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Survey of James Cook Research Fellows

In early 2002, past and current James Cook Research Fellows were interviewed in order to find out:

- what effects the Fellowships had on them, their research, and the people they work with;
- how they thought the scheme could be improved.

Summary of the main findings

Interviews of the 17 James Cook Fellows who were awarded their fellowships between 1996 and 2001 were conducted in order to:

1. Find out what effects the fellowships have on the people to whom they're awarded, on their research, and on the people Fellows work with;
2. Determine ways in which the scheme could be improved.

Eight of the 17 Fellows had completed before the end of 2000, and 9 were either current Fellows or had completed after the end of 2000. The 8 who completed before the end of 2000 were asked extra questions about what they have been doing since completion, and how the fellowship had influenced their further work.

All former James Cook Research Fellows are engaged in research

All of the 8 Fellows who completed before the end of 2000 are currently engaged in research. One is overseas, 6 work in NZ universities or CRIs, and 1 is self-employed in New Zealand. All hold senior positions and supervise staff and/or students.

The James Cook Research Fellowships fund research that wouldn't have been possible otherwise

Fellows were asked if the fellowship had enabled them to do research that they wouldn't have been able to do without the fellowship. They answered:

The ways in which the fellowship enabled this research were by:

- providing uninterrupted time for research;
- funding Fellows to work overseas;
- funding research that would not have been funded by any other scheme;
- providing a source of salary.

One Fellow said:

“Prior to the award of the fellowship I was leader of a large team. We were on the beginnings of a commercialisation drive – I had to manage IP. So research is done in the spare time under such circumstances. It freed me from all of that. I spent a lot of time at [an overseas] University, and I was completely free there to focus on my research. It was extremely productive, primarily because that time was available”

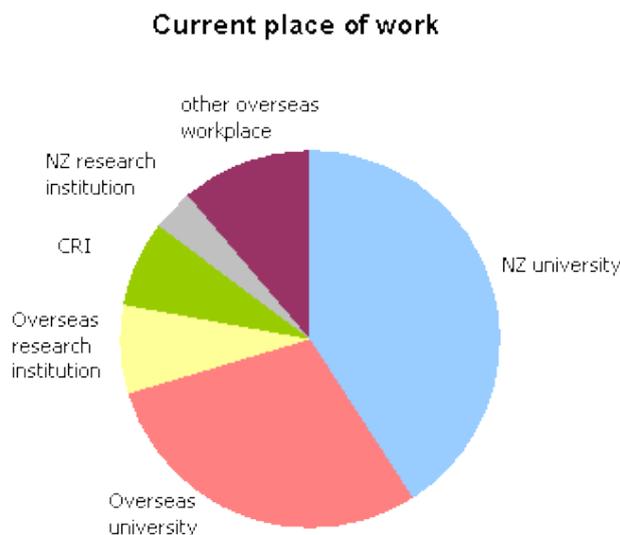
Further work builds on James Cook-funded research

All 8 Fellows who completed before the end of 2000 said that their work subsequent to completion of the fellowship had been influenced by work done on the fellowship. All said that the fellowship had opened up a new research area. For 7, the fellowship enabled the Fellow or a member of their group to gain expertise that was useful for further work. Seven set up ongoing collaborations or made useful contacts during their fellowship, and for 4, access was gained to further funding (from overseas sources, the Marsden Fund, CoRE or NERF).

Effects on careers and reputations

Six of the 17 Fellows stated that the James Cook Fellowship had or probably had a positive effect on their careers and reputations. Seven felt that it had a positive effect on their reputation, but no effect on their career, with 4 commenting that their careers had already progressed to a high level before award of the fellowship. Four said that they did not know about these effects or that it was too early to tell.

