

# UCU AFRI Principles: improving the research process at Newcastle University

## Purpose

On June 6 2016 the Deputy Vice-Chancellor agreed that, in return for the UCU halting industrial action, management would withdraw the 'Raising the Bar' (RTB) terminology and the 'Research Expectations and Performance' documents (RIPE). Instead, both parties agreed to work together to 'develop a common understanding and collegial approach to improving research' – the Alternative Framework for Research Improvement (AFRI). In contrast to RTB, this is a bottom-up process, devolved to the unit level.

This document is produced by UCU Newcastle branch to aid Heads of School/Unit in working with their staff to produce local iterations of AFRI. It is also aimed at helping academics (UCU members and non-members) take an active role in this, as mandated by the June 6 agreement. It is based on scholarly evidence, the 2016 *Independent Review of the Research Excellence Framework* ('the Stern review'), Newcastle University's statutes and June 2016 agreement with the UCU, and statements and principles issued or endorsed by HEFCE.

This is not a document on governance. RTB indicated serious problems of top-down governance at Newcastle University, in particular the formulation of a programme which middle managers (heads of unit) who had the best sense of what would work were expected to implement but had no role in designing. That question (which was partially identified in the 2015 Report from the Working Group on Governance) needs tackling by the university as a whole, but is beyond the remit of this report. There are encouraging signs that the university as a whole is learning from the RTB experience.

Rather, this document is a statement of (1) foundations, (2) guiding principles and obligations, and (3) monitoring processes that the UCU will observe in working with managers to ensure the June 6<sup>th</sup> agreement is honoured. Appendix 1 contains a practical example of how 'Learning Communities' can be used by units to develop the research process and improve research at Newcastle University, and Appendix 2 is a suggestion about how AFRI can be reviewed for Equality and Diversity issues.

## 1) FOUNDATIONS

Newcastle University exists 'for the public benefit, to advance education, learning and research' (Statutes). The June 6 agreement recognised that in order to achieve this we need to be seen to be 'performing well' in key metric exercises such as the REF, however flawed and 'problematic' they are. To do this we need to 'improve' our research in a self-directed, reasonable and sustainable way.

Such improvement must not be pursued by a top-down outcomes-based performance management (OPBM) paradigm, of which RTB was an example. Extensive scholarly evidence finds that OBPM in public sector/education is flawed because it focuses people's efforts only on what is measured at the expense of other important areas, distorts workers' sense of purpose, leads to gaming the system, has adverse health and wellbeing effects, stunts innovation, and destroys the trust between managers and staff that is necessary for optimal performance (Lowe and Wilson, 2015). OPBM is an outmoded model, abandoned by progressive and leading global businesses: and Newcastle University is leading the way by abandoning it in the HE sector. The focus should be on supporting the research process rather than managing the research output.

The abandonment of RTB must not mean simply shifting management by metrics down to the unit level. It means a shift to a metrics-lite university where quantitative indicators act as a 'useful complement to other forms of evaluation and decision-making' in the research process, not the chief measure of academic value (HEFCE, 2015, *Report of the Independent Review of the Role of Metrics in Research Assessment and Management*).

Nor is this an easy way out or an excuse for laziness. It is a demanding process requiring bottom-up formulation of research process improvement plans and mutual accountability amongst scholars to deliver them.

## 2) KEY PRINCIPLES

We identify **ten** key principles derived from the June 6 agreement, HEFCE statements, and UK legislation that HOU, Deans and others should observe in working with their scholarly collectives to draw up local iterations of AFRI.

### 1) Bottom-up, not top-down

The June 6 agreement states that we 'encourage staff to participate in establishing' appropriate frameworks and that the process of drawing up AFRI is 'consultative and inclusive.' Plans for improving research cannot be simply written by Heads of Unit or deans, but should be a result of collegial discussion at the unit or sub-unit level (which HOU should initiate if they are not taking place already). The focus must not be on individuals, but on 'the collective level' of research groupings - recognising that these may look very different for different disciplines and within disciplines, and also may be interdisciplinary. This must not result in a bureaucratisation of these groupings, which will undermine attempts to improve research.

