

# The Employment of Research Workers on External Funds in the University of Cambridge, 1924–2000.

1924–1975

In the 1920s, under the old Statutes, it was customary to appoint ‘Assistants to Professors’. By Grace 20 of 13 June 1924 J.Chadwick, Ph.D. (later Sir James, Nobel Laureate) was appointed Assistant Director of Radio-Active Research with a stipend provided by the Government’s Department of Scientific and Industrial Research, to assist Sir Ernest (later Lord) Rutherford, Cavendish Professor of Physics.

New Statutes came into force on 1 October 1926. The precise status of Assistants before that date need not now concern us, but by 1932 the General Board had concluded that posts with the title ‘Assistant Director of Research’, which had been proliferating and which were supported on external funds, ought to be recognized as of equal status to the University Teaching Offices defined in the Statutes, and they obtained an undertaking that the Council would promote the necessary revision of the Statutes, which was achieved in 1934.

Pending such revision the device was used of making ‘ADRs’ University Administrative Officers by Ordinance, which was permitted under the Statutes, thereby making them University Officers. Then an amended Statute D,II,1 added to the existing Teaching Offices the phrase ‘or an office recognized by Ordinance as a University teaching office for the purpose of the Statutes’, and following its approval the necessary Grace for making ADRs Teaching Officers was passed. (The distinction between Teaching and Administrative Offices was to be abolished in 1974; all became simply ‘University Offices’.) By 1934, therefore, the problem of employment on outside funds had arisen and been solved. But not for long.

The first ‘Assistants in Research’, on outside funds, appeared in Medicine in 1938, and others soon followed, but though each post was individually created by Grace and included in *Ordinances*, ‘ARs’ were not initially classed as University Officers. After the War, in 1948, the General Board included in its *Seventh Report on the duties and stipends of University teachers and research workers* a discussion on the current status of ARs and concluded that they should remain without the status of University Officer. *Statutes and Ordinances* for 1949 contains Schedules in which 23 ADRs and 14 ARs are listed, most no longer on outside funds (other than the Treasury grant). At the same time the University was increasingly concerned to regularize arrangements for the administration of outside funds, which had grown haphazardly especially during the war, and in 1950 it approved a Council notice requiring all monies to be handled by the Treasurer (the Notice survives in *Statutes and Ordinances* to this day). This presumably put an end to the ‘unofficial’ employment of research assistants.

In 1952 it was decided to introduce the University Office of ‘Senior Assistant in Research’ but to retain non-officer status for AR’s (and for the newly-created ‘Technical Officers’ who were to be at the same level). There had also been a proposal to create an office senior to ADR, but in other respects similar to it, which the General Board had declined to recommend. This refusal was challenged in the Regent House, so the Council advanced a Grace to confirm the General Board’s position. The Grace was subject to a *non-placet* by a number of Biology ‘B’ professors and defeated by 149 votes to 126. Much to-ing and fro-ing then ensued, resulting finally in a General Board Report proposing an easing of the route whereby

an ADR could advance to a University Lectureship, which evidently satisfied the non-placets.

By 1955 the hydra of categories of employment by the University had developed another head, that of 'posts' established by Ordinance (not being University Offices), such as that of Statistician to the Medical School. The General Board collected together all these posts whose holders they thought should be eligible for sabbatical leave and listed them in a Schedule in *Ordinances*, creating the unofficial title of 'University Posts' in the process. They then published a Report in an attempt to give official recognition to the distinction between a University Office and a University Post: 'A University post shall be defined as a post established by Ordinance or filled under Ordinance, not being a University office or an employment as University assistant'. The Regent House thought otherwise, however, and at the Congregation in the Senate-House on Saturday 29 October 1955 it threw out the Grace on a division so decisive that there was no call for the Proctors to take the votes singly.

A chastened Council quickly came back to the University with a Report which said they would give further consideration to the question of 'nomenclature' provided the Regent House would let them have an Ordinance defining 'Posts' in the interim, which was then agreed without opposition. At the same time an Ordinance was approved with the title 'General Regulation for Employment by the University' to cover 'any person who is not the holder of a University office or a University post and is not a University assistant'.

