

NUAcT Fellowships: Open Call 2019

Updated Chairs' Report

Introduction

The first Open Call of the NUAcT Fellowship scheme was launched in January 2019, and we welcomed applications in any discipline aligned to research strengths at Newcastle. The call was open for 8 weeks, with a submission deadline of March 10th.

This first round attracted enormous interest, with over 700 applications being received (with 637 of these being complete and undergoing evaluation). Applicants included candidates with a diverse range of backgrounds from 69 different countries, with 83% being external to Newcastle University. We note that women were under-represented amongst the applicants, and we will seek to further increase diversity in the pool of applicants for the next round (see Appendix 1). At the end of the selection process, 21 fellowship offers were made (a list of current Fellows can be found on the [NUAcT website](#)).

Selection process

There were five evaluation panels to cover the different disciplines: Arts and Humanities (AAH), Engineering and Technology (EAT), Economic and Social Science (ESS), Medicine and Biological Sciences (MBS), and Physical and Natural Sciences (PNS). Panels contained a Dean of Research, subject specialists, HR and EDI representatives, and were chaired by the Director of NUAcT or the Chair of the NUAcT Board. Details of the numbers at each stage of the process across the five panels are given below (percentages are relative to the total for each stage).

All applicants were evaluated against the scheme criteria (see Appendix 2), across three stages: longlisting, shortlisting and interview.

Longlisting was based on the one-page cover sheets, which included an overview of the project, CV highlights of the candidate, and fit to Newcastle. Successful applications at this stage were sent for full internal peer review by subject specialists, which helped inform the panel's decisions about which applicants should be shortlisted for interview. Interviews were spread over a period of six weeks: all candidates were invited to attend in person, or were offered a Skype interview if unable to attend.

Chairs' feedback and observations on the recruitment process

Overall, the panels were impressed by the number and quality of candidates which we were able to attract and appoint in the first round. Across the panels, there were a number of common themes that emerged that candidates may want to consider when preparing future applications.

It was felt that candidates would do well to pay particular attention to their one-page summary, since this was the only part of the application that was used to longlist applications for full peer review. The format of the one-page summary sheets was quite variable, but having clear sections addressing each of the three areas (project proposal, CV highlights and fit to Newcastle University) worked well. We'd advise applicants to clearly highlight their career achievements to date, evidencing their career trajectory (for example, dates of key career steps and/or PhD), and to present their project summary in a concise and accessible way that could be understood by people outside their immediate research area.

It was also clear that applicants varied in how much they had considered how well their research fitted to the strengths in Newcastle University, and the degree of contact that they had with researchers at Newcastle prior to making their application. It is advisable that candidates explore possible links at Newcastle prior to making their application, and think not just about the immediate research grouping they might work in, but also others that would facilitate interdisciplinary working.

The panels reviewed research proposals from a wide range of disciplines, and although specialist reviewing was sought around the innovation in the proposed project and strength of CV for the career stage and discipline, it was beneficial for the importance and novelty of the research to be conveyed to people outside the immediate discipline. Some proposals didn't appear to fit into a longer term research vision, and we'd advise applicants to convey how this project would lead to them becoming a leader in their chosen field beyond the lifetime of the fellowship.

There are no set criteria that mark a researcher as being ready to transition to independence, but panels took note of the applicants' career trajectory since PhD (including consideration of career breaks and/or health issues highlighted in confidence to the panel), evidence of developing ownership of their research, and a maturing vision of how the research fits into the wider discipline and beyond. It is worth noting that candidates invited for interview ranged from those just a couple of years out from their PhD to junior lecturers. Research assistants should try to demonstrate their intellectual and academic independence from their current host group, and build a picture of how their career choices so far have helped them develop their own research that could open up new thinking in their area.

In the project proposal, it was helpful for the panel to be able to see a clear line of work that would be undertaken during the project, including the applicant's approach to developing and supervising the PhD project. In particular, a clear idea of how the project would develop over the 5 years, and what funding opportunities would be targeted allowed panel members to see the feasibility and ambition of the research being proposed.

The workplace culture statement was an opportunity for applicants to demonstrate their commitment to and support for a positive working environment, and equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI). Overall, the panel noted a number of shortcomings in these statements, including a lack of clarity of what constituted EDI, and what actions applicants have taken or would take to address EDI issues that they were aware of. Applicants are encouraged to ensure that this section focuses on how they would improve EDI in the workplace, ideally building on their past involvement in EDI initiatives.

Interviews gave applicants an opportunity to give a 7-minute vision about their NUAcT Fellowship, before answering questions from the panel about their research, their approach to leadership and career development, and contributions to workplace culture. As an academic track scheme, where successful fellows will become tenured academics after 5 years, the panels looked for responses that were aligned to the University's core values and strategic ambition, and considered how the fellow would develop their research and career at Newcastle. Panels were particularly inspired by candidates who made it clear that they will contribute beyond their own discipline and be proactive members of the researcher community at Newcastle. Applicants are advised to think about how they would support their own career, and those of students and colleagues, as well as positively contribute to EDI and a positive workplace culture.

