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# REC HURDLE:

## Revisiting Employment Contracts: Helping Underrepresented Researchers to Develop, Lead and Excel

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### Project Aims

- Design and operationalise individual & institutional approaches to reduce the extent and impact of precarity across the University of Nottingham.
- Focus on the impact on professional development, and the disproportionate impact on minoritised groups.

### Institutional Context

- Sector-wide financial difficulties leading to institutional downsizing
- Organisational restructures and voluntary redundancies
- Significant changes to administrative platforms and processes

## Institutional Approaches

### Data Analysis

**Reviewed use and impacts of fixed-term contracts (FTCs) for all research staff:**

- 29.94% fixed-term, 60.80% permanent contracts, 9.26% permanent with underlying funding
- Staff are more likely to be employed on FTCs if female, non-white, or aged below 35.

**Staff experiences of FTCs reported through focus groups:**

- emotionally and financially destabilising
- pressure to overperform to secure future employment
- reduced development opportunities due to short contract durations or lack of investment from managers.
- repeatedly recruiting and onboarding staff on FTCs leads to significant administrative workload and hindering team continuity.

### Benchmarking

**Scoped and shared sector-wide examples of existing good practice and evaluated them for transferability/scaling.** 8 categories were identified.

|                        |                                                                  |
|------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Bridging</b>        | Practices linked to bridge & continuation funding,               |
| <b>Collaboration</b>   | Practices to improve collaboration across organisations          |
| <b>Contracts</b>       | Practices linked to the contractual status of researchers.       |
| <b>Development</b>     | Practices linked to the development of researchers               |
| <b>EDI initiatives</b> | Practices or ideas focusing on improving EDI                     |
| <b>Funding</b>         | Practices based on how researchers are funded                    |
| <b>HR Practices</b>    | Practices linked to HR processes such as recruitment and culture |
| <b>Pooling</b>         | Practices pooling of research staff resource.                    |

### Researcher Transition Support Pilot

**Co-created a pilot model to reduce precarious employment in research roles - a live and up-to-date database of upcoming employment opportunities, collating university-wide grant applications at pre-submission, submitted, and funded stages.**

- Improved early visibility of roles reduces uncertainty around future employment and enables researchers to make more informed career decisions.
- Enhanced equity of access to information about upcoming opportunities across all research staff, supporting transparent routes into new positions.
- For Principal Investigators, the pilot offers a structured mechanism for identifying and engaging with research staff whose expertise aligns with future project needs.

## Individual Approaches

### Careers & Employability Support

**Specialist 1-to-1 careers advice, mentoring and development opportunities, and career confidence and skills workshops.**

Evidenced positive personal and professional change relating to participation in these activities.

**Established a peer mentoring scheme for PRISMs.**

Mainstreamed University mentoring provision for Professional Research Investment and Strategy Managers (PRISMs), providing ongoing tailored support within business-as-usual institutional mentoring beyond the REC HURDLE project.

**24/7 online co-created careers resources for researchers.**

A dedicated careers webpage for research staff, collating University and external resources.

### Bespoke Professional Development Scheme for Minoritised Groups

**Individualised professional development support for under-represented researcher staff across career stages and job families, including 1-to-1 guidance, coaching, mentoring, and funding for bespoke development.**

Activities included training courses, part-time study, placements and secondments.

**Achievements documented by external, internal and participant community evaluation:**

- Enabling personal and professional change at an individual level;
- Improving participant empowerment and agency;
- Providing authentic insights into lived experiences of minoritised staff, barriers faced, and support needed;
- Measurable step changes in participant’s careers (awards, funding, publications);
- Sense of community, support and hope – provided a narrative change for participants;
- Bespoke flexibility was the programme’s greatest asset;
- Without exception, the most valued programme element was the freedom to direct one’s own development fund;
- Confidence was the single most universally reported outcome.

**Participants identified three key mechanisms leading to improvements in confidence:**

1. Affirmative Trust - being told ‘yes’.
2. Social Mirroring, seeing yourself in others who are succeeding
3. Competence Accumulation, skills building on each other

## Sector-Wide Approaches

### Research Precarity Working Group

**Established a national grass-roots collective to catalyse collaborative action combating precarious employment at a national scale.**

Many members are themselves precariously employed, adding practical difficulties in continuity, and significant emotional labour.

- Over 100 members within one year of launch.
- Created an evidence bank coordinating ongoing initiatives, data, literature, evaluation, policy documents, and learnings.
- Roadmap for engagement with policy-makers, funders and HEIs as a collective to drive change.



Join the  
Research  
Precarity  
Working  
Group

### Reflections on Culture Change

**Cross-Departmental:**

Project team included from academic, HR and research professional staff: This has improved cross-departmental collaboration, allowed departments to learn from one another, aided in avoiding unintended consequences of project initiatives, and led to research staff involvement in policy and data improvements beyond the project.

**Cross-Institutional:**

Practical difficulties in driving change, and a lack of parity, due to localised policies, processes and data collection. Emergent collaborations and coordinated collective action required for opportunities to create lasting positive change with scarce resources and support one another.