



3.5.3 Research-only role

I realised that ...I need to be more proactive ...I'm not a student anymore, and ...nobody will come and tell me ...it's also very...fuzzy in terms of responsibilities and roles ...you receive your responsibilities and role ...when you sign your contract, but no one really enforces it or tells you 'you are expected to do A, B, C' ...it was up to me to realise ...to take the lead ...no one will do it for me. (CM)

CM's experience of transition from PhD study to full-time researcher illustrates the lack of clarity that can surround research-only roles. The participants in our study employed in research-only positions spoke of the diverse expectations and responsibilities their roles involved.

For example, Jennifer describes a week when she was a new researcher engaged on two part-time research-only contracts:

Project 1: Meetings of different kinds including research club meeting; seeking and inviting people to participate in outreach activities; emails of various kinds: responding to questions about research, accessing publications, and possible collaborations; organizing of different kinds: chasing a writer, sending publications, scheduling rooms;

Project 2: Analysis of interview data

Own work: Writing conference paper proposal; arranging a time to meet with a student recommended to her to discuss potential collaborations

In contrast, Trudi, who had become a senior member of her team, spent most of her time on administrative and management tasks and remarked that there little time to spend directly on research activities:

Managing staff, making sure everyone's okay, making sure that their projects are on on-track ...day-to-day decision making from] ...should this person be included in an email list ...really mundane things like that, to writing ...the [funding council] annual report, which took ages in collecting and collating all the data ...I spend a lot of time seeking funding ...there's been a lot of funding applications and writing and management of that ...We've got to employ some new staff for two projects starting in September, so writing job descriptions and working out dates and times and making sure that we've got them all in on time in order for them to be able to have given three months' notice, and just keeping up to track with university policy on recruitment and selection and hiring and those sorts of things ...And then managing my projects and making sure the researchers are all working...my research assistant is working fine and that sort of thing ... And if you're writing funding grants, you're not writing journal articles.



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Albert, who had experience outside the academy, drew on that experience to manage ‘the business side ...product management, how to plan resources, finances, stuff like that ...that has come in really handy in terms of writing grants and structuring teams once we get the grants awarded in terms of actually doing the research.’

And, Funky Monkey, saw managing research as a way to move from ‘bench work’ to providing leadership:

I hope in five years that I would be not constantly on the bench anymore. For sure I hope to be—if I’m doing some sort of [bench work] ...but then also doing administrative work or project management, or team lead, or different projects ...[including] leading a team of people to do some good research.

Challenges to be aware of

Being a researcher is often seen as a route to a research-teaching position; however, unless you have been awarded your own fellowship, such posts can be challenging. Working on someone else’s funded research on contract is very different from having a fellowship to pursue your own work. Indeed, Catherine spoke of her relief on receiving a fellowship and having ‘a sense of escape in ...getting away from the contract work I was doing.’ So, if you are considering a research route to a research-teaching position, here are some points to bear in mind.

First, your institutional status can be challenging: researchers referred to being treated as second-class citizens and being regarded by their colleagues or institutions as ‘second rate’ or ‘not real academics.’ Most had little job security and in some cases they had less access to institutional resources than those in research-teaching positions. When considering a research-only post remember to find out about the resources and career support that will be available in that role.

Second, while your work may help you develop your research profile, it may not prepare you well for teaching and supervision. Both Trudi and Catherine sought out additional work to gain experience of teaching and supervision. This enabled them to develop additional aspects of their academic profile, increase understanding of their institutions and broaden their networks. Engaging in teaching and supervision is also a way to encourage colleagues to recognize your ability to contribute more broadly to the department and to the wider institutional mission. If you hope to move from a research-only to a research-teaching position we suggest that you seek out opportunities for teaching and supervision.

A *third* challenge is the insecure nature of many research-only positions. Many researchers are employed on short-term contracts that are contingent on receipt of external funds. In order to secure full-time work some researchers work concurrently on two or more funded projects. For instance, Catherine reported at one point:



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[My contract]'s just been renewed ...it's only been renewed for a year ...so it goes on...I know for sure I will be continuing to do about 10% work over the next nine months or so at least for [that] ...I'll have quite a bit of work to do on one [other] project that I'm already written into, and, from October, I'll also have quite a bit to do on this project that we just heard this morning that we have won.

Jennifer had a similar experience which as she notes creates tension:

The position I'm in now, I'm paid by two different research [grants] ...Basically, my job is in parts, so I am paid 70% by one [grant] and then I'm paid 30% by another [grant, so] ... technically, I'm supposed to be working two days a week on [xx] and then three days a week on [yy] but the actual fact ...

Onova actually turned down a third contract which would involve a move and was ready to give up academia (though a job came through shortly after). She was just of the precariousness of life on contracts: 'Even though it was almost three years all told [2 contracts], I lived in a furnished apartment, all my belongings were in storage, you know, it was really that sense of 'I don't really live here.'

Fourth, becoming familiar with the project may be time-consuming, e.g. reading a range of new literature or learning a new form of analysis. CM describes how this combines with the short-term nature of the work to make it difficult to know how best to contribute and how to create a coherent career path:

Just to get to know what the issues are, it can take a long time for...and I mean, my research contract is only this long, so if you use all the time just to get to know the field, you cannot contribute to it much! ...if it's only a short...relatively short contract ...you hop from one issue to another, and it doesn't serve you in your CV, doesn't serve you in terms of publication, it doesn't provide any continuity ...I see it as a great disadvantage.



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