PeopleInsight

UCEA UNIVERSITIES & COLLEGES EMPLOYERS ASSOCIATION



# A Tale of Two Perspectives:

## *Bridging the Gap in HE EX*

# Foreword

**Professor Ken Sloan,** UCEA Employee Reference Group Chair, UCEA Board member, Chair of Guild HE, and Vice-Chancellor and CEO, Harper Adams University



Enhancing and developing the employee experience (EX) must be at the heart of our sector, particularly at this time which is marked with unprecedented challenges and disruptions we are all now facing.

As a Board member, I am delighted that the UCEA Strategic Plan - Facilitating transformational change, Enhancing the employee experience now locates EX as first in its list of strategic priorities. More recently, UCEA's Five-Pillar Action Plan has been released – this is evolving to respond to members' fast-changing needs. It takes forward work under UCEA's EX Five-Pillar programme of work, providing EX thought leadership, sharing and improving employment practices in the sector, and supporting our members as employers of choice. I believe that EX is a priority and developing EX discussions and communication in our rapidly changing world is key.

UCEA has encouraged, promoted, facilitated, and initiated work in and across HE institutions regarding the wider EX. Also, UCEA's symbiotic relationship with People Insight (PI) is an excellent extension of this. So, I am pleased to introduce PI's 'A Tale of Two Perspectives: Bridging the Gap in HE EX'. This new report, commissioned by UCEA via PI, follows the success and positive feedback from their previous report, What's it really like to work in HE. A dedicated employee research provider, PI shares UCEA's EX commitment and, involving 75 HEIs, provides an extensive sector-specific report.

The report examines how EX has evolved by comparing HE employee data across timeframes and between Professional Services (including Technical Services) staff and their Academic colleagues. PI's report is thorough and honest in its conclusion, based on sector-wide survey findings and case studies. In its conclusion, the report explains that while there have been notable improvements in certain areas over the last few

years, such as career development and work satisfaction, further targeted efforts are needed to ensure a more equitable and supportive working environment for all. I know this is something to which we are all committed.

I am grateful to PI for their important and progressive work in this area with UCEA. I am also proud of UCEA's EX reference group and their contribution to this work. Furthermore, I would like to congratulate Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU) for their EX work, Inspire HE ranking achievement, and I would like to thank them for agreeing to share this in a case study to accompany the report. MMU's 'approach to workplace excellence: An Inspire HE case study' fits hand in glove with the report.

The current challenges facing our sector only emphasise the importance of keeping EX at the heart of any employment provision and change. Understanding and improving the employee journey is key to successful enhancement, development and agility. I trust readers will benefit from this report and UCEA's wider selection of resources, but also share the creative ways that are developing to instil better belonging and connection with colleagues across our vast and dispersed sector. This is a challenging journey, but by focussing on EX we can make positive differences to the experiences of our students and the impact we have on them beyond their time with us.



# Contents

Introduction 5

The New Normal: Changes in the HE EX Since COVID 6-8

1. Sense of community
2. Career development
3. Cross-departmental collaboration

Exploring the Divide: Academic vs Professional Services Staff 9-16

1. Workload
2. Wellbeing and balance
3. Reward and recognition
4. Development and manager support
5. Work satisfaction

People Insight's Practical Recommendations for HEIs 17-18

1. Enhance cross-departmental collaboration
2. Support workload management
3. Strengthen wellbeing and work-life balance initiatives
4. Improve recognition and reward systems
5. Implement a continuous listening approach

Insights to Impact: Case studies from the HE sector 19-23

1. Case study #1: Manchester Metropolitan's approach to workplace excellence
2. Case study #2: Strengthening community and inclusion
3. Case study #3: Improving career development and recognition
4. Case study #4: Enhancing leadership communication

Conclusion 24

# Introduction

People Insight is a dedicated employee research provider, partnering with a wide range of organisations to measure, understand and improve the employee experience (EX). With more than 75 Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) as clients - and strong representation across pre- and post-92 HEIs and the Russell Group - People Insight brings a wealth of sector-specific knowledge and extensive HE survey benchmarks.

Following the success of our previous collaboration with UCEA, this new report continues our commitment to exploring the nuances of the employee experience in Higher Education (HE). However, with a slightly different focus this time, examining how the employee experience has evolved, by comparing HE employee data across timeframes and between Professional Services staff and their Academic colleagues. There are recent and current considerations in these comparisons.