That Regulation, which did at least recognize the existence of such people albeit by exclusion, did not survive for long however, because it soon became necessary to put Assistant Staff on a more satisfactory footing, and in 1957 the Assistant Staff Board was set up and the above Regulation rescinded. The people who were neither officer nor post-holder nor assistant staff were reduced to being listed in a 'Schedule of persons excluded from the status of University assistant' which included '(d) persons appointed in a temporary non-pensionable capacity to take part in research work upon terms and conditions not applicable to University assistants'. There they languish to this day (*Ordinances*, 1999, p.156) with the addition of 'pensionable'. (The Schedule is not in fact an Ordinance, since it may be amended without a Grace; in 1975 the Council, for reasons which are neither explained nor explicable, added 'University officers' to the class of persons excluded from the status of University assistant in this Schedule.)

In 1968 the University started implementing the recommendations of the Grave Report, and by 1974 it was ready to remove the distinction between University Offices and the newer category of University Posts, and indeed to remove the existing division of the former into Teaching Offices and Administrative Offices. In the course of a complex sequence of changes to *Statutes and Ordinances* the Assistants in Research, who had hitherto held neither an Office nor a Post, were swept up into the omnibus category of University Officer (though they are not in Schedule J to *Statutes*, which governs entitlement to sabbatical leave).

By 1975, therefore, we have essentially the present system (2000). There are University Officers, Assistant Staff, and persons who are neither, and these last include all those on outside grants (nowadays, but not in 1975, there are of course many University Officers supported on outside funds; in 1975 the Trade Union and Labour Relations Act 1974 had rendered this practice inadvisable). All the posts which had been specially created to solve the problem of research workers on outside grants (Assistant Director of Research, 1924; Assistant in Research, 1938; Senior

Assistant in Research, 1952) had thus ascended into the University Officer class and were no longer used for their original purposes.

1975–2000

But the problem of the research workers, of course, would not go away. Still languishing in a Schedule to the Assistant Staff regulations, by 1977 they numbered about 450, and the General Board set up an *ad hoc* 'Committee on research assistants' to advise them what was to be done. Its members were Professor Sir Peter Swinnerton-Dyer, Professor Sir Brian Pippard and Professor Zangwill. They observed "*Research assistants have no mention in the Statutes and Ordinances of the University, and the Committee consider that this is an anomalous situation for so large a body of people employed by the University, albeit in an unestablished capacity*". They recommended the adoption of titles for research assistants, 'Senior Research Associate' at the level of ADR and 'Research Associate' at the level of SAR and AR together. In most respects these 'appointments', as they were called, were just the same as ADRs, etc., had been before they were absorbed into the University Officer category, but they differed in one vital respect: they were not approved by the University by the customary route of Grace and Ordinance. Indeed, when the recommendations of the Committee were approved by the General Board they had been modified on the recommendation of the Secretary General by the removal of the draft Regulations through which the proposed new titles would have entered *Ordinances*. When the resulting Notice appeared on 27 July 1977, therefore, no legislation at all was proposed: the Board had created the titles of 'Senior Research Associate', 'Research Associate' and 'Research Assistant' without authority\*. (In the end, 'Research Associate' had been reserved for the level of SAR and 'Research Assistant' introduced for the most junior level, corresponding to AR.) The hydra had developed another head.

The 1977 Board was of the opinion that 'it would be wholly inappropriate to propose changes in the Statutes to give research workers automatic membership of the University, or membership of the Regent House'. They were also prepared exceptionally to countenance the appointment of persons of the academic standing of a Cambridge Readership at the salary of a Reader, 'but they consider that the title of Senior Research Associate would still be appropriate for such an appointment'.

The matter could hardly rest there. A class of University employees who were graduates and who held 'appointments' which appeared to have official titles was unlikely long to remain silent, and early in 1985 five members of the Regent House requested a Discussion in the Senate-House on the 'Structure of the academic profession: terms and conditions of employment and status of contract research staff'. Dr T.D.Lamb was the lead speaker, and, addressing the question of status and the desire for membership of the Regent House, he suggested the creation of 'one or more classes of University office ... into which to appoint academic research staff' and he observed that this could be achieved by Ordinance.

The Council took nearly a year to reply, and when they did they would go no further than distancing themselves from the General Board's 1977 opinion to the extent of suggesting that perhaps just the Senior Research Associates might be granted membership of the Regent House, and they promised to prepare a short Report. This appeared on 30 April 1986, proposing an ingenious route for admitting

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\* *mea culpa* – I was a member of the Board.

