

# Enhanced Salaries and Stipends: A Summary Report

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## DEFINING 'SHORTAGES'

Recruitment and retention is increasingly difficult in a growing number of areas. The findings suggest marked variation by field, institution and location in the ability to recruit and retain researchers. The effects of a declining recruitment pool of 'home grown' researchers are mitigated by the ability to recruit researchers from abroad. In some fields, international researchers now constitute the majority of contract research staff and doctoral candidates.

Whilst the volume of applications was a problem in some areas, the key concern was quality and the risks associated with 'sub-optimal appointments'. The EPSRC and ESRC reported greater difficulty than the BBSRC in retaining doctoral students through to completion. The most critical problem lies in the transition from doctoral to postdoctoral research and the retention of postdoctorates.

Whilst shortages in some areas appear to be relatively stable, the findings indicate a high degree of fluidity and change. All three Research Councils identified areas of difficulty in the interstices between disciplines and the quality of basic, transferable skills (particularly in quantitative methods). This raises questions about the efficacy of targeting in an increasingly inter-disciplinary and inter-dependent research environment and the merits of single discipline approaches.

The enhancements in both the BBSRC and the EPSRC could be applied to a large proportion of awards - perhaps as many as 50% of postdoctoral positions. This raises important questions about the efficacy of targeting. The evidence required to guide and justify this form of resource targeting with any precision was lacking.

- Further work is required to assess the 'quality' issue and recruitment difficulties in less research intense and more peripheral institutional contexts.
- The broad and fluid nature of recruitment difficulties might support the alternative approach of overall increases in post-doctoral pay.
- Research councils should consider the merits of a 'coordinated approach' in order to increase awareness and avoid 'unproductive comparisons' between the Councils.
- To the extent that Research Councils are concerned with the human capital dimensions of initiatives (as the enhanced pay policy suggests) improvements need to be made in their ability to identify and track the body of researchers they fund to support effective evaluation and monitoring.

## UNDERSTANDING THE CAUSES OF 'SHORTAGES'

The study confirms the importance of pay as one of the single most important factors shaping attitudes towards academic careers. It emphasizes the relational quality of pay in career decision-making.

The relationship between pay progression and contractual security is a major concern. This is a complex issue which underlines the relationship between employment function and employment status (and pay) and the fundamental limitations of the contract research system. The perception of a 'pay ceiling' in contract research positions is linked to issues about role and the opportunities that such positions present in terms of staff development. Many contract researchers are heavily involved in the preparation of funding applications but this level of responsibility remains unrecognized as they are unable to act as co-applicants or principal applicants. The ASSET survey data point to the limited opportunity of contract researchers to take on supervisory or mentoring roles (or importantly have these roles formally recognised). The current approach to research funding ties the contract researcher to the parent project restricting their ability to engage in other forms of activity. This restricts both contract researchers' professional development with implications for their career progression but also the transfer of knowledge between more and less experienced researchers.

The overall increase in Research Council doctoral maintenance awards (to £12,000) is generally considered to be adequate. Pay causes more difficulties at post-doc level where researchers may face a drop in real income. Researchers often have two different perspectives on pay: the first relates to *adequacy* and the second to *competitiveness*. Whilst pay and security are of critical importance it is not clear that researchers are generally comparing their pay in a direct fashion with the private sector or pay abroad but rather considering whether the pay and security they receive is adequate to achieve an *acceptable quality of life*. In

many cases it is not and this is why they consider leaving. In other cases it is clear (particularly where attractive opportunities for researchers in other sectors are high such as in economics, veterinary science or engineering) that a direct comparison is being made with salaries in other sectors. Growing student debt and increases in fees are placing a renewed emphasis on financial rewards.

Whilst pay in the US is generally more attractive, differentials elsewhere continue to make the UK an attractive location to researchers from abroad. There is growing concern that the UK is failing to generate its own recruitment pools as the volume and quality of 'home grown' students making the transition into doctoral and post-doctoral research is perceived to be in decline. It is important to consider whether this decline is relative to the ability to attract higher quality (more experienced) applicants from abroad due to poor conditions and low pay in the sending countries. For many foreign researchers, pay is often not *the* critical factor shaping their decision to accept a position. The 'risk' is that the ability to recruit abroad might have a multiplier effect depressing wage rates in the UK.

The existence of natural progression routes and feeder programmes at undergraduate and Masters level increases the ability to improve skills training and the quality of students generating effective recruitment pools. Disciplines where such routes are less 'natural' (such as in business or veterinary schools for example) have greater problems. In some cases, disciplines are able to compensate for the lack of natural feeder routes through recruitment from proximate disciplines.

The extent to which the doctorate is valued varies enormously across disciplines and sub-disciplines. Where the PhD is accepted and respected in other sectors fewer recruitment and retention problems exist although attrition might take place rapidly following graduation.

