Appendix 1a: Case Study

Research Staff Writing Retreat case study

The University recognises the important contribution that our research staff make to the research reputation of the university. This includes the publication of research outputs and generation of grant income (through fellowships and contributions to grant writing). A writing retreat, organised by the Graduate School, was piloted in July 2015 to provide a dedicated writing and networking event for research-only staff at the University of Nottingham. For the purposes of the retreat, this was defined as the staff group whose primary role is to undertake research and who do not hold a tenured academic position. Research-only staff include both postdoctoral researchers and those who do not hold doctorates. The purpose of the retreat was to provide participants with three days of uninterrupted time away from normal working environments to complete a writing project. The Retreat programme was defined by the participants’ writing project objectives, which exclusively fell into two categories: preparation of fellowship proposals or journal manuscripts.

The daily programme for the retreat was designed specifically to incorporate good working practice. Providing core hours of 9.30-16.00 with additional optional add on writing sessions 8.15-9.30 or 16.00-18.00 for those who required the flexibility. The Retreat also had scheduled lunch and refreshment breaks between timed writing sessions to facilitate networking, cohort building and relaxation time. The Retreat had a procrastination space to allow writers some escapism if required. The majority of the Retreat programme was broken into timed sessions for writing (between 1 hour and 2 hour sessions). Optional short information sessions (Impact, Business case, Writing techniques) and drop in clinics (CV, Endnote) were also scheduled throughout the Retreat. Writers were free to choose whether to work according to the programme timings or to be self-directive. Only three elements of the programme were compulsory for participation: retreat orientation on day 1, daily peer-supported goal setting and daily peer-led progress checks. The peer-led goal setting and progress checks encouraged a supportive environment for the writing process were participants could discuss any issues they were experiencing, set realistic targets and general peer motivation.

Of the 16 attendees at the retreat, 10 were female and 6 male. Researchers were predominantly from the STEM subject (3 non-STEMM) areas and ranged in experience from 6 months post-PhD to 10+ years. All were researchers considered to be employed primarily to undertake research, on either fixed term or open ended (subject to funding) employment contracts. The retreat was open to all researchers from across the University (UK campuses only). Full catering and refreshments were provided throughout the retreat. A small fee (£30) was charged to participants’ project codes to cover catering and resources expenses.

Feedback was collected from the attendees at the close of the retreat on personal progress, suggestions for improvements, best features. Suggested improvements included availability of mentors, short talk topics and more retreats.

Participants reported a collective output of 30,000 high quality words written. By the end of the retreat two journal manuscripts had been completed and one fellowship application was submitted within a week of the Retreat.

Following the success of the pilot, funding has been secured to offer two retreats per year for up to 30 participants (research-only staff). These retreats will follow a similar format and will take place in mid-winter and mid-summer each year. For further details visit http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/researchstaff/writing-retreat