

SARDI Contracts Survey

Background

This survey was conducted following considerable concern raised by staff members working at SARDI about the high levels on short term contracts and the impact this was having on staff and the organisation.

Based on employment data detailed in the 2016 SARDI Review, SARDI employs around 414 staff. Of the 314 fulltime staff, most (242 staff or 77%) are contracted (term) employments, with 23% permanent (ongoing). The percentage of fulltime staff on term contracts varies across the four SARDI Divisions (Aquatic Sciences: 88%; Livestock and Farming: 85%; Sustainable Systems: 77%; Business services: 50%). Most term employees provide key science capability services in an ongoing capacity, in the core primary industry areas, and to support strategic and legislative requirements as set out in PIRSA's Corporate Plan 2017-18.

The high percentage of term employees in SARDI is in marked contrast to the remainder of PIRSA, where most are employed in ongoing positions, according to the PIRSA Annual Report 2013-14, although the figures on employment status are no longer published in PIRSA annual reports (assuming a similar number of SARDI staff were employed in in 2013-14 as there were in 2016, the percentage of ongoing full-time staff in the reminder of PIRSA is ~ 78%, compared with just 23% in SARDI). PIRSA employs a little over 900 staff, so SARDI term employees (242 staff) make up about 1/4 of the total PIRSA workforce.

The practice of employing staff on multiple, successive term contracts has resulted in key inequalities:

- Staff feel they are effectively discriminated against because they are denied the same working conditions as ongoing staff, with respect to job security and being able to access redeployment, retraining and redundancy assistance programs if their positions become excess to the requirements of the agency i.e. access to Appendix 1 of the SA Modern Public Sector Enterprise Agreement: Salaried
- Significant barriers to gender equity in the workforce, especially the limited number of women in senior scientific positions.
- Lack of job security has impacted on staff well-being and morale, and presents challenges for staff seeking more flexible work arrangements.

These are other issues are highlighted in many of the respondent's comments.

SARDI staff feel they are being kept in the 'contract space' (many believe in breach of the PS Act), are being denied access to ongoing employment (which many feel they are entitled to), and are being denied the basic rights of redundancy, redeployment and retraining available to ongoing staff. As a consequence, individual SARDI staff, and not the agency, bear all the risk. SARDI staff feel this is not fair.

Who were the respondents?

Total number of responses – 96

This is a large response rate and therefore is quite indicative of the general issues in relation to contract employment at SARDI. The survey was sent to and responses were received from members of staff, not just PSA members.

Number on people on term contracts – 91

Number on-going – 5

45 of the 96 respondents reported that they had been in their role for more than 5 years

Type of employment

Casual – 2
Full-time- 82
Part-time - 8
No answer – 4

Positions

Research Officer – 17
Senior Research Officer – 15
Research Scientist – 11 (2 on-going)
Senior Research Scientist – 6 (1 on-going)
Agricultural Officer – 4
Principle Scientist – 4
Research Services Officer – 4
Technical Officer – 4
Information Services Officer – 3
Senior Technical Officer – 3
Science Leader – 2
Senior Research Officer – 2
TGO3 – 2
PO- Research Officer – 2
Diving and Maintenance Service Manager
Manager Info Services (on-going)
Farm Manager
Oceanographer
OPS3
Project Officer
Research Support Officer (on-going)
Senior Entomologist
Senior Operational Officer
Senior Project officer
Senior Seed Certification Officer
Sub Program Leader

About the contracts

Length of time been on contract

Years	Number	Years	Number	Years	Number
1	2	10	3	20	2
2	4	11	5	24	1
3	3	12	5	29	2
4	5	13	3	31	1
5	3	14	4	33	1
6	4	15	1	37	1
7	2	16	4		
8	3	17	2	No answer	23
9	1	18	4		

Length of current contract

Less than 1 year- 1
1 year – 5
2 years – 16
3 years – 9
5 years - 23
no answer – 24

Number of contracts

Number of contracts	No of staff	Number of contracts	No of staff
1	6	7	1
2	5	8	1
3	9	9	2
4	9	10	1
5	6	21	1
6	0	23	1

No answer – 45

Sections of the Act referred to in contracts

Sec 45(3)(a) – 32

Sec 45(3)(c) – 12

Sec 45 - 3

Sec 45(3) - 1

Sec 45 (3) (d) – 1

ASO71654 - 1

Reg 15(b) - 1

Sec 45 (1) – 2

(28 didn't know or didn't answer)

Projects and Funding

Is your position identified for a specific project or projects?

