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Foreword

If you’re reading this report, then the chances are you either work in higher education development or you take an interest in how it works. We’ve worked in the sector as consultants and practitioners for several years, and we’re also keenly interested in how it works.

This was one of the reasons why we donated to 15 UK universities in 2017. We noted how we were thanked and welcomed as new non-alumni donors, and even though some universities got the basics right, a third of those sampled didn’t thank us at all. Among many of the universities we sampled it was common to experience poor customer service, arduous online giving journeys, and irrelevant follow-up communications.

When we’ve described these experiences to front-line development practitioners, they’re often clear about where improvements could (and should) be made. They’re also familiar with the reasons why excellent donor experiences are important, and this report shows there’s no dispute about the significance of the donor experience in our sector. But if practitioners know what to do and why it needs to be done, then why did our mystery shopping exercise turn up such underwhelming results?

The sector has grown and professionalised, and now it needs to change again

Our mystery shopping exercise shows what it might feel like to make a small donation to a university. Elsewhere, we’ve championed the virtues of reviewing and improving the donor experience and shared our research on what a good donor experience consists of. But our conversations with practitioners have shown how knowledge and motivation are only part of the picture: leadership, culture, organisational structure, process, and technology hinders even the most seasoned of development professionals. Reflecting on this, we decided to look more closely at the context within which many development professionals are working today.

We agree with the fundraising think tank Rogare when they recommended that “ fundraisers ought to apply the same relationship building mechanisms they attempt with their donors to the relationships they have with their colleagues”. We felt that by closely involving higher education fundraising professionals throughout this unique research project, we could address a serious gap in our understanding of how our sector works: namely, what happens when practitioners take their knowledge of good practice and seek to apply it.

What is the sector we’re talking about here?

Higher education development as we know it has existed on this side of the Atlantic for just under 40 years (despite a much longer history of philanthropy within our universities), and by some estimates there are around 3,000 people working in it in the UK today. The catalyst for our sector’s establishment was the need for diversification of higher education income, and in the 1980s the initial hurdle was convincing institutions and their leadership that investing in fundraising was a good idea. As things progressed, we participated in exchange programmes with North America, and in a continued effort to professionalise during the 1990s we established conferences and professional associations.

As the sector got itself going, the government began to take notice. In response to reports calling for a stronger culture of philanthropy at universities, greater investment in fundraising, and increased professionalisation, the Department of Education and Skills and the Higher Education Funding Council for England ran matched-investment and matched-giving schemes from 2005 to 2011, aiding the sector’s growth enormously.

These days our sector is collectively raising around £1 billion a year, which is both a magnificent milestone and an appropriate point to bring our focus to new areas. Recent developments that have also prompted a change in focus include:

- In 2011, the Wolf Report raised important questions about ethical gift acceptance in universities.
In the summer of 2015, the death of poppy-seller Olive Cook and subsequent media interest prompted scrutiny of fundraising practices in general, with the Etherington report advocating increased regulation.7

Seeking to constructively address the falling levels of public trust in charities, the Commission on the Donor Experience was formed and later published their findings on fundraising best practices in 2017.8

Changes to data protection regulation also came into effect in 2018, requiring reflection on audience expectations in relation to the use of their data.9

While our sector has spent decades focused on professionalisation and on growth, the events above compel us to shine a spotlight on the needs of audiences – and that’s what we’re beginning to see. HE fundraisers are more interested than ever in how their work affects the reputation of their organisations, the satisfaction of their donors, and the sustainability of their fundraising programmes. As we increase our knowledge and skills it’s only natural that we seek to innovate, to question the status quo, and to further improve our practices for the benefit of our donors, alumni, volunteers, and advocates.

We have presented some simple, yet useful findings in this report

In 2018 we launched this HE Donor Experience research study, a study designed to help those who are looking outward, keen to understand how they can provide greater value to their audiences, and crucially, how they can make long-term changes and improvements stick. We reflected on the central question – ‘what holds us back from delivering outstanding donor experiences?’ – and we spoke to practitioners working in UK higher education development offices about their activities, plans and challenges as they tried to achieve donor satisfaction. Participation in this study has been staggering, reflecting the importance of the subject matter to those working in the sector.

What we have discovered through this exercise is simple, but nonetheless significant

If you’re prioritising activities that create dialogue with audiences, building responsibility and accountability for the donor experience into your team structure, and measuring the quality of the donor experience, you are likely to be helping a donor-centred culture to flourish. Conversely, if your team remains distant from its donors, responsibility for the donor experience is unclear, and the team is incentivised primarily by philanthropic income, you will be at risk of delivering poor quality donor experiences.

There is much more to this report than this summary could ever do justice, and I would encourage you to delve into the detailed findings and case studies if you are interested in pursuing a more donor-centred strategy and culture.

We have also noted several areas that require additional research. One such area is a possible link between a donor-focused team culture and staff engagement, as suggested by our depth interviews. While many involved in this project have spoken eloquently about the positive relationship that they believe exists between excellent donor experiences and philanthropic income, there would be even more of a case to invest in these experiences if it could also help address issues with staff turnover and keep talented fundraisers within our industry.

This has been a team effort

While Holly Palmer Consulting has provided the research expertise, the project has been steered by an enthusiastic Research Advisory Board who have made sure the insights presented are pertinent to current sector issues and useful to practitioners. I’d like to thank all of you on the Board for your encouragement, intelligent debate, challenging feedback, and excellent hospitality throughout the project.

I am also enormously grateful to Qualtrics who provided our survey software, and Fowlam Ltd who sponsored our prize incentives. Both organisations have helped promote the study and have shared their expertise in this report.
I would also like to thank the practitioners and institutions mentioned within this report who have kindly shared with us their stories to serve as inspiration to others. Your ideas and wisdom bring the report to life and we feel honoured to showcase your work to the wider sector.

