



“I quickly began to believe in myself”: Empowering professional services colleagues through professional recognition of their teaching and learning

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ABSTRACT

Addressing the challenges that Professional Service (PS) colleagues can face in attaining Advance HE recognition, this paper presents the initiatives undertaken at Manchester Metropolitan University to address this challenge. The paper outlines the approach used to raise awareness and demystify the process of Advance HE recognition. Both quantitative and qualitative data will be shared indicating the success and impact of the initiative, offering food for thought in how institutions encourage and engage PS staff to attain recognition. Using service data from the last five academic years, and research data gathered from a two-year institution-wide project into experiences of gaining Fellowship, this paper will reflect upon a dramatic increase in the number of colleagues from PS gaining Advance HE recognition.

Firstly, the paper will outline the steps we have taken to challenge hidden biases and assumptions that previously favored colleagues in academic roles. Secondly, the paper will detail a cohort approach to supporting whole areas of PS in these goals. Finally, the paper will document the headline figures around the growth of our PS colleagues gaining Advance HE Recognition. Across the past four academic years, approximately 37% of all awarded Fellowships (across all categories) have been to colleagues in PS roles. Data also reveals an evolution across the past four years where PS colleagues seeking Advance HE recognition have shifted from predominantly applying for Associate Fellowship to a more even spread across all categories of Fellowship in 2024/25.

By sharing the approaches taken and research into the experience of PS colleagues, it is hoped that colleagues in PS roles and colleagues with responsibilities for supporting PS colleagues to achieve recognition of their teaching and learning practice can take some of the lessons learnt and apply them to their own work.

Keywords: Professional recognition; reflective practice, professional standard framework, professional development

Introduction

At Manchester Metropolitan University, the awarding of Advance HE Fellowships is administered by a central academic development unit, as is commonplace in the higher education sector. This paper brings

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together a reflective account of how we in this academic development unit have grown the number of professional services (PS) colleagues gaining Advance HE recognition over five academic years. The paper will share the phases of development in this project over five academic years since 2020/21 and it will also present the data gathered that shows significant success in this area. Finally, the paper will share insights from a two-year research study, completed across the 2022/23 and 2023/24 academic years, exploring the experiences of PS colleagues working towards Advance HE professional recognition.

Sharing reflections with others, in our experience, can sometimes lead to presentation of overly positive experiences and accounts and we wanted to ensure this paper showed where the team has made mistakes to present a more realistic and honest account of practice. Therefore, the paper will reflect upon the missteps we have made, the challenges faced in this work, as well as the successes, and the role our own hidden assumptions or misgivings may have played in these moments.

Current debates in this area

Previous studies have shown that engagement with the Advance HE Fellowships scheme is associated with several tangible benefits for staff. For instance, Cathcart et al.'s (2021) study which explored the benefits of engaging with the Advance HE Fellowships highlights several key perceived advantages for educators. These include enhanced reflective practice, increased self-efficacy and professional identity, opportunities for career progression, as well as deeper engagement with the scholarly evidence base for learning and teaching, among others. In the same vein, Botham (2018) posits that engagement with the Fellowships scheme leads to positive change in a scheme applicant's perception of their practice and supports wider academic development of colleagues through mentorship and leadership. In addition, it is argued in the extant literature that the engagement with the Fellowships scheme enhances students' learning experience by improving the quality of teaching and learning (Matthews & Dobbins, 2021; Matthews & Pilkington, 2018). It is against this backdrop that universities across the UK and beyond are encouraging staff engagement with the Advance HE Fellowships scheme.

However, staff engagement with the Advance HE Fellowships scheme is not without its challenges. Although some higher education institutions have policies that require new staff to complete a Postgraduate Certificate programme that is accredited by Advance HE as part of a probationary requirement, in some cases staff struggle to engage successfully with this continuing professional development (CPD) activity due to the pressure of the need to either teach, apply for research funds or both (Gosling, 2010). It is important for staff to be allocated time to engage with the Fellowship scheme for their professional development. Literature also reports that in some cases, other staff may feel frustrated by what they perceive to be the erosion of their academic freedom if they are compelled to engage with the Fellowships scheme. This view is well captured by Smith (2016) who contends that educational developers might be accused of being obsessed with policing quality instead of improving it. Staff prefer to have a degree of autonomy rather than feeling compelled to comply without questioning the system (Roxå & Mårtensson, 2017).

There are few pieces of research, however, that specifically discuss professional services in relation to Advance HE Fellowships. However, the research that does exist finds similar positive impacts and barriers for PS colleagues (Ball & Ribchester, 2025; George & Rowland, 2019; Savage, 2019). Savage (2019) and Ball and Ribchester (2025) discuss the disparities between third-space and academic progressions pathways,

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with PS colleagues reporting a lack of career progression opportunities or pay rewards regardless of their engagement with Fellowship, and some challenges in how the language of the original UK Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF) may at times have been too tailored towards colleagues based in academic departments and programmes. However, in general, Fellowships are positioned as a way of PS colleagues establishing themselves as “legitimate contributors to the student learning experience” (Ball & Ribchester, 2025, p.7) and their roles as not only technical and supportive but as “pedagogic and intrinsic to the learning process” (George & Rowland, 2019, p.291).

