

What are the ingredients for fostering an effective research environment?

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Abstract

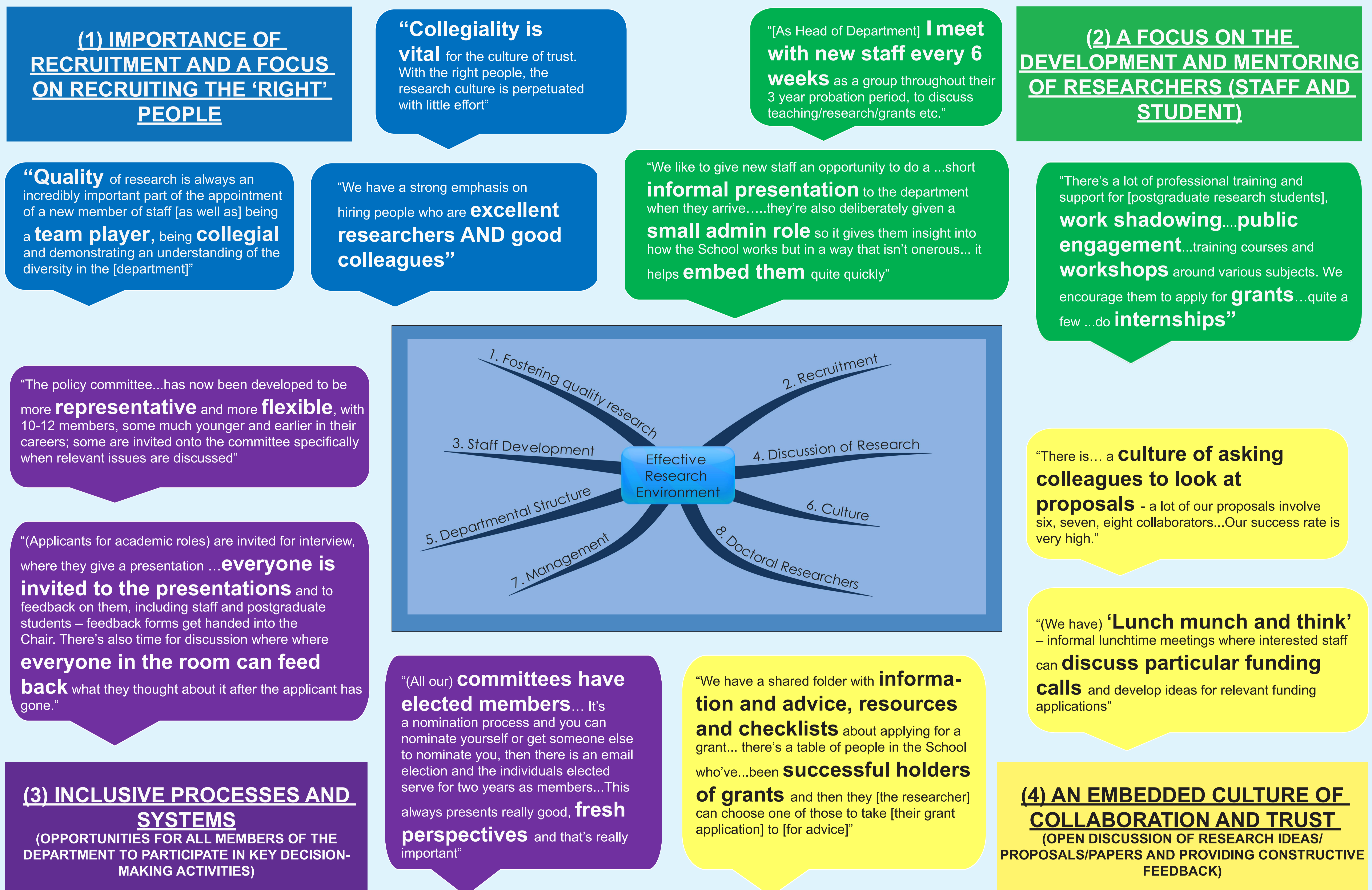
This study by the University of Sheffield aimed to investigate the characteristics of an effective research environment – meaning one which facilitates world-leading research, and upholds the highest standards in research (where all members understand the value of 'rigour, respect and responsibility'). The project involved capturing and disseminating good practices on how this kind of environment can be nurtured and sustained. It was undertaken as part of the University's approach to fostering a culture of research integrity, building on existing research indicating that a productive research environment tends to have characteristics that correspond with principles of research integrity (and which are set out in the University's Good Research & Innovation Practices policy: https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/polopoly_fs/1.671066!/file/GRIPPolicyUpdateJun16.pdf) such as being collegial and professional; engaging in open discussions with colleagues; and supporting colleagues in their personal and professional development.

Method

- 10 departments were selected from across the University's 5 faculties, using a sampling method that aimed to identify those departments which most demonstrated an effective research environment (taking into account results from national research assessments, surveys of researchers at a range of levels, and reports of internal review processes).
- The heads of these departments (and/or senior colleagues) were invited to participate in semi-structured, in-depth interviews covering a range of relevant themes (e.g. leadership, structures and processes supporting research, recruitment and management of staff).
- Interviews were audio-recorded and summary reports prepared. Reports of each interview were analysed to group quotes from participants under a series of headings (recruitment, culture, staff development etc.).
- A form of thematic analysis was then used to identify quotes that demonstrate values, practices and behaviours which support principles set out in the University's Good Research & Innovation Practices policy.

Findings

An interactive online tool (available at: <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/ris/other/gov-ethics/researchintegrity/research-environment>) has been developed to share the findings under a range of headings, which are illustrated in the Mindmap diagram below. Four key themes were identified, highlighted in the coloured boxes surrounding the diagram. A selection of quotes from participants that illustrate each theme are shown in colour coded boxes.



Conclusions

The study, although on a small scale, identified a range of good practices, values and behaviours that were demonstrated in departments. Many of these practices fell within broad themes that support the view that successful research environments tend to demonstrate characteristics that support the principles of research integrity.

These findings are being shared with research leaders across the University of Sheffield, with a view to assisting them with developing their own research environments, whilst also following principles of research integrity. Discussions with key areas of the University (including HR) are on-going with a view to making the findings available to colleagues at relevant points in time, e.g. during the induction of new Heads of Department or Directors of Research.

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