

Case study

Institution

Nottingham Trent University (NTU)

Project title

Transforming organisational researcher management cultures at NTU

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A case study on how NTU utilised the Research Leadership Development Programme, a bespoke programme in collaboration with Advance HE, to support colleagues managing researchers, which resulted in organisational change in research culture.

Introduction

Why did the project start?

The Research Leadership Development Programme 2024 was initiated to support colleagues who manage researchers. NTU participated in the Culture, Employment and Development of Academic Researchers Survey ([CEDARS](#)) in 2021 and 2023. The evidence in 2023 indicated many researchers were managed by colleagues who were not themselves active researchers, and researchers highlighted specific issues related to people, environment and culture.

What were the project aims or objectives?

The programme focused on leadership in research teams, collaborative practices and change management in response to the changing requirements for REF2029, research income generation, and the shift to more collaborative and interdisciplinary research.

The approach focused on teamwork and collaboration. It addressed the challenges of contemporary research leadership and aimed to develop confident and inclusive leaders to build and sustain an effective research culture and environment.

Project approach

The programme ran for two days in March 2024. This was followed by a 90-minute Evaluation Focus Group in June 2024, which enabled participants to identify and reflect on how learning has been embedded. The programme was aligned to [the Vitae Researcher Development Framework](#) and the [Researcher Development Concordat](#), which as managers of researchers as a core group.

A key part of the approach was about identifying evidence of change in researcher development over time. What knowledge and understanding did the managers of researchers retain? How did the managers of researchers implement new ways of working? What changes in culture could be identified?

Key areas of development included in the Research Leadership Development Programme:

- essential leadership and team building skills
- managing performance and navigating difficult conversations
- supporting and leading change, from individual to team to organisation
- resilience and wellbeing, for all involved.

Through participating in the programme participants benefited from:

- the acquisition and understanding of a range of approaches, tools, skills and knowledge for leading research development and change
- greater confidence in engaging with, influencing and supporting colleagues within their School, across the organisation and external collaborations
- an enhanced awareness of strengths, both as individual leaders but also within the context of their teams and external partners
- a network of research leader peers at NTU with whom they can share practices, ideas and the probability for research collaboration
- an appreciation of how these approaches and techniques support professional development and the professional development of colleagues.

Outcomes

The programme worked in bringing together managers from different Schools who support researchers. Colleagues described the “*very useful*” value of networking with researchers and leaders from different Schools. It was a “*fantastic*” two days of “*time really well spent*.” One of the key successes was the value in this event for the colleagues who do not identify as researchers: “*The networking was brilliant because I am not a researcher.*”

There was clear evidence of positive impact on research leadership. One researcher identified the importance of reflection on values, beliefs and behaviours. Researchers highlighted aspects of emotional intelligence, including “*self-awareness*” and “*self-regulation*” through listening, to improve relationships with colleagues. This was enhanced through “*open and curious*” approaches to conversations with colleagues, especially in areas of tension.

There was evidence of impact on researcher collaboration, especially in research funding. Researchers described how the programme had supported grant research development and applications. Researcher development had supported decision making and relationships with colleagues, including developing team leadership toward grant submission. One researcher described lasting impact and “*better communication around research.*” There is a challenge to participate and then apply learning.

Challenges

Identifying colleagues who manage researchers was a key challenge. Human Resources provided a data set, including those colleagues on the NTU Teaching and Research Pathway and our contract researchers, identifying colleagues who manage those researchers. It was these colleagues who were invited to participate in the programme.

Some colleagues who did not identify as researchers thought the programme was not relevant. In some instances, colleagues developed new understandings about how participation in the programme supported management, leadership and relationships with colleagues.

Next steps

Both short and longer-term next steps have been identified, based on this case study evaluation.

1. Integration with NTU Researcher Network Events (2024-25)

Build on the existing collaboration with Human Resources, Finance and Research Strategy & Operations to create and deliver a specific series of events focused on Researcher Funded Project Management to address process improvement and relationship building during pre-award and post-award stages, particularly through costing, recruitment and planning.

2. Future Research Leadership Development Programme

Plan for the next programme on a two-year cycle, aligning with the 2025 CEDARS evidence base, including an enhanced focus on preparing participants for REF2029 requirements.

3. NTU Contract Researcher Conference (2025)

Redefine and refocus on contract researchers, organising and delivering a conference focused on research income generation and roles of contract researchers in large research funded projects. The conference objectives should address key questions: How can Research Assistants, Research Fellows, and Senior Research Fellows contribute to large-scale projects? How will contract researchers network with research leaders to advance their roles? How can diverse role models be offered to researchers at all stages of their careers?

