

ECR open meeting with the Provost, Professor Mark Spearing

On the 11th May, 29 early career researchers and academic staff met informally with the Provost, the key areas of discussion are detailed below along with actions and/or advice from ILlAD.

Key messages: ECRs/ECAs are at the heart of the engine room of research, you do excellent research and are (and should be) a vital part of the University community; you have a voice and need to engage with the University to inform University strategy.

You raised the following...	The Provost responded...	Julie did/suggests
What is your role?	6 Russell group universities have a Provost role. As the VC role becomes more outward facing and operates in a political environment, the Provost frees up the VC and takes care of the day-to-day running of the academic side of the University. The Provost provides balance between research and education, and also line manages the Deans.	
International 1) HR issues, especially with contract (Marie Skoldowska Curie) can be problematic and difficult for international staff 2) Relocation (an additional issue): There is no support for staff relocating to Southampton; peers in Vienna and Berlin were offered temporary housing by the university for two months to get settled.	The Provost was concerned to hear that there had been problems with contracts and relocation – Julie to raise with HR. As Mark also held the portfolio of PVC International he recognised the importance of international mobility and the significant contribution all research staff made to the University.	Julie has raised the contract issue with Sarah Hollowbread (HR) to make HR aware of the problems and have asked her to look into it. The relocation issue will expand with increased mobility, so I have also asked HR who can look into this further. The University needs a better policy on this.
Probation Why is it 1 year on a two year contract? Also the paperwork was not applied in a timely way It was noted that HR was not very helpful in providing information on managing expectations around the four year contract point.	Probation and appraisals are vital – we have a duty of care to you, we need to see how you are doing. Each of us should have a regular conversation with line manager – you need to be conscious of what you want and where you want to go. After 2 years you are essentially permanent, regardless of the source of funding for your position, however even “permanent” staff do not have the right of tenure.	I raised all points with HR and asked them to look at the appropriateness of the length of probation for fixed term contracts and the information they provide on the 4 year point. Clarification: After 2 years, you have the same rights as permanent staff and if you are made redundant at the end of your contract, you will receive remuneration for that.

		<p>After 4 years you have the right to ask for a permanent position but you are not guaranteed this, and it is also entirely dependent on funding.</p> <p>Finally, all Faculties are able to offer jobs on open contracts but currently only the Faculty of Medicine does so. May I suggest postdocs look into their local situation and lobby their Faculty. However, please note: even if everyone was on an open contract it would not affect the retention rate in research areas.</p>
<p>Career prospects and management</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Grant applications – you need a permanent post or the promise of one to be able to apply. Also, in some areas, we can't have junior fellowships without FEC – could we have VC Fellowships, like Durham? 2) Networking opportunities. 3) Mentoring – only 1/3 of attendees had a mentor – but some had joined the University scheme and it was pointed out that they still had not been allocated a mentor, although one person had been asked to be a mentor! 4) In terms of workload, a lot of additional pressure is filtering down to postdocs. They would like to take up opportunities but don't have time and can't take them up. 5) Could career development support for ECRs/ECA be a 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) In 1980s, it used to be clearer what career track you were on, that is not the case today. Some grants you need a PI and some you can become the PI on. You can ask for a letter of support from the University to assist your grant application [especially in the case of the latter]. The Provost would dearly like to have similar fellowships – we need to invest in researchers and even undergraduates, but we do not have the money to invest. This is why we need to grow our income so that we can invest. The challenge for all Universities but especially Southampton is that HEFCE is cutting funding. We lost £50million for capital investments, we should be making 5% surplus but we only make 2%, i.e. £10 million. This puts a real strain on our resources - we are in the bottom 1/3 of Russell Group Universities in terms of making a surplus in the UK. We will be undertaking a business model review so that we can get up to 5-10% surplus. MIT have an endowment to invest in themselves – we don't have that. So if we invested in fellowships the money comes from elsewhere. Already apologising for IT and HR systems, we need to find way to up our game. All comes back to the business model: we can cut and become leaner, or go out and make money. We are gradually upping our game, i.e. raised £10 million for cancer immunology centre. But need to up further and then scholarships/fellowships would be high on the Provost's list. Investing in people is vital [in response to a comment about self-financing conferences and copy-editing]. Our salary bill is high, but 	<p>Speak with your Faculty Research Support Officer to find out what you can apply for. ECRs can get too hung-up sometimes about being the PI on a grant when evidence of any successful application for funding (no matter how small, i.e. travel or equipment grants) would be more convincing than nothing at all.</p> <p>The need to increase our surplus as a University and to create more income for investment does, I think, present those in the early stages of their career with fabulous opportunities to make a contribution and help diversify income - see ICURE for example. http://www.setsquared.co.uk/research-commercialisation/icure-innovation-commercialisation-university-research-programme</p>