Savage’s (2019) study of technical services colleagues in a creative arts university found that PS colleagues here could see the benefits of Fellowship for the university but less so for themselves. However, the four participants in Savage’s study found that gaining Fellowship did increase their ability to articulate and develop their teaching practice in the short term and offered a way of benchmarking their practice against sector expectations – a finding also reported in both Ball and Ribchester’s (2025) study and in George and Rowland’s (2019) short paper.

All papers above positioned Fellowships as a way of not only developing teaching practice but also of improving career prospects in an increasingly difficult sector (Ball & Ribchester, 2025; George & Rowland, 2019; Savage, 2019). George and Rowland encourage engaging in librarian-specific charterships, such as those offered by the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP), in addition to Fellowships as Advance HE provision has wider sector currency.

Savage (2019) and Ball and Ribchester (2025) note the importance of reducing barriers for PS colleagues by offering meaningful, bespoke training opportunities. Here, these CPD opportunities, such as the cohort approaches to be discussed in this paper, offer PS colleagues the chance to network professionally, to reflect upon and develop their practice and a form of investment (in time at least) from the university in them as educators.

Context of Advance HE recognition at Manchester Metropolitan University

The UK Professional Standards Framework (PSF) for teaching and supporting learning in higher education was originally launched in 2006, and later refined and amended in 2011, formalising the UKPSF (Bradley, 2022). The UKPSF crystallised four categories of Fellowship – Associate Fellowship; Fellowship; Senior Fellowship; and Principal Fellowship. Each of these categories has a specific focus and remit ranging from teaching and learning to local educational leadership and large-scale strategic leadership.

Manchester Metropolitan University has offered Fellowship in some form since 2005, when provision was accredited by the then-Higher Education Academy. Initial provision here offered Associate Fellowship via a taught route. Over time, as the number of categories of Fellowships has grown, so has the provision at Manchester Metropolitan University. We now offer professional recognition via a professional recognition route at all four categories of Fellowship – Associate Fellow, Fellow, Senior Fellow and Principal Fellow - and a taught route to gaining Fellow status (Descriptor 2). Both the recognition route and taught route have thrived over the past twenty years. However, as this paper will detail, the recognition route has seen a particular increase in the number of colleagues gaining Advance HE recognition over the past five years.

Our scheme is open to all colleagues with relevant experience, irrespective of whether they are in a professional services role or situated in an academic faculty. As the paper will later detail, this has always been the case, though our language has not always proactively welcomed or encouraged colleagues outside

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of traditional academic roles to apply. To support the above open offer, we offer workshops and information briefing webinars open to all colleagues at the university where they can learn more about the requirements of each category of Fellowship.

In 2023, Advance HE redeveloped the UKPSF into the Professional Standards Framework 2023 (PSF2023), placing a renewed and overt focus on practitioner effectiveness and inclusivity. In 2024/25 we transitioned successfully to PSF2023. However, the research data presented in this paper is from colleagues who were recognised against the UKPSF. As the data below shows, we have maintained strong engagement with professional services colleagues since moving to PSF2023, so the insights gained from the data will remain helpful to colleagues operating similar schemes and supporting similar colleagues to recognition.

A five-year journey

This paper shares reflections from a journey of making our scheme more proactively inclusive to eligible PS colleagues. The steps here represent a five-year process, covering phases of deliberate activity which will be discussed and reflected upon. The project aimed to widen the reach of our recognition scheme from being predominantly academic contracted colleagues to a more representative and inclusive scheme, and is summarised below:

Table 1 Overview of five-year process to make recognition scheme more inclusive

Phase	Academic year	Aim	Action
1	2020/21	Develop inclusive documents.	Review resources (documents and website) and edit any perceived language barriers.
2	2021/22	Design and test cohort-specific workshop.	Delivered pilot cohort approach to Technical Services (TS) colleagues
3	2022/23	Embed cohort-specific workshop into business-as-usual for TS and extend to other PS areas.	Establish TS Cohort work, extend pilot to Library Services
4	2023/24	Refine resources, extend workshop delivery to additional PS areas.	Extended delivery to include colleagues across Learner Development and Careers & Employability Services
5	2024/25	Manage growth, extend offer of Fellowship category.	Build capacity around high PS numbers, develop PS cohorts at Senior and Principal Fellow categories

In a slight deviation from how papers are normally presented, and to aid reflection and discussion throughout, we felt it useful to share the headline data on whether our efforts to engage Professional Services colleagues were successful in the early stages of this paper. Here, we felt that colleagues reading

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this work would benefit from knowing whether each phase of activity was successful, rather than waiting for a ‘big reveal.’ The table below shows a significant year-on-year growth of PS colleagues gaining Fellowship since 2020/21 (Table 2):

Table 2 Number and percentage of PS claims between 2020 and 2025

Academic year	Total of Fellowship applications made	Claims from PS colleagues (n)	Claims from PS colleagues (%)	Number of Fellowships awarded to PS	First time success percentage for PS
2020/21	36	2	6%	2	100%
2021/22	44	22	50%	22	100%
2022/23	95	33	34%	33	100%
2023/24	119	41	34%	40	98%
2024/25*	150	47	33%	37	89.5%

* This year includes some UKPSF Claims and PSF2023 claims as we transitioned to the new framework.

