# SCHOOL OF INFORMATICS

## Strategy Committee

**26 October 2016**

## Teaching duties expected of research staff

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**Background:** This document is a response to the recent email requesting research staff to take on teaching duties for the Introduction to Software Engineering that included the following paragraphs that indicate that research staff will now be required to take on teaching duties.

*"The School would see provision of this teaching support work as part of your expected RA duties, and so would not pay you extra for this support. Earlier this year, the School's Strategy Committee agreed that it would be reasonable to expect many of the School's RAs to contribute up to 5% of their RA time to teaching-related duties, regardless as to whether this requirement is explicitly included in their RA job description. (Standard new RA contracts include this requirement, but older ones might not.)   I understand that, in cases where RAs are required to complete time sheets (eg for EU funding), then any time allocated to teaching related duties would be reimbursed by the School.*

*Historically, most teaching support has been provided by PhD students and, more recently, demonstrating and tutoring support by MSc students and Honours years students with first class averages.  However, with the dramatically-rising numbers of undergraduates and MSc students in recent years, this is becoming more and more difficult, and the School is keen to also draw on the expertise of its RAs."*

**Action requested from the committee:** Development of a solution that does not involve compulsory teaching duties for research staff but that allows research staff to contribute voluntarily and appropriately to teaching and teaching support.

**Equality and diversity implications – Yes:** under the proposal for compulsory teaching duties for research staff, it is unclear how this work would be spread equitably among research staff, and this potential lack of fairness may be based on protected characteristics.

**Resource implications (staff, space, budget) – Unclear:** it is unclear whether the imposition of teaching duties (without pay) is due to lack of resources within the school.

# Teaching duties expected of research staff

In light of the email mentioned in the background section, members of the pdra-staff list were asked for their opinion (positive or negative) about compulsory teaching duties for research staff. In two days, 40 responses were received, all of which were negative about this imposition. On the positive side, the large majority of responses were supportive of research staff being voluntarily involved in teaching. The appendix of this paper summarises the various reasons that research staff believed that compulsory teaching duties are a counterproductive idea under different headings.

We ask Strategy Committee to reverse the decision to impose teaching duties on research staff and to work towards a solution that benefits everyone and harnesses the enthusiasm of some research staff to make a contribution to teaching. It is important to distinguish between career development teaching activities for research staff, and teaching duties for which the School cannot allocate current staff. We make the following distinction.

- **Career development for research staff:** Whether involvement in teaching is career development Is specific to the individual. This will be different for someone who has not had opportunities at PhD level compared to someone with extensive lecturing experience. Most research staff fall somewhere between these two extremes. Voluntary involvement in teaching for career development is appropriate. It could be unpaid, such as the current choice to supervise MSc projects, to take on tutoring (where it meets career development goals) or to give guest lectures, or it could be paid if the amount of time warrants it such as lecturing a significant portion of a course.
- **Teaching duties which the school cannot cover with academic staff or employment of graduate students:** This category consists of anything that cannot be seen as career development and should be paid employment. In particular, this includes low-level teaching duties such as marking, and duties that may have very little research benefit such as supervision of weak MSc students.

We also make some proposals towards a solution that is beneficial to everyone.

- To increase the number of volunteers (with approval of their PI) for teaching support, the School should be creative in making these positions attractive. A solution may be to offer funding for travel or employment of interns, or other non-salary benefits.
- The school could identify candidates for research positions who have a particular interest in teaching, and with the agreement of the PI give them contracts where 100-x% of their time is for research and is paid from grant money, and x% of their time is paid from teaching funds.
- To support career development of research staff, short-term full-time contracts (for three months or so) could be offered to research staff to take on teaching of a course, as was done in the past in the Department of Computer Science.
- To support research staff who are between grants, employ them to do low-level teaching duties such as marking.
- Investigate how it is possible to pay research staff extra for low-level teaching duties such as marking. The university has recently had people employed on more than one contract that together sum to more than 100%.

More generally, to improve teaching within the School, we propose provision of 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), and the employment of teaching-only staff with a well-defined career path to senior levels within the School.

# Appendix: summary of responses from research staff

- **Questions about the School's use of resources**
  It was not clear to people why the school has not employed people to do the work since there should be additional funds from the increased student numbers. If the school needs more academic or teaching staff, then they should employ them rather than imposing duties on research staff. Alternatively, if the school has taken on more students than they have funds to deal with then it is not reasonable to expect research staff to fill the gap. It also seems wrong to effectively take funds meant for research to use for teaching. It is not appropriate to expect that non-permanent staff have their roles further casualised for the benefit of those privileged with permanent academic positions.

