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Australian researchers held back in struggle for jobs, funding

January 15, 2013 2.09pm AEDT

[Jenni Metcalfe](#)

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Australian researchers are frustrated with a funding system that makes job prospects unreliable and often ties them to short term contracts. AAP

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There's a lot of bitterness, anger and frustration out there in the world of Australian research.

A [new survey](#) has shown that researchers like their work, but not the system in which they work. It's the lack of certainty of employment; the overly-competitive race for grants, fellowships and jobs; and (for more senior people) the onerous burden of teaching and administration.

Of the 1200 researchers who completed the survey, nearly 80% said they found a career in research as "very" or "reasonably" attractive. The best features were working on interesting and important issues, and working in a stimulating environment.

Working on challenging problems, finding solutions, and making a difference and helping people are all attractive features of a research career.

The Australian Council of Learned Academies (ACOLA) was commissioned to conduct the survey and eight focus groups by the Commonwealth Department of Innovation. The aim was to identify the pressure points in the research career pathway and identify possible solutions.

Respondents were asked to identify the best and the worst of the Australian research system. On the good side, they nominated the PhD stipend that allows graduate students to make a start.

But they were four times more likely to identify bad aspects of the system, where uncertain job prospects tops the list. Over 80 per cent of respondents say there is too much reliance on short-term contracts.

As one respondent puts it:

"Job uncertainty is appalling, we are the most educated people in the country and we can barely provide for our family and have at most three to four years job stability. This is extremely stressful."

Another said she had chased three contract jobs across three different states in two years. This is not unusual, and family life has to fit somewhere. Experiences like this are forcing researchers to consider better-paying but less imaginative pursuits.

Workload is another issue: teaching loads are heavy, and administrative tasks are being shuffled onto academic staff as universities scramble to manage tightening budgets. Increasing demands for accountability add to the load.

To the young researcher, it all looks clear at the beginning: honours degree, PhD, post-doc positions, then a steady progression up the research ladder.

The actual experiences can be quite different, as young graduates encounter a sharply narrowing opportunity funnel. They finish their PhD and discover positions and opportunities are limited. Why did no-one tell them about the real employment situation before they started? There is a sense of being cheated, of being lured into a career of backwaters and dead ends.

Publications and citations are the measures of progress, but there is little time for young researchers to develop a publications record. Other activities such as interactions with industry are largely disregarded. Such constricted metrics encourage perverted behaviours: respondents with international experience described their relief at not having to churn out a lot of little articles and being allowed to concentrate on more meaningful work.

For many post-docs life becomes a series of short-term contracts with senior researchers, leaving them little opportunity to write up their own work or establish themselves as independent researchers. Career path – what career path?

The competition for grants and scholarships is intense. The chance of an early career researcher winning a DECRA Award in 2011 was remote: 2159 applications for 277 awards. Applications can take months to prepare: an ANU study reportedly showed the cost of preparing a Discovery grant application is \$50,000.

Respondents were also asked to suggest improvements. What can government programs and the systems of universities and research institutions do?

It is clear the fundamental problem is lack of funds: not enough positions, overly-competitive grant schemes, heavy workloads because of lack of staff, not enough time for new graduates to write up their research.

But there are low-cost changes that would help systems become more responsive, such as encouraging and rewarding researchers for working more closely with industry. This would require a sharp shift in university culture and reward systems, as well as changes to practical matters such as superannuation.

Young researchers want help to develop their careers, through mentoring and career advice. Small grants systems to attend conferences, publication subsidies and training in generic research skills would boost their competitiveness.

Researchers of all ages want a new flexibility and responsiveness in national funding programs. Several funding cycles over the year, and feedback on unsuccessful applications would help. International schemes have other desirable features: longer time frames, grants that covered research costs as well as salaries.

The costs of preparing applications is considerable – does the Productivity Commission have a role in suggesting changes to ARC and NHMRC applications?

Australia can look at other changes, to the teaching-research nexus, setting out a clear research career pathway, balance in workloads and low salaries.

But behind all this is the basic question of supply and demand: if Australia needs more highly educated citizens, why do researchers have to scramble so fiercely to win positions and grants? Or should the resources be diverted to meeting Australia's real needs, for instance for plumbers?

Co-author Toss Gascoigne is a consultant who receives funding from government departments at state and federal level, research organisations in Australia and overseas, CSIRO and other clients.

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