Where academic research is taking place in close association with professional or vocational training, it is more difficult to attract professionals into academic research and retain them. The pressure on pay is acute in these situations.

Some of the recruitment difficulties identified by the Research Councils - and the Roberts' Review - are not directly concerned with relative pay but reflect specific strategic objectives to develop new research areas and build capacity.

- The findings underline the need for a significant review of employment policies and research funding.
- The fixed-term regulations should encourage universities to take greater responsibility for contract research staff and draw them into the mainstream of university HR provisions. Institutions need better guidance on the implications of the new regulations for HEIs and contract research staff.
- Other measures such as increasing flexibility in the length of contracts (receptiveness to longer contracts); increasing the opportunities for contract researchers to become co-applicants and, in some cases, applicants for research council funding and enabling contract researchers to act as doctoral supervisors and mentors would help to break the relationship between employment function and pay.
- The emphasis on pay adequacy and concerns around housing costs and debt might indicate the value of housing schemes and debt relief/waivers.
- The implications of internationalisation in academic labour markets requires careful monitoring.
- Further attention should be paid to measures to support feeder routes with a specific focus on inter-disciplinarity.
- In the case of capacity building in emerging research areas, it might be more effective to increase the volume and ring-fence awards.
- Where recruitment difficulties reflect shortages of specific transferable skills, applicants should be encouraged to make the case on the basis of scarcity of skills rather than differential pay.
- Further work is required with researchers who have left the sector or at an earlier stage to gauge the views of those about to make this decision.

## THE IMPACT OF ENHANCEMENTS

Where researchers have benefited from an enhancement, this has often made a significant difference at least in rendering a position viable or in shaping the decision about which academic post to take. Enhancements increased the attractiveness of posts and the volume of applicants. However, enhancements were seen as making positions more competitive in relation to positions at other universities *not* positions in other sectors. Where respondents made direct comparisons with pay in other sectors, such as in economics and business, the enhancements required to begin to match such salaries were considerable - at least double existing levels.

Enhancements did facilitate transition onto doctoral study and first-time postdoctoral positions and so do support retention within the wider system more generally. However, at doctoral level, retention to completion

was a more serious problem in particular EPSRC and ESRC fields where lucrative opportunities exist in other sectors. It is not clear that enhancements support retention in these cases.

Whilst the acceptance of higher salaries, especially of existing and named staff, in new grant applications might help to support retention, this does not solve the problem of mid-post retention.

- Specific measures are required in areas where pay differentials are particularly high (including professional areas).
- Retention of contract researchers between and during positions is a serious problem that requires additional measures.

## IMPLEMENTING SELECTIVE ENHANCEMENTS IN HEIs: SOME PROBLEMS

The impact of the scheme has been reduced by low levels of awareness and resistance. Awareness - in terms of eligibility and process - is very low across the board reflecting the lack of an effective high profile communication strategy and a reliance upon 'institutional trickle-down'. Many did not know about the scheme and even those receiving enhancements were sometimes unaware they had received it and why. The scheme is often confused with the Roberts Review Skills Training Scheme. Other significant developments were taking place in relation to pay at the same time - such as role analysis and the implementation of the single pay spine - and this compounded the degree of confusion and irritation. The impact of low levels of awareness is less of a problem in the BBSRC area due to its more centralised approach (see below).

### **Awareness: Identifying 'Change Agents' within Universities**

In order to improve information flows and policy take-up, it is important to identify the most appropriate 'agent' or entry point. Although HR departments hold general managerial responsibility, the situation for staff on externally-funded, research-only, contracts is more complex than that for core HEFCE-funded staff. The key actors in this process are the grant applicant (PI) in association with research administrators or finance officers.

### **Implementation Barriers: The Tension between Grant Application Behaviour and Post-doctoral Pay**

Research administrators were slightly more likely to have heard of the scheme and sometimes encouraged PIs to cost salaries at a higher level. The continued reluctance of PIs to do so reflects the conflicting pressures they face. Winning grants is critical to the successful execution of their research agenda and personal career progression (being closely linked to performance criteria). The increasingly competitive funding environment is placing pressure on PIs to demonstrate 'value-for-money' in applications. On the other hand, PIs are aware of the risks of 'sub-optimal' appointments and the exploitative conditions faced by researchers. The reluctance to cost salaries at a higher level is a particular problem in relation to unnamed researchers. Moreover, contract researchers involved in grant applications are concerned to balance their need for salary progression with the risks of 'costing themselves out of a post'.

The process of negotiation of employment terms and conditions at least in the context of the length of contracts and levels of pay involves a discussion between research administrators, PIs and, where relevant, contract researchers. The interface between this discussion and university HR units is generally very weak. The reasons for this are understandable, to the extent that it is the grant that funds the specific HR context, in a more direct way than the pooled or collective experience of core HEFCE-funded staff. However, the resulting relationship between employment function and employment status (and pay) results in the effective marginalisation of contract research staff from central HR processes.

