

To: Barry O'Brien, Director of Human Resources, University College Cork
cc. Mary O'Regan, HR Advisor, University College Cork



UCCRSA position statement on postdoctoral “period of training”.

In 2012, UCC adopted the Research Career Framework, outlining a clear career progression for Postdoctoral research staff. While many elements of this policy are welcome, UCCRSA feels that the designation of postdoctoral research roles as a ‘period of training’ lasting six years is regressive, not in keeping with the role or qualifications of postdoctoral researchers, and de-professionalises this cohort of employees.

UCC HR and the VP for research, Professor Anita Maguire, held consultation and debriefing sessions with the UCC research community in 2012 subsequent to the commencement of the framework, and assured researchers and the UCCRSA that there would be no alteration to the status of researchers, and that researchers would not become ‘students’. In light of numerous concerns from research staff, UCCRSA submitted a letter to HR in 2013 requesting that the “period of training” phrase be removed from the Research Career Framework and the HR4S Charter and Code of action plan submission to the EU commission. UCCRSA felt that this phrase might be used in the future to alter that status of researchers. The request was ignored, and the HR4S action plan was submitted un-amended.

We strongly believe that designating postdoctoral and senior postdoctoral roles as a “period of research training” de-professionalises researchers who have already undertaken significant research and academic training throughout their PhD, and contribute fully as staff members of the university. According to SFI, postdoctoral researchers in Ireland are expected to generate at least two high-quality publications per year. In addition, postdoctoral researchers are expected to be involved in training and co-supervision of postgraduate students, and research lab/project management. Academic posts that have very similar duties and research outputs, and require very similar qualifications and experience for appointment as a postdoctoral researcher are not considered to be a period of training, despite the fact that a newly appointed lecturer at the beginning of the scale will also be developing skills in research, teaching, publishing and securing funding akin to that undertaken by a postdoctoral researcher. Furthermore, the ‘period of training’ and 3-year cycles of forced progression represents an unacceptable difference in employment conditions from other UCC staff. All other employees are able to remain at the top of their salary scales indefinitely, yet postdoctoral staff are forced into successive 3-year cycles requiring them to move to the next level or leave the system.

According to the European Framework of Research Careers, postdoctoral staff and senior postdoctoral staff (up to 6 years recommended) are professionals and are staff members of an institute. Training and development is highly recommended, but the role is never defined as a “period of research training” in this document. Similarly, the Building Research Careers Brochure (published by the IUA) states: *“Despite the temporary nature of the contract, the postdoc is recognised as a full-time employee,*

enjoying all associated rights of the employing institution. As with any fulltime employee, the fact that they are learning or receive formal training does not make them “trainees”. The postdoc is already a young professional researcher.”

While the European Charter and Code refers to “Researchers in their training phase” (pg 14) and a “period of research training” (pg 28), UCCRSA feels that UCC HR have used this wording out of context to alter the status of postdoctoral researchers.

It has since come to our attention that UCC HR recently refused a request for a Contract of Indefinite Duration submitted by a (postdoctoral) staff member with 5 years’ experience on the ‘objective grounds’ that they were in a “period of training”, confirming the concerns of the UCCRSA about the true motives for outlining the ‘period of training’. It is therefore our assertion that the postdoctoral ‘period of training’ is simply a means for securing ‘objective grounds’ to refuse employees their rights to a Contract of Indefinite Duration under the Fixed Term Workers Act. Continued implementation of this interpretation and de-professionalisation of postdoctoral researchers is likely to compromise the ability of UCC to retain world-class researchers and reduce research output, resulting in a continued drop in international rankings. Furthermore, we are concerned that UCC will fail to retain the EC accreditation of HR Excellence in Research when it comes under external review in 2 years’ time, compromising UCC’s ability to secure EC funding.

UCCRSA request a statement justifying the ‘period of training’ and outlining UCC/HR policy regarding eligibility of postdoctoral researchers with 2 or more contracts over a 4-year period to Contracts of Indefinite Duration. We also request that the following alterations are made to the UCC Research Career Framework:

- “period of research training” be removed
- “training” be amended to “professional training and development”

We thank you for your time in considering this matter and look forward to receiving your response in due course.

Regards,



On behalf of UCC Research Staff Association Committee