



# Veryan Johnston,

## Executive Director of Human Resources, Newcastle University

For fifteen years, Veryan Johnston has promoted organisational change at the North East's leading Higher Education provider. This has involved introducing performance management, investing in leadership development, and leveraging the University's reputation for world class research, teaching and learning, to ensure it continues to attract and retain the best staff and students. Here Veryan explains why her role continues to provide her with a complex, yet rewarding challenge.

*You've spent almost two decades in the Higher Education (HE) sector. How has the role of the HR professional changed during that time?*

When I joined Newcastle University in 1998, HR was seen as an administrative rather than a professional function and this was typical across the sector. Since then, HE has gone through a period of transformation which has seen universities become more business-like in how they operate. As a consequence, the role of HR has also changed considerably. At Newcastle University, for example, HR is no longer perceived as being a central administrative function, but rather is considered an integral component of the 'business', working alongside academics and managers in the areas that are critical to them, just as it would within any modern company.

*Were you brought into the role to affect those kinds of changes?*

Yes, I was. In my previous roles at Northumbrian Water, culminating as Head of HR, I was used to a very progressive approach to HR management. Following a review, Newcastle University had outlined a number of operational changes it wanted to make and I was responsible for implementing the changes outlined in that review.

*What was the biggest challenge you faced when you came in? How did you overcome it?*

Building trust with senior academics was a big challenge because there was a lack of understanding, at that time, of what an HR professional could do within a university. One of the biggest challenges for me personally was in the area of leadership development. If you were an academic manager you basically looked after your own development; so I had to work hard to demonstrate how my team could help them. I remember a head of faculty being shocked when I first asked him 'What is it you want to achieve?' because he was expecting a 'policeman' style of HR. By working with them, I was able to build their trust and respect. Furthermore, by seeking out people who recognised the benefit of what we were trying to achieve and using them as champions across the business, I was able persuade others of the value of HR.

*Fifteen years on, would you say this 'cultural change' has been a complete success?*

The faculty pro-vice-chancellors all consider the HR Manager as a critical member of the faculty teams. They're also much more inclined to seek advice from HR. Furthermore, I think leadership development and succession planning are an integral part of the University today, thanks to my

team as well as academic colleagues, championing that approach. The term 'performance management' is also widely understood now. So, there's been a big shift, but there is always more to do.

*What are the current challenges you're facing?*

One of the big challenges across the HE sector is how to manage the changing expectations of students. Students expect more today and as a consequence our students services have had to take a more customer focussed approach. From an HR perspective we need to ensure we are supporting all our staff to achieve their objectives whatever their area of work. The University will never be a business in the same way as in the commercial sector, but becoming more focussed on service certainly needs to be part of how we work today.

*Is this change similar to what you experienced at Northumbrian Water when it was privatised in 1989?*

In some ways it is, yes. At the university there are people who are nervous about losing what is really good about higher education, because of the shift towards a more flexible market in Higher Education. Similarly, there were employees at Northumbrian Water who were not entirely comfortable with the new commercial imperatives of the organisation, because the public service ethos was important to them. The University doesn't have a profit motive in the same way that the privatised water companies do - we don't have to worry about the stock market - but we do have to be mindful of league tables and our reputation. In both instances, I think external drivers have acted as a catalyst for positive change, by facilitating a move towards a culture which is better for all stakeholders.

*Universities are investing in human resource management but is it having an impact on overall performance?*

A few years ago the Higher Education Funding Council (HEFCE for England) set aside a significant amount of grant money, across the HE sector, to be invested in HR strategy. We had to demonstrate to HEFCE that we were using our allocation to deliver tangible improvements across a variety of areas such as recruitment and selection, performance management and staff development and HEFCE were very satisfied with the outcomes. Since then the University's KPIs have improved in terms of the quality of its research output, the number of students applying to the University, students getting jobs when they graduate, the quality of how students interact with the University and



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also some areas of employee satisfaction, which are addressed in our employee opinion surveys. From an HR perspective, we're happy with our contribution to these improvements, but you can't say one department in particular has had an impact on overall performance.