Refining our selection process for the Open Call 2020

Following the 2019 Open Call recruitment round, we reflected on our outcomes and procedures, identifying what worked well and areas where we can improve our processes. This involved widespread consultation with a range of colleagues, including panel members and specialist reviewers, Heads of Unit, the NUAcT Board, the University's Equality, Diversity and Inclusion team, and colleagues in HR. Priorities highlighted were to improve guidance for candidates given their wide range of disciplines and backgrounds, consider how we increase applicant diversity through our advertising, and ensure that we remove the potential for any bias in the selection process wherever possible (although numbers are small, we were concerned that the proportions of women and BAME candidates at the offer stage were lower than at the application stage in this round). In response, we have altered the wording in our promotional materials that we hope will attract a more diverse applicant pool and will advertise through more targeted routes to better reach underrepresented groups. We are ensuring that all our reviewers and panel members have undertaken unconscious bias training, and will remove personal details wherever possible to minimise the potential for bias in recruitment. And we have restructured the summary sheet to help candidates highlight their strengths at the longlisting stage, providing more guidance around this and other sections of the application. More details about how to apply will be made available through the NUAcT website when the Open Call 2020 is launched in mid-January.

Prof Candy Rowe
Director of NUAcT

Prof Brian Walker
Pro-Vice Chancellor for Research Strategy and Resources, Chair of the NUAcT Board

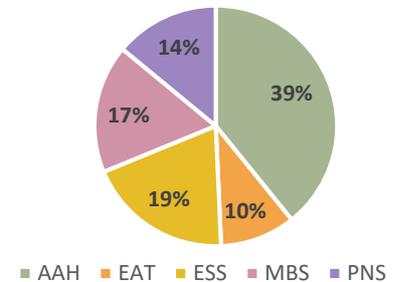
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Appendix 1: NUAct First Open Recruitment Call Outcomes

1. Number of applications in total by panel

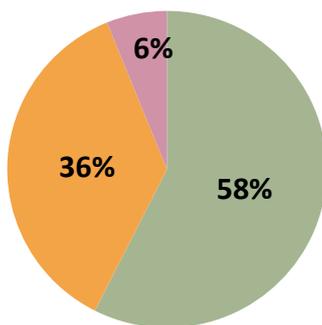
Panel	No. of complete applications
Arts and Humanities (AAH)	250 (39%)
Economic & Social Sciences (ESS)	124 (19%)
Medicine & Biological Sciences (MBS)	110 (17%)
Physical & Natural Sciences (PNS)	89 (14%)
Engineering & Technology (EAT)	64 (10%)
<i>Total no. of complete applications</i>	637

% of applications in each panel



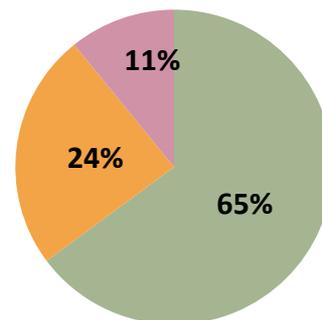
2. Representation of applicants by gender, ethnicity, disability and sexual orientation

Gender



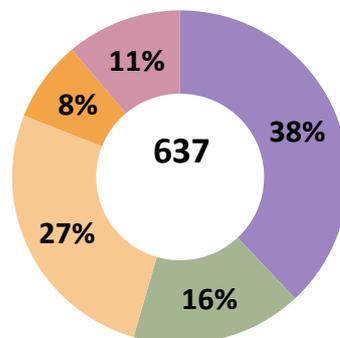
Male Female Prefer not to say

Ethnicity



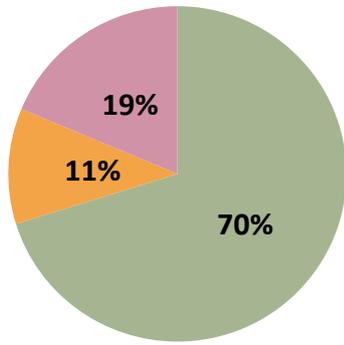
White BME Prefer not to say

Intersectionality (Ethnicity, Gender)



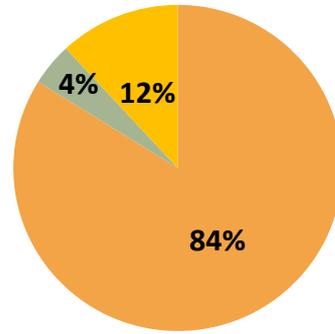
White, Male BME, Male White, Female BME, Female Prefer not to say

Sexual orientation



■ Heterosexual ■ LGBT+ ■ Prefer not to say

Declared disability



■ No ■ Yes ■ Prefer not to say

Appendix 2: NUAct Evaluation Criteria

Principal criteria	Specifically
Excellence and potential of candidate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Readiness for transition to independence • Excellent record of the researcher relative to their career stage • Evidence of independence and thought leadership • Trajectory considered to show potential to become a world class researcher • Potential to develop into 'rounded' academic, including delivery of research-led teaching
Excellence of proposed research	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Originality, significance and distinctiveness of planned research • Coherence of workplan with existing research at Newcastle University • Rigour and feasibility of proposed programme of work • Impact and engagement plans
Vision for future and contribution to Newcastle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identified future funding plans and fit to funder strategic priorities • Long-term research plans to maintain a distinctive and outstanding research programme • Contribution to and development of EDI and positive culture change • Contribution to research environment, e.g. mentoring, impact activities, partnership-building, motivation to contribute to NUAct cohort etc.