This message is sent on behalf of:

Jon Driver, VP Academic and Provost pro tem
Sandi de Domenico, Associate VP, Human Resources
Dugan O’Neil, Associate VP, Research
Jeff Derksen, Dean and Associate Provost, Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies

We are writing to provide an update on the status of the Research Personnel Initiative (RPI) and to provide clarification regarding some concerns we understand are circulating.

In 2018, SFU undertook the development, research and implementation of the Research Personnel Initiative (RPI) to make the graduate and undergraduate students, as well as the range of other people who presently work as research personnel, employees of the university. The goals were to better support these people in the research and tasks they do for SFU, to recognize them as employees and to improve support for the people who are their supervisors.

By inviting Postdoctoral Fellows (PDFs) and research assistants (RAs) to become SFU employees, SFU’s aim was threefold:

- to give all research personnel at SFU the benefits and equity of employment that the institution provides
- to more fully recognize research personnel as integral members of the SFU community and the university’s research work
- To strengthen our foundations of strong research performance and rising research activity by attracting and retaining more highly capable and skilled people

The Initiative was planned in two phases. Phase 1 was designed to start with PDFs, a much smaller and more well-defined group (178) with longer periods of employment, to allow SFU to work through the complexities of rewriting policies, developing processes, implementing employment arrangements and supporting stakeholders through the change. This phase started in 2019 and was completed early 2020.

Phase 2 was planned to make Research Assistants, a larger and very diverse group, employees of SFU. While the project team were preparing for Phase 2 (RAs), TSSU initiated a certification drive of Research Assistants. The University worked with the TSSU to sign a Memorandum of Agreement where the university would voluntarily recognize RAs as members of TSSU after eligible individuals were identified and made SFU employees. While we have had a delay in the dates with TSSU for a number of reasons (not least of which is the COVID crisis), we want to reassure you that we still hold the aims of the Initiative and are continuing with the critical work of making research assistants employees of the University.

One of the most significant components of this initiative has been data gathering: currently, while SFU manages payroll for many research assistants, they are employed by the individual faculty member holding the grant rather than being employees of the University. As there is no central means of consolidating this data, our team has undertaken the painstaking work over the
past 6 months of reaching out to departments, faculty supervisors, and research assistants themselves to gather data on where research personnel work, what work they perform, and how their positions are funded. As you can appreciate, many in our community have been exceptionally busy since March responding to COVID and preparing for the gradual restart of research and online teaching, and as such our queries about research assistants have understandably been delayed while the University deals with the urgency of the COVID situation. Gathering the information for all of the Research Assistants has also been further delayed by some complications in sharing the date with TSSU due to privacy regulations in British Columbia.

We have heard that there has been concern that SFU is now attempting to narrow the scope of personnel who will become employees, with a focus on research assistants in laboratory settings. This perception is incorrect - nothing has changed in the scope and aims of the RPI project. We appreciate the concerns of faculty members and also share the view that students doing archival manuscript research for a professor may be research assistants in the same way as students working in laboratories.

If you have any concerns about this or any other aspect of RPI, please reach out to rp_info@sfu.ca at any time. We are always happy to provide clarification. A reminder that the status of the project is kept up-to-date at http://www.sfu.ca/human-resources/research-personnel-initiative.html