

Research Assistants: A struggle for job security

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At the Australian National University, staff are divided into two main categories: academic and general. There are about 1000 academic staff, which includes teaching staff in the Faculties and many of the research staff in the Research Schools. Non-academic staff are called general staff, of which there are some 2500 at ANU. General staff includes classifications such as typists, secretaries, packers, cleaners, engineers, architects, programmers, laboratory craftsmen, technicians, electricians, mail assistants, librarians, technical officers, physiotherapists and clerks. The two classifications of general staff with which we are concerned are research assistants (RAs) and research officers (ROs), of which there were nearly 200 in full or part-time positions at ANU in 1983.

RAs provide assistance in research. Their duties can include library, archival, laboratory, experimental or field work. Some work under complete direction, while others assist intellectually in research and do work leading to scholarly publication.

ROs usually provide an identified service to a department or research group. They are expected to make a considerable academic contribution to research, normally leading to publication.

Aside from those whose employment is tied to a particular fixed-term project or limited-term funding, most general staff receive continuing appointments after a three-month probationary period. Continuing appointment means that appointment is made for an indefinite period and is only terminated at cause, for instance redundancy, dismissal or retirement.

RAs and ROs are the only categories of general staff for whom continuing appointment is not made available as a matter of course. This anomaly, and the problems associated with it, led to a struggle for improved conditions for RAs and ROs at ANU in 1983. In this article we describe the situation and problems of RAs and ROs at ANU, and describe the 1983 campaign for better conditions. We hope that this account may provide some lessons for others in similar situations in other institutions.

The situation of RAs and ROs at ANU

Of those RAs and ROs who are in positions where there is a reasonable expectation that work and funds will continue indefinitely, only a small fraction actually have continuing appointments. Thus the basic situation of most RAs is one of job insecurity. (We are less concerned here with the position of RAs and ROs on projects of fixed term, such

as those whose salaries are paid out of grants. For these positions, continuing appointment is seldom appropriate.)

Most RAs and ROs receive short term contracts, typically 1 or 3 years, which may or may not be renewed. Even so, the conditions at ANU for RAs and ROs are rather better than at most other tertiary institutions. Until 1981, continuing appointment was not possible until after serving 6 years as an RO or RO. In November 1981 the ANU Council made it possible to receive continuing appointment after only three years at the discretion of a dean or director. Variations, such as continuing appointment on appointment, are possible on the authorisation of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor.

Although continuing appointment is possible after 3 years service, it is not often conferred. In 1983, only 21 out of 165 RAs and 17 of 28 ROs had continuing appointments. A survey which we conducted of RAs and ROs revealed that out of 99 respondents virtually all expressed a desire to be on continuing rather than renewable appointments.

The primary problem with this situation lies in the provision that continuing appointments are to be granted *at the discretion of* the appropriate dean or director. The exercise of this discretion has prevented many RAs and ROs gaining conditions which at face value appear to be obtainable under the regulations.

The basic arguments for continuing appointment are as follows:

(1) As members of the general staff, RAs and ROs should be entitled to equity in conditions with other general staff. RAs and ROs do work which is often very similar to that done by workers in other classifications for which continuing appointment is routinely available.

(2) In a situation of apparently diminishing resources, RAs and ROs are often terminated or prevented from pursuing a continuing appointment *not* on the basis of their intellectual and scholarly contribution to their department, but on the basis of their vulnerability. At the end of 1981, the Asian Studies Faculty cut all its RAs not on continuing appointment.

(3) A succession of short-term contracts can contribute to personal stress. For example, some RAs have had six reappointments in 16 years, 10 in 9 years, or 14 in 15 years. Such situations create a great deal of needless anxiety as each renewal is approached. Short-term contracts contribute to personal problems involved in making major financial commitments or planning extended leave.

(4) A previously published study of female employment at ANU¹ noted that

the ratio of female to male RAs and ROs was about 65:35. One of the major conclusions of this study was that women are selectively employed because, for a variety of political and social reasons, women are likely to be less able to effectively resist attacks on their job security and are more likely to try to endure working conditions not generally acceptable to men. There may be an unspoken expectation that women do not require continuing appointments because they do not have families to support. This myth should be dispelled.