Ken Burnett, one of the founders of the Commission on the Donor Experience, encouraged us to embark on this journey and kept us going when we began to falter. We can’t thank him enough – not just for what he’s done for us, but for fundraising as a whole.

Lastly, this report is dedicated to our research participants who volunteered their time for depth interviews and surveys, who promoted the survey widely, and who joined us to discuss the issues raised by the early research findings at the 2018 CASE Regular Giving and Development Services conferences. The impact of this report is down to your enthusiasm, thoughtful reflections and candidness. We can’t thank you enough.

Over to you!
We hope that the findings will be used by leadership in the sector to reflect on and work to remove some of the barriers to excellent donor experiences that may exist in their institutions.

We also hope that this report inspires discussion and debate within development teams and among leadership within the wider sector. This is not the final word on the subject, and we hope to see many more blogs, articles and industry research studies address issues relating to the HE donor experience in years to come.

We have made the anonymised survey data set and a Tableau visualisation of the full results available to anyone who wishes to further interrogate the survey findings. We encourage practitioners and sector suppliers alike to create their own interpretations of the data and share these with their teams, clients and subscribers.

If you have any questions or would like to discuss the implications of this study for your team, please don’t hesitate to get in touch with us here at Holly Palmer Consulting (now Omri Insight, as we have shifted our base to New Zealand) or with any of the Research Advisory Board members. We’d only be too happy to help.

And so, over to you!

- Holly Palmer, Holly Palmer Consulting
June 2019

References
The Higher Education Donor Experience Research Project had three primary objectives:

1. To investigate UK development professionals’ attitudes towards donors and the donor experience through qualitative and quantitative research
2. To identify barriers that staff face when making changes to improve the donor experience
3. To formulate a series of practical recommendations that will assist the industry to improve the current standard of donor care

The qualitative phase of the research, which took place in July 2018, consisted of depth interviews with 16 UK higher education development professionals. It uncovered in detail the way the donor experience is conceptualised and evaluated, how teams typically work to review and address issues with the donor experience, and what eases the process of making changes.

In October 2018 all UK higher education development professionals were then invited to complete our online survey. Having identified three themes that emerged from the qualitative phase, we used the survey to test the prevalence of these ideas across the sector, and included questions about audience research, staff engagement, and professional development.

We have also benefited from insights beyond the interviews and the survey. We were invited to present about our project at two recent CASE conferences (Development Services in October 2018 and Regular Giving in December 2018), where we led discussions about the themes and findings of our study.

In addition, our Research Advisory Board of current and recent UK higher education development practitioners have consistently challenged our assumptions and contributed their own thoughts and ideas to this report.
Part 1: What we found

The main event
Executive Summary

1. There is a lack of formal structure in place to support a focus on the donor experience

Despite a shared understanding that a good donor experience is vital to increased and sustainable philanthropic support for our institutions, we aren’t commonly measuring the quality of the donor experience and we haven’t made sure responsibility and accountability is clear. All the practitioners we spoke to in the qualitative phase of the research defined and discussed the benefits of a good donor experience with ease and enthusiasm; indeed 92% of our survey respondents said that the donor experience was something that was discussed at their institution. However, less than a third (32%) of the respondents to the survey said their office measures the donor experience in some way, 45% said their office hadn’t sent a survey to donors in the last 2 years, and 59% said their office hadn’t conducted any focus groups with donors over the same period. As the leading way of measuring the donor experience in our sector is donor feedback and surveys, we would expect these percentages to be much higher. Perhaps contributing to this lack of measurement is a lack of oversight - 27% of the respondents to our survey said that no one is ultimately accountable for the donor experience at their institution, and a further 20% said they don’t know if anyone is.

2. We aren’t involving donors in decisions that affect them

When describing their processes, our qualitative interview participants rarely mentioned seeking the views of donors prior to making decisions about donor events, communications or recognition programmes. Given the requirement to understand reasonable audience expectations when it comes to the use of data under GDPR, we were surprised that only 12% of respondents to the survey said their office had conducted audience research when drafting their privacy notice. We also found in the survey that it is unusual for the views of stakeholders other than high-level donors and high-level prospective donors, volunteers, staff and consultants to be involved in campaign planning, even though these campaigns are typically aimed at broad alumni (non-donor) and smaller-gift donor audiences.

3. Most development practitioners are working on improving the donor experience at their institutions

Many development practitioners are aware of their institution’s shortcomings and most are doing their best to continuously improve regardless of their perceptions of the current offer. 85% of respondents to the survey have plans to improve the donor experience this year, and most agree that it’s likely that those improvements will be made.

4. Resourcing is the biggest barrier to improving the donor experience

Additional resourcing is cited by survey respondents as the number one thing that would help them to provide a better donor experience, and a lack of resource is the number one reason why practitioners say the donor experience isn’t being measured.

5. As a sector we are relatively open to audience research

Most of our research participants were in agreement that research can add considerable value and is also one of the only methods available to measure the donor experience holistically. Barriers to entering into research dialogue with donors are unlikely to include misconceptions about the value of research to development, beyond some lingering concern that it is difficult to translate research insight into action.
Who was involved?

