

Researchers living on the fringe

Richard Pearson

The academic world in Britain is changing rapidly due to government action and economic pressures.

THE British government's long-awaited White Paper on higher education has now appeared, offering a package of reformed structures, vocationalism, and increased student numbers, all within a broadly static budget¹. The key to the future is clearly going to be market forces, with the labour market having a far greater role in determining course balance and structures, and, it is hoped, student choice. But in what promises to be the most dramatic change, a competitive market is going to be set up between institutions as they seek to 'win' the most favourable contracts from the national funding bodies. For — if returned in the forthcoming general election — the government plans to reform or indeed replace the existing funding and 'arms-length' management bodies of the University Grants Committee and the National Advisory Board by funding agencies which will place contracts with higher education institutions to deliver different kinds of services, be they the education of different types of graduate, the carrying out of research, or the provision of continuing education. At the same time higher education institutions will be encouraged to enter into more direct contracts with industry for research, consultancy and technology transfer.

The net effect is likely to be much greater diversity between institutions, as success breeds more success and expansion for a few, others will increasingly specialize and seek out their market niche, while others will contract and decay. Whether the full logic of the market will follow through, allowing some to close and indeed new institutions to be born, American-style remains to be seen. What is clear is that new employment relationships will emerge as higher education institutions have to manage greater uncertainty as to the size and balance of their workloads and become more flexible in setting and maintaining employment levels. Tenure will become increasingly rare and short-term and part-time contracts more prevalent.

This has already happened in many areas of industry and commerce where increasing reliance is being placed on a 'periphery' of temporary, short-term contract staff, part-timers, and freelancers and the self-employed as firms cope both with fluctuating work-loads and changing skill needs, while a 'core' of stable employment is maintained. For the majority in this core who will have to work more flexibly, then

employment security is usually high and training and career development is more often available. This increasing practice, dubbed the 'flexible firm', does, however, depend in part on there being an adequate supply of under-utilized skills in the wider labour market. Where this is the case the people in the periphery normally have poorer working conditions and receive little or no training to help them keep their skills up to date and be able to do the jobs of tomorrow. There are some groups who can, however, take advantage of this status, where, for example, there are skill shortages and they can sell their time at a much higher rate as a freelancer than as a salaried employee. In the universities and polytechnics a similar phenomenon has applied for many years, with a core of tenured lecturers and a periphery of contract researchers.

In the case of the universities, a study for the Advisory Board to the Research Councils just out² shows that short-term contract researchers are increasingly being used by research councils, industry, foundations, government and overseas sponsors to fulfill their research needs, with the numbers rising by over 70 per cent in ten years to total of 10,000 in 1985. This was during a period when the number of university-funded academic staff fell by 5 per cent to just over 31,000. In 1984 about half the contract researchers were funded by the research councils who had a total budget of over £540 million, with the Science and Engineering Research Council paying for about 3,000 and the Medical Research Council (MRC) nearly 1,200. These two funding bodies increased not only their numbers over the period but also their share of contract researchers (Fig. 1). This concurs with the shift in the research councils' budget away from expensive capital towards people in

intensive areas such as engineering. On a subject basis, medicine and engineering both increased their share, science kept its proportion, while that for all others fell. On a cost-centre basis, clinical medicine accounted for one in six researchers, with major financial support coming from a wide range of sources including the MRC, government, foundations and industry.

The researchers themselves were still predominantly male, although women

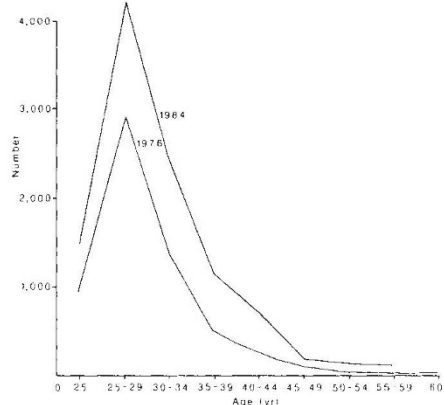


Fig. 2 Age distribution of short-term contract researchers.

were an increasing proportion, totalling over 28 per cent in 1984. One in four researchers had a PhD, while all but a few of the remainder had first degrees. As a group they are ageing, with 42 per cent over 30 in 1984, a proportion that had risen from 35 per cent 8 years earlier. The main age cluster, however, remained in the range 25–29 (40 per cent, Fig. 2). As well as ageing, the length of stay in contract research is also lengthening, with 40 per cent having been in their fourth year or more in 1984. There is still a large flow of people through these posts, with one in four leaving after one year.

These statistics provide only a partial picture of the pool of contract researchers, a group which is likely to expand further in the future and to be complemented by an additional group of contract teachers. For the present it is likely that there will be a pool of candidates willing to chance their luck with these jobs, perhaps because they see them as the springboard into more permanent academic careers. However, if previously permanent career posts are transformed into itinerant posts the supply of candidates may start to dry up. □

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1. Johnstone, B. *Nature* 326, 531 (1987).
2. Varlaam, C. *Contract Researchers in Universities* (IMS/ABRC, 1987).

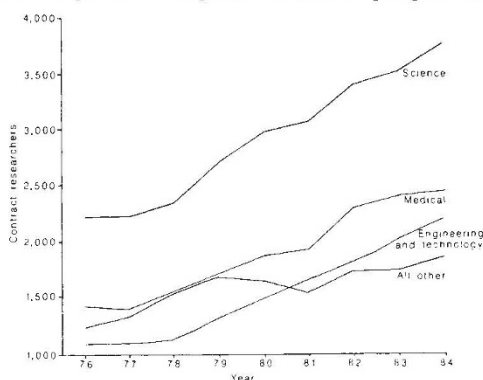


Fig. 1 UK contract researchers by subject group, 1976–84.