

Learning & Teaching @ Newcastle Podcast

Ideas in Academic Practice: Technicians gaining AdvanceHE Recognition

Hello and welcome to Episode 11 of the Learning and Teaching at Newcastle University podcast.

My name's Ben Steel and I'll be your host for this episode. This episode is the third instalment of Our Ideas in Academic Practice series.

The first ideas in academic practice episode we had was Episode 2, which was an episode with Dr. Paul Fleet and Michael Atkinson.

Talk about mental health and mental well-being. The second instalment was episode six, which you'll find in your feed there.

And that was with Sue Gil and Dr. Paul Hubbard talking about our branch campuses in Malaysia and Singapore.

This episode, which is our third instalment, is a conversation between Doctor Rosa Spencer of the Learning and Teaching Development Service,

and James Davoll, a technical services manager from the School of Arts and Culture.

They talk about UKPSF through AdvanceHE can be achieved by a wide range of colleagues here at Newcastle University that contribute to learning and teaching.

James has also put together a really good PDF guide to support technical services colleagues in their journey to achieve the UKPSF so... without further ado.

Let's hear from Rosa and James. So James and could you tell me a bit about who you are and what you do at the university?

So I'm James Devoll. I am the School of Arts and Cultures technical manager.

And in reality, what that means is I kind of wear a couple of hats.

I look after a team of specialists, technicians that do everything from music studio work through to fine art kiln rooms and wood working spaces.

But due to previous experience teaching, specialising in kind of recording both audio and video,

I directly teach on quite a few modules within our department media, culture, heritage.

And I also run some workshops in fine arts and music for some of our students, or maybe interested more,

I suppose artistic uses of some of the technology that we have at university.

Right. So quite a diverse role, really.

How- If someone asks you, what would you do? How do you describe that in a short sentence?

I normally to say I'm the head technician at the school about and then just leave it at that.

If I get more questions, I'll go with it.

But yeah, it's a weird one. It's kind of evolved around me.

But I think part of the reason for me being in the university is this kind of stimulus of being exposed to those different areas of interest that I personally have.

So it works both ways. That sounds really interesting.

So you are also a fellow at the Higher Education Academy.

Is that right? Yes, I am. And then how did you find the process of gaining fellowship?

Was it do you think it was made more difficult by not being in a formal academic role?

I think if I hadn't had the prior experience of doing the PGC,

I think I probably would have struggled with some of the terminology and some of the ideas of a kind of a reflective practice.

And I think that's what a lot of the technicians I see is a struggle with that concept, one- kind of decoding what some of the terminology is.

So the word pedagogy is not a common used word within like support staff, particularly technicians.

They would call it, I suppose, applied practice.

But I think potentially, yes, they did find that a little bit more difficult.

But I was quite well supported by. So two of my academic peers were very happy to help with the supporting documentation.

The thing that I like to admit is this was the first thing I probably have failed in my life is and when I put in for it the first time I've just become a father for the second time.

Probably hadn't slept very much. Didn't answer one of the questions. Yeah, I can imagine how that happened.

Yeah. So that was quite you know, It was actually part of my teaching.

I do my students because I teach very practical Hands-On stuff.

I don't think a lot of it you can learn without failing that. You've got to do it wrong first and have that little flap and then you try harder, too.

So I did try harder, but I think like I was saying that I had a PGC beforehand and that was very useful to kind of engage in.

I suppose scholarly activity, again, is in a grey area, but like it, like teaching, the definition for those activities are very wide.

So what one person would call inducting another person at call, teaching what one person would call, you know

practicing. Someone would call scholarship or maybe going to a, for instance, as an art technician or a.

A faculty, a medical scientists technician going to a course, they would see that as kind of professional development,

maybe not link that to scholarship by learning the process better informing.

Therefore, their role to. I suppose at least that leads us on to kind of.

The 'why's that I did it more than how I.

Handle the application itself. If not doing it correctly the first time and then leading into doing it correctly.

But yeah it took me a little time to figure out the language,

to figure out what some of the areas of activity where and the core knowledge and values that we were

trying to demonstrate but also I think I did it in the written way rather than the verbal way.

I always feel I probably should've done it verbally because I kind of struggle took to me,

some of the activities I was doing with obvious why I was doing them in the way I was.

But actually I had to explain why. And that was actually really beneficial because I was like, oh, maybe that isn't the best way.

And then that became part of my application by opening up to discussing one of the workshops with my fine art students. I asked them.

So I was gonna show you this way and in this order.

