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KEEPING AFLOAT WITH A RESEARCH POOL

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Introduction

A gap was identified in the ability of the Faculty to provide research assistance for project start-up at short notice, as often required upon award.

To enable the Faculty to respond more rapidly, in March 2012 a Research Pool of ten suitably experienced academic researchers, at Research Assistant grade, was recruited to provide support to short and long-term projects.

The Research Pool work alongside the research team to deliver support to a variety of client groups.

Research Pool staff are not guaranteed set hours and can work a varying number of hours during a working week/month. They have no fixed working pattern as the demands of the project dictate the amount of support required. All work is offered to the whole of the Research Pool on a fair and equitable basis by providing them with the scope of the work and requesting registers of interest from them.

Contracts are based on a 1 year rolling basis, with equal access to training and benefits given to permanent staff.

Training

Variable hours staff have a managed induction period, just like any other member of staff as, by their nature, such contracts are for staff that are required on an on-going basis. Essential training includes health and safety aspects relating to the post/organisation and equal opportunities/diversity. They also have access to People Development opportunities as agreed with line management and have an annual performance development review as per University policy. Funding is also allocated for specific targeted training to ensure that skills required are current and new expertise is developed.

Skills and expertise

- Qualitative – focus groups, one-to-one and telephone interviews, use of NVivo, transcribing, literature reviews
- Quantitative – design and delivery of surveys and use of statistical packages
- Interpretation and analysis of results and reporting

In total over four years the research pool have contributed to 7495 hours of work over 53 projects.

Allocation of Work

2012	2013	2014	2015
1686	1295	3172	1342

The research pool almost doubled their research activity in 2014, by providing an extra 1486 hours of work. 2014 was the most productive year for the research pool, with 12 staff working across 29 projects.

In 2015 the research pool worked on 24 projects, however there were only 5 staff actively working due to a number of staff going on to full-time employment.

Members of the Pool left due to gaining a permanent post, either within our University or elsewhere, after improving their skills with us or having moved out of commuting distance. We are on our third round of recruitment and selection. The Research Pool has been so successful that we have received approval to increase the number of researchers from 10 to 15.

'Variable hours' – is that like zero hours?

There are some overlaps between the variable hours contracts of Research Pool staff and the sort of contracts commonly referred to as 'zero hours', and it is important to bear in mind the genuine problems with zero hours contracts which have lead staff unions in the sector to oppose their proliferation.

However, there are some key differences in implementation and experience with our Research Pool which we believe ameliorate some of the problems with zero hours contracts:

1. Research Pool staff are not required to be ready to work whenever they are asked – work offers are circulated and allocated to those most able to take up the work in terms of skills and time, with no penalty applied to those unable to take up each opportunity.

2. The work involved in the Research Pool is never required at such short notice that it leaves staff struggling to arrange care for their dependents.

3. Unlike in teaching, Research Pool work is steady throughout the year.

4. Research Pool staff undergo the same recruitment process and have the same access to inductions, training, CPD and appraisals, as full-time staff.

5. As the Research Pool has become more established within the faculty, steady work tends to be available for all Research Pool staff who want to take it up.

6. Our Research Pool has acted as an 'in' for early career researchers to successfully apply for permanent posts when they have become available within the Faculty.

Testimonials

Member of the research pool:

"The research pool offers early career researchers the chance to gain experience in different research teams and with a variety of research methods. This experience enhances the CV and opens up more possibilities of permanent research positions."

Professor Steve Robertson, Primary Investigator

"The research pool provides an opportunity to bring good quality research staff with a range of skills into projects when they are required. This flexibility of incorporating staff into work that sometimes only requires a couple of days, and other times a more significant involvement, is crucial given the flux that forms a core element of the research and evaluation work here at Leeds Beckett"

Professor Richard Hogston, Director of Research, Faculty of Health and Social Sciences

"Our Research Pool enables us to meet the immediate needs of our rapid response to community-focused research as well as providing staff development and career opportunities."

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