- **Quality of teaching and student satisfaction**
  We hear from the NSS that students are unhappy with the quality of feedback and the lack of interest from some lecturers in Computer Science. It seems likely that using unmotivated and unincentivised research staff to fill gaps in teaching duty allocations will rather exacerbate the problem rather than improve the situation.

- **Type of teaching duties**
  From the email sent about the Introduction to Software Engineering course, it appears that some of the work involves marking of assignments and exams rather than face-to-face interaction with students. Many research staff have been paid to do this type of work as PhD students, and have gained as much as (non-monetary) benefit as can be obtained. Furthermore, since this type of work can be done by upper-level undergraduates and postgraduates, it may be a breach of visa regulations to do low-level teaching work when local talent can do it.

  It is not clear whether MSc supervision will be counted as a teaching duty. It was emphasised in responses that this can be more important for career development than low-level teaching. However, being required to supervise a weak student would not be useful for either career development or research goals.

  Funders allow some teaching or non-research components. However, some (see Marie Curie and RCUK, for example) require that it be closely related to the research that is being undertaken (which would mean that guest lectures and project supervision would be acceptable). Low-level teaching duties on an introductory or general Computer Science course could be in breach of these rules.

- **Career development for research staff**
  The 2011 RCUK Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researcher notes that "[t]he importance of researchers' personal and career development, and lifelong learning, [should be] clearly recognised and promoted at all stages of their career." Research staff should only take on teaching duties that are beneficial to their career. Since many will have done basic teaching duties at PhD level, doing more will not help development. The major attribute that research staff are judged on when being considered for future jobs (which they must find because they are on fixed-term contracts) is their research output. In terms of any possible evaluation of teaching suitability, having done a lot of low-level teaching duties will have little impact. The ideal teaching experience for one's CV would be to have lectured (at least a significant portion of) a course.

- **Time allocated for teaching duties**
  It is unclear whether these teaching duties will be expected on top of existing research work, particularly if the PI involved does not agree with the teaching duty imposition. Since most research staff already perform overtime with no additional pay, it is not reasonable to expect them to take on even more work. It appears to be general knowledge that one of the reasons that PhD students are often reluctant to take on this work (paid rather than voluntarily or mandatory) is because the time allocated does not allow sufficient time for one to complete the work. There is no reason to assume it will be any different for research staff. If the School falls further behind with resources for this type of work, will the required percentage increase from 5% to 10%?

  Research staff also have flexibility to attend workshops and conference, as well as to spend extended periods of time at partner institutions to the benefit of their research. Compulsory teaching duties could limit these opportunities.

  Questions were raised about how the school would ensure fair allocation across research staff. For example, would those research staff with teaching experience be asked first or expected to do more? Additionally, potential unfair allocation may be based on protected characteristics.

- **Support for voluntary teaching involvement**
  Respondents were positive about opportunities to take on teaching that met their career development objectives and many said that they were already doing MSc and PhD supervision or tutoring (without additional payment). A number felt that taking on teaching duties would not be to the benefit of their research or their career goals but had no objection to others doing such work voluntarily.

- **Process by which the decision was taken and announced**
  People were concerned about how the decision was taken and was announced to research staff. There is no record in the Strategy Committee minutes that the decision was taken and furthermore it is not clear that academic staff in the school were consulted on the decision. There was unhappiness that the points raised by the IRSS in January 2016 at Strategy Committee were ignored. Additionally, there were objections to contracts being modified without discussion.

- **Comparison with other Computer Science departments**
  In deciding whether this is an appropriate decision, the School should consider how research staff are treated in the leading Computer Science departments in the UK. Compulsory teaching duties for research staff will damage the School's reputation among this group. At least one of our comparator departments pay research staff extra for teaching duties. Additionally, compulsory teaching duties for research staff have had negative outcomes in terms of teaching quality and student satisfaction elsewhere.

- **Consideration of the university's goals**
  The decision appears to be contrary to the University's Strategic Plan 2016 which states *"[w]e have a clear focus on early career researchers, for whom we will provide the best support and research environment in which to develop extraordinary careers"* and *"[r]ecognising the importance of excellent teaching, we will recruit and nurture excellent staff. We will provide the knowledge, skills and support they need to teach well"*.