In June 2018 we invited the higher education development sector to be involved in the first phase of our research, consisting of a series of telephone depth interviews with practitioners. We were encouraged to see 38 professionals expressing an interest in being interviewed. After careful consideration we chose 16 participants based on several criteria, including:

- Length of service: we spoke with newcomers to the industry as well as seasoned professionals
- The number of HE institutions worked for: similarly, we spoke with practitioners who were able to compare experiences across institutions, as well as those familiar with just the one
- Job role: when asking for participants we stressed that the study wasn’t just focused on donor relations teams, so we were lucky enough to also speak with practitioners working in regular giving, alumni relations, operations, and major gifts
- Seniority: we suspected that perspectives on the donor experience might differ based on seniority, so we included those working in officer-level positions as well as managers, directors, and area directors
- Institution type: we spoke with practitioners based in institutions across various Mission Groups: the Russell Group, Million+, University Alliance, Oxbridge, and one specialist institution
- Institution location: we spoke with those working in institutions based in London as well as plenty based elsewhere in the UK. In fact, we spoke with people working in institutions based in England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland

The interviews themselves took place throughout July 2018, and each typically lasted for an hour. Each participant was asked to sign a consent form and the interview was recorded. This recording was accessible only to the researchers involved and the participants remain anonymous within this report.

Depth interview findings

Below is a summary of the depth interview findings by question.

How would you define “the donor experience”?

- It’s often defined by a timespan, though there’s little agreement on when that commences. Some claim it starts with the first point of contact (which might be when alumni begin their studies or after they graduate), whilst others claim it starts later: when cultivation begins, or when they’re first asked for money, or even after they agree to donate. Several participants also talked about when or if the donor experience ends: some claim it doesn’t (unless the donors themselves say it has), but others saw it as cyclical in that it re-commences after a donor makes another gift (one participant described it as a helix).

- In addition to focusing on the timespan involved in defining the donor experience, several participants described it as a journey – sometimes one with “tangible benefits”. To some, that journey encompasses every interaction between the university and the donor (or, as one participant put it, “it’s everything we do”), whilst others listed specific components such as events, impact reports, and e-newsletters. One participant said simply that “it’s about relationships”, and there was sometimes a recognition that the donor journey is intertwined with the alumni journey.

How would you describe a good donor experience?

- Some participants recognised that the donor experience “differs from donor to donor”, and the aspiration was to create totally tailored experiences. Yet whilst one participant claimed that “we don’t have the right to generalise”, many others felt that completely tailored experiences aren’t achievable to scale (two participants used the phrase “there’s only so much...
you can do for a £10/month donor”). This led several participants to express concern about the time and money involved in creating donor experiences (specifically the return on investment – “you have to thank according to the gift”), noting this should be scaled based on the amount of money given. One participant who gives to a charity said that they “don’t give at the level that requires stewardship”, another worried that a donor giving a small amount might object to their money being spent on a glossy magazine, and yet another was concerned about offering a “disproportionate” amount of stewardship.

• Despite this, there was still an emphasis on creating a personal connection with donors (such as using the phone more to thank than to ask for gifts), and in doing more than simply thanking a donor in the hope they’d give again (“I do this then they do that.”). One participant described it as “imparting the transformational impact of philanthropy onto donors”, whilst another was critical of a culture where an institution prioritises its own interests above the donor’s (“what can we get?” vs. “what is this individual trying to achieve?”)

• Some participants talked about the effect the donor experience has on the donors themselves, asking the following kinds of questions:
  a. Does it validate the donor’s motivation to give in the first place?
  b. Does the donor feel good about giving?
  c. If the donor gives again, do they do so without feeling “pushed” into it (i.e. do they feel that the next ask has come “out of the blue”)?
  d. Does the donor trust the institution?
  e. Do they feel recognized for the existing relationship they have with the institution?
  f. Do they understand the difference made by their giving?
  g. Does giving feel a natural part of the donor’s connection with the institution?

• There was usually little evidence available to interviewees to provide definitive answers to the above questions beyond occasional anecdotes. There were a couple of exceptions: at one institution, donors were surveyed to find out if they thought their giving had made a difference and around 40% said “no” or “don’t know”, whilst a survey sent to another institution’s donors found that a high proportion of respondents said they don’t feel regularly updated about the impact of their gift/s.

In your view, what are the benefits of a good donor experience?

• Income was cited by many as the primary benefit, with most participants talking about the increased likelihood that a donor would give again, and perhaps give greater amounts (thus increasing lifetime value). A good donor experience is seen by some as simply a cost-efficient way of doing business.

• Some participants talked about how a good donor experience can strengthen trust between the donor and the institution and bring them closer together, and how that leads to more than just fewer complaints: in some cases donors can act as advocates or ambassadors that allow institutions to draw on “social capital” when donors are willing to “speak up” on their behalf. These non-financial benefits were described as “priceless”, and it was noted how they can help to raise the profile of the university in a positive way and even increase the number of donors. One participant said that a donor was so impressed with their annual report that they asked for another copy to share with a family member. A happy donor was also thought to be a good story for the development office to promote within the institution, especially if there’s scepticism within the organisation towards fundraising. This can also help when making the case for greater investment to senior leadership.

• One participant reflected on the benefits that a good donor experience has on them (“it makes you enjoy your job more”), whilst another said something
similar about how it leads to better internal working. One participant noted how a good donor experience is simply the right thing to do.

What is the quality of the donor experience like at your institution?

- Interviewees described how internal politics can sometimes compromise the quality of the donor experience, particularly when the development office is struggling to centralise the business of fundraising and alumni relations or if there’s insufficient support from the vice chancellor. There are also instances when academics don’t trust the fundraising team enough to relinquish control over relationships with their alumni, attributed to either the academic having a bad experience with the university’s development team in the past or a poor personal experience of fundraising and alumni relations at their own alma mater.

- Even where the development office is in control of the donor experience, there was a sense that donor relations teams tend to be at the beck-and-call of major gift fundraisers (i.e. an “admin” function) whereas they ought to be seen as specialists in their own right (echoing the shift seen in development services over recent years). There was a consistent feeling that the major gift donor experience is of a good quality (particularly given the disproportionate amount of time donor relations teams spend stewarding major gift donors), but there was usually less certainty about how those giving smaller gifts were treated.

