

**Response to the House of Commons Science and Technology Select Committee Inquiry into Short-Term Contracts in Science and Engineering.**

*Prepared by David Lee on behalf of Scientists for Labour*

**Summary**

Scientists for Labour is an organisation open to members or supporters of the Labour Party who are interested or involved in UK science and technology. Since its establishment in 1994, it has become a strong political voice for science. Scientists for Labour set out the following key points and recommendations in relation to short-term contracts in Science and Engineering:

- SfL accepts that fixed-term contracts are a necessary consequence of the predominant research funding mechanisms within the UK and that these funding mechanisms have been broadly successful in generating high quality, value for money research.
- SfL considers that major concerns exist in relation to short-term contracts, which must be addressed. These concerns are related both to employees, who may be adversely affected by the culture of short-term contracts, and to the progress of scientific research and innovation.
- SfL recommends that provisions be implemented to ensure that incremental dates are maintained when staff move from one contract to another. In addition, funding bodies, in partnership with employers, should work to ensure that, where appropriate, funding for projects is sufficient to cover the salaries of experienced scientists and not simply newly qualified post-doctoral researchers.
- SfL recommends that salary levels for researchers should be significantly increased, thereby off-setting the disadvantages of fixed-term contracts associated with a lack of job security.
- SfL recommends that opportunities for training and study leave should not discriminate against staff on fixed-term contracts.
- Funding bodies must examine their regulations, and amend where necessary, to ensure that funding opportunities are not restrictive in relation to staff on fixed term contracts.
- SfL supports the implementation within the UK of the European Directive on Fixed-term Work, but strongly urge the government to provide 'ring-fenced' extra resources to the Research Councils to meet the additional costs associated with the directive.
- The redundancy waiver should be abolished.
- SfL believes that staff should not lose extended maternity rights on the basis of being on a short-term contract where it is reasonable to expect that the contract would be renewed.
- SfL supports the Concordat and Research Careers Initiative, but believes that these initiatives should act as one strand in a co-ordinated approach involving Government, funding bodies and employers.

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

### ***1.1 The organisation:***

Scientists for Labour is an organisation open to members or supporters of the Labour Party who are interested or involved in UK science and technology. Since its establishment in 1994, it has become a strong political voice for science.

Scientists for Labour aims to improve the understanding both of science and of its importance, within the Labour Party and nationally. It is also involved in advising the parliamentary Labour Party on technical issues affecting other areas of government policy, and regularly lobbies government ministers on science policy issues. Many of our members are active research scientists working within University departments and so have first hand experience of short-term contracts and their effects.

### ***1.2 The author:***

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## **2. RESPONSE**

### ***2.1 Background:***

We are delighted to have the opportunity to respond to the House of Commons Science and Technology Select Committee Inquiry into Short-Term Contracts in Science and Engineering. The committee has not defined a 'short-term contract' and in this response we have taken it to mean a fixed-term contract, of three-years or less in duration. While the committee did not specifically restrict their inquiry to researchers working within Universities, Colleges and Research Institutes, the issues of short-term contracts are most significant within this sector. Indeed, recent data suggests that 94% of research staff, some 39,000 people, are employed on fixed-term contract, which will typically be three years or less. This value equates to 5% of all UK fixed term employees. The traditional view was that contract research staff obtain permanent academic positions after one or two contracts lasting 3-6 years in total. This appears no longer to be the norm. Further studies have suggested that 45% of contract research staff have spent between 3 and 10 years on successive contracts, while 12% had spent more than 10 years. Alarminglly the average number of successive contracts was four. Significantly, an increasing number of academic positions are now awarded on a fixed term basis. The proportion has increased from 39% to 42% over the past five years and in 1999-2000, fully 75% of new academic appointments were made on a fixed-term basis.

Scientists for Labour accepts that the culture of short-term contracts is a consequence of the predominant research funding mechanisms within the UK, which are based on 2-3 year project grants. This mechanism has been relatively successful in delivering high quantity and quality research, which is value for money. We feel it reasonable to draw a distinction between postdoctoral research staff who aspire to become independent scientists, or University Lecturers and staff in research assistant, technician, or research support roles. For the former fixed-term post-doctoral positions are a central element of their training before moving on to a junior group leader, or a lectureship job. It is very purpose of such positions that they are not permanent, and people enter them in the full anticipation of moving on. This is, of course, distinct from those who are in research assistant, technician, or research support roles who take jobs post PhD (or post-degree) and are not necessarily planning to move, but would like a more permanent and secure career structure. Future developments should be carefully structured to protect the latter group without inadvertently restricting the flexibility for training in the former.

Scientists for Labour's own soundings have revealed that among young scientists the perceived lack of a career structure is seen as the major impediment to progression in research and positively discourages very many good students from taking up a career in science and technology. Indeed we concur fully with the views of the Science and Technology Committee who opined that:

*'[particularly damaging] is the fact that many scientists are perpetually on short-term contracts. This insecurity is bad for morale, and it creates mortgage and may affect pension entitlement... The Government can no longer afford to ignore the problem of ... poor job security for postdoctoral researchers and support staff. A shortage of skilled personnel threatens to undermine its commitment to strengthen the science base. We have set out our response according to the basic format outlined by the committee in their call for evidence.'* (House of Commons Science and Technology Select Committee: 6<sup>th</sup> Report, Realising our Potential)

There is substantial evidence, both anecdotal and objective to indicate that job insecurity, related to fixed-term contracts causes good researchers to alter their career path to the detriment of science and engineering research in the UK. For example, staff may feel compelled to leave the sector to obtain a permanent job in a different field. While movement between professions is not necessarily a negative development, it should be made on the basis of choice rather than necessity. It is often associated more experienced staff who are particularly disadvantaged by job insecurities as they increasingly difficult to obtain a new contract due to the increased cost of employment. Many enter other related fields such as science teaching or management. The nature of fixed-term contracts increases the likelihood of staff moving to other countries, such as the USA, where pay and conditions for researchers are substantially better than in the UK. Moreover, staff who are committed to a career in research may find themselves obliged to take an academic post, in order to ensure job security which affects their abilities to concentrate specifically on research due to teaching and administrative duties. Other staff may take a position within industry, where conditions and job security are greater. Furthermore many gifted graduates will chose not to enter the profession at all. As a consequence it is becoming increasingly difficult to recruit high quality staff to research positions.