Table 1 shows the growth in the numbers of PS colleagues gaining Fellowship and the exponential growth of our scheme across the past four years. As the above shows, the strategies we are about to detail below have resulted in extremely high levels of first-time success for PS colleagues, all of which has been internally moderated and externally moderated by our external examiner. However, moving from the established UKPSF to the PSF2023 presented some transitional challenges around new criteria which resulted in a slight drop of first-time success rates across all categories of Fellowship and all contract types at our institution. However, we feel confident that this is corrected now and in 2025/26 (from October to February 2026 inclusive) we are operating at a 100% success rate overall for PS colleagues, suggesting we have navigated these transition points successfully. However, further evaluation is of course required on this period of transition, and is an area we are exploring for future research.

While the percentage of PS claims out of the total number of claims has not always risen accordingly, this has been due to a similar surge in interest in Advance HE accreditation at this university, particularly at Senior and Principal Fellow categories, for academic colleagues through overt links to Advance HE recognition in internal promotion processes. Alongside this we introduced a Senior Fellow by dialogue route which has proven to be immensely popular. Data regarding this was presented at the 2025 Advance HE Teaching and Learning Conference (Little et al., 2025) and will be detailed in further publications in due course. The next section of this paper will detail and reflect upon the concrete steps we took to achieve the above.

Phase I – Removing language barriers

In the 2020/21 academic year, the scheme co-leads evaluated the existing participant-facing documentation and websites for our accredited scheme and reflected that there was an unintentional framing of Associate Fellowship as for PS colleagues and the other three categories for colleagues located in academic roles. An example would be that only in the Associate Fellowship category documents and web content were PS colleagues explicitly named and then omitted from the other categories of Fellowship. Conversely Fellowship was equated to being a Lecturer, Senior Fellow with being a Senior Lecturer and Principal Fellow

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with being a Principal Lecturer. It is worth noting that at no point did any documentation say that PS colleagues could not work towards Fellow, Senior Fellow and Principal Fellow categories of Fellowship. Here, however, an unintentional exclusion by omission could be argued.

Once this was identified, the documents and website content for our accredited scheme were amended to remove references to specific academic or professional roles, focusing more on the relevant experience required to meet the criteria for the distinct categories of Fellowship. This change was noticed by PS leaders, and the scheme was meaningfully engaged with by a particular section of PS.

Phase 2 – The Professional Services cohort pilot

Having amended documentation to be more welcoming to PS colleagues in phase 1, scheme leads worked closely with technical services leaders to support colleagues in gaining Associate Fellow and Fellow status in the 2021/22 academic year. The Technical Services (TS) Development Manager wanted to ensure the teaching and learning expertise of their team was recognised as part of efforts towards the Technician Commitment (UK Institute for Technical Skills and Strategy, n.d.). Established in 2017, the Technician Commitment ensures that “Signatory institutions pledge to ensure the visibility, recognition, career development and sustainability of their technical staff”. Manchester Metropolitan is a signatory of this commitment.

Here, a tailored cohort approach was developed, based upon three workshops informed by experiences of writing retreats (Little, 2022; Murray & Newton, 2009; Paltridge, 2016) and academic reading retreats (Rhead, 2019). This was done in collaboration with the TS Development Manager, making best use of their insight into TS staff and how best to structure these sessions for maximum effect. Recent research from Ball and Ribchester (2025), noted earlier, also shows the benefits to ensuring training for PS colleagues is bespoke to them and their roles. In these sessions, participants focused on a different element of the portfolio application in each session, for example:

- Session 1 – completion of opening Biography statement and Grid of Professional Activities
- Session 2 – Completion of a written reflection focused on Area of Activity
- Session 3 – Completion of a second written reflection focused on Area of Activity

By participating in discussion and active learning strategies, TS colleagues would better understand the UKPSF Dimensions of Practice and the application requirements. These teaching strategies also always contained reflective and collaborative elements to encourage and support technical services colleagues towards meaningful reflective practice – this would better support their future applications. Sessions openly encouraged critical conversations about teaching and learning practices, as well as discussing which elements of the application colleagues were struggling with or finding easy to create a reflective atmosphere that would translate into their applications. By completing the three sequential sessions, technical services colleagues should, in theory at least, complete all elements of an Associate Fellowship application within the sessions with the expertise and support of the scheme co-lead with them in the room.