- In lieu of audience research (very few of our interviewees had conducted it), the quality of the donor experience at the lower end was often assessed based on comparisons with other universities and charities, usually organisations where the participant had previously worked themselves.

- Interviewees said there tended to be variations in the quality of the donor experience based on several factors:
  a. The cause the donor is supporting: a lack of case studies sometimes inhibits the office’s ability to demonstrate impact with any regularity.
  b. The amount they’ve given: a “thoughtful base level” or a “baseline of donor stewardship” is sometimes provided for those giving below a certain threshold, whilst at other times donors are placed in giving circles and the experience (crafted mostly according to internal viewpoints) scales according to the size of the donor’s financial contribution.
  c. When they were acquired: the donor experience provided to those acquired prior to the formation (or professionalisation) of the development office may have been haphazard and/or delivered by staff elsewhere in the organisation whose primary focus wasn’t donor stewardship.

Can you think of a recent decision that’s been made at your institution that has affected the donor experience, either positively or negatively?

- Decisions that positively impact the donor experience were usually cited first by participants when asked this question. The introduction of (or improvements to) an annual impact report was a common example, although the evidence for the effect it had on donors was usually based on some anecdotes and a feeling among the team (“we were pleased with it”). These initiatives were not often set in motion by feedback from donors, it was instead an internal decision (and not one necessarily made by the donor relations team either – it might have been operations, or even the director). Sometimes a member of staff would intervene to improve the personalisation of a communication (referred to as “off the framework” pieces of stewardship), for example by sending a handwritten thank-you to a donor.

- Examples of decisions that negatively affected the donor experience tended to be those made in isolation by staff external to the development office, often by academics or colleagues in the business school. Examples included:
a. Launching online platforms (e.g. crowdfunding and peer-to-peer networking) based on unrealistic expectations of audience need, resource requirements, or even the usability of the technology itself.

b. Dropping a philanthropically-funded research project without consulting the sole donor backing it.

c. A major donor’s academic expertise was no longer felt to be relevant for the course, and the donor was therefore cut out of this programme without talking this through with them first.

• Where decisions with the potential to negatively impact the donor experience were made in the development office, they were often more trivial examples such as a scheduling clash over mailing dates, or moving printed donor lists online. The rarer and more serious examples tended to focus on the consequences of scaling back resource:

a. Scaling back events came up a couple of times. In one case an international event went ahead at the last minute with less planning and money devoted to it than in previous years (donors noticed the change and remarked upon it with disappointment). In another case the development office was thinking about amalgamating two stewardship events to reduce staff time and budget, though donors hadn’t yet been consulted. In another institution the alumni relations budget for events was cut entirely, with the team instead supporting self-organised events (though it was suggested that, in fact, alumni prefer university activities as opposed to dedicated alumni activities anyway, so this wasn’t necessarily seen as a bad thing).

b. When limiting resources didn’t concern events it usually affected communications. In one case it was decided the team would replace a printed annual fundraising report with an electronic version for those giving below a certain value in response to complaints from a handful of donors. This was felt by the participant to be a positive move in response to donor concerns that allowed the team to “spend budget better”, even though the move itself subsequently prompted a small number of complaints from donors. Elsewhere, a printed magazine was reduced in size from A4 to A5 to save money and sent annually rather than twice a year.

• One interviewee described a change their office was making to donor event scheduling. The team was acutely aware of the possible negative impact this change might have on donors, and having described the various risks and possible mitigations they were exploring and the difficulties with making the final decision, it was only on being prompted by the interviewer that they resolved to call one or two of the donors concerned to seek their views. Several other interviewees described similar situations where they made decisions and dealt with donor complaints and feedback after the fact, rather than seeking the perspectives of their donors up-front.

• Silo working, short-termism, and a fixation with fundraising targets were sometimes cited as an influence on decisions that could negatively impact the donor experience. Participants observed how pressure from vice chancellors to meet campaign targets puts pressure on fundraisers, leaving little room for programmes to breathe: “we’re not patient enough with programmes and people”, as one participant put it.

Who would you say is responsible for the donor experience in your office?

• Responsibility for the donor experience was often described as sitting across teams, or with “everyone”. Sometimes a single individual was cited as being responsible for certain stewardship tasks (usually a stewardship or donor relations officer/manager, with the major gift fundraisers involved in some capacity when it concerned their own prospects), whilst directors would point to themselves as ultimately responsible (“oh, it’s always my fault if something
goes wrong!’ as one director cheerily put
it). One participant described how alumni
relations staff saw building donor relation-
ships as less of a priority given they were
more concerned with people turning up
on time to events.

• When the donor relations officer,
manager or team was cited as being
responsible or accountable for the
donor experience, interviewees would
often describe their activities as largely
routine. They generally disagreed that the
donor relations team would be able or
well-placed to challenge the decisions
of more senior staff that could negatively
affect the quality of the donor experience.

• None of the participants said their
teams had a clear overview of the donor
experience across teams, or that anyone
in the office was responsible for providing
this clarity and anticipating conflict,
although some cited the director as
playing a role in resolving conflict.

When and how is the donor experience
discussed in your office?

• According to our interviewees, discus-
sions about the donor experience don’t
tend to occur organically – usually the
donor experience featured in meetings
convened for other purposes such
as fund disbursement discussions or
campaign planning. None of the partic-
ipants spoke about dedicated meetings
being convened to discuss the topic,
however some mentioned that the senior
management team might discuss aspects
of the donor experience during their
meetings, but naturally only the most
senior people in the office are invited to
such meetings (which conflicts with the
commonly-held belief that “everyone” is
responsible for the donor experience). An
interviewee described how one institution
has a visual reminder of the donor that is
brought along to meetings.

How often do you speak with donors yourself?

