Improving the lot of contract-research staff

The Roberts review of the supply of scientists and engineers in 2002 identified a range of concerns about the recruitment, retention and development of university contract-research staff, notably the lack of a clear career structure, together with uncertain job prospects. The review anticipated that the implementation of the European Directive on Fixed Term Work would remove some of this uncertainty. The Directive requires that the use of successive fixed-term contracts with the same employer is limited to 4 years unless an extension can be justified on objective grounds.

In a subsequent letter to the Science Minister, the UK Life Sciences Committee argued that implementation of the Directive without providing additional ear-marked funding to universities might actually lead to an increased turnover of contract-research staff after 4 years. Universities could not afford to offer open-ended contracts to such staff because these would need to be funded from grant income, which is not assured. The Government regulations that implement the Directive took effect from 1 October 2002, and this prompted the Society’s Policy Committee to undertake a preliminary survey of Deans of Science, during the summer of 2003, on the impact that they thought the regulations would have on their institutions and on their short-term contract staff.

The study included 16 universities of different types, with a 2:1 ratio of pre-1992 to post-1992 institutions. Most thought that the major effect of the regulations would be to drive universities to manage better the career expectations of young contract researchers, since the offer of open-ended contracts would be such an important commitment. This would necessitate increased time and resources spent on monitoring the performance and providing unequivocal feedback to young researchers, as well as maintaining rigorous redeployment and redundancy procedures. Those offered open-ended contracts could expect improved career security; however, fewer postdocs were anticipated to remain in the system. Those who are taken on would usually have to be flexible and move between projects depending on grant income, which might decrease job satisfaction by hindering the opportunity to build up a publication record in any particular field.

Opinions were divided on whether there would be a high turnover of contract researchers who had been in post for 4 years, but this was not necessarily good news for those researchers. While a small proportion of universities proposed to offer all staff open-ended contracts after a satisfactory probationary period, a larger number expected that many postdocs would be lost after the first contract and half of them intended to claim objective justification for short-term contracts being extended beyond 4 years. The most frequent justification would be the uncertainty of grant renewal, and several universities said that helping them underwrite salaries between grants would be the most useful thing that the Office of Science and Technology could do.

The size of the financial burden imposed on a university by the new regulations would depend on the future pattern of contracts and the volume of research undertaken. Several of the institutions that are likely to have a significant number of researchers eligible for open-ended contracts thought that the major cost of any redundancies would arise more from the need to justify that these were fair and had followed due process, rather than from redundancy payments themselves. The post-1992 universities in the study drew no consolation from the fact that they would be affected less than research-intensive institutions. They complained strongly that they are treated unfairly by the Government in the way that money for research is allocated.

The full report is at the policy section of the Society’s website.
HEFCE working overtime on controversial initiatives

The summer and autumn of 2003 were busy times for policy submissions, with the Higher Education Funding Council for England, in particular, issuing a stream of consultations. At the time of writing the Society had contributed to the following submissions that were made through the Biosciences Federation:

- Roberts’ review of the Research Assessment Exercise process (HEFCE);
- Improving standards in postgraduate education (HEFCE);
- Proposed changes to the dual support system (Office of Science and Technology);
- Communicating the results of scientific research to the public (Royal Society).

All of these can be found on the Society’s website. Regarding the Research Assessment Exercise review, the Society welcomed the recommendation to end the grading of departments on a stepped scale, since this encouraged ‘games-playing’. It was concerned that the proposed triple routes of submitting for assessment could lead to the development of rigid tiers from which it would be very difficult to move to a higher level. And as a fundamental principle, the Society considered it essential for there to be a clear and predictive relationship between assessment outcome and funding. Regarding the dual support consultation, the Society considered it unreasonable for the Office of Science and Technology to place the responsibility on universities for recovering the full economic costs of research commissioned by bodies other than the research councils. Biomedical research charities, government departments and European bodies are all implacably opposed to paying increased overheads.

The Society was alarmed that the HEFCE planned to move all biosciences subjects to a lower teaching-cost-band in a further consultation on developing the funding method for teaching. It intended to argue that the HEFCE’s costing analysis failed to take into account factors such as the biosciences’ high efficiency, large student/staff ratios and relatively young staff, and furthermore, that the analysis was retrospective. The present funding is insufficient to cover salaries, overheads and cost of practicals without cross-subsidy, and to reduce it would be disastrous.