

PeopleInsight

What's it
really like to
work in HE?



Foreword

I am delighted to introduce *What's it **really** like to work in HE*, a new report commissioned by UCEA via People Insight to discover and understand, at a sector level, what employees value most about working in our sector, alongside priorities for further development. Whilst recognising the autonomy of HE institutions with varying employment policies and practices, the core offering of the employers in the sector is alike. This is in terms of the work HE institutions offer their staff and the opportunities for employees to contribute to their communities and the economy at large.

This report, alongside UCEA's updated Benefits of working in HE, helps inform the narrative for the sector's employee value proposition (EVP). This will be separate to the work that individual employers in the sector continue to deliver to establish their own EVP based on the feedback that their employees provide through their staff surveys. The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development's [Resourcing and Talent planning report 2022](#) highlight that besides pay, people want to work for organisations that are purposeful, inclusive, and support their wellbeing and offer career development opportunities. The HE sector offers just that as UCEA's latest Benefits of working report finds.

Across different sectors it is becoming more and more apparent that employees value different things from their employers and at different points in their career. HE employers, like other sectors, increasingly need to prioritise their strategies to account for differences in expectations of their diverse workforces, including the increasingly evident intergenerational differences in employee expectations, whilst continuing to spell out their core individual employment offering. We recognise this comes at a time of great challenge for leaders in HE, requiring demands on them to navigate extremely volatile financial conditions as well as other challenges, while supporting their staff. However, despite these challenges, there is much to celebrate about working in UK HE and we hope UCEA's resources, including our soon to be published Intersectional Pay Gaps in HE report, will help members to develop and celebrate their employment offering and to play an advocacy role for attracting people to work in our sector.

I am grateful to People Insight for their important work in this area with UCEA, and to members of UCEA's Employee experience reference group for their oversight of this work. And I hope this report is another piece in our jigsaw to help deliver UCEA's important strategic priority, supporting employer aspirations to enhance the employee experience.

Roshan Israni

Deputy Chief Executive, UCEA

Table of contents

Introduction	4
Employee engagement	5-6
Aspects of the HEI employee experience to nurture	7-10
1. Purpose-driven work	
2. Colleagues and teamwork	
3. The learning and working environment	
Aspects of the HEI employee experience to develop	11-15
1. Connection to senior leadership	
2. Workload	
3. Feeling valued	
Summary and moving forward	16-17

Introduction

People Insight is a dedicated employee research provider, partnering with a wide range of organisations to measure, understand and improve the employee experience. With over 50 Higher Education institutions (HEIs) as clients, including strong representation across Pre and Post 92 HEIs and Mission Groups institutions, People Insight has a wealth of knowledge of the sector and extensive HE survey benchmarks.

People Insight has been asked by UCEA to write this short report about what it is like working in Higher Education – to get underneath what employees value about working in the sector and to highlight some of the biggest opportunities for improvement. **The report draws on our HE sector benchmarks and how these compare with other sectors (based on People Insight data in August 2023).**



Employee engagement

Central to all of our employee surveys at People Insight is a measure of employee engagement. The employee engagement score provides an indicator of employees' emotional connection with their employer and a sense of how organisations are performing as employers. Where engagement is high, universities are creating the right conditions to enable their employees to thrive.

We find that generally, levels of engagement are slightly lower in Higher Education (HE) than in the private, public and not for profit sectors, with an average engagement score of 74% compared to 78% in the private sector and 76% in the public sector.

The engagement score is difficult to influence directly. So, alongside measuring current level of engagement, it is important to understand what is influencing it. Through additional analysis of the data, the "key drivers" of engagement are identified, and these vary between sectors and between organisations. Typically within HE, the key drivers of engagement include topics such as:



Learning and growth

Opportunities for skill development and career progression.



Perceptions of leadership

The belief that the HEI is being led effectively and that employees voices are heard.



Feeling valued




Employees feeling appreciated for their contribution and experiencing a sense of belonging.

What's it **really** like to work in HE?




This report provides further information about these important aspects of working within HE. It also highlights specific elements that employees find enjoyable and those that they find frustrating in the sector.

The report takes each of these topics in turn, as follows:

Aspects of the HEI employee experience to nurture:

-  Purpose-driven work
-  Colleagues and teamwork
-  The learning and working environment

Aspects of the HEI employee experience to develop:

-  Connection to senior leadership
-  Workload
-  Feeling valued



Aspects of the HEI employee experience to nurture

Purpose-driven work

Employees in HEIs are typically more passionate and driven at work than those elsewhere. 8 in 10 find their work interesting and challenging and a similar number get a sense of achievement from working at their HEI.

