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# Resolving the human issues in LIS projects

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## Abstract

*This paper describes a recent project funded by the Research Support Libraries Programme and JISC to study the human resource issues facing LIS staff who work on funded projects on fixed term contracts. Although most of their problems are the same as those facing academic contract research staff, neither HR Departments in institutions nor the project funders have applied the messages from the UUK Concordat to LIS staff. The study obtained responses to a survey from over 200 project staff and these revealed a disturbing range of good and bad practice in the way LIS project staff are treated. As a result a number of recommendations are made for the heads of LIS, institutional HR Directors, funders and project directors.*

## BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

This paper describes a study that was commissioned by the (UK higher education funding bodies' Joint Information Systems Committee) JISC and RSLP (their Research Support Libraries Programme) in October 2001 from a team from CHEMS Consulting and the Higher Education Consultancy Group. The report was published in September 2002. The aim of the study was to 'learn about the issues surrounding the recruitment, development and retention of project staff in UK higher education libraries and archives, with special reference to RSLP and JISC projects'.

Since the Follett Report in 1993 there have been over 500 funded projects in library and information services and these have involved at least 1,000 staff who have worked on fixed term contracts. Most of them have had no job security beyond the project's life and this has had a serious effect not only on their personal lives but also on the effectiveness of the projects they work on. The study focused on the human resource issues concerning these people, as there is a strong case for trying to retain their skills within the sector in order to

enhance future library and information service (LIS) provision.

In this paper the term 'LIS project staff' is used to describe all those from the LIS function working on projects. Most of these are on fixed term contracts but some are permanent members of staff. However, some of the projects included staff from academic departments where the focus of the work was on academic content. The term 'project director' refers to the person with overall responsibility for the control of project staff and their performance appraisal and review. A two tier structure is common in which a project manager has day to day control over the project, while a project director has the institutional accountability for the project. It is not unusual for the project director to be a permanent staff member of the library and information service or in an academic department.

The topic of fixed term contracts has been heavily explored recently in the context of academic researchers. The Concordat of 1996 which was supported by a consortium of research councils, academic societies and the CVCP (Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals, now Universities UK) highlighted the concerns of over 30,000 academic researchers all of whom were on such contracts. This was followed by the Research Contract Initiative (RCI) led by Universities UK and the Office of Science and Technology which has tried to persuade institutions to implement the principles of the Concordat. The RCI is still continuing its work of producing guidance on good practice, based on reports from institutions.<sup>1</sup> The issues involving the growth in the numbers of fixed term contracts are naturally of major concern to the relevant trade unions.

Similar studies of contract research staff have been under way in Scotland since 1995 and in two tranches of funding the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council (SHEFC) has supported a substantial staff development programme for project managers and contract research staff. In addition a major tracking study was undertaken of all the 3,300 contract academic researchers in Scotland between 1998 and 2000. The report from that study published in December 2001<sup>2</sup> reaches very similar conclusions to those in this project.

The data collection for this study centred on two web based surveys: one to staff on the 457 projects stretching back to 1994, and the other to project directors and project managers. The project staff were located by finding project direc-

tors and asking them to provide the names and whereabouts of their former project staff – if they knew them – and secondly, when they had been identified asking them to complete the web-based survey. The Data Protection Act proved to be an obstacle as many project directors felt that its provisions prevented them from passing on the names of project staff. This was overcome by asking them to forward letters about the survey, but inevitably this introduced another potential barrier. As a result of some energetic research, over 500 project staff were identified, and in all, 65 project directors and 138 project staff completed the survey; this represented a response rate of 43% from those 474 email addresses that were subsequently found to be valid. This response rate compares favourably with other attempts to track contract research workers. In the Contract Research Online Survey (CROS) project at the University of Bristol, for example, 24% of contract research staff responded to their surveys run within universities. The team was tempted to conclude that the relatively high response was due to the strength of feeling in the LIS project community about their employment terms and conditions.

In addition to the survey, the team visited nine institutions to interview project directors, their staff and institutional representatives such as the head of LIS and staff from the human resource function. Two focus groups were held in Glasgow and Leeds to test some of the emerging findings and interviews were held with representatives of funders.

