



INDEPENDENT  
INQUIRY into  
**Insecure Work**

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<b>Text of submission</b>	<p>Submission to the Independent Inquiry into Insecure Work in Australia</p> <p>Dr Kirily Jordan</p> <p>Australian National University</p> <p>16 December 2011</p> <p><b>Background</b></p> <p>By way of introduction, I am a Research Fellow at the Australian National University. This submission is made on the basis of my personal experience with the way that academic employment is structured and rewarded at universities. While I am a researcher by trade, it draws on my own reflections rather than sustained engagement with other sources.</p> <p>I am one of the lucky few 'early career' researchers I know with a continuing academic position. The very large majority are working on the basis of short term contracts, having to spend much of their time applying for very competitive grants in order to secure their own employment. This detracts from their research roles, limits their ability to publish, and makes it very difficult to plan for their futures. I believe that the 'performance measures' on which grants and promotions are awarded also devalue much of the work that myself and my academic colleagues are engaged in, leading to a widespread sense of demoralisation and considerable amounts of unpaid overtime as researchers have to continually try to 'prove' themselves in unsustainable ways.</p> <p>This brief submission focuses on three interrelated issues that I see as particularly salient: Job security; Remuneration; and Performance measurement.</p> <p><b>Job security</b></p> <p>While I am lucky enough to have a continuing employment contract, this arrangement makes me fairly unusual among other academics I know. Here at the ANU and at other Australian universities where I have worked the most common arrangement for academic staff has been fixed term</p>				

employment on relatively short contracts (two to three years). From my experience this is most common among early and mid career academics but is also frequent among more senior academic staff.

The constant message from university administrators is that there is not enough money to offer more continuing positions and that each academic staff member (including those on continuing contracts) is in a precarious position if they do not bring additional money into the university to cover (or at least contribute to) their own salary and other costs (office space, equipment, etc). These pressures are most intense for academics on fixed term contracts whose employment may be immediately terminated at the end of the contract period unless they have secured grant funding to support their salary costs. However, they are also felt by those on continuing contracts who are asked to seek grant funding to cover their own costs and effectively remove their salaries from the university's recurrent budget.

Seeking grants through the Australian Research Council (ARC)—the main government funding body for research other than clinical medicine—is intensively competitive and time-intensive. I believe the same is true of grant applications to the National Health and Medical Research Council (although I have no personal experience of this process). It is not uncommon to spend two months of full-time work preparing a grant application for the ARC. This is a very large commitment particularly given the many other demands on academics' time, the very low success rates for most ARC grants and the relatively meagre contributions they make to salary costs (see section below on remuneration). As an example, the success rate for the recent round of Discovery Early Career Researcher Awards (DECRA) was just 12.8% nationally. These are the awards supposedly designed to assist early career academics in developing a research career.

Low success rates for ARC and other grants mean that individuals seeking to secure their academic employment beyond the expiry of their current contract must often apply for multiple grants throughout the year; one eminently qualified and experienced early career academic I know applied for no less than seven grants in 2011 meaning that time to engage in her actual job of teaching and research has been severely constrained. Unless she secures one of these grants her employment will be terminated because the university will not pay her salary costs.

The lack of job security resulting from this institutional structure is compounded by the very late announcements of ARC grant outcomes. This year the announcement of DECRA's awarded for 2012 was made on 14 November 2011. For the many academics whose current fixed term contracts expire on 31 December 2011 this leaves woefully inadequate time to secure alternative employment if their grant application was unsuccessful. While it is true they can (and usually do) begin to explore other options prior to ARC announcements, this again takes them away from their core roles and hence penalises them on measures of teaching and research 'outputs' for the year.

These arrangements place considerable stress on individuals and make it especially difficult for academics with significant financial responsibilities such as mortgages and dependent children. They also

compete with the demands of producing high quality research and teaching of benefit to the university, students and the broader community.

It is my experience that these concerns are very widespread at universities and some recent research supports this view. For example, a study conducted at Melbourne University's Centre for the Study of Higher Education found that 60 per cent of surveyed early career academics across 20 universities were dissatisfied with their job security (Bexley et al. 2011: xi). The study suggested that job insecurity was limiting the capacity of academic staff to 'manage their personal finances, make important life plans and ... engage properly with their professions' (Bexley et al. 2011: xiv). It also pointed to broader implications including that the prevalence of short-term contracts was tending to undermine the sustainability of the academic profession by encouraging early career staff to relocate to overseas institutions or exit the sector all together. This should raise some concern particularly in the context of the Commonwealth Government's stated aim of increasing domestic participation in higher education and the importance of the sector in Australia's export economy.