Yes- 42

No – 16

unsure/ only generally referred to – 7

31 – no answer

Comments

This section of the survey raises issues about the definition of a project.

It appears that some staff have part of their position funded through external funding and some funded through the state meaning that project work is only part of their work yet these staff are on full time term contracts.

There is a common pattern where there is a general referral to projects in the contract but the actual project title is not used. This makes it difficult for staff to challenge whether employment should be term contract and also how long the contract should be.

The length of contract does not always reflect the length of project.

There was also reporting that the contract refers to project work but this is not an accurate description of the work.

It also seems that some letters of appointment do not refer to projects yet people are on term contracts and some letters that roll over existing contracts do not refer to projects.

Proportion of state and external funding

The definition of external is problematic. It appears the department has used a very broad definition which means that where staff do not regularly apply for grants and external funding but the funding comes from other State Government departments, industry levies or cost recovery or secure on-going federal funding, this is also defined as "external" and "project" funding.

It was a concern that some staff were unsure about the basis of their project funding, yet are employed on a contract.

Answers varied in this section but the main categories were:

Federal Govt funding

Fee for service and university funding

80% - 100% state funding

20% state 80%external

50% state 50% external

40% state 60% external

100% external

Large external funding buckets that only varied slightly year to year

Self funded through industry levy

State Government cost recovery

Same funding for many years but renewed every 3 or 5 years

Fee for service

How do continual term contracts affect staff? * denotes multiple responses

How being on constant rolling contracts affected staff personally

- Frustration
- Difficult to work alongside others who have job security and in a department where people funded through the same funding course have permanency. This is morally unfair as we do similar or the same work
- Unable to take long service leave/ have not used any of my long service leave as I am concerned I might need it if I don't have a job* / Need to keep accrued leave as a safety net in case my contract is not renewed*
- Cant get a bank loan for a house etc. *****
- Scared to speak up – continually reminded that my position is tenuous* (e.g.not speaking up re WHS issues, putting up with unreasonable workplace practices and culture) *****
- Hard to plan for a family / plan my life/go on holiday *****
- Unable to take full entitlement of parental leave because of fear of losing funding and job
- Very stressful and high level of anxiety due to the uncertainty *****
- Financial insecurity/ financial stress*****
- Feeling undervalued by my employer, including undervaluing the level of qualifications/expertise***
- Working longer hours**
- May put my visa at risk
- Loss of pay/ gaps in contracts/poor administration of contracts makes work frustrating and stressful**
- Regularly looking for other jobs
- Worried every 6 months that I wont be employed – constantly looking for jobs *
- Have learnt to not to worry because I think my funding will be secure*
- As I get older I think they will just get rid of me

How being on constant rolling contracts affected staff professionally

- Inefficient and un-productive for the workplace – constantly seeking funding instead of doing research
- Takes a toll on our hard work, dedication and diligence – is the hardwork worth it for a 1 month, 3 month 6 month extension?
- Here and now thinking instead of acting strategically
- Have to jiggle funding t o keep good staff on
- Many staff have good generic skills that could utilised across projects – this could be a better approach
- Constantly having to mentor new staff as they move to more secure contracts
- Removes motivation to be proactive in my job. Makes it hard to be committed