During the period of the study consultation was being sought on some significant new legislation that came into effect in October 2002. This was the Fixed Term Employees Regulations which stem from an EU Directive of 1999 that the UK government is now enacting<sup>3</sup> and, which, if honoured, will go some way to helping to resolve some of the key problems facing project staff. It will set a limit of four years to the successive use of fixed term contracts, abolish the use of a redundancy waiver clause (by which employees waive their right to redundancy payments) and seek to ensure that fixed term contract staff are employed no less favourably than permanent staff. Its imminent appearance has already persuaded Robert Gordon University to agree with the AUT that all its academic contract research staff should have open-ended contracts.<sup>4</sup>

### Main findings

Although it was dangerous to assume it, the findings from all data sources were consistent with

those issues identified by the RCI/Concordat and by the SHEFC study for academic contract research staff (CRS). They are summarised under six main headings:

- a) **Recruitment of staff:** The evidence showed that generalisations on recruitment are not possible owing to the many specialisms being sought, the influence of location and the occasional bunching of calls for projects that required similar skills. In general, project work was thought to be an attractive and sought-after option for LIS staff, so that in most cases there were plenty of applicants for posts. However, responses showed that there have been occasions when recruitment was very difficult (particularly for archivists, specialist cataloguers and linguists) causing projects to be delayed. 42% of project directors considered that it was becoming harder to obtain good staff, although 43% thought there had been no change in the last five years.
- b) **Reward:** Most project staff considered themselves poorly paid (56% of those surveyed earn under £20,000) but this factor did not rank as highly as the lack of job security in their concerns. Many were also distressed at the lack of any career structure allowing them little or no salary progression, and some staff with many years project experience had not seen their pay increase over that time. Competitive bidding for projects is seen as one of the main drivers keeping salaries low, since project directors were thought to bid low to win the project. More general concerns were voiced over conditions of service generally and there was a feeling among some LIS contract staff that they were not treated the same as permanent LIS staff and received fewer benefits.
- c) **Job security:** The lack of job security was the major concern of fixed term project staff and there was strong evidence that it caused uncertainty, personal distress and led to avoidable mobility of staff towards the end of fixed term contracts. 65% of project directors reported that staff had left early during their project in order to get another job. When this happens, directors suffer because of the disruption caused to the project's final months and the aggravation in having to find very short term replacement staff in a hurry, who will barely climb up the learning curve before the project ends. The institution is also involved in the extra unbudgeted cost and

hassle of recruiting staff for a short period. The report identified the perennial uncertainty and insecurity of anyone who wished to make a career of LIS project work, but was surprised to find that many staff considered this as an inevitable fact of academic life, about which nothing can be done. Many project directors were also resigned to accept this.

- (d) **Retention:** despite the general unease about job security, retention of project staff in the sector was good, since, although they claim to look outside higher education for work, staff nearly always opt for further contracts in the sector. It was seen as offering many advantages, such as fulfilling and intellectually challenging work, although only 50% stated that staying in higher education was their career plan. Unfortunately, the survey could not give much guidance on the numbers that had left higher education for a life outside, as so few of the respondents were from outside higher education. The great bulk of those replying were still in university life.
- (e) **Staff development and support:** The evidence showed that although induction and technical training is widespread, other forms of staff development were not widely taken up by contract staff. Only 10% had received training in project management and only 13% on research skills. Some thought they were second class citizens in terms of the benefits and support they receive from the institution. However, there was also a striking ignorance about the central human resource and career support services that were available to them and information about some benefits may not have been conveyed to staff. It was surprising also that only 35% of staff had been given annual appraisals or performance reviews.
- (f) **Funding methodologies:** Project directors believed that funders could help overcome some of the staffing issues noted above by amending aspects of the funding methodology and bidding process. They could be more interested in human resource issues and willing to adapt staffing budgets if needed. Most also felt that project budgets should be expected to meet all the direct staffing costs that had been incurred (eg. staff development, interview travel costs, costs of maternity leave), with a more generous interpretation of the relevant 'on-costs', such as rented space or management time.

The consistent message emerging from the many qualitative survey comments and interviews with staff was that, despite all the disadvantages of project life, it still remained – for most – satisfying and challenging. However, for some the frustrations and hardships became too much and they looked for work elsewhere. Many were resigned to the situation not changing and showed a tacit acceptance that the difficulties were system-wide and associated with modern academic life, rather than peculiar to the project, the funding body or the host institution.

The reality is that some of the human resource difficulties are purely institutional and could well be changed by introducing good human resource practices. Sadly, because of a lack of experience, the study's respondents were not always able to identify what might be done to tackle the problems they faced.

