Andrew D. Kennedy.
Final Report: University Postdoctoral Research Fellowship
Submitted to the Research Committee, UWA. March 2002.

I have been asked to submit a Final Report on my University Postdoctoral Research Fellowship (UPRF) in the Department of Geography at UWA. Usually this should be done on a pro-forma but since I have now left UWA and do not have access to the template I hope that the Research Committee will accept a free-form report instead.

My time as a Research Fellow at UWA was characterised both by great enjoyment and huge frustration. Great enjoyment, because UWA is an outstanding place to work and the Department of Geography provides a stimulating research environment. Great frustration, because senior management at UWA seem unable to recognise and capitalise on the enthusiasm and potential of individual staff.

When I first arrived at UWA on 1 November 1999 I was told by my acting Head of Department, A/Prof. Denis Rambley, that I should view my three-year UPRF appointment as a wonderful opportunity. He advised me that if I was successful at teaching, securing research income and publishing papers then I could expect to be rewarded with an ongoing position when my Fellowship finished. His advice was to make myself as indispensable to the Department as possible.

I quickly set out to follow A/Prof. Rambley's advice. The approach that I adopted was to use the first two years of my UPRF to lay the foundations for a long-term research career. Over the coming months I energetically applied for research grants and was rewarded with considerable success. I received three ASAC grants from the Australian Commonwealth Government for Antarctic research, a Small Ecological Project Grant from the British Ecological Society for a project monitoring long-term vegetation change in the Kruger National Park, a UWA Small Grant for botanical research in Botswana, two Supplementary Travel Grants to support my participation at scientific conferences in Cima and Melbourne, as well as a valuable donation of aerial photographs from the Wilderness Trust of South Africa. In total, I attracted over $80,000 in research income to the Geography Department and my research was featured in several UWA publications (e.g. UNIVIEWS 20(2):12-12, UWA News 19(9-5), UWA News 20(11-5) as well as on ABC Radio (Afternoon Programme, 19 April 2000).

I planned to use these initial grants as "seeding" for a long-term research initiative. My strategy was to carefully identify topics that fell within the Strategic Priorities of the UWA Academic Review and that simultaneously conformed to the objectives of the UWA Internationalisation Strategy. This explains my emphasis on environmental projects involving collaboration with staff from British and South African universities. Having won these initial grants, I planned to use them to support more substantial applications that my overseas collaborators and I were preparing to submit to the ARC, National Geographic Society, ASAC and other funding sources during 2002 and 2003.

The effort on the research-front did not stop me from contributing to other spheres of university life. I was active at lecturing (Geography 202 and 321), tutorials and supervising Honours students and I received extremely positive feedback from the undergraduates that I taught. Several Geography students asked about opportunities for doing postgraduate research with me. I also received enquiries from students at overseas universities who had seen my UWA web-pages and were keen to get involved in my Antarctic research; the interest of Mark Stevens, one of the applicants for the UWA 2002 UPRF awards, originated in this manner.

Simultaneously, I carried out a range of administrative responsibilities. These included the roles of Library Liaison Officer and Supervisor for the UWA Publications Audit for the Department of Geography. I attended UWA Staff Development Workshops on Supervising Postgraduate Students, Winning Research Grants and Writing Scientific Papers. I acted as a Referee for several international journals (Antarctic Science, Biodiversity & Conservation, Global Change Biology) and reviewed grant applications for both the Australian ASAC and the British NERC. I submitted six papers for publication, of which four were at press in 2001. In all of these areas my Head of Department, Professor John Dodson, let me to believe that my performance was exemplary.
Even up until October 2001 I felt confident that UWA would award my enthusiasm and productivity with an ongoing appointment. However, in November 2001, all my hopes were dashed. The new acting Head of Department, A/Prof. Arthur Conacher, advised me that the assurances that I had received from A/Prof. Dermit Runfrey about successful UPRFs being awarded ongoing appointments were unfounded. I was told that my salary would cease in October 2002. The only opportunity for extension would be if I accepted a short-term position as Stu-clin Lecturer to cover for Professor John Dodson during his secondment to Interim Dean of the Faculty of Natural and Agricultural Sciences. This appointment would last between 4 and 5 months and would not provide any opportunity for research.

This left me in a very difficult position. Although I was enjoying my job at UWA it was clear that senior management did not support my ambition to develop an innovative and thriving research group within the Department of Geography. It was also clear that I would not be able to honour my existing commitments to ASAC and other funding bodies: my ASAC project was scheduled to run until October 2004. The only way that I would be able to complete this contract would be by working unpaid after my UPRF finished.

After much deliberation I realised that my UPRF had become untenable and that my only course of action was to resign. I left UWA on 31 January 2002, with much regret, but with no other option available to me.

In conclusion, I am extremely grateful to UWA for awarding me a Postdoctoral Fellowship. I enjoyed my time in the Geography Department and feel extremely privileged to have spent two glorious years at the University. It is a wonderful institution and I will always look back with warm and fond memories. However, I am extremely disappointed that senior management seems unable to recognize that the staff that they appoint as UPRFs have the potential to become the next generation of leading researchers at the University. What is the point of attracting outstanding young scientists from overseas if they are forced to leave just as they start to realise their full academic potential? Surely UWA should cultivate successful Research Fellows, not discard them?

The recruitment policy of UWA appears to lack the flexibility to respond to opportunistic circumstances. The brightest and best young academics can pass through the University on short-term contracts without any effort being made to retain them. My contention is that UWA will not realise its full potential as a first-class research-led university until this is changed.

Even now, in March 2002, I would welcome the opportunity to return to UWA to build on the success that I achieved during the first two years of my Fellowship. I believe that I have demonstrated my potential to succeed at teaching, attracting research income and publishing papers and that my re-appointment would represent a valuable investment for the University. However, it appears that the inflexible UWA recruitment policy will not allow this to happen.

Andrew Kennedy
University Postdoctoral Research Fellow: 01.11.99 to 31.01.02
15 March 2002