between flexible and efficient working and fair and secure employment, which will bring benefits to universities and staff alike. Over the long term this is expected to lead to a substantial reduction in the number of fixed-term contracts in the sector.

The Government is pleased to see that JNCHES is working for good human resources practice in all aspects of employment and particularly in career development and training opportunities for all HE staff. The higher education sector's Equality Challenge Unit is advising the Joint Committee on role analysis and equal pay for work of equal value and the Funding Council on universities' HR strategies covering all staff.

37. We have received ideas on how to remodel the management of research in our universities. We now need a Government that will listen to them and is bold enough to act (paragraph 112).

The group taking forward reform of the dual-support system will consider this issue and how it is addressed in the future. The implementation of the Fixed-Term Regulations will also go some way to improving the career management and development of staff working in UK universities.

The steps to improve organisation and management of research set out in the recent White Paper, "The Future of Higher Education", will help contract research staff and their careers. In particular, a focus on more concentrated and better-managed research units will mean opportunities for institutions to provide better-structured employment for CRS.

38. It is hard to identify a single culprit for the continuing mistreatment of our research workforce, but top of the list must be a management culture in some of our research-intensive universities, which is callous and shortsighted. The universities are under funded, but that is not an excuse for poor management (paragraph 114).

39. Reviews, financial investment and changes in the law can only achieve so much without tackling the fundamental underlying attitudes and behaviours (paragraph 114).

40. To resolve the problem of huge numbers of research staff working on short contracts, it is clear to us that university management must change radically, not just at the top level but in the way individual departments and research teams are managed (paragraph 103).

Our current and future plans to support institutions' human resources strategies have already been outlined in the response to recommendation 21. The new money will give increased priority to creating an excellent work force and to the sector's proposals for a more strategic approach to leadership and management.

We agree that human resource development needs to be better in depth: not only should there be better strategic management at the top, better performance management, training and career development which explicitly values teaching, but also research careers should be better managed and developed. HEFCE human resources strategies can cover all these areas.

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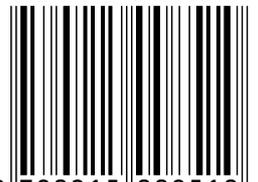
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