Employees value the intellectually stimulating environment they work in, with academics even more positive than professional services staff about the work itself which may encompass impactful research, critical thinking, and engagement with complex ideas. Many are passionate about the research they conduct in their respective fields, finding it fulfilling and appreciating the ability to explore specific topics or questions within their area of expertise.

The opportunity to teach and engage with diverse and passionate students is also a highlight. Academics enjoy working alongside students who share their passion and interest, and all employees take pride in having a positive impact on students' lives and careers. The rewarding experience of contributing to students' growth and development is evident across the sector.



What's it **really** like to work in HE?

More broadly, employees have the sense of making a positive impact through their work and a genuine interest in contributing to their respective disciplines, local communities and society as a whole. They have a strong personal connection to their area of expertise and a belief that their work matters which results in a strong alignment with the HEI's purpose and high levels of pride. This comes out strongly in feedback from employees who talk about the wider purpose of their work. There is pride in the contribution to new knowledge that benefits society, the opportunity to input life changing research and to educating future generations.

Employees enjoy the diversity of their roles which typically encompass a variety of tasks and projects to keep work engaging and stimulating. Freedom, flexibility and autonomy are commonplace and highly valued. 79% of HE employees say they have the freedom they need to get on with their job, which is in line with public sector employees. Employees value the opportunity to innovate and develop ideas, with the freedom to work independently and feel trusted by colleagues and managers. Hybrid working, flexibility in work hours and opportunities for remote work have made a big difference to many (particularly those in Professional Services), enabling employees to manage their work-life balance more effectively.

It is common to see that employees within the sector are passionate about the work they do and get high levels of personal satisfaction and fulfilment from doing meaningful work that supports student success.

79%

of HE employees say they have the freedom they need to get on with their job



What's it **really** like to work in HE?

Colleagues and teamwork

The relationships people have with the colleagues they work with is important and a key highlight of working in the HEI sector. More than 9 in 10 say they have good relationships with the colleagues they work with, and three quarters are confident that people help and support each other at work.

Employees regularly cite their colleagues and local teamwork as the most positive part of working within the HE sector, with many mentions of colleagues being friendly, supportive and kind. They feel that their workplace is characterised by a welcoming atmosphere where people genuinely care about each other.

There is a strong sense of camaraderie within local teams and positive interactions and relationships between employees contribute to a fulfilling work experience. Line managers are widely considered to be approachable, respectful, and considerate, with 84% of HE employees saying that their manager treats them fairly and with respect and three quarters agreeing that their line manager communicates effectively. Supportive line managers play a crucial role in fostering a positive and productive work environment.

As well as a collegiate atmosphere, it is one of mutual respect. Colleagues feel proud to work with esteemed peers and there is respect of each other's knowledge and experience, and the role everyone plays in creating a positive environment for students.

The relationship employees have with their immediate colleagues plays a key role in their motivation at work. Employees enjoy respectful, trusting relationships and feel supported in their roles.



The learning and working environment

Employees working in the sector are motivated by the opportunity to learn and grow at work.

55% of HE employees feel they can learn and grow at work which is similar to other sectors. In addition, employees in HE are more likely than those in the not for profit and public sector to feel that their job makes good use of their skills and abilities.

It is motivating for employees to feel they are using their skills to the full and that they have the opportunity for further growth and development. Employees in HEIs have access to various forms of training, courses, and learning resources, highlighting a commitment to their ongoing professional development. There is generally support from colleagues and managers for development, with managers often taking the time to coach and develop their employees. The opportunity to build their skills, attend internal training courses and to participate in mentoring schemes are all frequently cited by employees as positives of working in the sector.

Networking and collaboration opportunities are also highly valued – some employees have the opportunity to collaborate with experts in their field, attend conferences and build a network of colleagues and collaborators within and beyond their HEI.

Employees also regularly mention the opportunity to teach and research topics of personal interest and engaging with students on stimulating subjects. Teaching and interacting with bright students contribute to the personal growth of employees as well as students.

Universities prioritise advancing knowledge, research, and academic excellence, and so employees have expectations that there will be opportunities to expand their knowledge base. Whilst many training opportunities are available, more could be done to communicate these opportunities and to help employees (particularly Professional Services employees) to understand ways they could build their career.

Beyond direct learning opportunities, the campus environment is one which is highly valued. Many campuses are visually appealing with green spaces and attractive landscapes which contribute to a pleasant environment and support wellbeing. Access to cultural and recreational resources on campus enriches the employee experience, and employees appreciate that the investment in campus resources results in personal and professional growth.