This report combines our robust HE sector benchmarks with practical recommendations, providing timely guidance for HEIs looking to improve their workplace experience. Alongside these insights, we share case studies from HEIs actively addressing the challenges highlighted in the report. Together, these elements offer a clear, actionable roadmap for enhancing the employee experience in HE.

We also acknowledge the rapid evolution across the HE sector and the wide understanding that HE employers face unprecedented cost challenges. Recent increase in employer National Insurance (NI) contributions at the very least cancels out increases from the government's new tuition fees increase, while increases in employer TPS pension costs are impacting many HEIs. The sector's financial situation is central to the increasing prospect of restructuring across HE, but decisions affecting jobs are never taken lightly and HEIs have strong track records of handling staffing changes in an open and fair way after fully considering alternatives such as voluntary severance. But challenges surrounding this unwanted situation emphasise the importance of keeping EX at the heart of any employment provision and/or change. Understanding and improving the employee journey is key to successful change, development and agility. It is crucial for HR to be alert to changes in the broader economic and social context, as well as possessing the confidence and organisational awareness to identify the implications for organisations. Change is fundamentally about people and behaviour.

We recognise that the three EX areas identified below are impacted by the sector's challenges, but EX must continue to evolve at this critical time for the sector. EX considerations will need to be at the heart of any HE efficiency and transformation programmes to maximise the value and impact for HEIs.

# The New Normal: Changes in the HE EX Since COVID

Our survey data, which consists of over 400 HE all-employee surveys over the last 3 years and feedback from over 240,000 employees, reveals that the three areas with the most significant changes in employee experience are:



**Sense of community**



**Career development**



**Cross-departmental collaboration**

## 1. Sense of community

Camaraderie within teams has significantly improved among staff since the period of COVID-19. This is evident from the notable increase in staff who report feeling a strong sense of community in their teams post-COVID, with the percentage rising from 58% in 2020 to 68% in 2024. This improvement can be largely attributed to the partial return of staff to campus, as in-person interactions are proven to foster stronger bonds and facilitate more organic and meaningful connections among employees.

Universities, by their nature, provide a collaborative working environment where tasks such as lab work and research are more effectively conducted in person. Shared physical spaces like offices and breakout rooms naturally encourage relationship building, which is often challenging in remote settings.

### Successful practices from our partner universities:

**Encouraging greater on-campus presence**

- Leaders are setting higher expectations for employees' on-campus presence, particularly for Professional Services staff in some institutions.

**Increasing the volume of engagement activities**

- These include workshops, away days, staff awards, festivals and various social events and informal gatherings. Many of these activities were either cancelled or moved online during the pandemic, which diminished their impact significantly.

# 2. Career development

It is encouraging to see significant progress in meeting employees' career development aspirations, as reflected in a favourable score increase from 39% to 46%. While there is still room for further improvement (the all-sector average is 52%), this positive trend highlights meaningful strides in supporting professional growth.

The challenges posed by the pandemic, coupled with evolving working practices, appear to have spurred innovation in the design and delivery of learning and development opportunities. For some staff, enhanced access to vital physical resources such as libraries, research labs, and specialised equipment has likely been instrumental in enabling these advancements.

Additionally, the resurgence of face-to-face interactions through networking, mentoring, and line management conversations may have proven beneficial, with a more stable working environment allowing staff to focus more clearly on their professional development.

## Successful practices from our partner universities:

### Promoting opportunities more clearly

- A number of HEIs have made significant strides in providing clear information about career development opportunities and improving how these are communicated.
- Initiatives include a series of workshops on career development, focusing on identifying skills and career paths, writing applications, and preparing for interviews.
- Additionally, lunch-and-learn talks have been introduced to broaden colleagues' exposure to and understanding of different roles and teams across the institution.

### Providing additional support

- Universities have enhanced support for staff by offering work shadowing and mentoring opportunities, more clearly defining the skills required for each post and role and providing additional guidance to internal applicants to help them make a strong case for promotion.

### Creating career pathways for staff

- Institutions have developed clear outlines of the skills, behaviours, attributes and relationships required for staff to succeed and progress.
- Formal and transparent routes have been established for staff to be promoted to higher job grades upon achieving specific knowledge, skills and experience relevant to their current roles.

# 3. Cross-departmental collaboration

Despite improvements in the sense of community among staff, there has been a decline in the perception that different parts of the HE community work well together, dropping from 52% during COVID to 34% today. This is well below the all-sector average of 45%. This is separate to the related cross-institutional collaboration, an item high on the political and sector agenda.