What is the real problem in the staffing of LIS projects? From the perspective of the staff concerned the answers were relatively predictable: the large majority all wanted greater job security; a reduction in the frustrations of project life; and greater integration within mainstream LIS services. These aspirations would generally be supported by the relevant trade unions, critical of the consequences of increasing casualisation in the work force. Project managers would generally agree with their staff, since they have suffered from the endemic problems of the early departure of key staff on fixed term contracts before projects end.

From an institutional and system-wide perspective the answer to the question was less clear: most projects are completed with staff costs kept relatively low; there were no obvious indicators of institutional concern about shortages of LIS staff; indeed many human resources managers thought the issues were not significant enough to identify in their human resources strategy. If they were alert to the topic of contract research staff and had taken action on the Concordat, few considered that it applied to LIS staff on projects. In such cases it is tempting to conclude that the LIS staffing problems are typical of project funding, and, although difficult for the staff concerned, just a fact of modern university employment.

#### **HR PRACTICE IN INSTITUTIONS**

Institutional practice in connection with LIS project staff varied considerably, and visits to nine institutions showed a wide range of practice in the implementation of effective human

resource policies. Some are excellent practitioners and examples of good practice from case study institutions are presented in the report, but a few are poor. One was very bad indeed. The findings were always based on academic contract research staff rather than LIS project staff, who were never considered a large enough category to merit any special policies. Areas where practice differed were:

- The existence of clear policies on when fixed term contracts should be used.
- The automatic dissemination of information to contract staff about their employment rights under current legislation.
- Flexibility in adapting the normal institutional recruitment and employment processes to the funders' timetable.
- The use of a redundancy waiver clause in fixed term contracts – even though it is due to be outlawed shortly and institutions have been recommended not to use it.
- The creation of bridging funds at LIS department or central university level to finance the employment of staff in gaps between contracts and so retain them within the institution.
- The application of policies on staff development, annual appraisal and performance review to all contract staff in exactly the same way as to permanent staff.
- Treatment of contract staff in all ways as though they were permanent.
- The provision of career planning advice and support for staff nearing the end of their contract.

The conclusion from the review of institutional practices was that ways must be found of bringing the 'worst' practitioners up to the standards of the 'best'. This presents the LIS managers with a problem, since on their own they might not be able to achieve this kind of change within the institution in the management policies of a senior administrative colleague. However the head of LIS may not be alone, since a survey in one institution revealed that only half of the staff on fixed term contracts were academic researchers. Therefore a large number of people share the concerns of LIS project staff.

#### **THE INFLUENCE OF FUNDING BODIES**

Funding body policies and practices have an impact on project staff. One regular concern was their policies on meeting all staff-related costs within project budgets. Most funders start from the research council rule that no overheads will be

paid at all as they are funded from the core grant. There was much uncertainty as to just what staff costs could and could not be included in project bids. Given the usual wish to win in a competitive situation, most project directors were leaving extra staffing costs out rather than putting them in to bids. In particular, institutions were uncertain as to whether they can claim for all staff development costs for project staff. Interview costs, removal expenses and extra costs arising from maternity leave were also all grey areas. Shortly, the legislation may lead to redundancy payments figuring among claims to funders and whether or not these can be recovered needs to be confirmed. Project directors reported that the exact definition of what is an overhead needs clarification. It was found that a growing number of institutions are not bidding for projects, if they are unable to recover any overhead expenses from the funder. The funding bodies may have to review their policies in this matter if they wish to receive bids from the full spectrum of institutions.

Another concern was that the funders' record in bunching the launch of projects requiring similar specialist skills can lead to delays and problems due to the inability to recruit a large number of staff at the same time. Some phasing of project start dates might provide some respite. However, the practical realities of funders' independence from each other and need to spend within agreed programme timeframes means that the coordination needed to stop bunching of projects is unlikely to happen.

The study debated the question whether those bodies funding LIS projects have any obligation to help to develop the relevant skills in project staff. Do they not have a responsibility to build up cadres of LIS staff with the skills that the sector needs and should they not therefore monitor human resource policies to enable this to happen? It might be argued that there is an analogy with the research councils who see the development and training of research staff as one of the key outcomes from their funding. The team did not think this comparison was a valid one, as on the whole the work of LIS project staff is developmental and not research and has a shorter time horizon. (It is accepted that there are a few exceptions to this, as some of the eLib or National Science Foundation projects might be considered research rather than development.) This means that the prime responsibility for ensuring that the LIS profession contains the right skills sets is with the institutional LIS managers and their advisers in the profession. Despite this conclusion the report concluded that

fundere have an interest in seeing that staff working on their projects are treated well in accordance with the best human resource practice. They must also make sure that nothing they do in allocating funds or defining the limit to project budgets makes the situation of LIS project staff any worse.