The sector provides extensive opportunities for employees to use their skills to the full and employees have a desire to continue to grow and develop personally and professionally.

Aspects of the HEI employee experience to develop

Connection to senior leadership

Trust and confidence in leadership in HE is typically lower than elsewhere: 48% of employees in HEIs agree that they have confidence in their senior management team, compared to 63% in the private sector and 51% in the public sector.

Confidence(%) of employees in senior management team



Leadership style can be perceived as “command and control” with top-down decision-making, and a lack of inclusive and empathetic management practices. There are concerns about top-heavy leadership and unclear hierarchies which hinder productivity and effective communication.

Leaders play a crucial role in providing clarity of vision. When leaders provide employees with a clear vision, it articulates a destination and fosters a sense of purpose and direction among employees. A lack of clear vision, on the other hand, can result in a sense of uncertainty and frustration among employees, which can subsequently affect their quality of work as well as their level of motivation. In the HE sector, 49% believe that their senior team provides a clear vision of the overall direction of the HEI, which is slightly below the public sector and significantly below the private sector. Employees want to see a clear vision, translating into key priorities and a plan to achieve it but many feel there is a lack of communication about these priorities. There is a need for stronger top-down communication to drive the conversation and relay important information to employees in a timely manner, rather than assume that employees know what the HEI's priorities and plans are.

Just under half of HEI employees feel that senior leaders make an effort to listen to employees, compared to 55% in the public sector and 62% in the private sector. HE employees are also less likely than those in other sectors to feel that senior leaders are open and approachable (46% agree in HE compared to 64% across all sectors).

Confidence(%) of employees think senior leaders are open and approachable

46% HEI

64% all other sectors

Many employees report finding it difficult to reach or contact anyone “higher up the chain” and feel that senior leaders can be disconnected from their employees and students. As a result, leaders have a lack of awareness and understanding of what is happening on the ground, what employees’ concerns are and what they need from leaders. Thus, many employees shared their hope for leaders to be more open to listen to them and to act based on their feedback. By taking the time to listen to employees, leaders can not only more effectively manage their employees, they can also demonstrate that they care and value their employees voices and opinions, creating a people-first culture.

It must be acknowledged that this is report relates to a challenging time for the HE sector with industrial action and a marking and assessment boycott. This has undoubtedly influenced employees’ opinions.

Nevertheless, we know that perceptions of leadership have a strong influence on levels of employee engagement, so this is an important area for focus. We also know that during the pandemic, many leaders successfully established a more empathetic style of leadership which was very much appreciated by employees.

Some employees do provide positive feedback about their leaders in terms of their communication style and offering a supportive, respectful approach which employees find helpful and greatly appreciate. Having leaders that encourage open communication and are approachable contributes to a positive employee experience as employees feel listened to and feel able to share their concerns.

Senior leaders need to prioritise clearly communicating with their employees. As well as providing a clear narrative on the future direction of the HEI, there is a need to take time to listen to employees to understand the true employee experience.

Workload

Employees in the HE sector are less likely than others to feel their workload is reasonable (55% agree vs 64% across all sectors and 61% across the public sector), or that they can cope with the demands of their job without regularly working excessive hours. Only half of employees feel that they can meet the requirements of their job without regularly working excessive hours, and 59% feel they strike the right balance between their work and home life, compared to 66% across public sector employees and 70% in the not-for-profit sector.

Academics are more vocal than professional services staff about workload pressures, they often face heavy workloads due to teaching, research, administrative responsibilities, and other duties. Feedback includes comments that the volume of work can be overwhelming, and there is a danger that heavy workload and insufficient employees can lead to stress and burnout. Whilst academics often fare worst, workload pressures are not limited to this group. Concerns about high workload come from across the sector, with employees frequently mentioning concerns over their high workload and having to work beyond their contractual hours to get the work done. This negatively affects their ability to maintain a healthy work-life balance, resulting in less time for employees to rest and recharge after work or for personal relationships and activities that bring them joy and fulfilment.

Issues commonly cited include employee shortages due to positions not being filled, workload allocation models not accurately reflecting the time required for various tasks, and excessive bureaucracy. Excessive administrative tasks can add to the workload and detract from core responsibilities. Inefficient systems and processes can lead to unnecessary work and stress, making it difficult for employees to focus on core responsibilities. There are calls from employees within the sector for a reduction of workload, fewer administrative tasks, better planning, and realistic workload expectations.



What's it **really** like to work in HE?