Universities UK's Taskforce on Efficiency and Transformation in Higher Education is taking an 'all options on the table' approach to how - after years of working to reduce costs individually – universities can partner, collaborate and deliver transformation and cost savings through new models and ways of working.

Hybrid working arrangements, which are likely to vary across different departments, may be contributing to this issue, as conflicting schedules reduce opportunities for face-to-face interaction – essential for effective cross-departmental collaboration.

Additionally, the return to "business as usual" has led to the dismantling of collaboration structures that were specifically developed in response to COVID. These structures played a critical role in coordinating teams and fostering a sense of unity and shared purpose. By 2024, there has likely been a reversion to siloed working, exacerbated by the increased pressure and workload teams now face in the post-pandemic environment.

## Successful practices from our partner universities:

**Encouraging cross-team updates**

- HEIs are raising awareness about the work being done across different areas by encouraging teams to invite members from other departments to their meetings to share project updates and progress.

**Improving information sharing and signposting**

- Efforts are being made to enhance the dissemination of information about activities and developments across the university, while also improving clarity on who to contact for various services

**Establishing a shared calendar of events and networking opportunities**

- Universities are setting up shared calendars of activities and internal events relevant to staff across the institution, encouraging attendance, and facilitating networking sessions to help staff connect and build relationships.

**Emphasising goals and strengthening shared purpose**

- Institutions are continuously highlighting university goals and reinforcing a shared purpose by communicating university values and reminding staff how effective teamwork and individual contributions are essential to the university's overall success.

# Exploring the Divide: Academic vs Professional Services Staff

In addition to exploring changes in the overall HE employee experience, this report also highlights the most significant differences in perceptions between Academic and Professional Services staff. These disparities are particularly noticeable in the following areas:

1. Workload
2. Wellbeing and balance
3. Reward and recognition
4. Development and manager support
5. Work satisfaction

## 1. Workload

Discrepancies exist between Academic and Professional Services staff regarding their workload experience. Our data reveals that Academic staff are far less likely than their Professional Services counterparts to feel they can comfortably manage their workload (43% vs. 63%) or cope with job-related stress without it impacting their work.

**43%**

**43% of Academic staff feel like they can comfortably manage their workload**

**63% of Professional Services staff feel like they can comfortably manage their workload**

**63%**

This challenge is well-known within the sector, driven by various factors unique to academic roles. Academics face the pressures of teaching and mentoring students while simultaneously conducting and publishing research. The demanding nature of applying for research grants further adds to their workload. Moreover, academic workloads often peak at specific times of the year, such as the beginning of terms and during exam periods, intensifying these pressures.





## Successful practices from our partner universities:

### Investigating the causes

- Universities are exploring the root causes of excessive workload through staff focus groups and are reviewing how work is allocated and executed.

### Holding regular resourcing meetings

- These meetings are held to discuss current and upcoming workloads, enabling the identification and redistribution of high workloads as necessary.

### Offering training

- Universities are providing workshops and coaching on time management, task prioritisation, and maintaining mental health and wellbeing.

- Training is also offered to line managers to better support staff with their workload, along with specific training on key activities like marking and helping new staff manage heavy marking loads more efficiently.

### Enhancing and streamlining systems and processes

- Institutions are identifying ways to improve systems and processes within faculties and are collaborating with central directorates to co-design and streamline these improvements.

- Efforts are also being made to simplify access to online resources by removing duplicate and outdated documentation.

# 2. Wellbeing and balance

Given the specific challenges related to their workload, it is not surprising that Academic staff have less favourable views on their wellbeing and work-life balance compared to their Professional Services colleagues. This disparity is particularly evident in perceptions of whether the university adequately supports their health and wellbeing at work, with 44% of Academic staff agreeing, compared to 61% of Professional Services staff. Views of both groups are below the all-sector norm of 67%. Additionally, Academic staff are less likely than Professional Services staff to feel they can strike the right balance between work and home life (48% vs. 71%). This compares to the all-sector norm of 69%.

48%

**48% of Academic staff feel like they can strike the right balance between work and home life**

**71% of Professional Services staff feel like they can strike the right balance between work and home life**

71%

69%
all-sector norm

**When compared to 2021,** both Academic and Professional Services staff are now slightly less likely to agree that their university provides sufficient support for their health and wellbeing at work, with a 6-percentage point decrease for Academic staff and a 2-percentage point decrease for Professional Services staff.