While we could only secure enough training time to support colleagues to complete the components of an Associate Fellow claim within the sessions, colleagues could opt to complete three more written reflections

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and work independently towards a Fellowship category application if they wished. Here, PS colleagues were provided with additional resources and asynchronous support to achieve this goal of Fellowship.

Interestingly, however, this option was rarely chosen in 2021/22 with most opting for Associate Fellow.

On reflection, at times we did not do enough to translate the language of the UKPSF. As one of Ball and Ribchester’s participants noted when discussing the UKPSF dimensions of Practice, “a lot of the language can feel a bit like it’s going over your head” (2025, p.8). The data would indicate that PS colleagues from technical services were not as experienced with reflective writing as other PS groups or with bringing educational research into their writing, which was a mandatory requirement of the UKPSF for Fellowship. During these early sessions, participants reported finding reflective writing especially challenging. They also found the peculiarities of the UKPSF and mapping the fifteen Dimensions of Practice challenging too. Here, we needed to reflect upon the sometimes-challenging language of the UKPSF criteria, and the tacit understandings of them that we have when experienced with Advance HE recognition.

Future sessions made discussions of these criteria more exploratory and ensured better understanding. An invaluable link we made was with other colleagues, such as James Davoll at Newcastle University, who also supported Technical Services staff to gain Advance HE recognition at his institution (Davoll & Spencer, 2021). James created a guide which translated the fifteen Dimensions of Practice into questions related to areas of Technical Services work. This proved to be a vital addition to future sessions, helping us to create a bridge between the day-to-day language of technical services work and the Advance HE Dimensions of Practice themselves.

Despite these early session design issues, across the 2021/22 academic year, 100% of technical services colleagues who finished their claims and submitted were successfully awarded their chosen category of Fellowship on first attempt with no claims referred for a resubmission, showing the effectiveness of provision for those who stayed with it.

The challenge then became about gaining a greater understanding of each cohort and tailoring the pace and teaching methods to them. The cohort approach was repeated twice in the 2021/22 academic year and has continued in each subsequent academic year. After each cohort, scheme leads reflect with the TS Development Manager on successes and challenges and redevelop the sessions for the next cohort. Consequently, each cohort has got iteratively more successful, gaining a higher number of cohort completers each time and, consequently, more Fellowships awarded to PS colleagues from TS. This work with TS has been celebrated in communications from Advance HE as an example of good practice (Kennerley, 2024).

Phase 3 – Spread to other Professional Service areas

In 2022/23, we began to share the successes of this work with TS internally in spaces such as Education Committees. This work was noticed by another PS area and scheme co-leads collaborated in the same way again to support the university’s team of academic liaison librarians to gain Fellowship through the same cohort approach. Here, the support of managers was crucial in giving these colleagues designated time to complete this work and backing in providing supporting statements. The crucial role of these Fellowship advocates cannot be overstated and echoes the findings of previous research (Ball & Ribchester, 2025; Savage, 2019).

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The same three session approach was taken, though, significantly, all colleagues here indicated a preference to complete a Fellow category claim rather than Associate Fellow, completing extra work outside of the taught sessions. Anecdotally, Library colleagues seemed more confident in reflective and academic writing, but some did need support and encouragement to ‘own’ their role as teachers, as opposed to a support service. This work was successful with 90% (n=16) of the academic liaison librarian team successfully gaining Fellowship status because of this cohort approach in the 2022/23 academic year.

This work continued into 2023/24 and was adapted and delivered to the University’s Learner Development and Careers and Employability Teams, with significant numbers gaining Fellowship status across the 2023/24 academic year. By the end of this academic year, 96 colleagues from Professional Services had been awarded some category of Advance HE Fellowship in the three academic years since this work began in earnest in 2021/22. This equates to an average of 32 PS Fellows per year, compared to the two PS awardees in the year before this work started.

Upon reflection, the same trend noticed in 2022/23 continued into 2023/24, with colleagues from Learner Development and Careers and Employability showing the same level of confidence and experience in writing reflectively. Many Careers and Employability colleagues, for example, engaged with additional postgraduate qualifications through organisations such as Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (AGCAS) that often involved reflective writing. Similarly, several colleagues from our Learner Development team had engaged with other forms of reflective accreditation such as Association of Learning Development in Higher Education (ALDinHE) Fellowship recognitions. As such, much of the work here was not in supporting colleagues to write reflectively but to understand how to translate their practice into something that aligned with the UKPSF 2011 criteria.

The tacit understanding of the scheme leads was not always perfectly translated into the languages of learning development or careers and employability education. At times, attempting to bridge the gap between the discursive perspectives of Advance HE to different organisations was not always easy and future sessions have taken this into consideration. Future sessions made use of supporting resources to help with this translation such as ALDinHE’s (2025) excellent mapping of learning development work, and their own accreditation, against the Advance HE PSF. Additionally, AGCAS provides some guidance in their Professional Pathways guidance (AGCAS, n.d.) that helps careers and employability specialists to locate their practice in relation to categories of Advance HE Fellowships. Further, George and Rowland’s (2019) guide to Fellowships for Librarians is another excellent resource in mapping disciplinary body requirements to the UKPSF. Utilising and signposting these resources have been essential in helping our colleagues to succeed.

