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Efficiency as a strategic enabler at Edinburgh Napier University

Lindsay Ramage, Head of Research Governance, Edinburgh Napier University, discusses the success of the introduction of Worktribe to manage the ethical review process for research projects.

This time last year, Sheffield Hallam University's Richard Calvert wrote a post on the AHUA blog about reframing efficiency in the context of higher education.

He concluded that "Understanding efficiency… as a strategic enabler rather than a periodic cost-cutting exercise, requires a shift in mindset. It needs clarity of purpose and strategic direction".

It struck a chord with me, as I've spent many years taking on the multifaceted efficiency challenges of research administration and encouraging academics and administrators to see the positive benefits of collaborative systems in their everyday work.

Since 2015, I've been working on a strategic project at Edinburgh Napier with an ambition to improve processes

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and performance by managing as much of the research lifecycle as possible in one place.

And year by year, we are moving closer to achieving this. Now, much of our research administration is managed online on our chosen software platform, Worktribe. This includes pre-award and post-award management, research project costing, research outputs, impact capture, academic and researcher profiles, research ethics and REF submission management.

We're striving towards efficiency, but in a much broader sense. It's not just about saving time and money, it's about improving processes and having accurate, accessible and auditable data about our research, all in one place. It's about being able to make strategic decisions that will help us actively respond to an ever complex and fast-changing environment.

As anyone who works in higher education knows, implementing change isn't always easy or popular, and we've had many challenges to tackle so far in pursuit of our goal. We've tackled HR and finance system integrations, transitioning away from legacy systems while at the same time the sector has been faced with the need to tighten budgets, which affected our resourcing to deliver our ambitions. Engaging the academic community in change projects is often a challenge – their primary focus is usually teaching and research and getting their valuable buy in and feedback on 'administrative' systems and processes is essential to any research change project.

Streamlining the ethical review process

In this blog, I'd like to share the success of our latest endeavour: to introduce the ability to manage the ethical review process for research projects as part of our research management system.

Like many institutions, we have numerous ethics committees across the institution, and each of these committees had their own processes, requirements and approvals procedures all of which were managed and stored at the local level. Not only was this confusing,

especially when projects included collaboration between schools, but it meant that it was difficult to report centrally due to the inconsistencies across the university.

There were three main drivers for us to incorporate ethical review into our research management system:

To have a better way to record the ethical review process, to systematically audit and review what we were doing and report to senior management.

To move away from the delays and inefficiency of paper-based systems.
To be able to confidently respond to increased external scrutiny and potentially more external reporting requirements on ethics and integrity.

As we had everything else as a one-stop shop in Worktribe, we were keen to add on functionality to manage ethical reviews, something that was still in development at that time.

We became one of the early adopters of Worktribe's ethics management product in early 2020. The shared ambition was to create a product to streamline the ethical review process that was based on sector best practice and could be used by institutions across the UK. It would be used by academics, professional services and research teams alike and would not only speed up ethical approvals for research projects, but also ensure compliance and reduce risks as part of the research project lifecycle.

Being part of the Early Adopter Programme meant that together, we were also able to help shape the product by providing ongoing feedback.

This approach relied on a strong relationship of honesty and transparency in order to quickly arrive at a product that was very simple to implement on the existing platform, having essential features and knowing that these would be continuously improved – meaning value was realised more quickly.

After a few rounds of development based on user testing feedback at Edinburgh Napier and the other early adopter

universities, we went live with Worktribe Ethics in two academic schools in June 2020.

Realising efficiency in the broader sense

We are already seeing the benefits of roll-out: academics complete their ethics applications online and the approvals process is much more efficient. All data and evidence are recorded, and can be linked with project records, meaning that we can report more easily across the research lifecycle.

Since our initial implementation, we have 291 University applications in Worktribe. All seven University ethics committees are now using the system. We now have enough ethics data in the system to allow strategic reporting and auditing in a way which was not possible before.

Importantly, we're now confident in the accuracy of our research ethics data, and able to respond to increasing scrutiny or reporting requirements on ethics and integrity if necessary. All of these elements align to our strategic direction, and our goals around efficiency, transparency and growth.

In addition, the feedback from academic staff has been really positive, especially those involved in user testing as part of the Early Adopter Programme, who say that the product now exceeds their initial expectations. This buy-in has been essential to effectively roll-out across the institution.

Not only that, but we have seen a tangible change in how our staff approach ethical review. Having the product embedded in the main system we use to support research has increased awareness of the need for ethics review as it is visible in the system as part of project requirements. In addition, the numerous discussions about this across the university have improved awareness and culture of research integrity.

I hope that this positive story provides AHUA members with a little more confidence that greater efficiency is a

strategic enabler in our sector. And with the right mindset and strategic direction from HE leaders, transforming our administrative processes means that we are much better placed to tackle the challenges that we will face in the next few years.

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