On the other hand, the introduction of flexible and agile working has started to allow some HE employees to have greater control over their own work schedule, which many find helpful. This flexibility also allows employees to maintain a healthy work-life balance, to rest and recharge after work, and be able to attend to their other commitments and responsibilities outside of work, all of which have a positive impact on their wellbeing and job satisfaction. Work-life balance is especially enhanced when leaders encourage their employees to look after themselves and respect their time outside of work. In addition, when employees feel supported and well resourced, they feel more able to manage their workload and protect their work-life balance.

The demands on some employees within the sector are significant and there is a need to acknowledge and respond to concerns about workload.



Feeling valued

Feeling valued by the HEI often comes up as a key driver of engagement. This relates to whether employees are valued for who they are and what they bring to the HEI, whether they feel they are treated fairly and whether they feel recognised for the work they do.

Universities place a lot of focus on equality, diversity and inclusion, and employees' perceptions are generally similar in HE to other sectors. However, just over half of employees in HE feel that all employees have an equal opportunity to develop, compared to two-thirds of employees in other sectors. There is regular feedback from the sector that promotion criteria are too rigid, that external candidates are favoured and that there is a lack of career pathways within Professional Services.

Recognition also affects whether people feel valued. Just under six in ten employees say that they feel valued and recognised for the work that they do, which is slightly lower than the not for profit and public sectors. Generally, employees in HE feel that their managers are supportive and provide recognition, but there is less of a sense of wider recognition for hard work, and there is a perception that some projects and positions are celebrated more than others. This is compounded by the high workload and long hours that we see in the sector; employees feel that they are going "over and above" but that this is not appreciated.

Levels of pay can also influence whether employees feel valued. There are calls from within the sector to increase levels of pay and to ensure that pay rates reflect workload, qualifications and market rates. Employees perceptions of pay remain in line with those from most other sectors but fall below the public sector.

A simple 'Thank You' to recognise employees' effort can go a long way and help them feel appreciated for the work they do as well as act as a source of motivation to keep up the good work in the future. This sense of recognition can not only be encouraged by leaders, but peer-to-peer recognition as well. Moreover, a feeling of belonging within a welcoming and supportive community contributes to employees' sense of value, which is further reinforced by promoting mutual respect and appreciating individuals for their unique qualities.

All employees need to be valued and understand what they bring to the institution, regardless of their role. A short thank you can go a long way...

Summary

There are many reasons why working in HE is an interesting and fulfilling experience, and an exciting place to forge a career:

- The work itself can be **fulfilling and intellectually stimulating**, surrounded by experts with access to cutting edge research and the opportunity to engage in stimulating discussions.
- There are opportunities for employees to work **flexibly and autonomously** in many roles.
- Teamwork is strong, with employees working effectively with their immediate colleagues in a **supportive and respectful** work environment.
- There are opportunities for **personal and professional growth** with access to resources and opportunities for development.
- **Teaching and inspiring** students is one of the most fulfilling part of the role for many. Witnessing students' growth can be highly rewarding.
- Working in the sector provides a clear **sense of purpose** through contributing to the advancement of knowledge, supporting the skills development of the next generation and providing opportunities to contribute to local communities.

Moving forward

In order to make the sector an even more attractive proposition, focus should be given to the following areas:

Enhancing leadership connection:

Leaders play a pivotal role in fostering an environment of trust and productivity. To enhance connection to the senior leadership team, attention should be given to:

- Visible Leadership, communicating regularly and openly to keep employees informed about important decisions and how these link to strategic priorities.
- Active listening, encouraging leaders to authentically listen to employees concerns and to demonstrate that they are doing so.

What's it **really** like to work in HE?

- Facilitating open feedback channels to create opportunities for employees to share feedback, questions, and concerns.
- A more empathetic style of leadership demonstrating care for employees so that they feel valued and respected.

Addressing workload challenges:

Effective workload management is essential to maintaining a healthy and productive workforce. To address workload challenges, consideration should be given to:

- Reviewing workload allocation models, to ensure that workload is shared in a fair and equal way.
- Expanding the workforce where necessary to balance workloads.
- Streamlining administrative processes to remove barriers to efficiency at work.
- Continuing to prioritise wellbeing and to ensure sufficient resource and support is allocated to this.

Creating a culture of feeling valued:

Every member of employees should feel valued and appreciated. To achieve this, there is a need to:

- Consider different ways of recognising employees for their efforts and achievements, regardless of their role or background.
- Speak to employees to better understand what would make them feel valued.
- Demonstrate that employees feedback is valued and used to drive improvements.
- Ensure that fair treatment is promoted across the HEI with leaders serving as role models of fairness and respect.

PeopleInsight

People Insight marries leading edge survey technology with real expertise to bring you the most intuitive, actionable employee experience platform. Our knowledge is your power

www.peopleinsight.co.uk 