Phase 4 – Extending the offer beyond Associate Fellow and Fellow

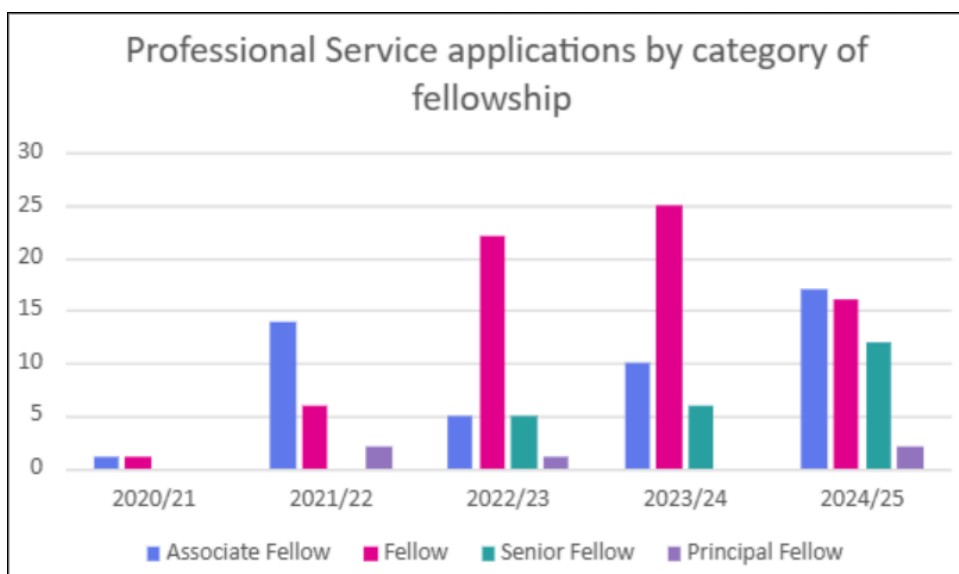
The summer of 2024 also saw the development of a similar cohort approach but targeted to Senior Fellowship criteria piloted with senior colleagues in the Careers and Employability service who had expressed an interest in this while completing their Associate Fellow and Fellow recognitions earlier in the year. Here, a small group of six colleagues who all held sufficient leadership and co-ordination roles in their teams were brought together to explore their leadership practice, following the same approach as the Associate Fellow and Fellow provision noted above but now focusing on Senior Fellowship criteria. All six were successful and several have since gone on to mentor others too, further enhancing the visibility of PS colleagues in the Fellowships scheme. With the growing visibility of PS in our Fellowship scheme, we now

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have strategic leaders from across the university, located in PS, who are beginning to work towards Principal Fellow too.

We feel that this also led to a broader reimagining of the categories of Fellowship as being open to all colleagues, PS or academic-contracted. This is reflected in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1 Professional Service applications by category of fellowship



This work has evolved from primarily returning successful Associate Fellowships for PS colleagues, to one that now offers a range of awards across all categories of Fellowship. Before offering fuller reflection on the above we will detail a research study which has run concurrent to this work across the 2022/23 and 2023/24 academic years before discussing research data in relation to the above.

The research study

Alongside the above, we have also been conducting a two-year study into the experiences of all colleagues who were awarded Fellowship of any category through our recognition route. Here we can share the research data specific to PS colleagues who have gained Advance HE recognition across the 2022/23 and 2023/24 academic years.

Institutional ethical approval was granted by the Science and Engineering Research Ethics and Governance Committee at Manchester Metropolitan University under application number: 55045. This was done to gather mixed-methods survey and interview data from colleagues across two academic years. Additionally, the study was conducted broadly in alignment with British Educational Research Association (2024) ethical guidelines. Surveys were created and administered via MS Forms, representing a free of charge tool familiar to our participants and one which would anonymise all responses at source. The survey tool contained both open qualitative questions and quantitative questions such as Likert scales – this was done to gain data that was both rich and easily presentable to key stakeholders. All survey requests were then sent out via the central academic development team’s role account and included project information sheets. Furthermore, the participant information sheet made it clear to participants that by submitting data to MS Forms, it

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would anonymise it at source and that this would be considered as informed consent. This information was reiterated on the first page of the survey itself too.

The survey request was sent to 214 colleagues who were successfully awarded Fellowships across the two academic years. We obtained 95 responses to the survey, representing a response rate of 44.4%. Of these responses, 24 were from PS colleagues, representing 11.2% of our complete sample. However, across the two-year period, 74 Fellowships were awarded to PS colleagues, so this 24 represents 32.4% of those PS colleagues who would have responded to the survey. While more respondents would always have been preferable, the research team still felt that data triangulation and saturation was appropriately met.