Interestingly, while there has been no change in perceptions of work-life balance among Academic staff since 2021, **Professional Services staff report an improvement (+3 percentage points), likely due to the flexibility that allows many to work from home part of the week instead of being on campus every day.**

In recent years, staff expectations of employer support for health and wellbeing have increased. Growing awareness of mental health issues has heightened the demand for comprehensive support, which some universities may find challenging to fully meet. Moreover, the heightened stress and anxiety stemming from the pandemic, coupled with rising workload pressures and instability within the higher education sector, have likely contributed to the decline in satisfaction with health and wellbeing support.





## Successful practices from our partner universities:

### Promoting open communication and support

- Increasing opportunities for staff to discuss concerns with their line managers through initiatives like 'Open Door' sessions.
- Creating open dialogue about wellbeing, creating an environment where employees feel comfortable discussing issues, and ensuring that leaders and managers are approachable.
- Re-communicating university policies on special leave, family leave, and flexible working to support work-life balance, while keeping staff informed about available wellbeing resources.
- Encouraging team members to take their annual leave throughout the year to avoid burnout.

### Social and engagement activities

- Introducing a calendar of events and local engagement activities, such as wellbeing breakfasts, festive fun days, summer festivals, and staff listening events, to gather suggestions for improvement and foster a sense of community.
- Expanding opportunities for colleagues to socialise by offering a range of activities at different times and days to accommodate a broader cross-section of staff.

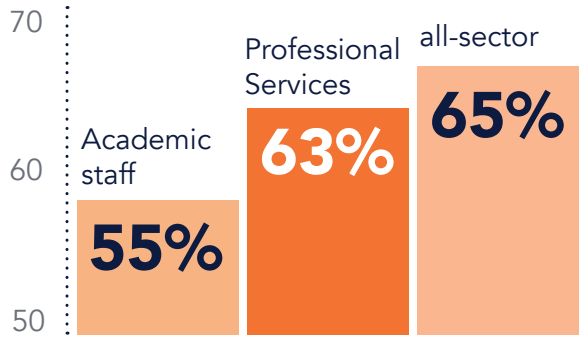
### Training and knowledge sharing

- Actively promoting mental health and wellbeing through team training sessions, sharing knowledge and resources, and facilitating open discussions within teams.
- Organising lunch-and-learn sessions on wellbeing topics, aimed at helping employees develop healthier work habits. Topics include nutrition, resilience and managing the challenges of a digital world.

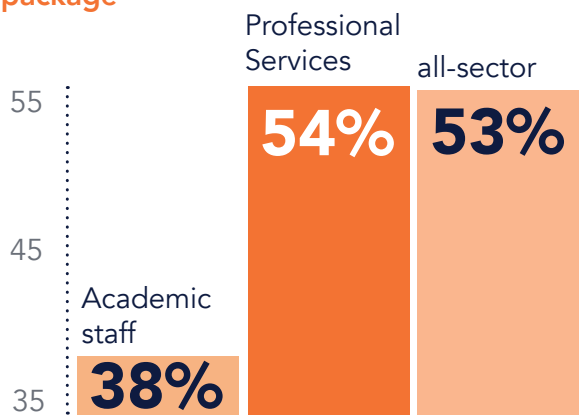
# 3. Reward and recognition

While there is room for improvement in reward and recognition across the board, it is evident that Academic staff hold less favourable views compared to their Professional Services colleagues. Our HEI benchmark data reveals that only 55% of Academic staff feel valued and recognised for their work, compared to 63% of Professional Services staff. This also sits below the all-sector norm of 65%. Additionally, Academic staff are less satisfied with their total benefits package, with only 38% expressing satisfaction compared to 54% of Professional Services staff. Whilst the level of satisfaction among Professional Services staff is in line with the all-sector norm of 53%, Academic staff sit 15 percentage points below it.

**I feel valued and recognised for the work I do**




**I am satisfied with the total benefit package**




Several factors contribute to this disparity, including high workloads, inadequate recognition systems, resource constraints, and perceptions of insufficient compensation for their efforts. All of which is likely to be compounded by external factors such as inflation and the rising cost-of-living.



## Successful practices from our partner universities:

### Implementing formal recognition programmes

- Regularly highlighting excellent performance and best practices in team meetings and all-staff communications.
- Celebrating staff achievements through faculty-wide emails and establishing awards for teaching excellence, service excellence, innovation and more.
- Introducing faculty prizes to recognise outstanding contributions across different areas.

### Adding a personal touch

- Creating an on-the-spot reward scheme that empowers managers to promptly acknowledge and reward positive behaviour.
- Sending personal letters or emails to congratulate staff on major successes, ensuring that achievements are recognised promptly.
- Organising an annual "Thank You" event where senior leaders personally express gratitude for outstanding work, reinforcing a culture of appreciation.

