CENTRE FOR LEARNING INNOVATION

ACADEMIC STAFF SURVEY: RA EMPLOYMENT
----RESULTS----

Summary

A total of 33 academic staff responded to the survey with Level A and B academic staff accounting for more than half the respondents. RAs are employed on approximately 58% of research projects and mainly on a casual basis with contracts lasting for six months or less. Funding for RA support is quite evenly spread between internal and external sources (a more detailed breakdown can be found at question 5). Interestingly, academics report that finding and equipping RAs is a moderately challenging endeavour. It appears that those who utilise the services of administrative staff have little trouble actually employing these RAs once they have been found.

One of the key findings to emerge from this survey was the lack of standardisation in determining an RA's pay level. Indeed, while 'skills required' and 'HEWA level descriptors' appear to be the most commonly used criteria for establishing pay levels, it is clear that a variety of other methods are also employed. In terms of skills required by RAs, literature searching and reviewing, project co-ordination and data analysis are among those most commonly identified. Academics do however report that RA's ability to co-ordinate projects and analyse data requires further development. On average, respondents were quite willing to allocate a small proportion of a project's budget to the development of relevant RA skills. Finally, in terms of their contribution to research productivity, the support provided by RAs was overwhelmingly regarded as essential.

Q1. How many *different* project RAs have you employed in the last 12 months?

	Frequency	Valid Percent
None - have never employed an RA	5	**15.2**
None in the last 12 months	4	**12.1**
1	10	**30.3**
2	6	**18.2**
3	1	**3.0**
4	3	**9.1**
5	2	**6.1**
More than 5	2	**6.1**
Total	33	100.0

- Most staff (72.72%) have employed at least one RA in the last 12 months

Q2. If you've never employed an RA, why not?

- 5 of the 33 participants reported having never employed an RA.
- As multiple responses were permissible a breakdown of reasons identified follows:

Reason	n
Haven't needed to – I don't do research	0
Haven't needed to – no time to do research	1
Haven't needed to – my research hasn't required it	1
Lack of project funds	3
RAs in the Faculty don't have the skills I need	0
Difficulties with administrative processes to do with employing RAs	0
Other:	3

"Other" reasons identified:

- a recent commencement of work
- a lack of knowledge about how to employ and effectively use RAs

Q3. On what percentage of your research projects do you employ at least one RA?

M = 57.61%, *SD* = 33.16, Range = 10% – 100% (N=23)
Thus for those who have employed an RA within the past 12 months, research assistance is sought for an average of 57.61% of research projects conducted.

Q4. Of all of the project RAs you have employed during the past year, what percentage have been:

	Percent (n = 21)
Casual – employed for six months or less (a single contract)	69.76%
Casual – employed for more than six months (multiple six-month contracts)	10.95%
Fixed-term fractional/ part-time	6.43%
On a consultancy basis/ through the RA's ABN	5.95%
Casual – employed for more than six months (a single contract)	4.76%
Full-time	2.14%
Another way	0%

The results above illustrate casual RAs employed for six months or less on a single contract are predominantly utilised by researchers.

Q5. Which sources of funds have you used to employ RAs in the last year?

Results indicate that a mixture of funding sources exist to support RAs. Internal funding is the largest single source.

	ARC	NHMRC	Other external	Industry	Internal	Faculty	Uni	Other
Percent (n= 50)*	14%	2%	12%	6%	22%	14%	18%	12%

*Multiple responses permitted

"Other" funding sources identified:

- REA
- my salary
- professional associations
- school

Q6. How easy is it to find a suitable RA for your research projects?
Q7. How easy is it to employ an RA once you have found one?
Q8. How easy is it to equip an RA once you have employed one? (e.g. office space, stationery, keys)

Here, the item scale ranged from 1 (easy) to 5 (difficult).

	N	Minimum	Maximum	**Mean**	Std. Deviation
Easy to find	25	1.00	5.00	**2.56**	1.16
Easy to employ	25	1.00	4.00	**1.98**	.96
Easy to equip	22	1.00	5.00	**2.66**	1.32
Valid N (listwise)	22				

Easy to find?

Since the mean score (*M* = 2.56) is approaching the midpoint on the scale and the standard deviation is not insubstantial, this would suggest that most academics find it moderately challenging to find an RA.The comments shed some light on the issue. They revealed that many good RAs are generally difficult to find as they tend to be fully 'booked'. In other words, when an academic finds a good RA, they tend to guard them. Another concern expressed several times involved the risk of employing an inexperienced RA with no track record. Some academics perceive this as a risk since it may take longer to train an RA to 'get up to speed' than resources available for the project.

Easy to employ?