Data were analysed by three members of the research project team independently, following Braun and Clarke’s (2006) process of data analysis before coming together to discuss and agree common codes and thematic groupings which will be discussed below.

Findings

Across the two-year study, PS colleague’s responses revealed recurrent themes around their experiences of working in a cohort, the importance of informal mentorship and professional recognition as a validation of their educational impact. These findings will now be explored below with illustrative quotes and reflected upon in further detail thereafter.

Experiences of working in a cohort

Across the two years of the study, there was a 96% satisfaction rating for the process of gaining Fellowships which indicates a strong endorsement of the approaches detailed above. The design of the cohort sessions, the focus on writing during the sessions and the inclusion of writing space were noted as key strengths of our approach:

Working as a group helped as we could support each other and share resources. Having shut up and write sessions scheduled keeps everyone on track. (22/23 respondent, Fellow)

Here the ‘shut up and write’ style of the sessions, combined with moments of group work, instruction and discussion created the supportive environment that was originally intended:

Brilliant initial workshop [...] It got us to dive straight in and to start to write - even though this was hard, it was what we needed to get started. (23/24 respondent, Fellow)

The practical nature of these writing retreat-style sessions was also noted with respondents highlighting that they “liked working on the applications with colleagues and the support and encouragement we got from scheme leads” (22/23 respondent, Fellow). Here, a bespoke, community-focused approach was beneficial and impactful. This is broadly in-line with the findings of Savage (2019) and Ball and Ribchester (2025), whose studies highlighted in other settings just how crucial bespoke training can be for momentum in completing applications, personal confidence and professional networking.

The importance of informal mentorship

Mentorship is an integral part of professional recognition pathways like these (Ball & Ribchester, 2025; Spowart et al., 2019) and is a core part of our accredited provision. However, prior to our reaccreditation to

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PSF2023, mentorship was a strongly encouraged but not mandatory part of the process. As such, many participants did not agree a formal mentor, but used the sessions for informal mentorship from those around them and from the scheme leads present:

The support and encouragement we got from X. His conviction that we would have no problem achieving Fellowship status was the catalyst I needed. (22/23 respondent, Fellow)

Here, in-session, informal mentorship meant that developmental feedback could be provided, and questions could be answered whilst writing Fellowship applications, building a confidence-building and supportive space for applicants.

However, many did utilise in-session support and informal mentoring, and work with a formal mentor outside of these sessions. Here, again, their experiences were also excellent:

I felt very supported throughout the process. My mentor (Y) was very experienced and was able to offer the right advice and guidance as well as holding me accountable to ensure momentum when there was periods away from the application. (22/23 respondent, Senior Fellow)

Respondents often noted how well-trained mentors complemented the in-session activities and cohort approach: “The process was genuinely enjoyable with a great level of support from both my mentor and the team” (23/24 respondent, Senior Fellow). Our mentors are giving an initial induction training and then regular updates and communications from scheme leads, with many acting as assessors on the scheme too to enhance their working knowledge. Both Savage (2019) and George and Rowland (2019) note the value of engaging in deep reflection that PS colleagues gain from engaging with Fellowships, and a fully formed mentorship approach promotes this level of reflection.

Additional quantitative data tells an interesting story regarding mentorship and guidance. While very few of the 2022/23 participants, primarily from Technical Services, engaged in formal mentorship, 90% of these respondents indicated that they had a formal mentor when submitting applications. Our scheme does not mandate standardised requirements of the mentorship process, appreciating the diversity of our mentors and applicants, but many typically offer regular meetings and feedback on drafts, negotiated on a case-by-case basis. Here, respondents referred to the scheme leads specifically and saw their role, through the taught sessions as formal mentorship, despite the scheme leads not acting in this capacity formally. Conversely, just 40% of respondents in 2023/24, who chiefly consisted of Learning Development and Careers & Employability colleagues, noted a formal engagement with mentorship. These participants referred to scheme leads as guides, and noted clarity of processes and documents more, despite having the same processes and cohort approaches.

Recognition as a validation of their educational impact

Earlier, we noted how research focused on PS experiences of gaining Fellowship had noted how Fellowship is often used to benchmark and legitimise the position of PS colleagues in teaching and learning (Ball & Ribchester, 2025; George & Rowland, 2019; Savage, 2019). The process of critically reflecting upon their identities as educators and the value they bring to the university was noted as incredibly rewarding, if not always easy. Across both years of this study, this same finding was found, with colleagues noting how Fellowships created space to critically value their role in teaching and learning:

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I quickly began to believe in myself and to embrace the sheer amount of teaching and learning work I have been engaged in, and to appreciate the gleaned experiences and learning. (22/23 respondent, Fellow)

Overwhelmingly, respondents noted that “I enjoyed taking the time to reflect on my practice and explore current literature around the topic areas to keep up to date with my work” (23/24 respondent, Fellow). Here, we found that in addition to gaining the recognition itself, the process of reflecting upon practice and identifying their own role in providing excellent education was a transformative process for colleagues. Colleagues noted how engaging with the sessions and gaining recognition built confidence and encouraged critical reflection:

I found the application process very rewarding and (dare I say it) enjoyable. It felt good to celebrate past achievements whilst also acknowledging my personal learning curve and those occasions where more effective solutions could have been employed to enhance particular learning situations. (22/23 respondent, Fellow)

However, not all colleagues had the same experience. Particularly in the 2022/23 academic year, featuring primarily Technical Services colleagues gaining their recognitions, a notable number of respondents reported finding reflection challenging and more time-consuming than they thought it would be:

The process took longer than expected but it was an enjoyable experience in the end. (23/24 respondent, Senior Fellow)

Here some respondents noted that it “wasn't as easy as I'd been told it was, but I'm glad I did it!” (22/23 respondent, Fellow). We reflected earlier that those first few cohorts of Technical Services colleagues in Phase Two, reported in sessions finding reflective writing more onerous than they expected, and that scheme leads found tailoring these sessions occasionally more challenging than they also expected. This was borne out in the data gathered in the study as these comments about finding the reflective process challenging was only reported by those who gained recognition in 2022/23. This finding was not present in the 2023/24 respondents.

We now reflect upon the above findings and discuss consideration and recommendations for colleagues in similar roles.

Discussion

As the findings show, all colleagues noted that they had a positive experience of mentorship, whether this was a formal arrangement or informal through the taught sessions and guidance from scheme leads, tying in with recent studies which explore mentorship and professional recognition. For example, Davidson (2022) noted the mutually beneficial process of a mentee-mentor relationship as a space for sharing good practice and critical reflection. Recent autoethnographic research by Toogood (2025) also advocates for the significant impact of mentors in preparing a Fellowship claim. This aligns with wider scholarship on professional recognition schemes which conceptualises mentorship not solely as a formal one-to-one relationship, but as a relational and dialogic practice embedded within institutional CPD provision (Davidson, 2022; Matthews & Dobbins, 2021).

However, as also discussed above, the difference in self-reported engagement with mentorship differs across the two cohorts, with 90% of the 22/23 cohort stating they had engaged in mentorship, to just 43%

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in the 2023/24 cohort. Differences in engagement with mentorship across cohorts can be understood in relation to career stage and familiarity with institutional development processes, a pattern noted in studies of CPD and Fellowship engagement which highlight uneven ‘process knowledge’ among participants (Botham, 2018; Gosling, 2010). In this sense, reduced engagement with mentorship among less established colleagues reflects well-documented patterns in early-stage CPD engagement, where optional developmental support is less readily taken up until greater institutional familiarity and confidence are established (Botham, 2018; Gosling, 2010). This drop is even more interesting when one considers additional demographic data showing the difference between these two cohorts in terms of their length of time working at the university.

Those who responded from the 2022/23 group (n=10) were longer-serving members of the university with 8 out of 10 respondents having 8 years’ service or longer at the University. In this sample, these colleagues tended to be from Technical Services and the Library. Previous research with technical and library staff engaging in Fellowship has highlighted the importance of institutional experience in navigating recognition processes and interpreting support roles such as mentoring (George & Rowland, 2019; Kennerley, 2024). Respondents from the 2023/24 academic year (n=14) differed significantly from the above. Respondents here had less time working at the university with 57% having 7 years or less time working here. These colleagues tended to be from Careers and Employability or from Learner Development.

So here we see more established colleagues reporting more engagement with mentorship, or identifying session guidance as mentorship, versus those who had not been at the university for as long who reported a far lower engagement with formal mentorship. Here, we reflect that this indicates one of two possibilities.

In the case of the 2022/23 respondents, we naturally reflect positively that colleagues felt the support and guidance within the sessions was received as a form of formal mentorship. However, with these respondents seeing session leads as their mentors more frequently, they may have stopped themselves from looking beyond the sessions and having the more traditional one-to-one experience of mentorship with one of our trained mentors. This finding reflects literature which suggests that mentors in professional recognition contexts often operate as ‘literacy brokers’, supporting applicants’ understanding of genre, expectations, and process knowledge through embedded guidance rather than exclusively through formal mentoring relationships (Heron & Corradini, 2019). These respondents all gained positive outcomes regardless, so this is not a cause for concern for us, but something to be mindful of in future work here.

Conversely, the 2023/24 respondents reported much lower engagement with formal mentorship, indicating that they either did not go beyond the session and work with a formal mentor, or identify the guidance and support in sessions as mentorship. This variation in how support practices are recognised echoes broader findings in academic development literature that developmental work is often implicit, interpreted locally, and unevenly named, depending on professional role and institutional positioning (Smith, 2016). Again, the same considerations regarding highlighting the benefits of formal one-to-one mentorship should be taken into account here. Interestingly, however, these respondents reported no challenges in engaging in critical reflection and a higher number of comments about finding the process a form of validation of their professional educational impact. These respondents also reported shorter time periods of working for the university. So here, we could infer that these PS disciplines of Careers & Employability and Learner Development report more confidence in critically reflective recognition schemes like this, over a shorter period, possibly due to the ways in which organisations like ALDinHE and AGCAS already engage with Advance HE. This interpretation is supported by research suggesting that professional services disciplines

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with established external recognition pathways may engage with Fellowship schemes as affirming and validating practices, rather than as sites requiring intensive mentoring support (Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services, n.d.; Association of Learning Development in Higher Education, 2025; Ball & Ribchester, 2025; Toogood, 2025;).