• Despite the multitude of front-facing
staff involved in our study, surprisingly
few of them spoke on a regular basis
with donors. Whilst directors and major
gift fundraisers would talk often to their
prospects and donors, they were only
likely to encounter donors giving smaller
amounts by chance at events. When
those in less senior positions outside
major gifts spoke with donors it was
usually due to their own pro-active efforts
without direction from senior leadership.

Measures of success

• Participants overwhelmingly cited income
as the first KPI, usually followed by donor
numbers (or number of donors giving
above a certain amount, such as £1,000).
Some other measures were mentioned
such as donor retention, number of solici-
tations, number of people spoken to, and
number of career mentors - though these
metrics weren’t as prominent in the office
(i.e. they weren’t generally discussed at
key meetings or celebrated). There were
a couple of cases where offices gathered
non-financial performance metrics via
annual surveys, but the results weren’t
incorporated into KPIs (the participants
tended to recognise that as an oversight).

• Sometimes the teams did celebrate
other things like events going well, or
shared positive stories about donors, or
even operational successes in the case
of new offices (e.g. implementing a
facility to accept Direct Debit payments).
Occasionally collaborative working would
be celebrated, particularly where it led to
securing a new gift of an unusual nature
(e.g. a long-term pledge), or where a
logistically complicated endeavour was
achieved (e.g. arranging for academics
to meet with donors internationally). In
only one instance was an industry award
referredenced, and although this was a
source of great pride for the office, it was
noted that it was the wider marketing
department team who champion award
submissions.
Who responded to the survey?

The survey was open between 23 October and 21 November 2018, and it was built using sector-leading Qualtrics survey software. In total we received 361 responses, and 329 of the respondents said they work for a UK higher education institution (of whom 317 confirmed they spend most of their time working in development).

Those working for the majority of their time in development were the target audience for this survey, and as such these individuals answered the majority of the survey questions. Only a small number of questions were asked of those who do not work in HE development most of the time.

We asked a series of questions within the survey to record the length of experience development practitioners possessed, their role, and their current working environment. This context has allowed us to split and compare the answers of different groups throughout the survey.

- 22% of the respondents who work in HE development for the majority of their time have done so for more than 10 years. 19% have done so for 6-10 years, 31% for 3-5 years, 19% for 1-2 years and 10% for less than a year.
- 9% of the respondents are the most senior development professional in their office (such as the director of development or similar). 14% said they lead multiple development-related teams or functions (for example, they may lead multiple fundraising specialisms), 38% lead a single development team or function (such as ‘alumni relations’ or ‘regular giving’), and 40% said their role does not require leading development teams or functions. The last group are likely to be those working at officer/assistant level as part of larger teams.

Comparisons between groups

For the purposes of comparison of survey answers among different types of development professionals, we grouped respondents according to their answers, as described below:

- How many years have you worked in higher education development? For this question, include the years you’ve spent working in the UK and, where applicable, abroad.
  - More experienced: 6 years or more (127 respondents)
  - Less experienced: less than 6 years (188 respondents)

- Which of the following mission groups does your current higher education institution belong to?
  - Russell Group: currently employed by an institution belonging to the Russell Group (167 respondents)
  - Not in Russell Group: currently employed by an institution that does not belong to the Russell Group (77 respondents)
• Roughly how many members of staff spend most of their time working in development at your current higher education institution?
  a. Larger office: 21 members of staff or more (142 respondents)
  b. Smaller office: 20 members of staff or fewer (167 respondents)

• Which of the following best describes your current role?
  a. Management: is the most senior development professional in the office, or leads multiple development-related teams or functions, or leads a single development team or function (188 respondents)
  b. Not in management: role doesn’t require leading development teams or functions (123 respondents)

• Which of the following describes where you spend most of your time in your current role?
  a. Fundraising role: works in mass fundraising, or one-to-one fundraising, or community fundraising (141 respondents) Note: Our strong belief is that anyone who works in fundraising is a fundraiser, however we felt that for the purposes of comparison between different types of roles in a development office, a useful delineation would be those who work directly in ‘making asks’ vs those who fundraise in less direct ways.
  b. Not in a fundraising role: works in any role other than mass fundraising, one-to-one fundraising, or community fundraising (168 respondents)

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### Respondent overview

#### How many development staff are employed by your institution...?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>More than 50</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21-50</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-20</td>
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<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-10</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fewer than 5</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don't know</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Larger office vs smaller office*
Which mission group does your current institution belong to?...

Russell Group vs not in Russell Group

Russell Group: 54%
Don't know: 21%
Former 1994: 12%
Other, please state: 4%
University Alliance: 3%
Specialist: 2%
Million+: 2%
Not aligned: 2%
GuildHE: 1%

How many years have you worked in higher education development?...

More experienced vs less experienced

More than 10 years: 22%
6-10 years: 19%
3-5 years: 31%
1-2 years: 19%
Less than a year: 10%
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Fundraising role</th>
<th>Not in a fundraising role</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>One-to-one fundraising</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Operations</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mass fundraising</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alumni relations</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>88%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donor relations</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>89%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volunteer engagement</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>96%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communications</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>97%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Events</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>97%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (please specify)</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>98%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community fundraising</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>99%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Where do you spend most of your time in your role...?**

**Fundraising role vs not in a fundraising role**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Fundraising role</th>
<th>Not in a fundraising role</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I am the most senior</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>91%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>development professional in my office</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I lead multiple</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>86%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>development-related teams or functions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I lead a single development</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>team or function</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My role doesn't require</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>leading development teams or functions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The donor experience generally: speaking with donors

We began by asking: ‘roughly how many donors do you have a one-to-one conversation with in a typical month?’ We stressed that this might include conversations that occur face-to-face or over the phone, as well as via email or other digital channels.

| Roughly how many donors do you have a one-to-one conversation with in a typical month? This includes conversations that occur face-to-face or over the phone, as well as via email or other digital channels. |
|-------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| None (n=51)                                      | 18%                             |
| 1-5 (n=101)                                      | 35%                             |
| 6-10 (n=65)                                      | 22%                             |
| 11-20 (n=39)                                     | 13%                             |
| More than 20 (n=33)                              | 11%                             |

Overall, a small proportion (18%) don’t have any one-to-one conversations with donors in a typical month, but most (57%) speak to between 1 and 10 donors per month.

