

Reflective practice: getting maximum value from the HR Excellence in Research Award process.

Newcastle University Case Study

Newcastle University recently achieved its 8th year of recognition for the HR Excellence in Research Award. In achieving this we have responded to feedback from the external assessors' report of our 2014 submission for the HR Excellence in Research by widening engagement so that our provision was more inclusive and driven by a more balanced consideration of academic need and Human Resources considerations. The assessment of our 2018 submission for the HR Excellence in Research Award confirmed that we had increased the academic drive and achieved this goal. Our reflective practice approach to this was singled out for positive feedback in the assessment of our 2018 submission.

This case study is about our reflective practice approach and how we have used the HR Excellence in Research Award to improve our support for research staff.

Widening engagement

Since 2014, an important change has been the creation of the Developing Excellent Researchers (DER) Subcommittee of University Research Committee. This was in direct response to the assessors' feedback about widening engagement, so that we were more inclusive and less driven through Human resources:

"It was noted that the 2/3 institutional representatives who joined the conference call [part of the external review process] were based in Human Resources which implies the process is being driven through HR. The review panel noted that there may be a risk that the action plan is not currently embedded in the academic community more broadly."

To drive an academic-led agenda the DER Subcommittee, which convenes quarterly, is chaired by one of the Faculty Research and Innovation Deans, with Dean-level representation from all three University faculties. In addition, the committee includes research staff representatives, representatives from HR, senior University Research managers, the Careers Service and Leads on research-focussed University initiatives such as our recently launched Newcastle University Academic Track (NUAcT) fellowship scheme. Under the umbrella "Developing Excellent Researchers" (DER) all three university Faculties thus have taken ownership of this agenda.

The sub-committee is well attended and researchers play a key role, including having an opportunity to input into the agenda and raise issues. The sub-committee feeds into the University Research Committee (URC) and links to Faculty Researcher Networks and working groups.

This established network means that people can contribute their views and engage with the Developing Excellent Researchers agenda and gives a direct route for research staff to contribute to the institutional strategic research agenda via URC. This was important in developing our submission as it ensured that we were engaged with individuals from our research staff cohort through to those in senior research management roles who were keen to contribute to the development of our research support systems and the HR Excellence in Research goals. Changing the focus of support for the HR Excellence in Research and widening engagement has facilitated a more reflective approach. It has had the added

benefit of allowing us to develop more representative input to other activities such as the recent consultation on the revised Concordat.

Reflecting on our previous plan

A key part of our preparation for the assessment was to reflect on our previous HR Excellence in Research Action Plan to identify what had been achieved. This process allowed us to demonstrate how the plan was converted to tangible actions and activities that support our research staff. Internal factors such as faculty restructuring, changing staff roles and departures, new strategic priorities, and the work arising from these, all impacted on the plan. Having the consistency of the Developing Excellent Researchers subcommittee however allowed us to meet these challenges more effectively. In developing our self-assessment report we adopted a pragmatic and open approach by being explicit in our narrative about the reality of supporting researcher development against the backdrop of a dynamic University environment. This had important consequences for our approach to the self-assessment which was treated as part of a process of continuous improvement rather than a more mechanical “tick box” exercise.

Developing the new Action Plan

In the design of our new action plan for the HR Excellence in Research Award we ran a number of focus groups for research staff to attend. The aim of these ‘Help Us to Help You’ events was to gather feedback and ideas for the future. Faculties also included ‘Help Us to Help You’ in researcher forums and working groups plus other Faculty meetings. We also drew on the CROS Survey results from 2015 and 2017.

In this way the draft action plan was, in the words of one of our Deans, ‘socialised’ and firmly based on feedback from research staff and those involved in supporting researchers.

The Action Plan was approved by the DER Subcommittee and signed off by URC. It is monitored by the DER Subcommittee as part of its ongoing work.

External Audit

The act of co-ordinating and capturing progress on the previous action plan, preparing our self-assessment report and developing a new action plan provided the motivation for reviewing our Developing Excellent Researchers agenda through reflection and discussion internally. Input from independent parties has also helped development of our offering and the opportunity for externally auditing our self-assessment report through the teleconference with Vitae and external peer review of our self-assessment by representatives from other Universities, have provided invaluable input for our forward plans. The questions asked in these external reviews were positively reflective and prompted further thinking that has allowed us to refine our plans considerably.

Lessons learned

- **Realism and practicality:** although we wanted to be ambitious in our new action plan, we needed to be realistic bearing in mind everything that is going on at the University. Also, some activities perceived to be ‘day to day’ e.g. induction, are of great value and shouldn’t be lost amongst more ‘exciting’ strategy work.
- **It is okay to try and fail:** A positive attitude to innovative practices is important and even if something hasn’t worked, it provides a valuable learning opportunity. ‘It is better to try than not to try at all’. People need to feel comfortable that they can attempt to implement innovative ideas even if they are not ultimately successful.

- **Change happens:** structures, people, objectives, projects, all change and the action plan isn't a fixed document so it needs to be flexible to accommodate change. This process is about continuous improvement.
- **Making connections:** Our actions take advantage of other activities that are happening therefore reducing duplication and increasing our ability to influence/collaborate.
- **Set SMART objectives:** It was a challenge to look back at our previous plan to establish what had been achieved where measures of success could not be easily codified or quantified. This can be obviated by setting SMART objectives.
- **Positive attitudes and expertise:** Research staff and others were prepared to give their time, expertise and contribute positively.
- **Importance of leadership:** Particularly from the Deans of Research & Innovation and Research Managers.
- **Coordination:** Identified, dedicated central support to guide and coordinate the process are essential to success.
- **Keeping it simple:** Not overcomplicating the process or content.

Summary

The HR Excellence in Research Award process has been invaluable as a reflective practice tool supporting continuous improvement. A reflective approach shifts the focus from achieving an "Award" (although that is good!), to honestly looking, learning and implementing change leading to ever-improving practice for the future.