Heron and Corradini’s (2019) study across two universities assert the importance of mentors acting as experienced Fellows, but also as “literacy brokers” (p.970). Our findings also resonate with wider literature on the affective and affirmative dimensions of professional recognition, where mentoring—formal or informal—supports confidence, professional identity, and a sense of belonging within the institution (Cathcart et al., 2021; Spowart et al., 2019). Here, mentorship plays an integral role in exploring and clarifying ‘process knowledge’ required for schemes such as Fellowship (Heron & Corradini, p.972). Our study aligns with these findings, and with the findings mentioned by Davidson (2022) and Toogood (2025), whether in formal mentorship or in-session ad-hoc mentorship. Here, PS applicants across the duration of this ever-evolving series of interventions have noted the “affirmative nature” of the mentor-mentee relationship (Heron & Corradini, 2019, p.978).

Reflections and recommendations

Advance HE recognition is one way to acknowledge the invaluable contribution that PS colleagues make to the student experience and to educational leadership. As one participant noted: “I’d encourage as many PS colleagues to undertake it as possible, it’s a brilliant way to recognise the excellence in teaching and learning present” (23/24 participant, Senior Fellow).

As we reflect upon the project detailed above there is clear pride in the work we have done to make Advance HE recognition more accessible to PS colleagues from across the university. However, as noted, we have also learnt some valuable lessons along the way. As such we have the following recommendations for colleagues looking to explore similar work at their institutions:

- **Recommendation 1** – Language matters. Examine your outward facing web pages and documentation and ask who they are written for, who they might omit and how you can change that.
- **Recommendation 2** – Use existing resources. Engage with groups like ALDinHE, and AGCAS who have wonderful resources correlating those disciplinary practices with the PSF2023.
- **Recommendation 3** – Understand it is a long journey. Over the past two years in particular, we have been sharing each year with Heads of PS areas, and Heads of Faculties the names of those successfully awarded Fellowships via emails and internal newsletters, and have shared these findings at conferences and Advance HE events. However, even after almost five years of working in this area, sharing the successes of PS colleagues across our university, and in the wider sector, we still have pockets of PS space at our university where Advance HE recognition is understood to be only for academic-contracted colleagues and we of course are working to change those perceptions too.

As we continue to move forward with PSF2023, we now know with confidence that a considerable number of Advance HE applications will be from PS colleagues. We now plan to continue the growth of PS representation in Senior and Principal Fellow recognition over the next few years too.

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Biographies

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Appendix – Survey instrument

Survey questionnaire PSF at Manchester Metropolitan University 2023-2024

We are conducting some research at Manchester Metropolitan University into the experiences of applicants at all AdvanceHE Fellowship levels. You have been invited because of your recent engagement with the PSF process. Your participation is voluntary. This information will be used to help improve Manchester Met’s professional recognition scheme and we may also potentially use some of the anonymised feedback in published outputs or conference papers. This research project has been reviewed by the Science and Engineering Ethics Committee. If you need further information on this project please contact Valeria Vargas, v.vargas@mmu.ac.uk in the first instance.

Survey

1. What is your gender? (if you prefer not to say, please leave blank)
2. What is your ethnicity? (if you prefer not to say, please leave blank)
3. How long have you worked in higher education?
4. What is your job title?
5. Which faculty or area of the university are you from? (Options: Faculty of Arts and Humanities; Faculty of Business and Law; Faculty of Health and Education; Faculty of Science and Engineering; Professional Services; Other)
6. What is the name of your department(s)/school(s)? Please write in full.
7. Which level of AdvanceHE Fellowship did you apply for? (Options: Associate Fellow; Fellow; Senior Fellow; Principal Fellow)
8. Which route did you take? (Options: Written; Live Presentation; Pre-recorded Presentation; Professional Dialogue – Senior Fellow only)
9. Why did you decide on this route?
10. Did you have a mentor during your application? (Options: Yes, No)
11. On a scale of 1-5, how satisfied were you with your experience of the AdvanceHE Fellowships recognition scheme? (Options: Very satisfied; Somewhat satisfied; Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied; Somewhat dissatisfied; Very dissatisfied)
12. Do you have any further feedback about your experience of applying for your fellowship?
13. Do you have any further feedback about your experience of participating in the scheme?
14. If you are interested in participating in an interview to discuss in more detail the topics in the questions above, please provide your name and your email address (this information **will not** be used for analysis purposes)