4. Evaluation and Monitoring Enhancements

Develop additional follow-up mechanisms to assess the long-term impact of leadership training on researcher development and organisational culture. This should include strengthening evaluation by conducting focus groups and collecting more longitudinal data to track changes in leadership practices and culture across NTU Schools, Centres and research groups. This could focus on colleagues who have completed the Vice Chancellor's Future Research Leadership Programme.

5. Action Sets for Learning

Implement action-learning sets, modelled on Advance HE practices, to deepen understanding of team dynamics and researcher management and leadership roles. Consult researchers and experiment through NTU Researcher Network events.

6. Strengthen Pre-Award Processes

Collaborate with internal departments to improve research funding processes, focusing on the pre-award stages by providing additional training and tools to help research managers support grant applications more effectively.

7. Development of Resources and Networks

Expand and update online resources through Thrive, NTU's active learning experience platform, which is provided by [Thrive Learning](#), to support flexible learning and grant planning. Maintain and enhance networks of research leaders across NTU for collaboration, sharing practices, and fostering interdisciplinary approaches through facilitation.

8. Addressing Identified Challenges

Increase efforts to identify and engage colleagues managing researchers to ensure relevance and inclusivity by providing additional support to non-researcher managers to help them better understand the research environment and its processes.

9. Ongoing Collaboration with Advance HE

Continue the strategic partnership with Advance HE to refine programme content, including emotional intelligence and research culture modules. Conduct follow-up workshops through the NTU Researcher Network to embed learning and track progress.

10. Preparation for REF2029

Focus on aligning training and leadership development to the evolving needs of REF2029, ensuring NTU remains competitive and prepared. Engage research leaders in planning and decision-making to influence NTU's overall research strategy and culture.

These identified next steps ensure continuity, scalability, and sustainability of NTU's efforts to enhance research leadership and culture through the NTU Researcher Network and related programmes and projects.

Evaluation and monitoring

The approach to evaluation was based on the Evaluation Focus Group, three months after the two-day programme so that researcher development could be assessed.

Additional comments

General

The interactive programme was widely praised by participants, with one research manager describing it as "*very useful*" for networking across NTU departments. Colleagues valued the opportunity to share opinions on key issues and explore new approaches. Participants called the experience "*time well spent*", "*fantastic*," and "*a good two days*." The Evaluation Focus Group highlighted the importance of maintaining new connections

Non-researchers also benefited, noting the programme's relevance, particularly for networking and Senior Fellowship references. Some questioned its fit for non-researchers but acknowledged its value in bridging practice, scholarship, and research. This questioning of 'relevance' is a useful outcome itself, opening-up space for conversations about the importance of managers understanding research environments and processes to support researchers at different career stages. Additionally, participants identified project management training, including roadmaps, milestones and planning, as a critical need.

Research Leadership

A research manager highlighted the programme's lasting impact, emphasising its role in fostering opportunities to engage with multiple heads of department, who are leading researchers at NTU. This has resulted in "*better communication around research*." Another manager noted the programme's complementarity with the Vice Chancellor's Future Research Leadership Programme, with its unique focus on aspects of leadership. One participant expressed being "*very glad*" to have joined. However, a challenge was identified in applying the learning amid demanding workloads, requiring conscious effort to integrate insights into research leadership practices.

Participants valued reflecting on values and behaviours, particularly self-regulation and emotional intelligence, which were explored through deep listening. The emotional intelligence exercise was described as "*fantastic*", enhancing understanding of both personal emotions and those of postgraduate research students and colleagues. This exercise also improved self-awareness of strengths and capabilities. A manager reported adopting an "*open and curious*" conversational approach, informed by a new appreciation for the tensions and priorities of researchers.

Research Team Dynamics

A manager described the action learning set as a "*valuable*" and "*relevant*" exercise, noting its practicality in supporting the research agenda and enhancing leadership capabilities with colleagues. The programme played a pivotal role in strengthening NTU's research culture, enabling participants to reflect on how they and their teams contribute to this culture. It also facilitated discussions around appraisal and research leadership practices.

The action learning component was particularly effective in building confidence, especially for activities like conducting end-of-year reviews for researchers. The programme created space for self-reflection, with one manager emphasising its focus on small, deliberate steps toward "*positive social impact*" through participatory action research, bridging practice and research.

Additionally, a manager shared the experience of leading a writing retreat in India, culminating in co-authoring a research monograph. Another participant reflected on how the programme reinforced their personal connection to research, revisiting their PhD journey, presenting four international research papers, and contributing to a book chapter. They highlighted the importance of ensuring that Professors actively support their peers, whether by advocating for them or offering steadfast encouragement by fighting their corner.

Research Funding (Achievement)

A researcher manager shared that, after attending the programme, she successfully led a team to submit a grant application. One researcher noted submitting an £810,000 national and international grant proposal and publishing a paper as direct outcomes of the programme. Another manager highlighted its value in supporting a funding bid, noting, “*I know it added value, though it was hard to articulate.*” The programme also enabled a manager to make key decisions for a grant application, improving interactions with colleagues during the process.