Fundraisers are more likely to have contact with donors. 5% of fundraisers and 29% of non-fundraisers have “no” one-to-one conversations with donors in a typical month. This difference between fundraisers and non-fundraisers persists for the 1-5 conversations range (26% fundraisers vs 43% non-fundraisers) and 6-10 conversations (35% fundraisers vs 12% non-fundraisers).

Discussing the donor experience

92% of respondents say that the donor experience is something that is discussed regularly in their office, regardless of whether they would use the term ‘the donor experience’. This is enormously encouraging and shows that this is a topic important to many fundraisers and their teams.

There were no statistically significant differences between the answers of different groups to this question within the survey.
My own attitudes towards the donor experience

We presented a series of Likert-style questions to respondents intended to gauge their personal attitudes and behaviours towards donors and the donor experience. We found:

- 69% agree or strongly agree that they are aware of the views of their donors
- 55% agree or strongly agree that they regularly review the quality of the donor experience
- 43% agree or strongly agree that they are comfortable with the quality of the donor experience
- 3% agree or strongly agree that they believe it’s more important to hit income targets than it is to deliver a great donor experience
- 65% agree or strongly agree that they often do what is right by the donor even if it means sacrificing short-term income
- 78% agree or strongly agree that they feel comfortable challenging decisions that they think might compromise the donor experience.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How strongly do you agree with the following statements about yourself?</th>
<th>All respondents who agreed or strongly agreed with each statement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I am aware of the views of our donors</td>
<td>69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I regularly review the quality of the donor experience</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am comfortable with the quality of the donor experience</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I believe it's more important to hit income targets than it is to deliver a great donor experience</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I often do what's right by the donor even if it means sacrificing short-term income</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel comfortable challenging decisions that I think might compromise the donor experience</td>
<td>78%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This mostly paints a positive picture of development staff attitudes and behaviours in relation to the donor experience. Very few hold the cynical view that income is more important than great donor experiences, and the majority feel they are in tune with the opinions of donors. The majority however do not agree that they’re comfortable with the quality of the donor experience at their institution, perhaps as they are either unaware of the present quality, or that they can already see room for improvement.

Those working in a direct fundraising role are more likely to agree that they are aware of the views of donors (78% vs 61% non-fundraisers), that they regularly review the quality of the donor experience (66% vs 46% non-fundraisers), that they often do what’s right for the donor even if it means sacrificing short-term income (75% vs 56% non-fundraisers), and that they feel comfortable challenging decisions that they think might compromise the donor experience (85% vs 71% non-fundraisers). Sadly, they are also more likely to agree that they believe it is more important to hit income targets than deliver a great donor experience (7% vs 1% non-fundraisers). These results are perhaps hinting at the pressures facing fundraisers, but also the opportunity they have to create and deliver excellent donor experiences.
My perception of office-wide attitudes towards the donor experience

In order to see how these may differ from personal attitudes, we then asked respondents to think about the prevailing office attitudes where they currently work. It was common in the qualitative phase of our research for interviewees to mention differences of opinion within the team, and sometimes office-wide cultures at odds with their own values. We wanted to see if this experience was more widespread.

We found:

- 64% agree or strongly agree that their office is aware of the views of its donors
- 59% agree or strongly agree that their office regularly reviews the quality of the donor experience

My office is aware of the views of its donors
My office regularly reviews the quality of the donor experience

What this tells us is that in comparison to their own knowledge and behaviour, development professionals generally feel that their office is slightly less aware of the views of its donors, slightly more likely to regularly review the quality of the donor experience, more comfortable with the quality of the donor experience, much less likely to do what is right by the donor even when it means sacrificing short-term income, and less likely to challenge decisions that might compromise the donor experience.

On delivering great donor experiences as a priority over short-term income, 29% disagreed or strongly disagreed that where they work it’s more important to deliver a great donor experience than it is to hit income targets in their office. This is clearly at odds with these individuals’ personal attitudes, given only 3% agreed or strongly agreed that it’s more important to hit income targets than it is to deliver a great donor experience. This is concerning as any tension between personal outlook and prevailing attitudes or observed behaviours is unlikely to be conducive to a harmonious working relationship within the team. A values conflict may even contribute to staff turnover as development professionals
seek institutions whether their personal priorities are reflected in team culture and strategy.

We’ve highlighted some of the starkest differences between personal beliefs and perceptions of workplace culture in the image below.

Managers have a slightly different outlook to more junior staff. Managers are less likely to agree that the office is aware of the views of its donors (58% vs 74% of junior staff agree or strongly agree) and less likely to agree that their office regularly reviews the quality of the donor experience (50% vs 72% of junior staff agree or strongly agree).

Those who work in smaller development offices are more likely to agree that the office often does what’s right by the donor even if it means sacrificing short-term income (58% vs 40% of those in larger offices). This is perhaps due to either greater visibility of these decisions when they occur, or perhaps it is because those in smaller offices will feel the effects of less donor-focused decisions to a greater degree.

Plans to improve the donor experience

Given the majority did not agree that they were comfortable with the donor experience at their institution, we would expect the majority to have plans to improve the donor experience in the next 12 months – and that’s exactly what we found, with 85% saying they had plans to improve the donor experience this year. Those in smaller offices were more likely to have plans than those in larger offices (78% of development professionals working in larger offices vs 90% of those working in smaller offices).