HOU should be required to evidence their engagement with staff and research students in the development of their (discipline specific) AFRI, and must distribute such plans for review, comment and collective approval by members of units affected.

In appendix 1, we provide an example of 'Learning Communities' being pioneered at Newcastle University's Business School as an alternative model of research improvement which HOU could encourage units to adopt. Various parts of the university are already formulating research clusters, groups and units along these lines.

### 2) Supportive environment

The June 6<sup>th</sup> agreement states "we want to work in a university that has an excellent reputation and can attract and retain the best people." RTB damaged the reputation of Newcastle University, and degraded the working environment by weakening the trust of staff in managers. Research improvement plans drawn up under AFRI must prioritise the rebuilding of Newcastle's reputation as a metrics-lite, supportive and collegial environment in which scholars are given the autonomy, resources and trust to work hard, innovate and be creative. These plans should include support for colleagues on temporary and Teaching and Research contracts.

As part of their AFRI submissions, heads of unit should set out how they will be proactive in establishing the resources, support and conducive culture that scholars and research groups tell them they need in order to improve research.

### 3) Emphasis on improvement not assessment

Energy must be rebalanced away from retrospective regrading of published research (through annual REF-readiness, internal or external quality assessments, etc) which is punitive, never as accurate as expert peer review, comes too late to improve publications, and which absorbs unnecessary amounts of resources. Rather, there should be greater emphasis on investing in improving research before completion and publication.

### 4) Non-coercive

Research improvement plans must be formulated to create, in the words of the June 6 agreement, 'a non-coercive culture and approach.' Plans for improving the research process must not be linked to threats to contractual changes, or other (formal or informal) penalties. Instead, scholars should be encouraged to develop their research autonomously in ways appropriate to them and their fields.

### 5) Output targets must not be central to performance management/research improvement

Some individuals may find it helpful to set personal goals for themselves such as publishing research in a certain timeframe, mastering a new body of scholarship during a sabbatical, learning a new human or technical skill for research, or applying for financial support from a research funder. However, given the problems associated with OBPM and the principle of non-coercion enshrined in the June 6 agreement, metrics or highly specific targets should not be used as a primary means for evaluating or managing academic and research staff as individuals.

### 6) Journal impact-factors should not be used as proxies of quality in processes of improving research

The authoritative 2012 San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA) – of which HEFCE is a signatory – recognises the limits and weaknesses of citation indexes and states that institutions must 'not use journal-based metrics, such as Journal Impact Factors, as a surrogate measure of the quality of individual research articles, [or] to assess an individual scientist's contributions.'

### 7) League tables are not to be used as substitutes for proper research improvement plans

HEFCE's 2015 *Report* concludes that national and international university league tables are problematic at many levels in their calculation, comparability and impacts. It is scathing of how 'Some HEIs effectively outsource crucial aspects of performance management to league table providers, by incorporating their rank position as a specific organisational target.' Post-RTB Newcastle University, striving to set best practice within the UK higher education sector, should no longer be amongst those HEIs. Therefore attaining a certain position in a league table ('benchmarking') should not be a goal for either units or the university as a whole.

### 8) Equality and Diversity Audited

The Equality Act (2010) legislates against discrimination based on the protected characteristics of age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion, sex, and sexual orientation. The new unit-level plans drawn up as part of the AFRI process must be subjected to appropriate and independent assessment. This is best done not at the unit level, but at the university level by a process agreed between the June 6 signatories (UCU and the Deputy Vice Chancellor) through the JNC. In appendix 2 we set out a proposed mechanism for undertaking this.