*In 2010, Newcastle University was one of the first Universities in the UK and Europe to receive the HR Excellence in Research award and it also recently retained it. How did applying for and winning the award, impact how you support researchers at the University?*

First of all, funding bodies, when assessing who gets funding, are no longer just considering the quality of research proposals, but are also now looking at the quality of the research culture at a university, including how good the HR support structure is in supporting those doing research. So, we recognised that if we were able to demonstrate how well we currently supported our researchers, then they would stand a better chance of successfully getting research funding in the future. A proportion of early career researchers seek employment outside academia, so it is really important that while they're still working with the university, they get the kind of support that will benefit them in their long term career choices. So, for example, we had to demonstrate that they were receiving good career advice and had access to a range of professional development opportunities. The award also challenged us to think how we could better support those researchers who want to stay in academia. In the past, the transition from being a student to becoming a research associate and thus, a member of staff, wasn't managed well. We had to make adjustments to ensure that during this transition, researchers were fully supported so that making that step was easier for them. By not managing this process properly, you risk losing talented researchers to other universities.

*What will the HE sector look like in five years time?*

We could see huge changes but it's difficult to predict precisely what they will be. We'll certainly see an increase in competition from our current competitors and from the private sector, as well as universities outside the UK. Competition is increasingly a global challenge in terms of attracting and retaining students and staff. Because a university like Newcastle has been around for many years, it's easy to think 'if we've survived this long, why change?' But unless you stay abreast of what's happening externally, you'll never keep up, never mind get ahead! We've got to keep focused on growing the University and at the same time continue to improve our research as well as the quality and relevance of the teaching and learning.



*Has growing the University's international footprint made it easier to attract top talent into the organisation?*

We've always recruited successfully, internationally. The quality of our staff and the research they produce is important because having a good reputation in a particular academic discipline makes it easier to attract high-quality students and staff, as well as operate with a global reach. In Medical Sciences, for example, are disciplines which have helped attract people to Newcastle University. Staying in contact with Alumni is also really important. We have a strong reputation in Singapore because many people who studied Marine Engineering at Newcastle University are now major international players in companies there.

*During your fifteen years at Newcastle University, which recruitment campaigns have stood out as being the most interesting or challenging?*

Being involved in academic appointments, particularly at professorial level, is always interesting. My role, besides being the HR professional in a panel and making sure that the process is appropriate and effective, is to ask questions around leadership qualities, interpersonal skills and other soft skills, to complement the academic assessment. Some of the most challenging campaigns are at the boundaries between academia and commerce or business, where you are looking for someone who has an understanding of academia, but also has worked outside academia in industry. These are rare

individuals and difficult to find. It's a privilege, I think, to be involved in those appointments.

*What attracted you to Newcastle University and why should other people consider joining the organisation?*

It brought several aspects of my career together. I had been an HR professional, I had lectured in Human Resource Management and had also recently been a student, studying towards an MBA. I think what's kept me here beyond the two years that I planned to stay, is the really interesting and dynamic culture as well as the challenge of being responsible for the wellbeing of five thousand employees, with different interests. Our employees have a wide range of specialised skills from the clinical consultants to the farming staff and the gardeners to the technicians. We also have twenty apprentices working for us at the moment and we're hoping to hire more soon. Not many organisations give you that sort of variety, especially when you add in the international diversity and different campuses and locations – in the UK and overseas - too. I think a lot of people fail to recognise that the University isn't just an institution of education; when you employ 5000 staff it is important to be recognised as a forward thinking employer. That's an attractive factor for any HR professional when deciding whether or not to join an organisation.

*What keeps you interested outside of work?*

Last year, I was elected Chair of Universities HR (UHR), a network of HR professionals across

the HE sector. UHR is all about promoting good practice in HR, raising the profile of HR across the HE sector and promoting Continuous Professional Development for HE HR professionals. We also run an annual national conference and awards ceremony. We hope by pooling resources we are able to support professionals in the sector, give them a voice regionally and nationally and help improve their development and progression. From a personal perspective most of my family are also in the North East. I was brought up on a farm in Northumberland and I still have very strong connections here. Gardening is my other passion. I get an enormous amount of satisfaction from developing something and watching it grow. I find it really therapeutic.

*Where do you look to for inspiration?*

At Newcastle University I was responsible for introducing an induction program for new professors, where they must give a brief presentation to each other on what their research and teaching plans are, as well as their aspirations. It's always inspiring to hear what each new member of staff is trying to achieve and the impact they hope their research will have, or is having, on other human beings. If I had to choose one particular person at the University as being a constant source of inspiration, it would be Emeritus Professor John Goddard OBE. He's very passionate about the 'Civic University' and what the University can contribute to the city and the region. He has also been very supportive of HR. You need people like that to rely on in such a big complex organisation.



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