Fellows were asked if their fellowship had had an impact on the careers of their colleagues, students, postdoctoral fellows or research assistants. They answered:



The ways in which it had influenced others' careers were by:

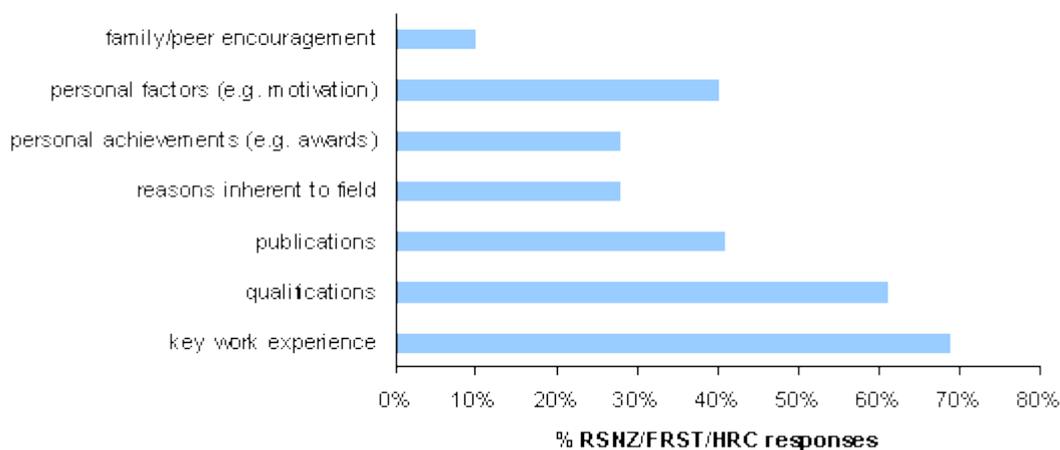
- providing an opportunity for students/staff to develop expertise in the area of the Fellow's James Cook research;
- giving the Fellow more time to interact with others, thus helping their research;
- allowing the Fellow to remain as their mentor;
- allowing the Fellow to employ more staff/students;
- leading to successful funding bids that then allowed the Fellow to employ more staff/students;
- removing the Fellow from undergraduate teaching, thus decreasing his/her influence on undergraduates.

In 2 cases, James Cook research has led to the subsequent establishment of a research institute. Both institutes are involved in developing collaborations and employing and training many people.

Improvements to the scheme

Fifteen of the 17 Fellows felt that there was room for improvement in the scheme. The most commonly stated problem (12 Fellows) was that the level of funding of individual fellowships is inadequate. The reasons given for inadequacy of the stipend were:

Factors that helped fellows gain preferred employment



Three Fellows said that their Institution had provided a top-up, to restore their salary to its normal level. However, for 2, this had led to problems (e.g. feeling obliged to do administrative work while on the fellowship). Of concern is that the extra cost of top-ups may decrease support for the scheme among employing institutions.

Three Fellows stated that the stipend is inadequate for Fellows who go abroad. A related finding is that more recent Fellows are less likely to spend time abroad:

	Fellowship based in NZ	Fellowship based overseas and in NZ	Fellowship based overseas	Total
Finished before end 2000	2	5	1	8
Finish after end 2000	7	2	0	9

Thus, it appears likely that Fellows are being deterred from spending time abroad by the inadequate stipend. Given that some excellent benefits have accrued from James Cook research that was carried out abroad, this is a serious issue.

Four Fellows stated that the stipend would have been insufficient if they were not able to obtain additional funds to cover their research costs. However, no Fellows actually reported not being able to obtain these funds, so this fear may be unfounded.

Other suggestions for improvements were:

- provide better publicity for Fellows and their work;
- provide more fellowships;
- extend the length of the fellowships;
- implement a better process for granting 3rd year extensions;
- rename the scheme;
- redefine the purpose of the scheme so that Fellows are expected to go overseas;
- consider implementing a two-stage selection process.

In response, the Royal Society is now developing means to provide better publicity and an improved process for granting 3rd year extensions.

Conclusions

This survey found that the James Cook Fellowship scheme is very successful. It has funded some very significant research, all of which is ongoing, and fellowships have produced benefits not just for Fellows, but also for the staff and students they work with. Fellows were very strongly supportive of the scheme, a typical comment was:

“Just total support for what I think is an extremely valuable scheme that has enormous repercussions beyond the actual immediate cost of maintaining the scheme.”

There is, however, room for improvement. The most serious problem facing the scheme is that the stipend is inadequate, necessitating top-ups from within institutions, and discouraging Fellows from spending time overseas.