BACKGROUNDS

At its last meeting in 2006, the Research Committee considered a range of issues associated with developing institutional definitions of the minimum level of research activity which would be used to identify staff who are 'research active'.

The meeting resolved that UWA would move away from its existing 'classification' of research active staff (all academic staff level B and above) and introduce a performance-based definition. It was also agreed that there was a need for a base-level, minimalistic, university-wide definition recognised by the Research Committee and used for reporting to DEST. There was also a need for faculties to develop their own definition of research active and set a faculty-specific minimal definition which would either be the university's definition or some higher standard. In addition, there was a need for faculties and the University to codify a set of 'research expectations' which would indicate to staff how much research activity it was reasonable to expect them to perform. It was also recognised by the Research committee that involvement in 'research supervision' should not form part of the definition of a research active staff member and that the question of who should supervise research students should be considered separately.

INSTITUTIONAL DEFINITION OF 'RESEARCH ACTIVE STAFF'

There are two possible ingredients which can be defined to determine who will be classified as research active using a minimal definition; research output, essentially publications, and research inputs, essentially external research funding. The level of activity can be defined over a number of years.

Possible definitions can be expressed in this way:

To be recognised as a research active academic staff member, a person will

(a) over a period of either 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, or 6 years
(b) have published the equivalent of 1, 2 or 3 DEST points, either as a sole author or as a joint author, or
(c) won external research funding of a total value greater than either, $10k, $20k, $30k, $40k, $50k, $60k or $100k

Hence a definition could look like this:

To be recognised as a research active academic staff member, a person will, over a period of 3 years, have published the equivalent of 1 DEST point, either as a sole or a joint author or have won external research funding of a total of $30k.

On what basis can the different elements be chosen? The time period may be expressed as an annual rate but achieved over a number of years. I would suggest 3 years because it is sufficiently long to combine years of high or low research output and get a meaningful figure and not so long as to add too much history to the definition.

For outputs and inputs, I suggest that the minimal rate to be recognised as research active could be defined as a rate of performance spread across all academic staff summed to 10% of the actual observed level of outputs and inputs.

Hence, if we take 2005 as a base year – total research income was $115m for 1202 FTE academic staff, and the total number of DEST points was 1625 (UWA points 1828). This would make the formulae read approximately:

To be recognised as a research active academic staff member, a person, over a period of 3 years, will have published the equivalent of 0.5 DEST/UWA point, either as a sole or a joint author or have won external research funding of a total of $30k.
I must admit that publishing the equivalent of 0.5 of a DEST/UWA point over a 3 year period seems extremely low. I suggest we raise the base for the calculation to 20% of total DEST/UWA output for publications and hold the external research funding at 10%. The figures would then read:

To be recognised as a research active academic staff member, a person, over a period of 3 years, will have published the equivalent of 1 DEST/UWA point (rounded up from 0.8), either as a sole or a joint author or have won external research funding of a total of $30k (rounded up from $28.7k).

There could also be a combined input/output measure with a rate of exchange of 0.3 DEST/UWA point for $10k: No DEST/UWA points plus $30k external funding = meets minimal definition of research active; 0.3 DEST/UWA points plus $20k = meets minimal definition of research active and so on.

The annual rate of activity to meet the minimal definition would be either 0.3 DEST/UWA points or $10k external research income.

Recommendation One:

That the Research Committee endorses either (a) or (b) as the minimal level of activity to be recognised as research active:

(a) To be recognised as a research active academic staff member, a person, over a period of 3 years, will have published the equivalent of 0.5 DEST/UWA point, either as a sole or a joint author, or have won external research funding of a total of $30k.

(b) To be recognised as a research active academic staff member, a person, over a period of 3 years, will have published the equivalent of 1 DEST/UWA point, either as a sole or a joint author or have won external research funding of a total of $30k.

Recommendation Two:

That this minimal institutional definition of ‘research active staff’ be referred to faculties for local adoption with the proviso that the definition can be revised upwards if this is appropriate for a particular faculty.

Recommendation Three:

That the Board of the Graduate Research School considers the implications of adopting a minimal institutional definition of research active staff for determining who should be eligible to supervise research students.

Expected Research Performance

It is obvious that The University of Western Australia will not reach its research goals if it is content just to work with a minimal institutional definition of ‘research active staff’. The institution needs some challenging expectations for improving research performance. It would be important for these institutional expectations to be defined and circulated at the same time as the minimal ‘research active’ definition and are likely to be based on the average annual performance for all staff (DEST/UWA points 1.4 per annum or $96,000), or more appropriately, to average performance based on classification level. Here the Socratic Index can help to provide better numbers over a five-year period by level:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Index</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>1.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>3.68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>5.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>12.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>19.72</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Where external research income counts as 1 point for up to $50k, 2 points for up to $500k and 3 points for over $500k and UWA points are used to calculate publication outputs.
These can be translated into research expectations over a 3 year period of the following order:

Level A, would be expected/encouraged to publish the equivalent of 1 DEST/UWA point and/or earn external research income of at least $60k.
Level B, would be expected/encouraged to publish the equivalent of 2 DEST/UWA points and/or earn external research income of at least $110k.
Level C, would be expected/encouraged to publish the equivalent of 3.5 DEST/UWA points and/or earn external research income of at least $175k.
Level D, would be expected/encouraged to publish the equivalent of 7.0 DEST/UWA points and/or earn external research income of at least $360k.
Level E, would be expected/encouraged to publish the equivalent of 12 DEST/UWA points and/or earn external research income of at least $600k.

Recommendation Four:

That Research Committee provides feedback to the DVCRI on appropriate university-wide expectations for research performance.

Professor Doug McEachern
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12 February 2007