It appears that it is quite easy to employ an RA once one is found. Indeed the mean score presented above indicates that academic staff generally find it easier to employ an RA than it is to find one (*M* = 1.98). Results of a repeated-measures t-test approached significance, t(24) = 1.99, p = .06, which lends a moderate degree of support to the

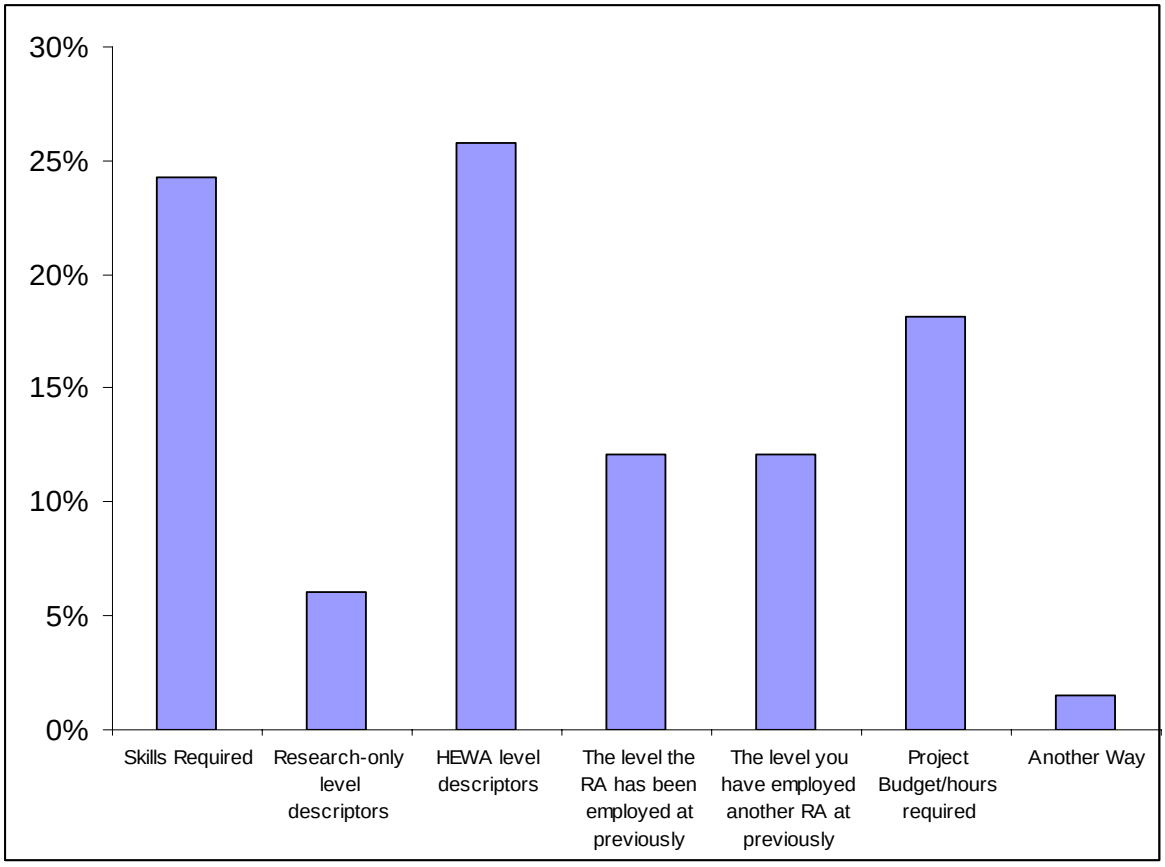
above idea. Comments were quite mixed, however some emergent themes included the supportive role played by administrative staff within the CLI, the difficulty in personally having to locate all the forms and then the subsequent time it takes to process all the forms. It appears that when administrative staff are contacted, this helps to expedite the process of finding all the necessary forms.

Easy to equip?

Academic staff report that is neither overly difficult nor overly easy to appropriately equip RAs once they have been employed (*M* = 2.66) Lack of office space was the most commonly mentioned difficulty in the comments.

Q9. Which of the following have you used to determine a project RA's pay level?

The graph presented below shows the relative frequencies, expressed as a percentage of total responses (n = 50, multiple responses permitted), of several factors used to determine an RA's pay level.



- Negotiation was another way identified by one researcher.

Q10. Because of project funding reductions (e.g. ARC grants), have you ever had to employ an RA for fewer hours or reduce their HEWA level, either prior to or during a contract?

		Frequency	Valid Percent
Valid	**Yes**	3	13.0
	No	20	87.0
	Total	23	100.0
Total		33	

It appears that it is quite rare for the RAs employment contract to change once it has been established. Twenty-three people responded to this item and only three of these have had to either reduce hours or HEWA level prior to or during a contract.