### Offering financial and tangible rewards

- Allocating local budgets to reward teams for their efforts, providing a direct financial incentive for collective exceptional performance.
- Offering vouchers or monetary recognition as rewards for excellent individual work, making sure that tangible rewards are part of the recognition system.

### Creating a recognition culture

- Training line managers in effective recognition practices, equipping them to more-readily spot valuable staff contributions.

### Continuously improving recognition through staff feedback

- Conducting focus groups and individual interviews to gather staff perspectives on recognition, identify areas for improvement, and collect actionable suggestions.
- Regularly reviewing and updating job descriptions to ensure they accurately reflect current responsibilities, helping staff feel their work is properly recognised.
- Reminding staff of the total benefits package provided by the university, reinforcing their value within the institution and ensuring they are aware of all the rewards available to them.

# 4. Development and manager support

Academic staff generally have less favourable views on development and manager support compared to their Professional Services counterparts. Only 58% of Academic staff feel they have received the training and development needed to perform their job effectively, in contrast to 65% of Professional Services staff, and the all-sector norm of 68%. Significant disparities also exist in perceptions of manager support, with Professional Services staff being more likely to agree that their manager provides regular feedback (69% vs. 57%) and takes the time to coach and develop their skills (60% vs. 51%).

**I have received adequate training and development to perform my job effectively**




Despite these differences, there have been some improvements since 2021. Both Academic and Professional Services staff are more likely to report receiving the necessary training and development, with a 3-percentage point increase for Academic staff and an 8-percentage point increase for Professional Services staff.

## Successful practices from our partner universities:

### Allotting time for development activities

- Scheduling dedicated time for professional development, ensuring staff can focus on personal growth, particularly in areas related to teaching and research.

### Supporting knowledge and skills development

- Creating workstreams that facilitate knowledge and skills development through shadowing, mentoring and coaching opportunities.
- Actively supporting and promoting enhanced development opportunities, consistently reminding staff of available resources.

### Developing management skills

- Designing and delivering a comprehensive 'Manager Series' focused on essential managerial skills and best practices, helping managers better support their teams.

### Supporting research and conference participation

- Encouraging research-active staff to attend conferences and initiate pilot projects, providing them with the necessary support and resources to advance their work and professional development.

# 5. Work satisfaction and a sense of achievement

In terms of work satisfaction and a sense of achievement, Academic staff generally report more favourable experiences compared to Professional Services staff. Academic staff are more likely to find their work interesting and challenging (87% vs. 77%) and to feel that their work provides them with a strong sense of personal achievement (80% vs. 74%). Perceptions of Academic staff also exceed other sectors, where on average 80% find their work interesting and challenging and 76% get a sense of achievement from their work.

**I find my work interesting and challenging**




There has been an overall improvement in perceptions of interesting and challenging work since 2021, with a notable 7-percentage point increase among Academic staff and a 3-percentage point rise for Professional Services staff. However, this widening gap suggests that while both groups are experiencing improvements, Academic staff are benefiting more significantly.

The central role of Academic staff in fulfilling a university's core mission of teaching and research is often more celebrated, whereas Professional Services roles are sometimes viewed as supportive functions, which can lead to less recognition and fewer defined career development opportunities.

## Successful practices from our partner universities:

### Providing Professional Services staff with access to academic content

- Offering access to academic content in areas of personal or professional interest to support the roles and growth of Professional Services staff.

### Shadowing opportunities

- Creating opportunities for Professional Services staff to shadow different teams within the university, fostering cross-departmental collaboration and a better understanding of various roles.

### Promoting external engagement

- Encouraging staff to participate in regional and national developments by attending conferences, workshops and networking events, where feasible, to broaden their professional horizons.

### Strategy and values engagement

- Organising strategy and values sessions to ensure all staff are aligned with the university's mission and goals, fostering a sense of purpose and belonging.

# People Insight's Practical Recommendations for HEIs

Based on these insights, HEIs have clear opportunities to enhance the employee experience. Given the trajectory of the HE employee experience post-COVID and the notable disparities between Academic and Professional Services staff, we have identified the top five areas where the sector can make meaningful improvements, along with our recommended practices for achieving them.

## 1. Enhance cross-departmental collaboration

To recapture the collaborative spirit that was more prevalent in 2020/2021, HEIs should:

- **Foster interdisciplinary projects (where appropriate):** Encourage the formation of interdisciplinary teams that include both Academic and Professional Services staff. This can be facilitated by clear communication of project goals and ensuring departments are aware of ongoing initiatives that impact staff across the board.

