



Committee Secretary
Standing Committee on Industry, Science and Innovation
PO Box 6021
House of Representatives, Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

The House of Representatives Standing Committee on Industry, Science and Innovation

Inquiry into research training and research workforce issues in Australian universities – Submission

The Telethon Institute for Child Health Research (TICHR) in Perth is an independent research facility dedicated to prevention of childhood diseases and disabilities. There are approximately 60 Postdoctoral Researchers at TICHR with up to 15 years postdoctoral research experience working in a variety of fields including asthma and allergy, infectious diseases, childhood cancer, aboriginal health, developmental disorders, and social determinants of health. The Institute Postdoctoral Researchers Association (IPA) was formed to identify and address issues affecting the research life of TICHR Postdoctoral Researchers. To this end, a recent survey of this group identified three major concerns:

- 1. Remuneration: current levels are too low**
- 2. Job security: long-term contracts and permanent appointments are not available**
- 3. Career development: the path towards independence, promotion and salary progression is unclear**

These issues create a significant amount of uncertainty about the future prospects for Postdoctoral Researchers and are worth discussing in more detail.

1. Remuneration

Concern about salary levels has reached a crisis point amongst the TICHR Postdoctoral Researchers due to the sharp rise in the cost of living, a growing awareness of salary disparity compared to universities, and the fact that the majority of early career researchers have a considerable HECS debt. Current TICHR Postdoctoral Researcher salaries range from \$49,401 to \$66,288. Equivalent skills command much higher rates of remuneration in Government departments, publicly-funded agencies and private sector firms.

The majority of TICHR Postdoctoral Researchers are funded by the Australian National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) through project/program grants or fellowships. These fellowships and grants have failed to keep pace with the market rate and the effect of this is two-fold: first, research institutes such as TICHR face difficulty in attracting and retaining Postdoctoral Researchers; and second, students will steer away from a career in research (especially those fields that are funded by the NHMRC).

Using the University sectors as one point of comparison, the TICHR remuneration available via the NHMRC Personnel Support Packages, ranges from 16% to 26% lower than equivalent positions at the University of Western Australia, depending on the superannuation scheme available. This is even after allowing for the value of salary packaging benefits available to medical research institutes.

2. Job security

All public research funding is awarded for a relatively short period in Australia. For example, the NHMRC awards a project grant for three years, a fellowship for four years, and a program grant for five years. Thus, staff funded by these awards can only expect to be appointed for a maximum of five years. However, the chief investigator of a project is free to appoint staff for a shorter period leading to the widespread practice of offering one-year contracts. The majority of TICHR Postdoctoral Researchers are currently on a one-year contract with no other benefits to compensate for the short period of appointment. The effect of this policy is to further undermine job security and compound the effects of poor remuneration discussed above.

3. Career development

Postdoctoral Researchers face a number of considerable hurdles that must be overcome if they are to develop a successful career. As already discussed, they have to contend with the uncertainty and limited opportunities that come with short-term appointments. The fellowship system offered by the NHMRC and Australian Research Council (ARC) provides one pathway for career development but only a fraction of Postdoctoral Researchers will benefit from this system due to the limited number of fellowships offered each year. However, such fellowships only provide salary support, and thus the career of all Postdoctoral Researchers depends on the success and funding cycles of project grant funding.

Postdoctoral Researchers suffer from insufficient time and resources to develop their careers. They do not receive adequate training for any of the career pathways open to them since all of their training is centred on their technical skills. Mentoring programs operate to provide developing researchers with opportunity and advice, but they are not a necessary condition of employment, and therefore subject to the interest and support of a Postdoctoral Researcher's supervisor.

Future Concerns

Declining interest in research careers among young people is a growing concern. As mentioned above, there is already a danger that a career in research is seen as poorly paid and too insecure to attract talented students. In addition, there is little incentive to undertake a postgraduate research degree when the value of scholarships such as the Australian Postgraduate Award (APA) lags well below both average starting salaries and average weekly wages in general. Indeed, the value of the APA is set to fall below the poverty line for the first time in 2008. Clearly, Australia's research efforts will suffer in the near future if the level of financial support for research degrees continues to decline.

Conclusion

Australia's future as an innovating country depends fundamentally on its research capacity. However, the widening gap between the costs of research and government support for research means the productivity cannot be sustained without greater investment in the future. *Competitive funding schemes should fund the full cost of sponsored research and provide sufficient time and resources for career development.* By enhancing the working conditions of research staff, this will provide an attractive place to work by high quality researchers. With the best people in place all else follows such as student quality, professional development, training of the next generation, human resources, grant success, commercialisation and translation of research into nationally significant policy and innovation, and international competitiveness in the areas of science, research and innovation.

Dr Matthew Wikstrom (Chair)
Institute Postdoctoral Researchers Association
Telethon Institute for Child Health Research

27 May 2008