### **Remuneration**

Academic salaries are usually low relative to the investment individuals have made in their own education and qualifications (almost always to PhD level). They are also low when compared to salaries on offer for those with similar qualifications in the public service and private sector. From my personal experience, although my current salary is well above the national average, it is significantly below what I could earn in a government department for a job with similar tasks and responsibilities. In regards to the private sector, I was recently offered a job with a private organisation for a starting salary \$20,000 per year higher than my current academic salary, and a potential further salary increase (to \$50,000 above my current salary) after an initial six month trial period. This would have put my salary broadly in line with that of a university Professor: a level of income it would likely take me two decades to achieve as an academic.

That I did not take up this job offer suggests that there are certainly attractions of doing academic research; including intrinsic motivation. However, it is my experience that the system of funding at universities takes advantage of academics' commitment to their jobs by paying relatively low wages to highly skilled people and offering them usually very insecure work.

Again, this experience is also reflected in broader analysis. Research from the Centre for the Study of Higher Education cited earlier found that Australian academics were 'highly intrinsically motivated' and had a 'deep commitment to scholarship' but that 40 per cent of surveyed early career academics were dissatisfied with their incomes (Bexley et al. 2011: xi). Low salaries relative to education and qualifications can compound the financial insecurity generated by fixed-term employment contracts.

A further concern is that although seeking grants from the ARC is intensely competitive, the salary contribution paid by the ARC for academic fellowships is quite low. For example, in 2010 I secured an

ARC Discovery Project including an Australian Postdoctoral Fellowship (APD). Securing an APD requires completion of a PhD and usually a significant track record in research and publication, but the ARC pays a salary cost of only \$63,942. The ANU's Enterprise Agreement requires that academic staff with a PhD be paid a minimum salary of \$80,166 so, if an individual is successful in securing an APD they can only be employed if the university (or more specifically the direct unit in which the individual will work) contributes the additional salary costs. A similar gap exists for other fellowships at more senior levels. I know of one case where a senior researcher was successful in securing a highly competitive fellowship from the ARC only to be told that the unit in which she worked could not fund the additional salary costs and therefore could not offer her employment.

### **Performance measurement**

There are widespread concerns at Australian universities about how academic performance is measured. Increasingly this is focused on quantitative measures of 'output' (especially the number of journal articles published and the 'ranking' of journals in which these papers appear) and 'inputs' in the form of external grant monies secured or income generated through teaching. While university managers often make some reference to valuing the contribution of academic teaching and research to the broader community, in practice these broader impacts are usually given much less weight than activities that produce an income stream or measurable esteem for the institution.

This is particularly problematic where meeting narrowly defined performance standards competes with broader goals. This can occur, for example, when academic staff are expected to publish in highly ranked journals even if they know it will not reach their target audience, or where they are discouraged from collaboration because the government's system of funding allocation rewards sole authorship. The time that academics must invest in meeting and reporting on performance measures that are ill-suited to the ways in which they see their roles as contributing to the broader community means that either their performance in this broader contribution suffers or they increase their amount of unpaid overtime to accommodate both sets of demands. These scenarios can contribute to increased stress and reduced personal wellbeing, as well as having flow on effects on families (where work hours are increased) or the community (where valuable but non-quantified work is compromised). From my perspective there is also considerable frustration among academics that these concerns are well known and widely shared and yet funding models and managerial structures that produce these tensions remain unchanged.

### **Recommendations**

1. Increase opportunities for stable employment and career paths in academic positions.

The current system relies much too heavily on fixed-term contracts and it is especially difficult for early career academics to develop a sustainable career path. Consideration should be given to additional Commonwealth funding to employ early career researchers while they develop their

	<p>research and teaching profiles.</p> <p>2. Redesign Commonwealth funding formulas and staff performance frameworks to encourage collaboration and value broader impacts of teaching and research.</p> <p>Funding formulas applied by the Commonwealth Government are translated into institutional pressure on individual staff to reorient their roles towards income generation. At the Commonwealth and institutional level there should be greater flexibility in defining performance (for example to encourage collaboration and community engagement) and more recognition of the value of research and teaching activities that benefit the community even when these activities produce no financial return.</p> <p>References</p> <p>Bexley, E., James, R. and Arkoudis, S. (2011) 'The Australian academic profession in transition: Addressing the challenge of reconceptualising academic work and regenerating the academic workforce', Centre for the Study of Higher Education, University of Melbourne, Melbourne.</p>
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*This submission was received online at the Inquiry's web site:*

<http://securejobs.org.au/independent-inquiry-into-insecure-work-in-australia/>

*Certain information, including full contact details, have been withheld to respect the privacy of the submitter. Further details about the publication of submissions and a privacy statement are available at the website.*