- **Facilitate regular cross-departmental communication:** Establish standardised cross-departmental channels of communication. These could include emails, meetings or forums where teams can share updates, discuss challenges, and celebrate successes.

## 2. Support workload management

Given the challenges around workload, particularly for Academic staff, HEIs can:

- **Offer targeted development:** Provide short sessions focused on effective time management, task prioritisation, and stress reduction techniques, specifically for those in demanding roles.

- **Approach resourcing proactively:** Schedule regular meetings to assess current and upcoming workloads, allowing teams to identify areas of strain and redistribute tasks to maintain balance and offer flexible work arrangements where possible to help manage peak periods.

## 3. Strengthen wellbeing and work-life balance Initiatives

To improve perceptions of wellbeing and balance, we recommend:

- **Launching/expanding wellbeing programmes:** Increase the visibility and accessibility of wellbeing programmes, ensuring they cater to the specific needs of both Academic and Professional Services staff.

- **Promoting a culture of open dialogue:** Encourage open discussions about wellbeing between staff and managers, supported by development for managers on how to handle these conversations effectively.

### 4. Improve recognition and reward systems

To address the gaps in reward and recognition, HEIs should:

- **Develop clear recognition programmes:** Establish clear, transparent recognition programmes that are accessible to both Academic and Professional Services staff. Include both formal and informal recognition within the overall approach.

- **Communicate total rewards continuously:** Regularly remind staff of the full range of benefits and rewards available to them, ensuring transparency and understanding of the value offered.

### 5. Implement a continuous listening approach

To effectively address the evolving needs of both Academic and Professional Services staff, it is crucial to establish a continuous listening strategy within the institution:

- **Regular employee surveys:** Conduct regular employee engagement surveys to capture real-time insights into staff perceptions, satisfaction, and areas for improvement. This continuous feedback loop allows HEIs to proactively address institution-specific issues as they arise.

- **Pulse surveys and focus groups:** Use pulse surveys and focus groups to delve deeper into granular issues, gaining a nuanced understanding of challenges and opportunities from different staff groups.

- **Benchmarking against sector norms:** Utilise benchmarking data to compare your institution's performance against sector norms, identifying where you lead and where you need to improve.

- **Data-driven decision making:** Leverage the insights gained from continuous listening to inform strategic decisions, ensuring that initiatives are aligned with the needs of your staff.

- **Custom action plans:** Develop tailored action plans based on survey results and feedback, prioritising initiatives that will have the most significant impact on employee experience and communicating progress to your staff along the way.

By implementing a continuous listening approach, HEIs can create a more responsive and adaptive work environment, ultimately leading to higher staff satisfaction, engagement and retention.



# Insights to Impact: Case studies from the HE sector

The following case studies showcase how universities have turned employee feedback into meaningful action, driving real improvements in career development, leadership communication and workplace inclusion. Unlike the tactical examples shared throughout this report, these anonymised stories provide a holistic view of institutions that have implemented strategic, university-wide initiatives based on survey insights. By sharing their journeys (including the challenges they faced, the actions they took and the measurable outcomes they achieved), these case studies offer valuable lessons for institutions looking to enhance their own employee experience.

## Case study #1: Manchester Metropolitan University's approach to workplace excellence

**Headline stats**

**70%**
participation rate

**80%**
engagement rate

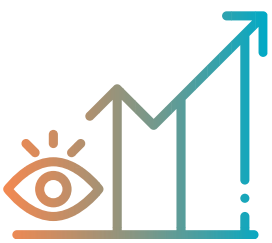
**11pp**
increase in the number of colleagues who would recommend Manchester Met as a place to work

### Number one for employee experience

In 2025, Manchester Metropolitan University (Manchester Met) achieved the prestigious top position in People Insight's Inspire HE rankings — a new rankings system designed to recognise and celebrate higher education institutions providing an outstanding employee experience through employee listening.

Manchester Met's number one position is a remarkable achievement, demonstrating their continuous commitment to improving levels of employee engagement, wellbeing and sense of belonging.

In this case study, we will look at the approach and some of the initiatives put in place by Manchester Met that contributed to their success, focusing on their strategic emphasis to employee experience and the impactful actions they have taken to create a great workplace for their employees.