76% of those with plans to improve the donor experience in the next 12 months agree that it’s likely these improvements will be made, 5% say it’s not likely, and 19% say they don’t know. Those who are more experienced are more optimistic (85% experienced development professionals say improvements will be made, vs 70% of less experienced professionals).

Those who said it was not likely their plans for improvement would be made were asked a follow-up question about their reasoning on this. The majority attributed this to insufficient capacity within the team (58%) followed by insufficient buy-in from senior managers (23%).
What is the main reason why improvements to the donor experience might not be made within the next 12 months?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Insufficient budget</td>
<td>(n=4)</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insufficient buy-in from senior managers</td>
<td>(n=13)</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insufficient capacity in the team</td>
<td>(n=33)</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Insufficient skills or knowledge</td>
<td>(n=3)</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (please state)</td>
<td>(n=4)</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

One thing that would help you to provide a better donor experience

Keen to understand the barriers and enablers beyond the small sample in the qualitative phase of our research, we included the following free-text question in our survey: “If there’s one thing that would help you to provide a better donor experience, what would it be?”

The most common request was for additional resources (39 respondents), followed by better supporter communications (25 respondents) and more feedback/insight into audience needs and opinions (21 respondents).

Below is a selection of the free-text responses to this question:

“More resource to manage the donor experience, especially with regards to online engagement.”

“Time. We’re quite a young team which has only recently developed sufficient staff resource to address these issues.”

“Bigger donor relations team that could provide more sophisticated, bespoke stewardship and cultivation plans for major prospects.”

“Appreciation of donor satisfaction/donor experience feedback as a valid KPI by senior university leadership.”

“Asks being led by donors interests rather than university priority.”

“A better understanding of the motivations of our donors - so that we can tailor their experience.”

“Empowered colleagues willing to speak to and engage with our donors.”

“More freedom to be creative and do things for my donors that I know would make a difference to them (as I know them as people first and foremost) without having to go through a number of sounding boards.”

“Investing in more personalised approach to thanking donors and not just using such comms to simply ask for more.”

“A longer-term vision. UK HE fundraising needs to be nurtured tenderly and carefully right now. In Regular Giving, as the £9,000 a year generation fills our ‘market’, they need something that isn’t targeted at the bottom-line. They will be the most discerning and demanding ‘customers’ of all ‘industries’ and they will need a clearly uncalculating and reciprocal relationship that we must develop with a spirit of generosity and support, not grasping, target-driven campaigns. We can raise funds from this group if we develop the relationship properly and clearly express the value we see in them and their experience.”

“Understanding that regular donor experience is as important as major donor experience.”
“Being given the creative freedom to really engage with donors- even with GDPR restrictions, it’s important to build trust, and that goes down to ensuring that first impressions count. We shouldn’t simply limit ourselves to email communications- hand written cards, surprise small thoughts gestures that are unexpected go a long way in engaging a potential donor. From experience, thank you calls have worked well in the past- the real struggle now is hierarchy & politics, that feel the focus should be more on bigger level donors and corporates rather than lower level givers, and that’s potentially damaging in the long term.”

“Telling better stories - improved outcome reporting. More compelling causes that are fundable propositions for alumni, rather than projects for which the senior management team of [the university] would like to recover/offset expenditure already committed.”

“More regular opportunities for donors to feedback and tell us what they think about donor experience.”

“Less of a focus on fundraising targets. More focus on donors at all levels and not just a view that major gifts start with £100k donors. An active programme of cultivation events and opportunities to add value to donors that give. Access to the senior leadership at the University to meet with donors or all levels - perhaps in a group. But we need to consider that other charities have more access to their CEO and will bring donors at all levels to meet with the CEO.”

“Treating donor relations as a specialism in its own right. It's viewed as an administrative function by the key decision makers and thus is at the mercy of the fundraising function. We have fantastic individuals in the donor relations function but they need to be empowered.”
Measuring and managing the donor experience

Is it measured?
Only 32% of respondents say they are measuring the donor experience in some way. 43% say they are not, and 25% don’t know if the donor experience is being measured. Russell Group development staff are less likely to say they aren’t measuring the donor experience in some way (34% said “no” vs 57% non-Russell group members), and those working in larger offices are also less likely to say “no” (32% vs 52% smaller offices). Those at management level are more likely to say they aren’t measuring the donor experience (51% say “no” vs 30% junior staff), perhaps due to increased knowledge and visibility of office KPIs given more junior and less experienced staff are also more likely to select “don’t know”.

Does your office currently measure the donor experience in any way?

| Yes | (n=91) | 32% |
| No | (n=122) | 43% |
| Don’t know | (n=72) | 25% |

If it’s not being measured, then why not?
For those who aren’t measuring the donor experience, we followed up with a question about why this is the case. 61% cited insufficient resource to measure the donor experience, 31% said they didn’t know how to measure it, and 30% said they didn’t know what to measure. 16% said that senior managers aren’t interested in measuring the donor experience. Those who work in Russell Group institutions were much less likely to cite insufficient resource as a barrier to measuring the donor experience (45% vs 80% non-Russell Group), and it was by far the main reason non-Russell Group development staff gave for not measuring the donor experience (80% chose insufficient resource, with the next most popular reasons being not knowing what to measure or how to measure it – both at 20%). Surprisingly, fundraisers who aren’t measuring the donor experience are more likely to say they don’t know what to measure than non-fundraisers (41% vs 17% non-fundraisers).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason for Not Measuring the Donor Experience</th>
<th>(n)</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>We don’t know how to measure the donor experience</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We don’t know what to measure about the donor experience</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We have insufficient resource to measure the donor experience</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We can’t record donor experience-related data and metrics in our database</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior managers aren’t interested in measuring the donor experience</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (please specify)</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**How the donor experience is measured**

Using a free-text question, we asked respondents who are measuring the donor experience how they are doing so. The most common way was through donor feedback (29) followed by donor surveys (28). Donor retention and renewal statistics was the next most popular method (14).

