

Proactive strategic recruitment in research groups

Dr Jouni Kekäle, Human Resources Director at the University of Eastern Finland, has developed a proactive recruitment model to promote strategic academic recruitment. Successful recruitment is a significant aspect affecting academic outcomes. Proactive recruitment demonstrates how intrinsic motivation together with diversity within the research group and academic freedom are crucial elements required to promote the innovation that universities are searching for. The proactive recruitment model offers new insights and diversity to a research group by the means of the actual recruitments, cultivating strategic development with the potential to raise the research group to a new level of achievement.

Accountability, improving quality and social relevance are key challenges to be met throughout higher education. The recruitment of academic staff is often considered vital to the creation of a successful university, contributing to both academic performance and excellence.

From the practical managerial perspective, academic recruitment aims to find productive researchers that will complement their research group. It is difficult, however, to attract researchers using only vacancy advertisements. Moreover, interviews are not enough to ascertain a candidate's motivational basis, habits, drive and persona.

Dr Jouni Kekäle, Human Resources Director at the University of Eastern Finland (UEF), has developed a recruitment model, proactive recruitment, to develop strategic academic recruitment at UEF. Dr Kekäle has been responsible for the recruitment development innovation since its inception in 2015.

The development and research process has taken the form of participatory action research, involving interplay between theory and practice, as well as research and action, in order to develop a greater understanding of recruitment. Dr Kekäle's research is underpinned by international literature and outcomes from internal discussions among the UEF leaders.

PREDICTORS OF RESEARCH PRODUCTIVITY

Previous studies have divulged that the best predictor of research productivity is collaboration with international colleagues. Dr Kekäle points out that prior international networking is central to the model in order to enhance academic quality and broaden the recruitment pool. He also observes that researchers require strong intrinsic motivation in order to sustain their research over a period of time, that is that they need to find the work naturally satisfying and work hard in order to achieve the pleasure of accomplishing a task, rather than external motivation such as a salary



Successful recruitments are key to innovative research.

increase. Indeed, discussions with the leadership team at UEF revealed that they considered that novel research and breakthroughs in science inescapably require internal motivation, together with hard work and in many cases, luck.

THE PROACTIVE RECRUITMENT MODEL

The proactive model requires a research group endeavouring to constantly strengthening their research profile while concurrently building a network of international researchers working in their area. Visits, collaboration and offering tenure track positions enable the group to develop relationships with likeminded researchers and discover their capabilities, thus expanding the pool of potential candidates before recruitment arises. This also overcomes the issue of candidates not knowing what it will be like to work at the new organisation, which was found to be the major barrier for people changing jobs in a global LinkedIn Survey.

Where traditional recruitment is viewed as an administrative procedure belonging to human resources management and taking a short period of time, proactive recruitment is led by the academic leaders making the recruitment decisions and involves long term follow up, getting to know the candidate through their work. Deviating from the mainstream recruitment approach of waiting to see who responds to a vacancy announcement, the proactive model helps to find researchers with the necessary intrinsic motivation and aims that are analogous with the rest of the research group. The employer has the opportunity to judge the candidate's motivation and skills in real life situations and assess if they might

be movable when a suitable position arises. The proactive model also offers new insights and diversity to the research group by the means of the actual recruitments, cultivating the group's strategic development with the potential to raise the research group to a new level of achievement.

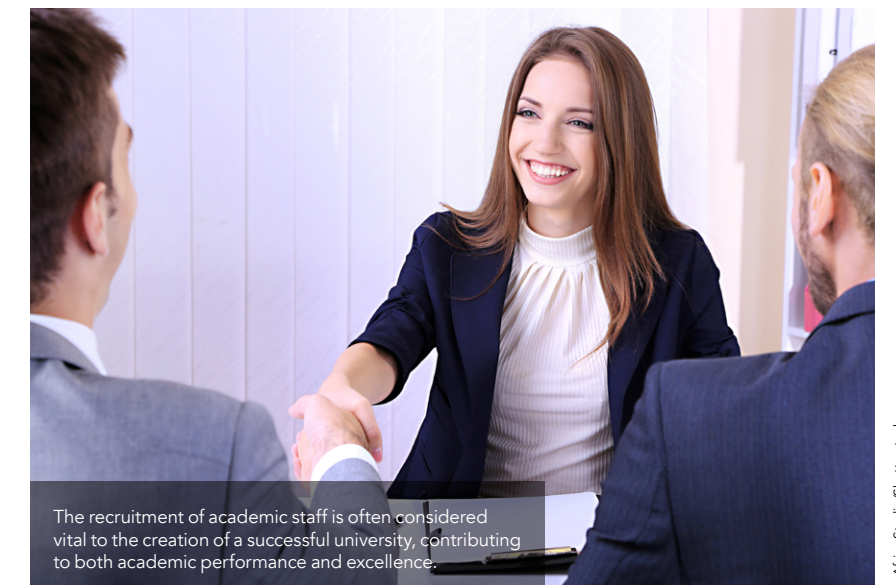
DEVELOPING PROACTIVE RECRUITMENT AT UEF

Dr Kekäle reflects on the highly interactive and open development process. There was wide discussion of recruitment within the university. In addition to discussions within the leadership group and the university's academic leaders,

two discussion rounds of the faculties took place, one led by Dr Kekäle and the Rector of UEF, the other by Dr Kekäle and the Head of Human Resources at UEF, Jenni Varis. Overall, the faculties' staff considered the proactive model to be a good approach to improve recruitment and validated the logic behind the model.