Q11. Which of the following functions have your project RAs performed:

The table below provides a sum total of responses for each item. 24 of the 33 participants provided responses for this group of items. The results indicate that RAs are frequently used for data analysis, literature reviewing and searching, transcribing, fieldwork and data entry.

	In the last 12 months
Literature reviewing	15.18%
Literature searching	15.18%
Data analysis - qualitative	10.71%
Data analysis – quantitative	8.93%
Fieldwork (e.g. interviewing, recruitment)	8.93%
Data entry	8.93%
Transcribing	7.14%
Grant or tender writing	6.25%
Administrative functions (e.g. filing)	6.25%
Writing academic papers	5.36%
Project co-ordination	4.46%
Technical functions (e.g. programming a website)	2.68%
Other (please specify):_____	0%

Q12. How important are RAs to your research productivity?

M = 4.48, *SD* = .82 [Scale: 1 (Not at all important) – 5 (Very important)]

This result clearly underscores the vital role played by RAs in maintaining high research productivity among academic staff.

Q13. During the past 12 months, how satisfied have you been with your RAs' research skills on average?

M = 4.28, *SD* = .72 [Scale: 1 (Not at all satisfied) – 5 (Very satisfied)]

Within the last year, it appears that academic staff have on average been highly satisfied with their RA's research skills.

Q14. Which skills do the RAs you employ need the most? Please tick up to 5 from this list, or add your own.

	5 most important RA Skills
Literature searching	17.70%
Literature reviewing	15.04%
Project co-ordination	9.73%
Data analysis – quantitative	8.85%
Data entry	8.85%
Data analysis - qualitative	7.96%
Grant or tender writing	6.19%
Fieldwork (e.g. interviewing, recruitment)	6.19%
Transcribing	5.31%
Administrative functions (e.g. filing)	5.31%
Writing academic papers	4.42%
Technical functions (e.g. programming a website)	1.77%
Other (please specify):_____	2.65%

"Other" skills academic staff identify as being most required by RAs include:

- "Commitment to the task"
- "Good interviewing skills, good interpersonal relationship skills to be able to liaise with teachers, students and other researchers. Skills to assist me in organizing my priorities and projects and anticipating some of my needs."
- "General organization"

This table helps to give some idea of the spread of skills employed by RAs. Notably, literature reviewing and searching are among skills most commonly required.

Q15. Which skills do RAs need the most development in? Please tick up to 5 from this list, or add your own.

	5 top RA skill development priorities
Project co-ordination	16.39%
Data analysis – quantitative	14.75%
Data analysis - qualitative	13.11%
Grant or tender writing	9.84%
Fieldwork (e.g. interviewing, recruitment)	9.84%

Writing academic papers	6.56%
Literature reviewing	6.56%
Technical functions (e.g. programming a website)	6.56%
Literature searching	4.92%
Transcribing	3.28%
Data entry	3.28%
Administrative functions (e.g. filing)	1.64%
Other (please specify):_____	3.28%

"Other" skills identified:

- "Preparing materials"
- "Some technical skills in managing data collection using video and audio devices and data reduction."

Project co-ordination and both quantitative and qualitative data analysis are the skills in which academics feel RAs need the most improvement.

Q16. How willing would you be to allocate a small proportion of your project budget to RA staff development if the skills acquired were directly relevant to your project?

M = 3.89, *SD* = 1.22 [Scale: 1 (Not at all willing) – 5 (Very willing)]

This average score indicates that on average staff are in favour of allocating funds to support the acquisition of skills directly relevant to the project on which the RA is working.

Q17. How much do you support the idea of your RAs attending free-of-charge skills development sessions in their own time (assuming that workplace health and safety and insurance requirements are met)

M = 4.60, *SD* = .76 [Scale: 1 (Not at all supportive) – 5 (Very supportive)]

The results here show that academic staff clearly support the idea of RAs attending free-of-charge skills development sessions in their own time.

Q18. Have you ever visited the Research Assistant – Professional and Intellectual Development (RA-pid) OLT site?