<p>question in PI appraisal? How do we find out about PI's objectives as that would be helpful in terms of helping us to strategize and know what is happening higher up. We need clear objectives too and the 'space to strategize' for our careers.</p> <p>There was a specific comment about the appraisal process being a 'dog's dinner' – please see Julie's response column.</p> <p>6) Lack of career pathway – nowhere to go, the University have invested in us – there isn't time to think about a career pathway.</p> <p>7) The pressure to teach on researchers and lecturers too, how do we alleviate that – should we hire more TFs and demonstrators? What about postdocs who would like to do teaching, how do we support them?</p>	<p>we need to be able to attract internationally mobile staff in an internationally competitive market (it was noted that salaries are nationally negotiated [there was a comment about postdoc salaries being low – please can the person who pointed that out email Julie with the details])</p> <p>2) The Provost stated that what is special about University is the extent to which people network – but you must also do it more widely. There are always opportunities for networking, for instance, you could randomly talk to people in the staff club!</p> <p>3) The Provost enquired into who had a mentor and urged everyone to consider finding a mentor. If people say they don't have time, and/or they don't value the activity – they probably would not be good mentors anyway. Mark had offered to be a mentor but had not been offered a mentee by the scheme either – so sympathised.</p> <p>4) The Provost reminded the ECRs that they are not slaves! You must preserve time for your career development, ideally 20-25%, or a day a week, just for you. You may, Mark acknowledged, need to negotiate this and if this is still too difficult, then Mark happy to raise.</p> <p>5) Ask what your PIs objectives are. We have just revamped the appraisal process and the form is only a guideline, you should be having ongoing conversations about what is in it for both of you, the PI and the Postdoc. We need to do well in teaching and research, research and impact, and we are asking if we have the right spectrum of activities. The Provost stressed the importance of everyone having an appraisal.</p> <p>Everyone's career development is different [in response to a question about Statisticians] – however, it is about independence and moving from executing someone else's ideas to growing your own, and independence. Might need a bit of luck but plan and identify what are the emerging fields – position yourself.</p> <p>First lecturer is being evaluated on independence – can you develop a curriculum for a class. For Professors, it is all about leadership, can they talk about curriculum as a whole. At the level of a lecturer (level 5) we are looking for independence and latent leadership.</p> <p>6) There is a balance between hiring within and letting people go elsewhere. Leading institutions send their researchers out, this is how they build their reputations – the Provost was a bit sceptical of</p>	<p>No-one tells you this, but you need to build your own professional network – for those reluctant to randomly speak to people in the staff club, there is advice on how to network, i.e. see the Management Pocketbook, and/or ask successful people in your department or discipline for tips on how they do it.</p> <p>I raised the problems with the mentoring scheme within ILIaD and expect to see an immediate improvement in this area. If this has not improved, please email me.</p> <p>Carving out time for yourself and moving towards independence is critical for your career development and the Provost's advice on this (see 4 & 5) is absolutely vital. Only you can do this (don't wait for your PI to offer it – some will, but many won't) and it will mean exercising your leadership, negotiation, influencing, and strategizing skills to get what you need. All of which are valuable attributes as you go through future career stages.</p> <p>I raised with HR the question of the 'dog's dinner' appraisal process.</p> <p>Please note: no matter what contract you are on, you can apply for promotion and if you are doing the job, you should be paid the appropriate salary. There is a set promotions round but you</p>
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	<p>those institutions that simply hire within. On the career track, it is fundamental that we have a balance between both and also a balance between research and education. The Provost insisted that the skills required to be a top researcher are the same as being a top educator i.e. communication skills, and more widely the ability to engage with people. In his experience the most capable researchers are also very able teachers. Working on teaching skills will often improve ones research and vice-versa. This was certainly his personal experience.</p> <p>7) The Provost recognised that first few years in an academic position were difficult. The first time you have to do everything it is time consuming and that makes you feel very vulnerable. However, you need to put in the time to gain the experience – and experience counts in academia. Mark accepted that we could do: Induction, PCAP and mentoring better.</p>	<p>can also apply outside of the process too. If you would like to know more, please contact your Faculty HR Manager.</p> <p>I have raised the points about better support for Induction, PCAP/teacher training for ECRs, and mentoring with colleagues in ILIaD. The mentoring process should have improved already (and if it has not, please email me); Induction and the teacher training provision will be reviewed soon.</p>
<p>Family and work-life balance The pressure of workload was being felt by ECRs and ECAs –</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) How do we manage that and what is the University doing? 2) Too many out of hours and weekend commitments expected, that are impossible if you have a family. The University needs some creative thinking about this – i.e. open nursery at weekend. 3) There is no provision for staff replacements for people on parental/maternity leave. 4) Diversity was noted as a big problem in the University and people who make decisions may not be aware of this in key ways i.e. provision for school children. Staff gets vouchers but students do not. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) We recognise the pressures on work-life balance and the education-research balance – and it is important we do have a balance. The Provost was recently involved in the promotions round for Professoriate and he was very gratified to see we are achieving a reasonable balance in the mixed portfolio – but he also asked candidates what they were doing to support their staff and most had something positive to say. 2) We are thrust into a competitive market for students and we have to put more resource into recruiting students. Parents prefer to come to weekend open days – but the Provost fully appreciated the comment. However, resources were tight and opening the nursery may not be viable. 3) & 4) We are very serious about gender and diversity and are open to ideas and suggestions about how to do things better. 	<p>I would strongly advise ECRs and ECAs to lobby their senior management team on these issues via the Athena SWAN groups, their Faculty Concordat Champion and the CDR WG – better still you could join the CDR WG as a rep.</p> <p>May I remind ECRs & ECAs to enforce and take any lieu days that are due to you.</p> <p>I have reminded HR about the working pressures early career staff are under and asked for the HRMs to raise this within their Faculties, especially the matter of provision for weekend activities. I also asked them to consider vouchers for PGRs (not sure if we will get them, but have asked).</p> <p>Adriana (thank you) has also flagged up that there is EU-H2020 funding on gender issues – anyone interested, please email me or Adriana. http://ec.europa.eu/research/participants/portal/desktop/en/opportunities/h2020/topics/2415-geri-4-2015.html#tab1</p>

