

Reinventing the appraisal



Universities need staff to be engaged and interested in the goals of the organisation. As in the commercial world, annual appraisals and personal development plans are used to gain important insight into the performance management of employees.

The annual personal development review (PDR) should be an opportunity for development goals to be set and engender alignment of individual motivations with those of the organisation. It has become increasingly apparent, however, that formal annual meetings are unpopular and are not as effective in meeting needs as they were in more stable times. Many SUMS Members are asking us to explore alternative approaches.

Many outside HE are moving away from traditional appraisal practice towards a more regular and less formal 'check in' with employees. With regular feedback, coaching and support this has allowed poor performance to be addressed more rapidly and supported staff to develop and increase their motivation to learn. SUMS has surveyed these new approaches as well as investigating practice within a number of universities.

SUMS benchmark

Within universities we explored current performance management practice and attitudes towards the effectiveness of these systems.

Using the PDR process to establish the 'golden thread' – the alignment of personal and organisational objectives – is the most common goal, but universities are also using the process to try to drive culture change and to improve performance across the board.

Most universities have implemented a single process for all staff, we found all are broadly similar in style. Attitudes towards the PDR process are markedly negative, with none of the universities describing their system as highly effective. Many staff say the process is carried out because they are told to do it, and it is often used in an attempt to compensate for failures of operational management. Related objectives and processes, such as work allocation, REF/TEF monitoring and wellbeing are often added into PDRs simply because they have no obvious home elsewhere.

Often just ticking boxes but should be about development.

The annual cycle does not fit with most research.

Performance issues need to be addressed at the time, not just once a year.

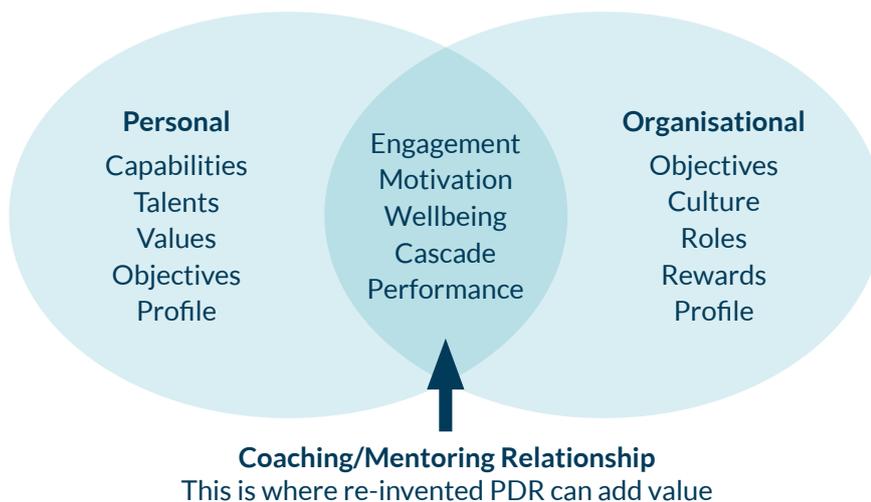
Learning points

After assessing the current PDR system within and outside of HE, our consultants have drawn a number of conclusions:

1. While PDR systems within universities are varied, there are a number of commonly occurring drawbacks – the most frequently encountered being due to the annual cycle not fitting appropriately with business and research timescales.
2. Current annual PDR systems do not drive individuals to perform to the best of their ability.
3. PDR systems do provide an allocated period of time for staff to discuss their position and future career plans. However, under certain conditions this has been found to be demotivating. Individuals' needs and aspirations depend on their career and life stage.
4. Managers who place high priority on people development would talk to staff about their future plans and current issues regardless of the PDR system.
5. Issues that staff regard as important, such as developing their careers and skills are not adequately addressed within current systems; nor are institutional issues such as engaging staff with institutional goals, developing a positive culture and managing rewards.
6. Outside the sector new approaches are fostering much needed innovation and collaboration.

Future recommendations

There is a gap that needs filling where personal and organisational objectives meet. Filling the gap would not only help motivate and engage staff, but would benefit universities too.



A proposed approach

Crafting a hybrid system which fits all aspects of universities is difficult, but a more effective approach could encompass the following:

- One framework with the flexibility to cover different roles along with personal aspirations
- An approach that distinguishes personal development from operational management
- Designing a new tailored PDR format that focuses on coaching and on longer term and personal objectives
- Agreeing development timescales and content that are designed around the individual's work and career or life stage
- Introducing mentors for staff and arranging training for them. These would not need to be line managers
- Enhancing training for line managers to address operational matters.

SUMS offers support and advice to help develop and tailor these concepts for universities. Please contact sums@reading.ac.uk for more information.



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