## 2.2 Pay and career progression

In terms of pay, research staff on fixed term contracts are disadvantaged compared to their counterparts on permanent contracts, as outlined in Table 1 below. The pay differential may be explained as follows. First, many researchers do not maintain their incremental date when they move from one contract to the next. Accordingly they may remain on the same increment for periods up to two years or longer while their permanent colleague obtain an incremental rise every 12 months. In addition many staff are compelled to take a pay cut in order to maintain their employment as funding organisations are often unwilling to fund the personnel costs associated with more experienced or older researchers. Scientists for Labour recommend that provision be implemented to ensure that incremental dates are maintained. In addition, funding bodies, in partnership with employers, should work to ensure that, where appropriate, funding for projects is sufficient to cover the salaries of experienced scientists and not simply newly qualified post-doctoral researchers. These issues have been the subject of a number of proposals made by Scientists for Labour and summarised in an article in *Chemistry and Industry* (vol. 21, p703, Dec 2000). Among other ideas we suggested the formation of a Research Career Fund which could provide resources for age related increments so that costs to funding bodies would be age independent, removing inhibitions on employing older, more experienced staff.

**Table 1.** Average salaries for staff on research grades by gender and employment status.

	Male	Female
Permanent	£23, 766	£20, 960
Fixed-term	£21, 044	£20, 280

*Source: AUT analysis of HSEA staff record, 1998-99.*

In many sectors the lack of job security associated with fixed-term contracts is off-set by relatively high salaries, allowing fixed-term employee to benefit from a welcome degree of flexibility. Fundamentally, salaries within the research sector are alarmingly low. As outlined by the Science and Technology committee a postdoctoral researcher in London is likely to earn less than an office receptionist. A significant increase in salary level may act to off-set the disadvantages associated with job security.

Researchers on fixed-term contracts are further disadvantaged in career progression. In many cases access to study leave and training is not as favourable as for permanent employees. Moreover, within research the ability to obtain a permanent academic position is often dependent on the ability to obtain independent research funding. Many funding bodies impose regulations which make fixed-term employees ineligible to apply for funding in their own right. Accordingly, a vicious circle exists, whereby staff on fixed term contracts are unable to demonstrate the ability to obtain funding, required to obtain a permanent position, simply by virtue of their employment status. Scientists for Labour recommends that opportunities for training and study leave should not discriminate against staff on fixed-term contracts. Moreover funding bodies must examine their regulations, and amend where necessary, to ensure that funding opportunities are not restrictive in relation to staff on fixed term contracts.

## 2.3 Redundancy arrangements and maternity leave

Most contract research scientists are obliged to sign a redundancy waiver as part of their contract, effectively removing their rights to redundancy pay and consultation. This situation relates to contract research staff with many years of continuous employment, who would otherwise benefit from significant protection against unreasonable redundancy and would be eligible to reasonable levels of redundancy pay. The implementation within the UK of the European Directive on Fixed-term Work is a welcome development. However, certain safeguards are required to ensure the protection of research staff. The proposed regulations indicate that after four years of fixed term contracts any subsequent contract would be open ended and subject to redundancy claims. There is therefore a real risk that in this situation employers/funding bodies would be reluctant to re-employ the same person to avoid such payments. Scientists for Labour strongly urges the government to provide 'ring-fenced' extra resources to the Research Councils to meet this additional cost. We also believe that in the longer term, all short-term contracts should be subject to the same redundancy terms as fixed term staff. Accordingly, the redundancy waiver should be abolished.

A significantly higher proportion of female academic staff are on fixed-term contracts than male staff. Accordingly the provision of maternity leave and rights is a major issue. While staff on fixed-term contracts are entitled to extended maternity provision, these rights do not extend beyond the end of a contract which ends during the period of maternity leave. Moreover, many funding bodies are unwilling to allow a new contract to start during the period of maternity leave, leading to an unwarranted break in contract with associated loss of extended maternity benefit. Scientists for Labour believes that staff should not lose extended maternity rights on the basis of being on a short-term contract where it is reasonable to expect that the contract would be renewed.

#### ***2.4 Concordat and Research Careers Initiative***

Scientists for Labour supports the Concordat and Research Careers Initiative, which set out standards for career management and conditions of employment for researchers on fixed-term contracts. The initiatives do not, however, address the fundamental issues associated with fixed-term contract work, which are related to pay and job security. Moreover, we are concerned at the speed at which implementation of the recommendations is acting to benefit staff on fixed-term contracts. Indeed in the second report of the Research Careers Initiative it is stated that: '[t]he available data suggest little change in the extent to which good practice is benefiting research staff.' Scientists for Labour believes that the Concordat and Research Careers Initiative should act as one strand in a co-ordinated approach involving Government, funding bodies and employers. Without a fundamental shift in policy at Government level related to the pay and conditions of researchers on fixed-term contracts, and a willingness on the part of funding bodies to embrace best practice, the Concordat and Research Careers Initiative will be merely 'window dressing'.