### 9) Long-term perspective

The Stern review identifies the creativity-stifling effects of 'short-termism' as a negative by-product of institutional pressure on researchers to match REF cycles. Performance in the REF is important, but heads of unit should recognise that both research and career cycles do not always match REF

and other audit cycles, and should support scholars and research groups in formulating long-term plans where appropriate. Thus these must take account of fractional working arrangements.

#### 10) Academic freedom

The Stern review observes that a major problem of the REF is that it leads to institutional pressure on academics to pursue 'safe' research that produces 'a steady stream of papers,' thereby 'discouraging innovative thinking and risk taking.' Addressing this, concludes Stern, is 'a priority.' Newcastle University's statutes enshrine academics' 'freedom within the law to question and test received wisdom, and to put forward new ideas and controversial or unpopular opinions, without placing themselves in jeopardy of losing their jobs or privileges.' Managers must not pressure individual researchers to pursue or avoid certain lines of research on non-academic grounds (such as grant availability, current trends, or REF cycles).

### 3) MONITORING PRINCIPLES

The UCU halted industrial action in June in good faith that management would adhere to the agreement. We will carefully monitor compliance with the agreement and work closely with the JNC to assist the university in the AFRI process.

We intend to respond actively if we feel that the June 6 agreement is being abrogated in letter or spirit to the detriment of our members, the cause of scholarship at Newcastle, and the university's local, national and international reputation.

Taking any issues on monitoring compliance forward involves a local committee decision, and then on its behalf the Vice President for Operations (currently Bruce Baker) will progress the matter. This role will include communicating with management and members, compiling regular assessments of the state of research culture at Newcastle University, and sharing best practice across the university. The VP will be supported by the Research Culture Working Group in this role.

Our aim is to work proactively with managers across the university to ensure a collegial and positive process of helping academics improve their research process and outcomes. If our members have concerns that the development of research culture in their unit is not progressing in accordance with the June 6 agreement and the principles set out in that document, they should contact Bruce Baker ([bruce.baker@ncl.ac.uk](mailto:bruce.baker@ncl.ac.uk)). We will encourage members to work initially within their collectives with their respective heads of unit to resolve issues in a collegial manner. Bruce will support and advise collectives in this process if requested; given the June 6 agreement, we are hopeful that this will be sufficient to resolve the majority of issues arising. We will support proactively any members that remain dissatisfied and feel that they have been disadvantaged or poorly treated in any way.

## APPENDIX 1: Learning Communities as mechanisms for research improvement within the AFRI framework

### Introduction

Over the last two years, researchers at Newcastle University Business School have been exploring whether Learning Communities can act as mechanisms to help improve the performance of staff who undertake complex work in complex environments.

The results from initial phases of this research have been presented to the Performance Management Association conference and longlisted for publication in a forthcoming special issue on Performance Management in the *International Journal of Operations and Production Management*.

Initial results show that Learning Communities positively impact on people's capacity to make difficult judgements in situations of complexity (Lowe, Wilson & Boobis 2016). We believe that they can act as practical models for unit-based plans to improve research processes as per AFRI.

## What is a Learning Community?

Learning Communities are groups of peers who want to improve their practice by reflecting on the complex judgements that they make, day in day out. They are means to purposefully generate a reflective 'Community of Practice' (Wenger 1998).

With support from ESRC Impact Accelerator Award, Newcastle University has developed and trailed Learning Communities in the following organisations:

- Fulfilling Lives Programme (£100m Big Lottery Fund Strategic Programme)
- NHS Clinical Networks
- County Durham Social Services (Dept of Education Transformation Programme)
- Ways to Wellness (Cabinet Office backed, Social Impact Bond programme)
- Cultural Spring (£3m Arts Council England Strategic Programme)

## How do Learning Communities work?

Learning Communities work because people are open and transparent about their practice. A Learning Community is a place of trust – where people trust their peers to give helpful, critical feedback on the questions they raise, and the doubts and uncertainties they have.