Yes – 13 out of 32 (40.6%)
No – 19 out of 32 (59.4%)

The following crosstabulation table shows that across most academic levels, there are still many who have not yet seen the RA-pid website. Notably, only 5 of the 17 (29.41%) Level A and B researchers have visited the site.

q18 * q19 Crosstabulation

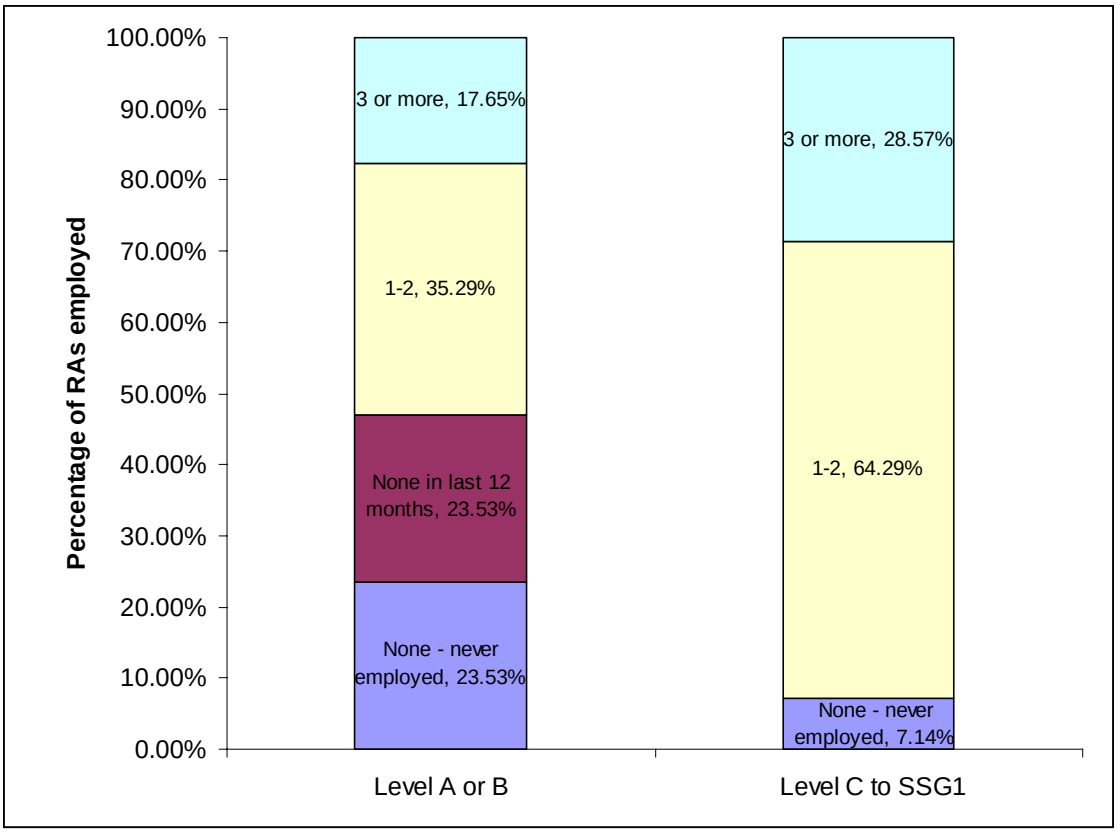
		q19				
		Level A or B	Level C	Level D	Level E or SSG 1	Total
q18	Yes	29.41%	33.33%	40%	100%	38.71%
	No	70.59%	66.66%	60%	0	61.29%
	n=	17	6	5	3	31

Q19. What level academic staff member are you?

q19

		Frequency	Valid Percent
Valid	Level A or B	17	54.8
	Level C	6	19.4
	Level D	5	16.1
	Level E or SSG 1	3	9.7
	Total	31	100.0
Missing	99.00	2	
Total		33	

The following table compares the percentage of different project RAs employed (question 1) by academic staff (academic level has been collapsed into two levels: level A or B and level C and above). Both academic level groups appear to employ mainly 1-2 RAs. As would be expected, there are more level A or B academics who have either never employed an RA or have not employed one in the last 12 months.



* n = 31 (Level A or B: n = 17, Level C and above: n = 14)
**N.B. No Level C to SSG1 staff members reported having employed “none in the last 12 months”.

Q20. Are you a member of a research program or area of interest?

		Frequency	Valid Percent
Valid	Yes	30	90.9
	No	3	9.1
	Total	33	100.0

Q21. Suggestions for improving RA processes in the Faculty or other comments about RA employment or development.

Nine of the 33 respondents chose to make a comment here. Making the process of RA acquisition and induction more systematic is one of the themes present in comments. To this end, a standardised induction package with information such as the nature of project they will be working on, timesheets, the A/C code at the time of budget, and job number is suggested. One respondent felt that by having a preservice research skills course, this would better allow researchers to identify those who might make good RAs and provide resources and support to nurture them. The idea of having a pool of readily available RAs with requisite skills was also supported. Such a pool would allow researchers to choose RAs with a skill set that would best match the needs of project. It

would also help to make the process of acquiring and RA for researchers more transparent and thus more equitable.