#### **THE STUDY'S RECOMMENDATIONS**

The team undertaking the study debated how far to go in making recommendations and considered whether it would be helpful to develop some Statements of Good HR Practice to be applied to LIS project staff. It was finally decided to focus on making recommendations for various audiences. They were as follows:

##### **Institutions**

- All institutions should apply the principles and spirit of the RCI Concordat to LIS project staff.
- Fixed term contract staff must be treated in the same way as permanent staff.
- All institutions should have a specialist on career research staff issues in the central HR function and this person should also look after LIS project staff and all other non-academic fixed term contract staff.
- Institutions should adopt the requirements of the Fixed Term Employees Regulations 2002 as quickly as they can and will need to develop guidelines on the options when fixed term contracts come to an end.
- All institutions must be encouraged to follow good practice (defined in the RCI reports and described in this study) as regards career research staff and LIS project staff.
- The careers service should develop special support programmes for fixed term contract staff in line with good practice described in the CRA reports.
- Institutions should seek to recover all the costs relating to staff from funders and must not bid at unrealistically low salary levels. Individuals should never be costed at a lower salary than they have been receiving.

##### **LIS Heads and project directors**

- Fixed term contracts should be issued for as long as possible within the terms of the project.
- LIS heads should liaise with the head of the HR function to ensure that their project staff are treated as well as contract research staff.
- LIS heads should liaise with the institutional head of HR to ensure that the institution matches the good practice described in this report.

- LIS managers have to recognise the special skills required of staff asked to become project managers and should develop a cadre of such people and provide them with appropriate staff development.
- LIS heads should aim to build up their own reserve funds to act as a bridging fund for meeting the costs of key fixed term contract staff when they are between contracts.
- Project directors will need to work closely with their fixed term project staff to understand their career plans and direct them to the appropriate support services in the institution.

##### **Funders and other bodies**

- CILIP, UCISA and SCOUNL should agree on good practice as regards LIS project staff and then seek to encourage its adoption by HR managers in institutions and LIS project directors.
- Funding bodies should state their commitment to good human resource practice in the LIS projects they fund.
- They should clarify what staff related costs they will meet from project budgets in their documentation and specifically emphasise that project staff should receive staff development and that it can be claimed from project budgets.
- Career information on similar job opportunities should be available to LIS project staff as they near the end of their project and CILIP, UCISA and SCOUNL should explore the various mechanisms for achieving this nationally.

##### **WILL ANYTHING HAPPEN?**

The team working on this study was surprised at the depth of feeling aroused on some of the issues. Although many project staff had become resigned to the difficulties of an insecure and uncertain life, several were outspoken in their criticisms of a system that allowed it to happen and took it for granted. They hoped that this study would bring about some change.

The study's funders have similar aspirations and have agreed to disseminate the report widely in order to open up the issues. A conference is also planned. The main impact however is within institutions and the onus for achieving change will be shared between the heads of the LIS and the HR functions.

At national level some of the recommendations require coordinated action between bodies such as

CILIP, UCISA and SCONUL and champions will be required to steer proposals through their decision making processes. Funding bodies such as JISC will also need to take note and review their processes. The study team trusts that the unhappy voices identified in its report will be a vocal reminder of the human issues and will provide an incentive to get results.

- 1 For the Research Contract Initiative reports containing summaries of good practice see [www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/activities/rci/asp](http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/activities/rci/asp)
- 2 Scottish Higher Education Funding Council (2001). 'Academic research careers in Scotland: a longitudinal study of academic contract staff, their jobs and career patterns', available on [www.shefc.ac.uk/content/shefc/research/crs/ResearchcareersinScot.pdf](http://www.shefc.ac.uk/content/shefc/research/crs/ResearchcareersinScot.pdf)
- 3 See the Fixed Term Employees (Prevention of Less Favourable Treatment) Regulations 2002. Details can be found at [www.dti.gov.uk/er/fixed/](http://www.dti.gov.uk/er/fixed/)
- 4 For details see [www.aut.org.uk/campaigns/rgu.html](http://www.aut.org.uk/campaigns/rgu.html)