

SETTING UP AN AREA SHADOWING SCHEME

The DASA Staff Engagement Group was formed in November 2016, following the dissemination of the Staff Survey results. The group was established to provide DASA staff with more opportunities to make their voices heard, and as a means to better understand the Staff Survey results.

Consult with Staff

Before developing an Action Plan, the group engaged with Directorate staff through a series of focus groups, written submissions and one-to-one interviews. During the consultation with staff, 'Working as One University' was identified as an area of particular weakness. Feedback was clear, not only did staff feel that we don't work as one university, they believed that we worked in silos and often didn't work cohesively together as one Directorate. It emerged that staff did not always understand or fully appreciate the work being carried out by their colleagues in other areas of the Directorate. This issue was prevalent throughout the Directorate even amongst long-serving members of staff, however, it was especially problematic for new staff joining from the private sector.

After consulting with staff, the Staff Engagement Group met for a brainstorming session to try and come up with initiatives to address this issue. It was clear that any initiative should align with Queen's core values and in this case there was a clear need to build on the CONNECTED core value, to be "*active collaborators, recognising that we can achieve more together*".

We recognised that we needed to:

- Connect better across the Directorate, working as one team to achieve our common goals
- Build local partnerships and networks which benefit all involved
- Utilise our talents to make a positive impact on staff, students and society

Develop the Concept

After much deliberation and discussion, the idea for a Directorate-wide placement scheme for staff was born. Initially, the concept was very basic, we envisaged that members of staff could spend a day (or half day) in another department to help break down silos and create better understanding across the Directorate. The potential pros and cons of the scheme were identified as follows:

Pros

- Help build an understanding and appreciation of work carried out in other Divisions
- Help build an understanding and appreciation of work carried out by other departments / service areas within own Division
- Give staff a greater understanding of the pressures and priorities of the other departments with which they frequently liaise
- Help build a greater awareness of the range of support offered by other departments
- Help build networks and make the Directorate more 'connected'
- Provides opportunities to work in partnership
- Help to generate ideas for future cross-departmental collaborations
- A great way of meeting colleagues in other departments

Cons

- May be viewed as an opportunity for a select few
- May be problematic in certain areas (i.e. staff might not be able to jump straight in and work without some training)
- There would be little benefit if a staff member is placed in another department and is simply given some menial task to perform
- May be problematic to facilitate (i.e. staff unavailable at last minute, lack of time to prepare for staff member being placed etc)
- Could be problematic to administer

Agree Basic Key Principles

The next step was to design the scheme in such a way that it would alleviate the any of the potential negatives highlighted above. As such we agreed some key basic principles.

Placement opportunities must:

- Provide staff with a chance to help or get involved without feeling uncomfortable or under pressure
- Provide staff with an authentic and interactive experience (e.g. student / staff facing event, support during a key service delivery period, attendance at a workshop, seminar, presentation or team meeting)
- Provide an opportunity to interact with staff and exchange knowledge and information
- Provide staff with an opportunity to understand the services offered and the scope of work undertaken by the host department
- Be agreed by line managers

Given that the initiative would be overseen by members of the Staff Engagement Group who volunteer time in addition to delivering other key roles within DASA, it was also deemed essential that the administrative burden of running the scheme should be minimal.

Pilot

With the basic principles agreed, the next step was to run a small pilot. Careers, Employability and Skills (CES) hosted the NI Graduate Recruitment Fair in June 2017 and the Staff Engagement Group identified four staff members from different departments to take part. Participating staff attending a briefing and information session prior to the event and then helped out the following day.

Feedback from participants was overwhelming positive:

“I found the placement very worthwhile – it gave me lots of ideas, pertinent to my area of work, which I can take forward with the wider team.”

“It was very interesting to see the range of potential employers attending the fair and the opportunities available to Graduates. Staff were very welcoming, and were able to answer questions and provide a high-level background on the fair as well as other events.”

“It allowed me a better understanding of what Careers do, although it was a very small insight into what I am sure is a very busy department with a large range of other duties.”

Participants in the pilot were also able to provide a range of suggested improvements that were implemented when the placement scheme was rolled out in the Directorate. Greater flexibility was built in to the length of placement opportunities. Some participants stated that a full day was maybe too much of a time commitment for some staff members and that half day options would make the initiative more accessible. Participants also identified the need for contact details of the hosts to be shared in advance should any issues arise.

Implement

The members of the Staff Engagement Group put a call out for placement opportunities via their respective team meetings and were able to collate a wide-range of appealing opportunities covering each of the key divisions and departments within DASA. To promote these opportunities to staff, each submission needed to include: the department offering the placement; a description of the placement; placement duration; date; and name of a key contact (within the department offering the placement).

Placement opportunities were then promoted within the Directorate via email from the Director. In addition, articles were included in the DASA Team Brief communications and staff were encouraged to discuss and promote opportunities at team meetings.

Expressions of interest were returned to the administrator, with staff allowed to select their top three placement preferences. Staff were matched to opportunities by stated preference and then on a first come, first served basis. After the matching process, the administrator sent an email confirming the placement and putting staff in touch with the key placement contact. It was then up to the participant and the key placement contact to follow up and make the necessary arrangements.

Get Feedback

At the end of each academic year all staff who successfully completed a placement are asked to provide feedback via a very short online survey. The survey results and word-of-mouth feedback of the initiative to date has been very positive. Participants have also been feeding back on placements to their teams and acting as advocates of the initiative.

The most recent feedback found that:

- 82% of staff stated that the placement gave them a better understanding of the type of work other teams do within the Directorate
- 83% of staff stated that the placement gave them a better understanding of the positive impact the work has on students, staff and society
- 87% were satisfied with their placement

Some of the open response comments from participants also clearly demonstrated the benefit of the initiative to staff:

“The placement enhanced my relationships with other staff members and I now have a greater understanding of their work.”

“There are clear synergies between what the team are doing and a number of projects I am involved in. I now have a better appreciation for what they do and the issues they face.”

“On a personal level, it made me aware of the faces within the department and confirmed to me that it is where I want to end to end up in the future.”

“I thoroughly enjoyed my three-day placement in WPU. The team were really welcoming and informative and I really enjoyed assisting with pupils’ participation in the Junior Academy. WPU do great work which many colleagues in my team did not know about.”

“A good community practice approach.”

“I think we should all do it, and we should be encouraged more by our line managers to get involved. It opens your eyes to the great work taking place in other parts of the University.”

Participation numbers to date:

- Summer 2017 (Pilot): 1 placement opportunity; 4 staff completed placement
- Academic year 2017/18: 30 placement opportunities; 16 staff completed a placement
- Academic year 2018/19: 52 placement opportunities; 32 staff completed a placement

Although the initiative is still relatively new, to date it is growing year-on-year.