

Informatics Research Staff Society (IRSS) response to proposed changes to RA job description

Recently a document was circulated by Martin Wright to Strategy Committee members, proposing a change to the standard Grade 7 research staff job description by adding the following text:

Contributing to learning and teaching through activities such as project supervision, tutoring and marking (limited to no more than 5% on an annualised basis).

As the group that represents and organises research staff within the School, as well as representing research staff on Strategy Committee, we wish to respond to this suggestion and raise a number of issues and questions.

First of all, we are not opposed to voluntary arrangements for involvement in teaching by research staff so this documents addresses the compulsory nature of the proposed changes. Furthermore, MSc and undergraduate project supervision are research-focussed rather than teaching, so strong encouragement for research staff to take on these specific tasks are reasonable. In the following, we use the term “teaching duties” to refer to “*Contributing to learning and teaching through activities such as (...), tutoring and marking*”

We raise the following concerns and questions and believe that these need to be addressed before any change to the job description can be considered.

- Research staff are employed by the University but are typically paid by funds from external sources. Which funders allow for research funding to be diverted into teaching funding in this way? If a funder does not allow this reallocation of resources, does this mean that researchers funded by that funder will be exempt? This would then disadvantage the group that does have teaching duties as they will have less time for research.
- Will all PIs accept this arrangement, or will it be the case for some research staff that they will be expected by their PI to do the extra 5% over and above a 100% research position (where significant unpaid overtime is the norm already)?
- Not all research staff have the same teaching abilities, either due to language skills or to research area. Will the proposed change mean that some research staff will not be used for teaching, and the burden will fall on those with good English skills or a computer science background?
- How will teaching duties be allocated? The proposal refers “*no more than 5% on an annualised basis*” but what happens if a research staff member is given intensive teaching duties in the month before an important conference deadline?
- Research staff are repeatedly told by the University that acquiring an academic job is very unlikely and that research staff should prepare themselves for a

career outside academia. This means that there is likely to be less motivation for taking on teaching duties than previously, and it is very unlikely that teaching is useful in terms of skill acquisition or career development.

- We understand that one of the reasons it has been difficult to find PhD students to pay for these teaching duties is that the work often takes longer than the hours paid. Will this be repeated for research staff so that nominally they are using 5% of their hours but de facto it is 10% or higher?
- There will be administrative overhead to manage the hours of research staff but because there will be no payment involved, insufficient resources may be allocated to ensure research staff are treated fairly.

We make the following alternative proposals:

- Research staff to be paid by the School for teaching duties. They would be funded for a $100\%+x\%$ research position, where x is the percentage of time spent on teaching duties, and this is less than 5% on a *monthly* basis.
- Alternatively, the School could lobby the University to change its rules regarding additional payments to those on a 100% position when the additional payments are for duties that are not part of the 100% position.
- Introduce teaching duties formally in individual research staff contracts on a voluntary basis. Both the PI and the researcher must agree to this, as well as the funder. This removes the compulsory nature of the proposed change, and enables choice of suitable research staff for teaching duties.
- Provide a career path within the School to a lectureship for those research staff that take on teaching duties (with the agreement of the PI and funder).
- Employ permanent teaching-only staff with a well-defined career path to senior levels within the School.

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