NON-TRADITIONAL, BUT EXTREMELY POWERFUL

As a research developer at the Glasgow School of Art, Dr Alison Hay has a unique perspective on how best to work with arts and humanities researchers, as well as non-traditional researchers more broadly, to draw out their highly valuable skills

MANY of our staff, and I suspect this to be true across other arts institutions, have a non-traditional route into academia: the linear undergraduate-PhD-postdoc-first academic position route isn't really the path many arts researchers go down. They've pursued – and very often excelled in – career paths outside of higher education and later been drawn back in once more.

At our institution we have a diverse cohort of staff, some of whom have followed that traditional researcher career path and some who have not. In the latter category, we are lucky enough to have architects who have designed iconic buildings globally but re-entered academia to give something back; designers with a track record in industry and impressive client lists; award-winning fine art practitioners … incredibly talented people, held in high esteem professionally, now looking to find their way in an environment totally alien to them.

And it's alien to them in many ways, not least of which is negotiating the research landscape. The acronyms alone are baffling to many: AHRC, REF, JoR, SFC – the list is endless.

The switch from working for clients to working in the public sector, where research councils and charities become the clients, is a massive change. Learning what counts as quality in the context of research rather than in the professional world can often be very disheartening to those with esteemed reputations gained elsewhere. However, I have found that there are some approaches that research managers and administrators can take to help our non-traditional researchers not only navigate the change, but shine in their new roles.
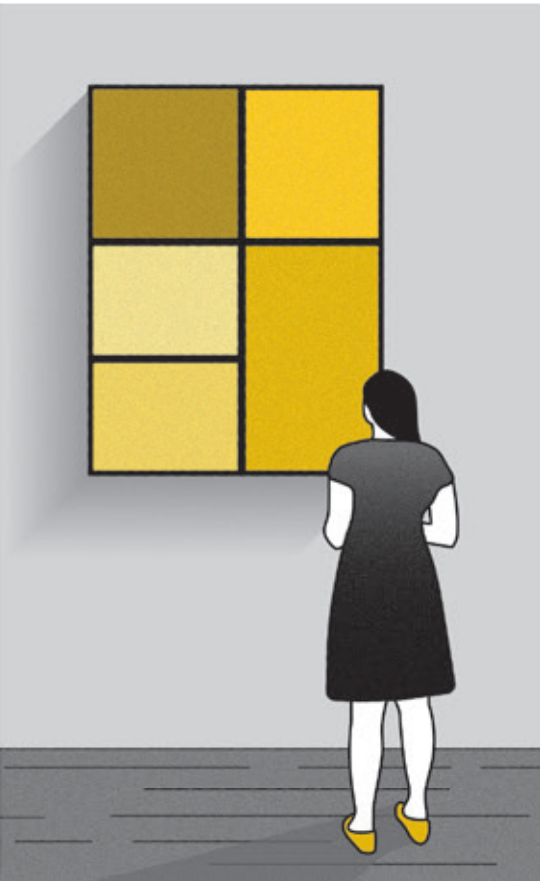
3 KEY ELEMENTS FOR MANAGING NON-TRADITIONAL RESEARCHERS

A good research management team needs to come up with strategies and tools that can capitalise on existing strengths:

DON'T THROW THE BABY AWAY WITH THE BATH WATER.

Many staff joining us from outside of the academy often feel their previous experience doesn't count. It does, and in one area especially: impact. Whilst traditional academics have struggled to find ways of engaging the outside world, here are a breed of researchers with readymade networks and knowledge that can be harnessed to great effect. That architect who just redesigned half of Moscow's city centre? He can make a huge contribution to priority research areas such as urban living, bringing not just his expertise but international networks and collaborators to UK research projects. A traditional researcher would need to invest significant time in building up that network for routes to impact: your non-traditional researcher very often has this readymade, but its value goes unrealised. Which neatly gives rise to...

TRANSLATION.

A major area my colleagues and I address is translating the world of research – explaining what research in a practice-based context looks like and finding common ground between what researchers want to pursue with what the institution and funding councils are looking for. One technique we have used successfully is our annual two-day research bootcamp, which seeks to take staff away from everyday distractions and focus solely on research. We start by focusing on the individual – the skills they have and the pressures they may be under. From that emerges a research idea that meets their skill set, their connections and their motivations whilst still being in keeping with what research in an academic context is and who it is for. This has been one of our most useful tools for this group of researchers.

TIME, TIME, TIME.

Another significant factor in our research environment is our staff is very often on permanent but fractional contracts – portfolio careers, if you will. This makes sense for teaching: keeping their hand in the professional world or continuing to undertake practice-based commissions keeps their teaching fresh and relevant. However, it means time for research, and for engaging with our research office, is extremely limited and precious. Glasgow School of Art previously had part-time research developers embedded in its Schools, but this structure did not work for the high degree of fractional staff: income and outputs were low, and not always of the required quality. Now, my colleagues and I are centrally based and full time, meaning we are flexible and responsive to their schedules. Moreover, their income has increased, and we have assisted many fractional researchers in mapping out their research trajectories.

PEOPLE-CENTRED MANAGEMENT

Whilst I have focused on three key elements applicable to the management of arts and humanities researchers, I imagine these principles would also hold in fields such as social work, medicine or law, where such researchers may also have a foothold in both professional and academic worlds.

Key to successful research management of such researchers, regardless of academic discipline, is playing to their strengths, increasing their confidence and providing a smooth path for transitioning into their new career path where possible. Initially, it's not about making them learn all the funders' rules for grant making or the high-ranking journal titles they should be targeting: it's more multifaceted – it's about truly knowing your researchers as people and what makes them tick and where their place in research lies. The rest can come later.

But a good glossary of acronyms is helpful in the meantime.

PROFILE

DR ALISON HAY is a research developer at the Glasgow School of Art. She has eight years of experience in research management in the Scottish higher education sector and has experience in researcher training, grant development, research ethics, contract negotiation and much more. She holds a PhD in Medicinal Chemistry – and no arts qualifications.