You want to do it a different way? You know, you want to contribute to this? We kind of like a, you know, a sticky note activity.

And they they created a whole new, different scheme, which, you know, we kind of just flew with, which was great.

And actually, it was it was a better way to go through it like it for them.

It made more sense as the progression. Yeah, that's really interesting.

And then exactly what we kind of hope comes out of that process of applying for a fellowship.

Is that reflection on practice and also the ability to step back a minute and think, "oh, is this the best way to do that?"

Am I- Am I being effective? Are there other ways to do that?

So, yeah, really great to see that you've evolved your students as co-producers in that process.

And hopefully that was quite rewarding for you as well to see them engaged on that level and being able to contribute to their own learning.

Yeah, this was like an extra curricular workshop, so it wasn't so much pressure on it.

So it could kind of fail, but they were really much more engaged because they kind of authored their journey for want of a better word.

Yeah. I liked that 'Authored their journey' good phrase.

So I think you kind of touched on this.

But I just wanted if you could just summarize what what does it mean to you to now have Fellowship of the HEA?

I suppose it kind of shows a kind of personal commitment and kind of validation of my kind of professional approach to teaching and to learning,

you know, within my role.

I feel sometimes with the kind of one, a manager hat on but to a technician manager that can kind of be eclipsed as to to maybe, you know,

I do lots of admin, but I think what it's allowed me to do is kind of feel a little bit less of imposter syndrome and more actually.

You know, this is this is really what my contributions are useful and their value and, you know, this has been recognized.

So that's really useful, I think. Again, I mentioned a little agenda about raising the visibility of what technicians were contributing.

And again, I think it's also helped with that as well. And that was kind of part of it.

Yeah, I think that's an really good thing. Definitely gaining recognition is what it's all about.

So being able to be recognized not just for your own professional practice, but in the in the eyes of others as well.

in terms of the contributions that you're making to this student.

learning experience I think is important. So I'm guessing that your experience, as you mentioned,

area that you found the language of the UK professional standards framework and the application process and applying for fellowship itself.

was a little bit alien and needed a bit of interpretation,

I guess in consideration in terms of how that fit into the kinds of things and activities that you were doing.

So is this why you created this technician's guide to fellowship that is specifically for technicians?

Yeah, I would say it's definitely part of it. So when I done my- when I completed my PGC.

I've kind of heard of words like summative and formal feedback and informal feedback.

And what the what what are these? But for some of my technicians, I look after a group of 16 and I was chatting to them about it.

And they kind of just automatically almost went on the defensive,

and kind of switched off Twitter because they didn't they didn't they hadn't been exposed to what that was.

And so when I asked them more about it, as far as

You know, I witnessed them have an interaction, say Loaning equipment.

Something is kind of you could see it as a Benilde, very standard activity that some would say, that's my job.

But they would they would be asking students questions and they would be watching students and

they would be reacting to what the students were showing them and what the students were saying,

and then aligning how they spoke to them in different ways and was like,

okay, what you've done is kind of give informal feedback as to suggestions of how they may proceed,

but you've kind of witnessed them with a piece of equipment and therefore able to kind of like.

Relate to what they were doing wrong or not, and they just didn't see that as kind of teaching.

And I was, you know, that that became the kind of driving forces we had,

all of these really great individuals that felt that it wasn't quite for them to.

I thought I was having these conversations. Why not write it down?

And part of writing it down was why not kind of write in easy in dictionary definition of what, say, informal feedback was,

you know, that occurs outside of the teaching and doesn't have to be a timetabled core activity to feedback to a student.

It could just be, oh, you know, students editing something on a computer and they don't know what this tool does.

So for our audience who have not yet read this guide

could you give them an idea of what this document is and what it is essentially being created here?

Yeah, I hope to kind of create a document that a line technician activity not just within the arts, but across the board with the framework.

And by. You know, not. I've borrowed resources from all over the Web.

I've spoken to your good self quite a few times, Rosa. And I really appreciate all of your contributions along with Dr. Paul Fleet.

Who has also been a really great help in pulling this together, but it's kind of trying to demystify it a little bit.

It's trying to write it in a way that the technicians can relate to it.

So the areas of activity and and actually all of the core knowledge and the values have been kind of.

Rewritten in a slightly more.

Well, I suppose it's meant to be just accessible to slightly more accessible way for the technicians to maybe be like, oh, I do that.

Rather than be like, oh, I'm not sure if I do that or not, you know, make it a bit more obvious that they absolutely do that.

So things like how do you know what you know? Yeah, I think reframing those questions.

