Doing Policy Consultation Well: A Case Study

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Overview

- Introductions

- A little bit about Sussex

- How the review came about

- Timeline

- Approach to consultation:

    - Professional Services colleagues

    - Academic units

- Learning

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About Sussex

- Overall student population c. 17.8k FTE (HESA 2023/24)

- PGR headcount c. 1,200 (internal data; all stages)

- Comprehensive, research-intensive university

- Ten academic Schools – highly devolved, but moving to faculties

- Sussex Researcher School:

  - Sits in Research & Innovation division

  - Remit = junior, postgraduate and early career researchers

  - 17 members of staff

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Context

- Institutional shift to re-focus on research (inc. PGR)

- UKCGE commissioned to undertake a benchmarked review of provision and support (delivered Summer 2022; ERC-funded)

- Identified that policies and processes were highly-fractured:

  - Lack of clarity of the status of existing information

  - No single policy covering the PGR academic journey

  - Out-dated policy and policy gaps

  - Information at the regulatory level too detailed

- ERC funding for a consultant to support phase one of the project

Timeline (2023/24)

Commencing December 2023:

Dec-Mar   Research and compilation of existing documentation

March   Drafted new policy (51 pages + appendices = c. 80 pages)

Mar-Apr   Consultation Phase 1: Professional Services colleges

Apr-May   Consultation Phase 2: Academic units

May-Jul   Governance approvals (three levels of committees)

Jul-Aug   Communication/socialisation

Aug-Sept   Implementation

Approach to consultation

- Aware of high degree of devolution across the University leading to diverging practice, and potential for a new policy necessitating significant cultural shifts

- Planning in time for meaningful consultation was considered from the outset

  - This included moving a committee meeting in April to May to allow the consultation to take place within the timeframe needed to achieve approvals before the new academic year

- Promoted transparency as being at the heart of the process

- Took a phased approach

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Phase 1: Professional Services (PS) Colleagues

- Why PS first? Aware that any changes in policy needed to promote compliance and be feasible within operational limitations

- Identified key stakeholders (e.g. those responsible for compliance) and gave forewarning where possible so they could plan to review

- Some colleagues reviewed in full, and others specific sections

- Provided individual versions for specific colleagues/teams to help keep track of commenting *[Sussex uses Box for collaborative work]*

- Used a spreadsheet to keep track of who/what/when

- Compiled and reviewed feedback and updated the draft

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Phase 1: PS Colleagues

- Key PS stakeholders:

  - Student Administration (Academic Regulations; Examinations and Assessment; UKVI Compliance)
  - Student Data and Records
  - Admissions
  - Academic Quality

  - Researcher Development
  - Research Ethics and Integrity
  - Library
  - The Dean of the Researcher School also reviewed at this stage, before consultation with Schools

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Phase 2: Academic Units

- Had to be sensitive to the lack of visibility of policy hitherto, and therefore understanding of what was new and what was existing policy being surfaced

- Chose to provide Schools with a summary of the items which we deemed to be substantive changes

- This was laid out in a spreadsheet (more on that in a second!)

- Left Schools to manage the consultation within their units

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Phase 2: Academic Units

Images of spreadsheet used for consultation. Columns include: policy status; policy outlines; rationale; application; School response; and School comments.

Policy status	Policy reference (internal use)	Proposed policy	Ratio
Please enter the date here when you have completed the			XX/XX
POLICY AREA			
New policy			
Change to existing policy			
Clarification to exisiting policy			

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Phase 2: Academic Units

Images of spreadsheet used for consultation. Columns include: policy status; policy outlines; rationale; application; School response; and School comments.

/2024			

nale	Application	School response	School comments
	Future PGRs, only	Support	
	Current and future PGRs	Do not support	
	Future PGRs, only		

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Phase 2: Academic Units

Images of segments of completed spreadsheet used for consultation, showing conditional formatting (cell colour determined by whether School supported the proposed policy) and distribution of support.

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Images of segments of completed spreadsheet used for consultation, showing conditional formatting (cell colour determined by whether School supported the proposed policy) and distribution of support.

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Committee approval

- A summary of School responses was shared in advance, together with a full draft of the policy which was colour-coded for ease

- At the meeting, the Chair laid out what was in scope for discussion and the group worked through each point where there were enough 'do not supports' from Schools to warrant review

- Some minor amendments were requested before committee members felt they could endorse the full document (updates made same day and members given 24hrs to respond)

- The policy was subsequently approved with no amendments at two further levels of institutional committees
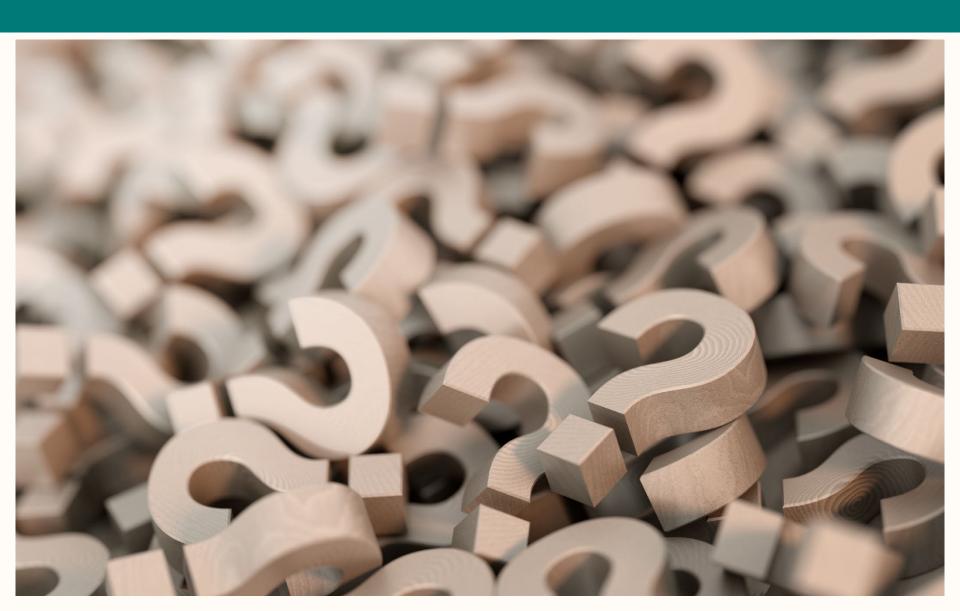
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Learning

- Doing consultation well is demanding and can come at a cost…

- …but it is vital for achieving buy-in and shepherding changes through committee efficiently

- Buy-in from your academic and PS lead(s) is critical

- Manage expectations about what is and is not up for debate

- Be clear with yourself about where you are prepared to flex to get the whole over the line

- Transparency helps to sugar the pill: even where people don't agree with aspects of what is ultimately approved, they can trust that the process was consultative and done in good faith

Questions?

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