(5) RAs and ROs are not commodities in some intellectual supermarket to be selected and discarded without concern for their welfare or the long-term welfare of the university itself. Some of those who are turned out of their jobs will end up underemployed or unemployed and hence their expensive education and experience will represent an opportunity cost to the whole society.

(6) Management abuses are more likely since the position of RAs and ROs is so insecure. Some examples are lack of communication about reappointment, late notification of reappointment and arbitrariness in the periods of reappointment. The most serious abuse is non-reappointment of RAs or ROs who have been active politically, disagreed with their boss on intellectual grounds or otherwise displeased superiors for non-academic reasons.

Reasons for lack of action

Many RAs and ROs had known about these problems for years, but no major action was initiated to rectify them. There are several reasons why it is hard for RAs and ROs to combine to improve their condition.

- Isolation. Most RAs and ROs work entirely in a single department, often for a single boss. The structural conditions for worker solidarity are mostly missing.

- Diversity. The jobs done by RAs and ROs vary enormously. This again reduces the potential for solidarity.

- Transience. Historically, many RA and RO positions have been held by people filling a post between other stages in their career, such as further study or child rearing. The idea that the positions were not meant to be permanent has been reinforced by the number of fixed term posts funded by outside money.

The trade unions covering RAs and ROs have done some useful pushing for their cause, but this has not been a priority item. Because the RAs and ROs are often transient, they are not as likely to become union members or activists. The unions have concentrated on making claims — especially salary claims — for the bulk of their members who have continuing appointment and are less concerned about security of employment.

- Dependence. Quite a number of academic staff who employ RAs and ROs prefer to keep them insecure, since it gives the department more flexibility in staffing and more control over potentially independent assistants. In many cases the work of RAs and ROs is exploited: full

academic credit is not given for work done². This academic abuse would be more easily resisted if RAs and ROs had more job security.

The campaign

Early in 1983, two of us who were RAs and who were on the ANU sub-branch committee of the Health and Research Employees Association (HAREA) — the

“Research Assistants and Research Officers are not commodities in some intellectual supermarket to be selected and discarded without concern for their welfare or the long-term welfare of the university itself”.

trade union covering RAs and ROs at ANU — decided it was time some action was taken to improve conditions for workers in our situation. Although the HAREA committee supported the claims of the RAs and ROs, we decided to take action independently of the union because of the possibility that some staff might react negatively to heavy union involvement.

The first step was collecting information about conditions for RAs and ROs. The ANU Personnel Office was very co-operative about providing statistics.

After collecting some relevant information, in May 1983 a notice was sent to all RAs and ROs on campus outlining the difficulties with their situation. This first step was important. For many RAs and ROs it was the first time that such information had been brought to their attention, and the first time they became aware that anyone else had had the same difficulties they had experienced.

The initial notice resulted in about 50 responses indicating interest in discussing the issue further. A meeting was called in June. About 40 people attended. A round of introductions elicited some startling case histories, providing further evidence that reform was needed. It was decided at the meeting to pursue concurrently three approaches to pressure the administration into improving appointment conditions.

(1) RAs and ROs were encouraged to apply for continuing appointment if their situation warranted it. It was hoped that people with good cases who were not granted continuing appointment would then take their cases to a grievance committee and provide a test case. The grievance procedure was a recent innovation, and provided a valuable independent channel for addressing problems of bias and abuse of power. It was also hoped that the pressure of applications and grievance procedures would encourage deans and directors to adopt a less stringent approach to granting continuing appointment.

(2) A sub-committee was set up to investigate the issues and prepare a submission to the University Council suggesting changes to the current regulations concerning appointments. As the ultimate governing body of ANU, the Council would have the power to make changes, and it seemed that it might be less tied to the status quo than the deans, directors and heads of department who administered it.

(3) A draft letter to the *ANU Reporter* — a university publication distributed to all staff — was discussed and later distributed to all RAs and ROs for signing. This was seen as the first stage in a publicity campaign.

These three approaches can be seen as different ways to apply pressure on the deans, directors and heads of department, who were seen as the key people influencing the implementation of policy on continuing appointments. Test cases for continuing appointment would bring the issues directly to their attention. Action by Council would put pressure on them from above, while publicity would generate concern and perhaps some pressure on them from below.