- Worried by managers see me as less valuable because I am a young woman and may take maternity leave
- I am considering a career change so I can get more job security***
- Constantly looking for secure jobs elsewhere*****
- Highly restrictive if you want a career in the public service and move around
- Time and money to train a person to the level expected only to have to train someone else
- No professional recognition – I have lead this work for 10- 20 years
- Seen as a liability, not an asset/ not valued *****
- Performance plans create fear**
- The culture is poor and fearful – Climate Survey in 2016 said fewer people would recommend the department as a great place to work relative to the total PIRSA workforce
- Morale is very low **
- Barrier to gender equality – specific issues related only to women (e.g. planning a family, parental leave and flexible work) Many good female staff have left SARDI to work in other parts of the public sector or the university sector.
- My professional self confidence has been undermined
- It influences planning and commitment for potential studies, course, workshops**
- I have no loyalty to SARDI as they have none for me
- I would like to advance to a senior role but am not sure there is a clear career***
- Can't plan ahead professionally
- I only look at work in the short term instead of planning long term projects
- I don't get much training and development
- You have little professional input- you are forced to take projects to keep your job.
- Loss of expertise
- It hasn't impacted **
- My career stagnated/ came to a stand-still

How term contracts impacts on the work performed

- I would be more happy, relaxed and perform better if I had job security
- Not much proactive or long term work happening
- Limits development of a skilled workforce
- Uncertainty is a killer for motivation to work long hours
- When a contract end date is looming, there is a lack of focus on existing work
- Lack of professional development for staff means we find it harder to keep up with latest thinking
- My role is to provide scientific leadership but the time I get to undertake actual science is limited
- It doesn't affect my work
- Hard to retain good staff in the country

How term contracts affected the ability of staff to access their rights.

- I don't take carer's leave
- No redundancy rights under the EBA (RRR) **
- Fearful of asking about maternity leave because I am worried they wont renew my contract**
- Had to come back very early from maternity leave and now there is little flexibility for someone who has a small child
- I Don't ask for any time off – too scared
- I take my leave around my program – I have accrued a large amount of annual leave
- I treat my leave like insurance in case I don't get my contract renewed****
- I haven't ever taken my long service leave**
- Gaps between contracts could lead to entitlements not being accrued
- If the contract finished on 30th June, LSL will be taxed on the top marginal rate
- I was denied the right to join the pension scheme with my super because I was on contract
- I don't access my rights because I don't want to “rock the boat” *****
- No information is provided about industrial entitlements at inductions

- We were not able to claim for overtime until recently
- I have a casual contract so it doesn't come with annual or sick leave
- Leave is hard to take – you have to be visible and active to keep your contract
- I have a serious health issue and am worried about how I will be looked after
- I want to work part time but am too scared they will get rid of me if I ask
- When I took leave I ended up working on my holiday
- In theory we have the same rights as others but in practice we cant access them.
- Planning for retirement is difficult because I don't know how long I will be employed
- None that I am aware of
- My manager supports me in a way that I can access my rights**
- It varies between managers. Our managers are not trained to be managers. They are scientists
- Had time reduced with one weeks notice
- We are being denied access to working conditions that other public sector workers have
- I don't feel able to claim overtime
- I have not applied for reclassification because I am worried this will affect future funding – younger, less experienced staff are cheaper **

Summary

The practice of high levels of contract employment in the scientific and research workforce of PIRSA is not only legally questionable but also morally questionable. It denies most of a workforce the opportunity to access the same industrial rights as others in the public sector and creates structural difficulties for women staff. It also undermines the ability to undertake strategic and long term research-based work for the benefit of our important primary industries of the state.

The definition of “projects” is debatable as a large amount of the work conducted by the workforce of SARDI is on-going work that is required by the state to be done. Funding sources are varied and not as tenuous as the high level of contracts would imply.

Other states and territories who have scientific and research agencies in the public sector and access the same funding sources, do not have the same level of contract employment and have created different arrangements that deliver more job security for their staff.

The high number of staff that identified stress and anxiety due to the uncertainty about their future employment and had genuine difficulties in planning lives, buying a house or starting a family should be of concern to any employer, but particularly in the public sector which has a commitment to being an employer of choice and to on-going employment as the prime form of employment.

If the public sector is to attract and retain the best and brightest scientific and research staff for the benefit of the South Australian community, the practice of rolling term contracts must cease and the agency should seriously and urgently examine ways of improving the job security of its staff.