And it's really helpful getting people to think about their practice and analyze it a little better in general terms.

Why do you do the things that you do in the way that you do them? And is it is a really good way to help people drill down there.

I guess that the nitty gritty of what the UK Professional Standards Framework is trying to get at.

And do you think I mean, I say how how does this guy help technicians who want to become HEA Fellows

or Associate Fellows?

I hope initially that helps them see a document that when it has their name on, it has technicians written in the descriptor and not for one.

I found on my journey that if it doesn't say that on the box, there might not be interest.

You know, it's not for us. So it says that on the front page then that that's me.

I'm one of those. The next thing is, is to try and then I suppose put a bit of a spark I suppose give a spark to read that thing.

That's what they do. And then a lot then this avenue to kind of validate what they're up to.

And I think there's a lot to be said for for that. As far as feeling good and the personal satisfaction that comes out of it.

And I hope it allows people to maybe have a little thing to be like, okay, might not be for me,

but I'd like to have a go and therefore I'll spend some time seeking help to develop to be able to apply.

But I really feel at the associate level.

I would you know, 80 percent of the technicians I encounter on the day to day are absolutely doing what is required to get that recognition.

Yeah, absolutely. I agree. I think you would be hard pressed to find anyone in those roles who who is

not supporting students in those ways that they can identify these two those

areas of activity and probably more within the UKPSF that they are that

they are performing and on a day to day basis never mind annually, weekly, monthly

Yes. Yeah. So. So why-

What motivated you to create this? Why did you do this?

And what what were you hoping would come out of it? What were you hoping to achieve?

I suppose locally I was hoping to achieve the idea of allowing my team- well it was not to save time,

which is quite selfish thing, but I was having similar conversations. But then people forget as they leave notes and actually write it down.

So I'd maybe written emails or spoken to people and kind of articulate the same things.

But in part, me was like, actually, you know what you're talking about?

So I kind of went into looking at more of the supporting documents around, like I say,

kind of cherry picking the bits I felt were most relevant in the UK piercer that already brought structure together.

So why reinvent the wheel to kind of carried through through that?

But it was just that it was just that kind of thing. Trying to.

I think start movements too romantic. I think it was trying to just.

Trigger something within technician's to feel like maybe this is something for them,

because a lot of times the feedback as a manager is you get it not for you or is not relevant or don't need it.

But also a lot of times it's hard to demonstrate for the technicians a way of progressing through the grades.

So whether that be that the current situation are in or moving on,

but having something like this indicates a real commitment to professional development and continuation of what they're doing,

which is really helpful when you're applying for a job because you can explain how you went about trying to succeed in gaining such qualifications.

And it also raises your it demonstrates your awareness of the, you know,

a more holistic idea of a university and of education, the kind of learner journey.

So that starts after the initial, I suppose, want. And then I kind of thought, well, of chatting to other institutional members.

The same problem was happening there. So I thought, well, why not?

You guys can have a go and use it. Maybe read it and give feedback and evolve it.

So that's what's kind of happened. So there's been a couple of pilots, such as the MMU,

where they can of using the guide and they're going to feedback on it was useful or not useful with how to stop if it was useful.

Great. I'm sure there'll be bits that, you know,

maybe some of the definitions weren't great or what I'd really love is to have a kind of archive of activities that

met all over the areas of activity or the core knowledge of the values and kind of identified because I'm not a sci-

I'm not a science technician. It be wrong of me to try and guess what activities to do.

Meets the criteria. But if we have a few examples, we can start being like, oh, this is a common thing,

that this is a really good activity that speaks to meet the criteria.

And then again, later, someone can see that and go 'oh I do that activity'.

Therefore, this is for me, and I'm there Snowbowl thing. This is the Hope and Sue.

I'm a special advisor for the National Technician Development Centre, which runs out of Sheffield, so I'm actually talking about this in a couple of months.

But the hope is to maybe kind of roll it out through that avenue as well.

Yeah, it's very much technicians focussed.

Yeah. Yeah, I think that would be great to get some national coverage on this and to help support that initiative in a wider sense.

I think what you're saying about and having lots of different disciplines subdiscipline contribute

to the to the guide is is a really useful way of encouraging actual whole because as you're saying,

they're all technician's very, quite unique in their own disciplines, just as academic roles are quite diverse.

So are technician roles is to trying to incorporate every type of activity that some work might be doing.

And a technician always is quite the undertaking.

So being able to get people, other technicians to contribute to those definitions and examples is really useful and useful exercise, I think.

So yeah, looking forward to seeing what comes out of that. Yeah.