Institutions have often set up specific groups or structures in HR in response to the research careers initiative and more recently fixed-term regulations. Whilst useful in some respects (in terms of policy development) this approach can effectively disconnect these issues from the core activities of HR staff and especially those seconded to departments or schools restricting awareness and policy implementation.

### **Cultural Barriers: Attitudes to Market Pay and General Change**

Whilst HR respondents were less likely to have heard of the enhancement scheme – and less likely to be aware of discipline-specific recruitment difficulties – they were generally supportive of the *principle* of pay enhancement as a mechanism to promote effective recruitment and retention. HR staff were actively responding to the implications of the new pay structures and many institutions were developing market pay strategies.

However, heads of schools, directors of postgraduate research and grant holders were struggling to deal with and disentangle the plethora of recent policy initiatives in the field of research training, full economic costing, pay and fixed term regulations. These respondents had concerns about both the principle and practical implications of basing pay differentials on shortages as opposed to merit or skills. The problems associated with employing staff on different salaries to do effectively the same work in similar and proximal situations was most keenly felt by grant holders as they have most immediate day-to-day contact with, and

managerial responsibility for, researchers. That said, in some shortage areas - such as economics or engineering, for example - staff were more accepting of the logic of market pay and had been effectively implementing it for some time. In such cases, the scheme is providing funds to support pre-existing practice.

The study revealed that pay differentials were having a structuring effect - institutions and other funding bodies were attempting to match Research Council pay where possible. Whilst this can be viewed positively in terms of generating overall pressure on academic pay, it may have unintended consequences in terms of pushing some funding bodies out of the market altogether and so reducing the overall volume of positions. It may also specifically advantage more wealthy institutions and groups.

- Significant efforts are required to increase the level of awareness and understanding of the scheme. Efforts should be focused on PIs and research administrators.
- HR managers need to consider ways of 'mainstreaming' HR issues in relation to contract research staff to improve communication within HEIs and fulfill their obligations under the fixed term regulations.
- The research community needs concrete assurance that the review process will not penalise grant applications involving higher salaries.

## REFLECTING ON RESEARCH COUNCIL IMPLEMENTATION APPROACHES

### The Centralized Approach

The BBSRC approach of designating shortage areas centrally and automatically applying standard enhancements to all posts that fall within those areas avoids - superficially at least - the problem of awareness and the 'risks' of escalating salary budgets in grant applications. However, it may lack the subtlety required to target resources efficiently in areas suffering key recruitment and retention difficulties. This policy will place greater responsibility on Research Councils to ensure that they comply with JNCHES guidance on market supplements and equality concerns and might demand careful attention to on-going monitoring of shortages at Research Council level. Despite the clarity of the BBSRC's approach, appointments in the shortage areas continue to be made at a lower level.

### The Decentralized and Responsive Approach

The PI/supervisor seeking to recruit a researcher is faced with a complex interplay of situations. The ability to attract applicants, encourage them to accept positions and retain researchers requires them to engage with this coincidence of events and the relational quality of pay in that context and often at an individual level. Responsive approaches to pay enhancement have existed for some time and are developing quite rapidly. Devolving responsibility to institutions to allocate funds as they see appropriate - through DTAs and encouraging grant applicants to 'make a case' for salary enhancements - recognizes the importance of local knowledge and context. This approach - used by the EPSRC - concurs with the development of the new flexible approach to pay under the JNCHES framework placing responsibility firmly on the institutions, as employers, to justify their approach to pay and ensure it is transparent and in compliance with equality issues. To be effective, this approach demands a higher degree of awareness-raising, clearer guidance, encouragement and monitoring. Unfortunately the advice issued by the EPSRC has not 'trickled down' effectively to reduce the perception of risk.

In terms of monitoring and evaluation, the centralized approach is more straightforward. The devolved, responsive, approach makes evaluation of the effects more difficult to assess.

- The Research Councils need to consider the relative merits and risks associated with these two approaches.
- If the policy of selective targeting is to be continued and accepted by the research community it needs to stand on a sound and explicit evidence-base and be amenable to effective evaluation. This is not the case at the present time. Although measures are in place to ensure wider financial accountability for the funding that HEIs obtain, Research Councils are currently unable to track the impact of their funding on human resources capacity.

The main report - *Assessing the Impact of the Roberts' Review Enhanced Stipends and Salaries on Postgraduate and Postdoctoral Positions* by Louise Ackers, Bryony Gill, Keleigh Groves and Liz Oliver - is available from the CSLPE website:

[www.law.leeds.ac.uk/cslpe](http://www.law.leeds.ac.uk/cslpe)