## Following the 2022 survey, three key focus areas were identified:

- **Ways of working:** A focus on flexible / hybrid working, smarter working spaces and innovative tech solutions aimed at enhancing the work environment. This also incorporated process and system improvements including advancements in HR and finance and technologies that better support colleagues and students alike.

- **Reward, recognition and wellbeing:** The University is still continuously evolving its pay, benefits and recognition package, which also better promotes employee wellbeing and sustainability.

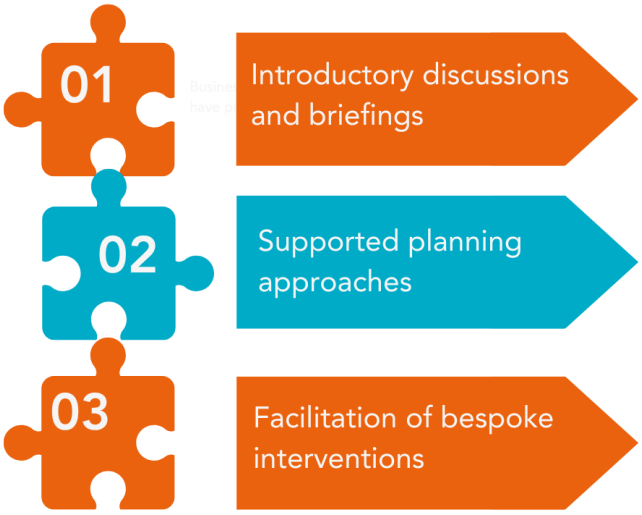
- **Connecting colleagues to the University's strategy:** Manchester Met developed wide ranging communications and engagement programmes for the launch and embedding of its education and research strategies, alongside a 'Great Place to Work' strategy. The University also worked on developing a compelling employee value proposition that aligns with its broader institutional goals.

By 2024, however, the University shifted to a more localised, leader/manager/team-driven model. This new approach emphasises collaboration, with leaders and managers working closely with their teams to co-create actionable plans and solutions that address their specific needs and challenges.

**With collaboration in mind, results were shared openly with all managers and leaders, creating an environment of transparency and trust. This open approach has empowered leaders to better understand their teams' needs, allowing them to collaboratively develop solutions that further improve the workplace environment.**

## A three-tiered approach to engagement

This approach enables and empowers leaders and managers, helping them to meaningfully engage with their teams, take action on what is within their control and influence, and create a collaborative environment where everyone works towards making their workplace a better place.



## Tangible results and impact

- **Increased survey participation:** Staff participation in the employee survey rose from an average of 43% in 2021 to 70% in 2024, an increase of 27 percentage points.
- **Enhanced engagement:** Employee engagement scores saw a significant rise, increasing by 6 percentage points from November 2022, to reach 80% in February 2024.
- **Improved advocacy:** The percentage of colleagues who would recommend Manchester Met as a place to work rose by 11 percentage points from November 2022 to February 2024.

**In addition to these internal improvements, Manchester Met has received significant industry recognition, including:**

- **People Insight Outstanding Workplace 2024**
- **Recognised as overall gold under the Teaching Excellence Framework 2023**
- **Outstanding for student experience in National Student Survey (NSS) results**
- **Improved performances** across several major ranking lists, including the Guardian's Best University rankings, the 'Most Improved in the UK' award in QS 2025 rankings and **a 29-place climb to 10th** in University Compare rankings
- Identified as a leading modern university for both the quality and power of its research in **the Research Excellence Framework***
- **People recognition** through awards such as UHR winners, CIPD and Greater Manchester Good Employment Charter finalists, and various EDI recognition awards

## Key takeaways for HEIs

**Manchester Met's approach to enhancing the employee experience provides several valuable lessons for other higher education institutions:**

- **Transparent communication:** Sharing results and actions with employees and linking those actions directly to employee feedback has proven effective in increasing trust and belief that feedback will lead to meaningful change.
- **Empowering local managers:** Providing data, resources, and flexible and tailored support packages has enabled local managers to take meaningful action in collaboration with their teams, fostering a sense of ownership and accountability.
- **Engaging senior leadership:** Involving senior leadership from the outset is essential for driving institutional change and building trust across the organisation.
- **Aligning initiatives with institutional strategy and success:** Investing in initiatives that connect employee experience with the broader goals of the university ensures that improvements in employee engagement directly contribute to the institution's success.

*The Research Excellence Framework (REF) is the UK's system for assessing the quality and impact of research conducted by higher education institutions.