The university's leadership group have had a number of discussions on proactive recruitment and its operational goals and proposals in the context of international approaches to recruitment practice. Since 2016, developing recruitment has also featured in the annual leadership seminars with discussions involving the university's

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leaders and internal bodies dealing with research. Dr Kekäle explains that “in the discussions we have concluded that the university’s vacancy announcements have not reached the global network of scholars to a sufficient degree, at least when considered against the university’s strategy, stressing increasing international recruitment. Recruitment has increasingly become proactive; a model of this has been formed through discussions in an iterative manner”.

UEF identified five top-level international research areas in its strategy for 2015–2020. Dr Kekäle interviewed the professors in charge of these areas and together they discussed best practices and problems attached to recruitments. They also examined the proactive recruitment model which gained the support of all five research professors, who acknowledged that they used a similar approach to identifying potential candidates.

APPLYING PROACTIVE RECRUITMENT

Dr Kekäle draws attention to how the proactive model can be integrated into normal networking between researchers and requires little additional effort and investment from researchers and their universities. Researchers who are active in international networks naturally view these research networks as channels to share knowledge among participants with the possibility of recruitment in the long term.

Proactive recruitment is more straightforward for research groups

that have already established strong reputations, as this makes them attractive with regards to cooperation and work environment. Research groups with no international contacts, which are not dynamic enough, may find it difficult to get started but they can still enhance their standing by developing a more proactive approach in the long term.

Successful recruitment is a significant feature affecting academic outcomes. Dr Kekäle’s research has shown that

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intrinsic motivation together with diversity within the research group and academic freedom are crucial elements required to promote the innovation that universities are searching for.

HUMAN RESOURCES DEVELOPMENT

Proactive recruitment forms part of the human resource development being carried out at UEF by Dr Kekäle and his collaborators. The objectives of the development projects were to establish good practices, explore recruitment and leadership issues within UEF and to cultivate the development of these human resources (HR) areas enabling UEF to meet its strategic plans. The fundamental concepts that came out of these projects were the proactive recruitment and a HR leadership model for a Responsible University.

THE RESPONSIBLE UNIVERSITY

Dr Kekäle defines a responsible university as “an institution that carries out quality research and teaching, responds to the needs of society through basic tasks and aims at solving certain global problems of humankind while venerating the fundamental freedom of science”. He goes on to explain how researchers are crucial to achieving these goals. Furthermore, the development projects at UEF demonstrate how a university

can nurture strategic aims and move towards solving global problems, whilst at the same time becoming more responsible in the process.

Dr Kekäle describes how working solutions have to change as the world around us transforms. Proactive recruitment and human resource development are dynamic processes and the processes described above are ongoing. This journey involves an iterative learning process that would be impossible without the cooperation of human resources management and academics. This mutual learning is not straightforward and requires resilience, trust and willingness to understand the viewpoints of the various participants in order to achieve the synergies and benefits in order to enhance innovation and academic outcomes.



Behind the Research

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Research Objectives

Jouni Kekäle’s main research interests include human resources management, academic leadership, quality, disciplinary, and organisational cultures in academia, and changing operational environment in Higher Education.

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Bio

Jouni Kekäle is both an academic (Higher Education Studies) and a practitioner as a HR Director in academia. He has acted as HR Director in universities for 20 years. He has participated in numerous institutional, national and international development projects. His most recent book is *The Responsible University* by Palgrave MacMillan (published as Open Access book <https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/2F978-3-030-25646-3>), which he co-edited.

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Collaborators

- Rector Jukka Mönkkönen, UEF
- Dean Jukka Jurvelin, UEF
- Head of Human Resources Jenni Varis, UEF



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Personal Response

What advice would you offer an institution that is considering using the proactive recruitment model?

Successful recruitments are a key to innovative research. In order to broaden the recruitment pool and to assess candidates’ intrinsic motivation, innovative capabilities and fit to the existing group, a longer follow up and cooperation is needed. Cooperation will give real life evidence of the outcomes even to recruiters who are not professionals in recruiting. Networking and international cooperation with good groups is crucial; it also enhances the motivation and ambition of one’s existing group. The basic model can be systematically used for development in various research settings, but it requires long term commitment and hard work.