SRA to the Regent House without actually mentioning them in *Statutes and Ordinances*. There was only one speaker at the Discussion, who pilloried the Council's attempt to include 'The People Who Do Not Exist' without explicitly referring to them in a Regulation. The Council's scheme was to describe an SRA as 'a person employed by the University who holds an appointment approved by the University for the purpose of [the relevant new Statute] during the tenure of his appointment' and then to pass a Grace approving the appointment of SRA for this purpose. A footnote to the Report said that, if the proposal and the associated Grace were approved, 'footnotes will be inserted at appropriate points in *Statutes and Ordinances* indicating that the appointment of Senior Research Associate has been approved for these purposes'. The speaker observed that this ruse could not work, because unless the Grace led to an Ordinance it would only be of transient effect (technically, an 'Order'), but if it led to an Ordinance then the title of SRA would have been officially recognized, albeit surreptitiously. He, like Dr Lamb, suggested that SRAs should be made University Officers, in their case ADRs, the post which, sixty years earlier, had been created for this purpose.

The Council were not amused. They quoted the General Board's 1977 Notice and the 1974 and 1975 Acts of Parliament as reasons for standing their ground. SRAs ended up in a footnote in *Ordinances* as planned (with the ultimate status symbol, an entry in the index). In the 1995 *Statutes and Ordinances* there was further progress: the footnote in *Ordinances* was replaced with a footnote which referred to a new footnote in *Statutes*: SRAs had finally achieved the status of a statutory footnote by an editorial adjustment.

Meanwhile, the General Board had been quietly promoting Graces adding to the SRA in the footnote. By 1991 'Lecturer (unestablished)' and 'Assistant Lecturer (unestablished)' had been added, and by 1995 the new footnote in *Statutes* included 'Research Professors' and 'Research Associates', duly indexed. The next year, 1996, 'Reader (unestablished)' appeared.

Nobody noticed these Graces because when the General Board published a Notice inventing a new title they did not refer to the associated Grace, published in the same number of the *Reporter*. Thus when, in November 1992, the Board invented a 'Northern Telecom Research Professorship of Photonics' and appointed Mr W.A. Crossland to it (backdated), they put a Notice in the 'official part' of the *Reporter* (p.244) and said they 'intend to give further consideration to the procedure which should be followed in any other cases that may arise in future of unestablished appointments with the title of Research Professor'. The new title was thus simply assumed to exist, and the Notice made no reference to Grace 4 of 25 November on p.255 of the same *Reporter* 'That the unestablished appointment of Research Professor be approved for the purpose of Statute A,II,3(f)'.

The procedure for creating this new class of Professor may be summed up as follows. (1) Publish a General Board Notice which gives no indication that appointments with the title of 'Research Professor' are new but which nevertheless fills one; (2) At the same time, but without any reference in the Notice, submit a Grace which uses the new title but does not purport to authorize it; (3) On the pretext of the Grace, insert the new title in a footnote in *Statutes*.

In August 1993 the General Board appointed another 'Research Professor' and repeated their earlier undertaking to think some more about the procedure for appointment, which they eventually did in January 1995, publishing a Notice which again simply presumed the existence of 'Research Professors'. In March 1996 another Notice declared that the General Board had invented the title 'Reader' preceded by a

name (they gave the example 'Hewlett Packard Reader in ...') and once again an unmentioned Grace was associated with the Notice. This new form of title was, in fact, indistinguishable from that of a legitimate Reader (for example, the 'Sir William Dunn Reader in Biochemistry').

In February 1999 the General Board reappointed their Research Professor of Photonics, calling him 'Professor W.A.Crossland' in their Notice in the official part of the *Reporter*, and in May they published a further Notice about procedure, but without reference to any titles. Then, in the *Reporter* of 27 October 1999 (p.80) the General Board announced that they had appointed two more Research Professors. The legitimacy of these appointments was then challenged under the provisions of Statute K,5.

A.W.F.Edwards, *Reader in Biometry*, 3 February 1999

*Note.* This account is deliberately free of detailed references, but in all cases years are given so these can be found by reference to the *Reporter* index without difficulty.