## Case study #2: Strengthening community and inclusion at a Post-1992 Institution

Following their 2023 survey, this post-1992 HEI committed to fostering a stronger sense of community and enhancing staff engagement. A range of strategic initiatives were implemented to achieve this goal, including:

- **An annual staff engagement event:** A marketplace-style event was introduced to showcase staff benefits, rewards, Equality, Diversity and Inclusion initiatives, wellbeing resources, career development opportunities and more, creating opportunities for connection and collaboration.

- **Enhanced leadership visibility and communication:** Senior leaders increased their presence at in-person events to demonstrate support and engagement, while communication channels were strengthened through initiatives such as Provost-led town halls meetings/focus groups for all staff.

- **Inclusion initiatives:** The University expanded its diversity networks, promoted allyship and appointed a Head of Inclusion to lead and drive forward its inclusion strategy.

**As a result of these initiatives, the 2024 staff survey recorded significant improvements in key areas, including senior leadership communication, perceptions of fairness, workplace culture, and advocacy for the University as an employer.**

**Additionally, the University achieved its highest-ever ranking in the Times and Sunday Times Good University Guide, rising 41 places between 2021 and 2024 – an achievement reflecting its broader institutional progress and commitment to excellence.**

## Case study #3: Improving career development and recognition at a Russell Group University

After conducting their first all-staff survey in several years, this HEI was eager to take meaningful action to enhance the employee experience in the areas of **career development and recognition.**

- **Career development:** The Institution committed to expanding access to learning and career progression opportunities. This included offering confidential career coaching, a dedicated hub of career resources, and a series of online webinars designed to help staff grow their careers. Additionally, a leadership masterclass was introduced for those aspiring to senior roles, alongside new learning pathways focused on management development.

- **Recognition:** A renewed focus was placed on celebrating and rewarding all staff fairly, regardless of role. The Institution collaborated closely with Unions to enhance employee benefits, provide additional childcare support and to offer discounts across a variety of retailers and services.

**18 months after the initial survey, a pulse check revealed significant improvements. Employees reported greater access to career development opportunities, increased opportunities for learning and growth, and higher satisfaction with pay and recognition. Every related survey metric improved by at least 5 percentage points, demonstrating the impact of these targeted actions.**

## Case study #4: Enhancing leadership communication at a Post-1992 Institution

Following their 2023 engagement survey, this post-1992 Institution prioritised strengthening communication between leadership and staff. Their goal was to improve executive leadership visibility and establish more effective two-way communication channels, ensuring that staff could voice their suggestions and concerns directly to senior leadership.

**To achieve this, the Institution implemented several key initiatives including:**

- **Regular feedback loops:** Structured mechanisms were introduced to capture staff input and ensure their voices were acknowledged and acted upon.
- **Increased leadership engagement:** Senior leaders actively participated in open forums, town halls, and transparent communication efforts, fostering a culture of accessibility and openness.

**As a result of these efforts, the 2024 engagement survey showed significant improvements. Staff reported greater confidence in the Executive Leadership Team's openness in communication, and there was a marked increase in agreement that it was safe to speak up and challenge existing practices. These actions highlight the impact of intentional leadership engagement in fostering a more communicative and inclusive institutional culture.**



# Conclusion

The findings of this report underscore the ongoing challenges and opportunities within HEIs as they strive to enhance the employee experience across both Academic and Professional Services staff. The data from our surveys highlight significant disparities in areas such as workload management, wellbeing, reward and recognition, and support for development, particularly between these two groups of staff. While there have been notable improvements in certain areas over the last few years, such as career development and work satisfaction, further targeted efforts are needed to ensure a more equitable and supportive working environment for all.

To address these challenges, HEIs must take a brave and proactive approach, implementing new strategies that foster cross-departmental collaboration, support workload management, and enhance wellbeing initiatives. Additionally, it is crucial to develop clear and transparent recognition programmes, invest in skills development, and promote continuous learning. By aligning these efforts with the institution's overall mission and values, HEIs can create a more engaged, motivated, and high-performing workforce.

To ensure our sector thrives as a collective, it is essential to adopt a collaborative inter-institutional approach to sharing good practice. By openly exchanging both successes and potential challenges, the sector can collectively maximise its potential to be a hub for top talent and drive excellence in the workforce.

Long term, adopting a continuous listening approach will be key to sustaining these improvements. Regularly gathering and acting on feedback will enable institutions to remain responsive to the evolving needs of their staff, ensuring that initiatives are relevant and impactful. By committing to these practices, HEIs can build a more cohesive and supportive work environment that not only attracts and retains top talent but also empowers all staff to contribute meaningfully to the institution's success.





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