Yeah. I hope as well. It's kind of it's kind of kind of peer mentality as well.

If someone reads it they might not do the example. But you know Sarah down the road in engineering.

That's exactly what she does. She's brilliant, I'll go tell her.

Yeah. No, I think that's really good. And very much in keeping with the way in which the UK professional standards framework evolved,

it was sector led and developed by academics and non academics working in H.E. who wanted to create this set of benchmarks for professional practice.

So I think the technicians guide is evolving in the same same sort of veins that as a collaborative, internally led document.

I think it's really nice to see that parallel. Why is it important that technicians are recognized in this way?

Do you think? I think technician's as a profession has been traditionally overlooked and maybe

overshadowed within education as far as the contributions to student journeys.

We've got another national initiative going on, which is the technician commitment, which is brilliant, which I'm kind of heavily involved in within our own institution.

And this just maps onto it perfectly as far as recognition, raising visibility,

showing awareness contribution that previously there are often avenues to do that.

And. It's kind of a win win for all involved as far as you know,

if we can demonstrate that our staff are operating to this standard and meet the framework and personally they get the validation,

they get recognition potential. You know, it's growth, isn't it?

But also for the university, it is those extra pressures as far as TEF will come up at some juncture, I'm sure.

Then we've got our commitment to the technician commitment.

And part of that is achievable by doing this because it is giving people a platform to kind of.

Well, soapbox to kind of stand on and be like, yeah, I do that.

This is me. I contribute. Yeah, absolutely.

And yeah, I think that's what we all hope that everyone will gain from from this process and engaging with recognition.

So I guess. Just to finish up,

what would you like to say to any technicians that are listening to this as you talk about your admissions guide in the process of gaining fellowship?

Is there anything you'd like to say to mood technicians listening out there?

I suppose it's just it's it's for you the role you do at an institution is vital.

You hopefully know that already and someone's told you. But if not, I am.

Every role, whether it be from like a low grade technician setting up rooms to say a higher grade technician running workshops.

It's it's all part of that student journey. It's all part of education and it's all part of why we're there.

I think from experience, the technicians are there for the same reason the academics are there,

and that's for personal stimulation with being in an educational environment.

And this is part of it. You know, you developing and reflecting and and doing is part of it so you can get it.

It's I think for for a lot of individuals, it would be very straightforward for them to apply.

I think affords people the opportunity to think about what they're doing and actually maybe recognize some bad bits,

what they're doing, and maybe they've become a bit stale. You know, maybe they've done it the same way for 10 years and.

Maybe that's the right way, but it's good to sit back and think about it.

I think. Yeah, I would just say if you fall on deaf ears within your own institution,

reach out because the community is really open to having discussions about this.

That's great. Thank you, James. I think those are really great words of wisdom and encouragement.

Hopefully we can get a few more technicians applying for the fellowship.

For any one who is listening out there. I would just say to me and the learning and Teaching Development Service to support staff towards fellowship.

So if you're applying, we have internal routes and that you can use to do that and we will support you along the way as well.

And we've got two different options. You can even talk about your practice, this, as James eluded to or you can write about it.

And it's really up to you. Which you prefer. So you've got some options that you can find more information on on our website

which we'll put in the in the text accompanying this podcast or just.

We also have technicians within each of the faculties known with fellowship to not there's a precedent, but there is a person within your field, too.

Maybe that's contracting. Yeah. Excellent. I think that that is a really useful stepping stone.

If you are a bit uncertain about process, whether it's for you, how long it might take and how you engage with that.

So yeah, having someone to talk to is really great. And.

So thank you, James. Thanks for talking to me today.

Always a pleasure. And it must be said, there needs to be big thanks to you for your contributions to this as well,

as well as being a kind of ally throughout the process that we've been going through the last few years.

It's not on on deaf ears, I think, yourself. Paul and others within the group of being brilliant.

Thank you. That really nice. You but. Yeah, they.

The idea is to try and encourage as many people as possible to engage with this process because it seems that it is

it is rewarding as well as as well as allowing you to gain recognition and validation as well for what you're doing.

So hopefully more, more and more people will come forward to try and try and do this, receive fellowship.

Thank you to both Rosa and James there for that great conversation. We hope you enjoy it.

You'll find out more about the scheme. And James PDF guide in the show notes in the next episode.

We'll actually look at the UKPSF in more detail.

Emma McCulloch from Learning and Teaching Development Service will take us through the story of UKPSF.

In the meantime, please like subscribe, download, all your friends download and we'll see you in two weeks time.

Bye. Bye.