The other important aspect of the campaign was maintaining support and involvement from RAs and ROs. Partly this was accomplished by the meetings and notices. Part of the effect of the letter to the *ANU Reporter* was to encourage RAs and ROs to take a public stand in support of better conditions. Later there was a questionnaire circulated to all RAs and ROs, which again encouraged active thinking about the issues.

How did the three approaches work in practice? Unfortunately, there was no-one who applied for continuing appointment, was refused, and who was willing to take their case to a grievance committee. So one of the most important potential channels for airing the issues and setting a precedent was not used.

The submission to Council was prepared and sent to the Vice-Chancellor. But instead of submitting anything to Council, the V-C set up a committee of 5 deans and directors to look into the matter. Though their individual motivations should not be doubted, the structural position of deans and directors is unlikely to make them sympathetic to the situation of RAs and ROs. Indeed, they are the people perhaps least likely to request reform in appointment conditions.

The sub-committee of 5 RAs — the authors of this article — prepared a detailed submission to the V-C's committee³, but the deans and directors accepted little of it, not surprisingly. The outcome of investigations by the deans and directors, submissions by us, and mutual discussions, was a recommendation from the deans and directors committee for limited improvements in the way the present procedures were implemented. Most importantly, the university was required to give reasons for decisions made about appointments of RAs and ROs. (Before this, giving reasons was not necessary.) And if dissatisfied, the RA or RO could apply for a grievance committee to look into the matter. This was an important advance. Nevertheless, it was far short of bringing the conditions



of RAs and ROs into line with other general staff which had been our aim⁴.

Finally, the publicity campaign was limited. The letter in the *ANU Reporter* was published⁵, but little else was done. Those RAs who remained most active on the issue became caught up in making submissions to the university, so that little effort went into publicity.

By the end of 1983, the delays and the pressures of other work caught up with those of us who had been carrying most of the effort in making submissions, preparing circulars and holding meetings. No further initiatives were made. The only formal improvements resulting thus were those recommended by the deans and directors committee.

The campaign did however have the useful effect of encouraging some RAs and ROs to become more aware of their situation and to expect and request better treatment. Some RAs received longer appointments than they might have otherwise. On the other hand, many abuses of the system continue to occur.

Lessons

Just because their conditions are poor does not mean that RAs and ROs will automatically organise to improve their situation. Just the opposite: their isolation, diversity and dependence, which make RAs and ROs easy to exploit, and also make them hard to organise. However, action can be organised if even just a few people are willing to take the initiative and put in some work. For those who wish to do this, we have a few suggestions.

- An important basis for any campaign is support and participation from as many RAs and ROs as possible. This should be an important factor in all decisions about actions taken. Newsletters, meetings and personal contact are important. And every precaution should be taken to avoid putting any RA or RO into jeopardy due to their participation, and strenuous action should be taken in defence of anyone victimised by the administration. It is also important not to put too much work on the shoulders of only a few activists.

- Keeping on good personal terms with people in the administration can be an advantage, even if those people do not support improvements for RAs and ROs. Inside information can be very valuable, and in any case it does little good to antagonise people.

- It is worth spending a lot of time on publicity and building support from other

groups. Trade unions are one important group whose support is important. Another group is academics in similar positions to RAs and ROs, such as tutors at ANU, who are an equally exploited group. It also may be worth soliciting support from students and from groups outside the university. Such groups can apply pressure from a variety of directions, and are not as vulnerable to reprisals or subtle pressure from superiors.

- Having a firm set of aims is important. All of them may not be achieved, but without direction a campaign can come unstuck.

1. Gwenda M. Bramley and Marion W. Ward, *The Role of Women in the Australian National University* (Canberra: Australian National University, 1976).
2. Brian Martin, 'Exploiting the academic peons', *Australian Society*, volume 2, no. 9, 1 October 1983, pp28-29.
3. Portions of the submission have been used in this article.
4. An account of this, and also of the problems facing RAs and ROs, is given by Marian Sawyer, *Towards Equal Opportunity: Women and Employment at the Australian National University* (Canberra: Australian National University, 1984), pp41-45.
5. Peta Dawson, Cheryl Hannah and 50 others, letter, *ANU Reporter*, volume 14, no. 12, 12 August 1983, p.6.

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