Participants reported gaining leadership and research-related language, which one manager applied in consulting work and her first viva competition. A research leader emphasised the importance of the preparation work available through Thrive, which facilitated research planning for future grant applications, fostering confidence, collaboration, and research leadership roles.

Reflections

The project benefited from collaboration with the Pro Vice-Chancellor Research and International, Richard Emes, and the Associate Dean Research in Nottingham Business School, Jo Richardson, who contributed to the co-creation and co-delivery.

Professor Richard Emes described the strategic context at NTU:

“Research at NTU is a collaborative effort. Not only does it emerge from an increasingly interdisciplinary landscape, but it is enabled by a range of academics and professionals in supporting and managerial roles. Having a learning environment for managers of research is important in bringing a variety of voices into a focused conversation, to break down boundaries and to see how all of us can enrich our research people, culture and environment.”

As part of her reflection in co-writing this case study, Professor Jo Richardson said:

“Co-creating this programme with Advance HE led to action learning, during the two days, which transformed conversations. Managers and researchers could take a more holistic view of the environment, as well as a more authentic view of what it means to be a rounded academic driven by a passion for knowledge creation, societal impact and research-informed teaching for the benefit of our students and our communities.”

Fiona McKerlie, Head of Researcher Development, described the NTU ways of working:

“NTU is committed to supporting leadership development at all career stages, as outlined in its HR Excellence in Research Award [Action Plan](#). Through extensive engagement with research leaders, we identified a critical need to support managers of researchers who may not be active researchers themselves. Recognising this gap, our partnership with Advance HE provided a valuable platform to foster meaningful discussions about the specific expectations placed on managers within a research context. This collaboration has been instrumental in developing frameworks that guide decision-making and offering clear references to better support leaders of researchers.”

The Research Leadership Development Programme 2024 was a forward-thinking initiative to address the unique challenges of research leadership at NTU. It emerged from CEDARS survey insights, which highlighted a need to support managers of researchers, particularly those without direct research backgrounds. The programme fostered collaboration, self-reflection, and emotional intelligence, enabling participants to lead with confidence and inclusivity. By emphasising teamwork, grant development and research culture, it demonstrated tangible outcomes, such as improved communication and successful funding bids. The integration of action learning, peer networking and tailored resources provided a foundation for sustainable growth in research leadership, culture and collaboration at NTU.

The work was supported through an internal Enhancing Research Culture Investment Fund.

Role of Advance HE

Advance HE was the key strategic partner for the project. Neil Smyth briefed Advance HE on the purpose and priorities for NTU and Advance HE provided a proposal in December 2023. Following feedback and ideas from Richardson, and further online co-creation meetings with Smyth, Richardson and Advance HE, a revised proposal was agreed in January 2024.

The work benefited from collaborative ways of working in co-creation and co-delivery. Advance HE adapted the existing programme into a tailored proposal. The two-day programme was highly interactive and collaborative, and the evidence gathered in the focus group indicates this was valued by the colleagues who participated in the programme

The proposal focused on an in-person event for 30 participants, consisting of three modules delivered over two days, supported by online resources and independent study and reflection. The rationale was about building a community of research leaders and a culture of leadership across the organisation.

- **Module 1 – Collaborative research:** networking, building effective and diverse teams, identifying team roles and team dynamics. Emphasis is placed on increasing authenticity, inclusivity and confidence to enhance collaborative research opportunities and developing effective research teams and strategies.
- **Module 2 – Research teams:** project management, grants and funding, and articulating the research narrative. This module focused on coordinating research activity, project management, grants and funding. There was an action learning set to address the challenges of grant application, focused on research team leadership questions.
- **Module 3 – Organisation and culture:** emotional intelligence, strategy and planning, supporting change and contributing to team and organisational performance. This module focused on identifying what is research culture, why it is important and how research leaders can use their emotional intelligence to influence the cultural environment within their organisation and more widely across the sector.

The module also touched on likely changes across the sector, how leaders can anticipate these changes and the forthcoming REF2029.

Advance HE delivered interactive and engaging sessions, focused on working on challenges through facilitator input, group interaction, in-depth collaborative work and reflections.

Advance HE prepared self-directed individual activities (asynchronous) parts of the programme content. Materials were made available to colleagues at NTU through Thrive. Colleagues could complete session-related tasks in self-directed and flexible ways of working. This preliminary work included reading, reflection and documentation.

Advance HE delivered a one-day follow-up Evaluation Focus Group, enabling the facilitators and NTU partners to meet with participants to identify how learning has been embedded and to identify future steps for researcher development. An important part of this approach was about identifying researcher development over time.

The Advance HE Delivery Team included two Advance HE specialist research leadership staff, offering a mix of academic, strategic and practical expertise in research leadership.

CITATION

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