

# Long-term research staff survey: preliminary results from closed-ended questions

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## BACKGROUND

A survey aiming to understand the personal and professional circumstances that lead to long-term employment (defined here as 8+ years) among research staff on temporary contracts (hereafter "long-term researchers" or "LTRs") was distributed between 8 June - 15 July 2022. The first published research findings about this part of the academic population were based on 24 interviews of long-term researchers based in the same university [1]. This survey aimed to upscale this initial study and was distributed by some researcher development teams in Researchers14 and a Scottish university network to their research staff.

This report presents a brief overview of preliminary results based on responses to the closed-ended questions. The analysis of the survey is ongoing and submission in an academic journal of the final analysis is anticipated for 2023.

## RESULTS

This section presents a summary of relevant closed-ended questions as a percentage of the total responses. Implications of some of these results are discussed in the next section.

- 179 responses from researchers in at least 17 institutions were received (Table 1).
- 56% of respondents had been LTRS between 8-12 years and 44% for more than 13 years.
- 53% of respondents were on open-ended contracts with an end-date and 47% were on fixed-term contracts.
- 26% currently worked part-time, but free-text responses suggest that more had been on part-time contracts at some other point in their career.
- 54% had applied for an independent research fellowship, 38% of whom had secured one at some point in their career (i.e. 20% of all respondents).
- 45% had applied for a lectureship at some point in their career.
- 94% had taught UG/PG classes and/or supervised MSc or PhD students while on research-only contracts.
- 83% contributed to research proposals, more than half of whom declared having contributed significantly.
- One quarter of LTRS declared that their research career had suffered from bullying and harassment; of these, more than half did not escalate the matter, either because they thought it would be a bad move for their career, because they had not realised they were being bullied until they left their position or because there was no route for them to escalate the matter.
- More than one third of respondents declared that their research career suffered because they were an interdisciplinary researcher.
- Half of respondents declared that their research career suffered from the poor managerial skill or lack of support from their line manager i.e. generally the principal investigator (PI) of the research grant they work in.

HE institution	Number of respondents
University of Edinburgh	46
University of Glasgow	30
University of Bristol	19
University College London	10
University of Leeds	10
University of Manchester	9
University of Cambridge	8
King's College London	7
Imperial College London	6
Queen's University Belfast	6
University of Nottingham	6
University of Durham	4
University of Strathclyde	3
University of Liverpool	2
Cardiff University	2
University of Oxford	1
University of Warwick	1
Prefer not to say	8

Table 1: Number of survey respondents per HE institution.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The results of the closed-ended questions generally confirm the findings from the first research study on LTRS [1]. Of particular importance, we recommend the following:

**Use a more inclusive vocabulary** Although our previous study [1] showed that the career aims of LTRS in different categories differed, the survey clearly shows that LTRS do not relate to the terms used to describe them. Preliminary analysis of free-text responses suggest that many LTRS, in fact, strongly object to terms like ECR or postdoc which implicitly deny their years of experience. More information on this can be found in an IAD blog post [2]. We recommend that terms like “ECR” not be used to describe all research staff, as is often the case, but that the diversity of the research staff population be recognised and terms like those presented in Table 2 be used to recognise the variety of ambitions and career stages research staff are at.

Terms used to describe the career stage respondents are at.	Percentage of respondents who chose “Definitely” or “A little”
Long-term researcher	84%
Senior researcher	81%
Contract researcher	71%
Career researcher	71%
Postdoctoral researcher	66%
Established researcher	65%
Research Fellow	61%
Early career researcher	22%
Junior researcher	6%

Table 2. Terms used to describe research staff in long-term employment on temporary contracts, in order of preference. The 5 options were “Definitely”, “A little”, “I’m not sure”, “Not Really”, “Not at all”.

**Do not present open-ended contracts with end dates as the solution to precarity** Many universities see increasing the number of such contracts as a measure to reduce precarity among research staff. This is at odds with how the majority of LTRS, many of whom are already on such contracts, feel about this measure (see Table 3). In fact, some interviewees from our previous study [1] and participants to the survey expressed anger at institutions for providing what some call “fake” open-ended contracts. We recommend that institutions recognise this conflict between their intention and the perception of this measure among research staff, and we suggest that careful wording be used when announcing or advertising such measures to avoid unintended negative feelings towards the institution.

Measures to reduce precarity	Percentage of respondents who chose “Very” and “Quite” interested
Researcher pool	66%
Research-only career progression pathway even if still on fixed-term contracts	61%
Open-ended contract with end date	34%

Table 3: Measures considered by some HE institutions to reduce precarity among research staff, by order of preference of respondents.

**Increase measures for “invisible” work to be recognised** Survey responses suggest that LTRS conduct a lot of tasks that are “invisible” and which are unrecognised. This can be problematic when applying for positions inside and outside of academia because proof of the track record can be missing. For example, 94% of respondents affirm being involved in teaching or/and supervision of students while being – paradoxically - on a research-only contract; many do not get paid for it. The majority of respondents also affirm having contributed to research proposals, sometimes as the lead, but could not be named as such because of eligibility criteria not allowing staff on fixed-term contracts being named PI or co-PI. We recommend that a better framework to quantify and to recognise the work conducted by LTRS - and more generally of research staff - outwith their job specification, be investigated. A number of solutions have been proposed: encourage and support RS to apply for e.g. AdvanceHE fellowships to get recognition for their teach and supervising by supporting; have a

workload model for research staff; conduct annual reviews with more than line managers to ensure that the work is recognised beyond the researcher's immediate research group.

**Diversify the academic career structure** A better quantification of the work conducted by research staff beyond their contractual duties will help understand the importance of LTRS within the research landscape. Survey responses show that 61% of respondents are more interested in being able to progress in their career than in securing an open-ended position (Table 3). Arguably, the survey suffers from survivor bias; those who wanted or needed to secure more stable positions may already have left. However, for those who stay, the survey results suggest that stagnating in one's position could be more detrimental than remaining on fixed-term contracts; almost two-third of LTRS want to keep on evolving as researchers and progress in their career. For example some universities, such as the University of Glasgow, already offer research-only career progression pathways [3] and we recommend that more follow this model. In addition, discrimination and bullying and harassment (B&H) play a considerable role in the career path of a large number of LTRs. It is clear from the closed-ended questions and answers that researchers have no confidence in anti B&H measures taken in their institution and trust that their career is more likely to suffer than that of the perpetrator of the B&H. There is also a large percentage of staff (mostly women) who work part-time because of caring responsibilities and who, therefore, cannot produce as much output as their full-time colleagues. While the quantity of output should be considered in term of full-time equivalence, it is clear that part-time research staff are not seen as competitive and struggle to progress in their career. The ongoing work to improve research culture has a strong focus on improving access to research from underrepresented groups, improving research conduct and on diversifying recruitment approaches at all career stages [4]. The diversification of the workforce cannot be considered in isolation from the diversification of the career paths that this workforce is on. As a consequence, we recommend that institutions offer a variety of research-only career pathways (see Table 3) to stop losing the talent they have invested in - in the case of some LTRs - for decades.

## REFERENCES

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