A Learning Community is a way to build a positive error culture (Gigerenzer 2014) – a work culture in which uncertainty and mistakes are viewed by everyone as an opportunity for learning and development. Learning Communities are therefore mechanisms to understand what quality and excellence means in areas of complex practice, and ways to support practitioners to improve their judgements in order to achieve quality.

## How do Learning Communities develop?

Learning Communities are designed by the people who take part. This is because each set of people need to find the way in which they can generate the environment in which they feel safe to talk about the difficult areas of their practice.

## Developing Learning Communities in Newcastle University

Newcastle University Business School has been successfully trialling a Learning Community as a mechanism to support and improvement academic practice around 'Impact' work. Following the success of this trial, Learning Communities could be rolled-out by interested departments/faculties who may wish to use it as a way to support improved academic practice in key areas, in particular research improvement/development.

Heads of Units can use the 'How to Develop Learning Communities' manual (to be launched in late November with ESRC funding support) to create Learning Communities within their own areas of practice. These groups are straightforward to establish, and can be self-governing mechanisms to enable authentic practice improvement conversations. The people charged with developing Learning

Communities can form an improvement support network within the University. The manual launch will be supported by a training programme. For more information on training programmes, the manual, and other support, please contact Louise Wilson, Network Delivery Manager, [lou.wilson@nhs.net](mailto:lou.wilson@nhs.net)

## Appendix 2: Proposed Process for Assessment and Management of Equality Law and Practice in regard to AFRI process.

1. The Equality Act (2010) (“the Act”) places highly insistent demands upon the University to ensure non-discrimination and to promote the inclusion of traditionally under included minorities.
2. Unfortunately, one limitation of this Act is its enforcement, which is almost entirely reactive. As such, it is possible for an institution to systematically fail to follow the principles of the Act without being called to account. Whilst the UCU is not stating that this is the case in the University, there is evidence of substantial deficits in the University’s approach: indeed, the (then) proposals for RTB can be properly described as an example of this.
3. Pursuant to the Public Sector Equality Duty (s.149) of the Act, the University is obliged to undertake a rigorous and thoughtful approach towards exploring the equality implications of any substantial policies and initiatives (or any active decision to retain the status quo). For instance, the development of a new curriculum would require extensive and competent investigation in respect of the potential implications for diversity with respect to each protected characteristic. Failure to fully meet the stringent requirements of s.149 would leave the policy or initiative in question subject to judicial review.
4. At the same time, there are other provisions in the Act which the University can contravene. Practices which seem innocuous could lead to liability for indirect discrimination under s.19 of the Act, if they were chosen inappropriately. As such, schools and units require the expertise to ensure that all decisions which can relate to Equality and Diversity are properly justified.
5. Whilst the University’s decision to have a Dean of Equality (together with Faculty-level Directors) is a positive step, this does not mean that the University has a robust enough process to ensure that the Act is always upheld.
6. As such, there is a need to ensure that there is review by a qualified and independent person in respect of the post-RTB AFRI process.
7. In the context of this Annex, a qualified and independent person is:
  - a. A qualified lawyer, i.e. a Barrister, Solicitor or a Member of the Chartered Institute of Legal Executives in good standing.
  - b. Has specific expertise and experience with respect to Equality Law.
  - c. Agreed to be appropriate by both the University and the UCU (i.e. either can veto an appointment).
8. All plans drawn up by the AFRI process should be reviewed by this individual.
9. The aforementioned process would give the University and the Newcastle UCU a strong reputation for equality, as well as ensuring (insofar as practical) that the framework of the Act is generally upheld. It would also ensure that the process is conducted by qualified professionals, rather than an additional workload given to Heads of Unit who may lack necessary expertise and time.

## References

Gigerenzer, G. (2014) *Risk Savvy: How to make good decisions*. Allen Lane

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Wenger, E. (1998) *Communities of Practice: Learning, meaning and identity*. Cambridge University Press