On November 15, 2019, Simon Fraser University and the Teaching Support Staff Union (TSSU) agreed to make research assistants employees of the University and voluntarily recognize them as members of TSSU. This agreement was made to recognize the valuable contributions and important role research assistants play in advancing SFU’s research mission. It was signed by Sandi de Domenico, associate vice-president, human resources and Derek Sahota, TSSU’s member advocate on behalf of the Research is Work organizing team, and was endorsed by Dugan O’Neil, associate vice-president, research; Jeff Derksen, dean and associate provost, graduate and postdoctoral studies; Joy Johnson, vice-president, research and international; and Jon Driver, vice-president academic and provost pro tem.

SFU and TSSU have mutually agreed to make all eligible research assistants employees of the University by May 2020. This agreement means that the University and TSSU will work together on a timeline and a solution that considers the needs of research assistants and faculties, recognizing research assistants’ right to unionize. Once research assistants become employees, SFU and TSSU will begin negotiating the terms and conditions of employment. As employees of the University, research assistants will be formally recognized as members of the SFU Community and faculty principal investigators will have support to administer the employment of research assistants.

This collaboration between SFU and TSSU is a significant step forward in supporting the University’s ability to continue to be competitive and expand innovative research and in recognizing the significant contributions research assistants make to the University. In 2018, SFU launched the Research Personnel Initiative to update the R50 Policies governing research assistants, research associates and postdoctoral fellows to make them employees. Over recent months, research assistants have been organizing to join TSSU to gain better representation for their work. The first phase of the Research Personnel Initiative to onboard eligible postdoctoral fellows (PDFs) as employees has allowed the University to pilot processes and learn more about what will be needed to support the transition the research assistants.

Faculties and their administration will be supported throughout this transition, as there is a high level of diversity and complexity in the different roles of research assistants. The first step for the project leaders will be to work with faculties to understand and define the work performed by approximately 1500 research assistants across SFU.

At this time, detailed information will be limited until the first phase of identifying research assistants and their current terms and conditions is completed. TSSU will meet with the project leaders every 30 days during the transition and updates will be posted to the HR website in the coming weeks.

Sincerely,

Dugan O’Neil
Associate Vice-President, Research
Simon Fraser University

Lillian Deeb and Scott Yano
Chief Stewards
Teaching Support Staff Union

Sandi de Domenico
Associate Vice-President, Human Resources
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Derek Sahota
Advocate
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