**Accountability for the donor experience**

In our qualitative discussions it was rare for there to be one individual, beyond the director, who was immediately identified as the individual accountable for the donor experience. While it was acknowledged that many individuals and teams were responsible for the donor experience either overall or in part, accountability was difficult for interviewees to pinpoint. We described someone who was ultimately accountable for the donor experience as a staff member who had oversight of the full donor experience, had access to measures of the quality of the donor experience (or had donor experience KPIs linked to their performance review) and who championed the donor experience by challenging decisions or activities that were not delivering positive outcomes for donors.

In the survey we asked respondents whether there was someone ultimately accountable for the donor experience at their institution. 54% said “yes”, 27% said “no” and 19% said they didn’t know. Given the importance placed on the donor experience by all our interviewees, it is surprising that accountability is non-existent or unclear for such a large proportion of development professionals.

We asked those who responded in the affirmative to the accountability question to name this person, and most pointed to the director of development (52 respondents), but many also cited the donor relations manager or team (38 respondents). The same is true of those asked who they think should be accountable, although nearly as many from this group said “everyone” as they did the donor relations team.
Audience research

Surveys, focus groups, and ‘other’ research methods

Overall, a majority (55%) of respondents said their office has sent a survey to donors in the last two years, and a sizable minority (41%) have conducted a focus group with them in the same period.

34% said they had sampled the views of donors using a method other than surveys or focus groups in the last 12 months. When asked what this alternative method was, most said events, meetings, or general conversations with donors.

Development staff working at Russell Group institutions are much more likely to have conducted surveys or held focus groups – there’s a typically a 30% gap on this between them and their colleagues outside the Russell Group.

How research insights have been applied

We asked respondents how the research they’d conducted had been applied at their institution. They most often cited changes to donor events (19), stewardship programmes (18), donor communications (17), donor impact reporting (12) and campaign planning (10).

Here are some of the uses of research insight shared by respondents:


“We created audience journey maps and supporter archetypes to better inform our work from start to finish.”

“It has actually informed our next direct mail fundraising campaign. Currently in planning stage.”

“Currently undertaking qualitative interviews to inform mid-level proposition development, donor engagement and stewardship. We plan to revise communications and events in these areas following the research and hope it will point to new activities that would be meaningful to donors.”

“If you mean research on their experience, then I do not think we have applied this. We have not done enough of it.”

“Used as case for investment and to improve the operations of the office.”

“Attempted to align these with communications and volunteering opportunities. Not altogether successfully.”

“Incorporated it into our work and changed relevant things.”

“Updated the database with alumni views, interests, employment and affinity to make a donation and planned a telephone campaign around affinity.”

“Research conducted was turned into graphs and presented to the director and shared with donors via regular comms.”

“Many of the insights received are contradictory - and it has highlighted the fact that not all donors want to [be] thanked in the same way. Many are keen for one-to-one meetings and the chance for a personal talk to find out what is going on with us. Others hate that and don’t want to waste our time (or theirs). Many love receiving donor reports; others find them twee and like they are just a chance to ask for more money. Trying to get it right for everyone is difficult so sometimes taking a tailored approach to individuals is best.”

“Individual responses are recorded on the system for people to use to their advantage when trying to get a gift.”

“I don’t feel that we collected useful insights worth acting upon. Feedback and recommendations were received but they were often reflective of a donors interests and were sometimes contradictory e.g. implementing one donor’s wishes would alienate another.”

“Greater choice in terms of stewardship reporting (e.g. video, phone call, f2f meeting, as opposed to report)”

“Feedback has been used to inform case for support but limited feedback into how we steward donors, which is mainly based on what our competitors are doing.”
Using research to inform key decisions that affect donors

When asked “did your office conduct audience research when writing its privacy notice?”, only 12% said that they had. 40% said they hadn’t and 48% said they don’t know. Respondents from larger offices were much more likely to say they don’t know than those from smaller offices (63% larger offices vs 34% smaller offices). The low proportion of agreement overall suggests that, even though the specifics of how each office handles personal data affects donors, the data subjects in question haven’t informed decisions for the most part.

We then asked about multi-year fundraising campaigns, which are common in the sector and will often involve a certain degree of audience research (although often this is conducted after key decisions in relation to the campaign have already been made). Whereas 47% of managers said they’d been involved in planning a multi-year fundraising campaign within the last 2 years, the same was true for just 24% of non-managers. This suggests that less senior members of staff are either not being involved in campaign planning, or not feeling sufficiently involved to recognise it. This difference was strictly hierarchical – there was no statistically significant difference in this response between less experienced and more experienced development professionals.

We asked respondents who had been involved in campaign planning which groups of stakeholders had been consulted in the campaign development process. The groups who were most likely to have been consulted during campaign planning were staff working at the institution (80%), high-level donors (74%), high-level donor prospects (65%), external consultants (65%) and volunteers (51%). The groups least likely to be consulted are smaller gift donor prospects (15%), smaller gift donors (30%) and alumni not yet supporting the institution (36%).

When combined, these two findings in relation to campaign planning imply that audience consultation during the planning stages of a multi-year fundraising campaign is limited in scope, with both junior staff in the development office and donors giving at lower levels (and non-donors with lower perceived financial capacity) given less of a voice.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>When planning your last multi-year fundraising campaign, please select who was consulted</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High level donors</td>
<td>74%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High level donor prospects</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smaller gift donors</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smaller gift donor prospects</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volunteers</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alumni not yet supporting the institution</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff working at the institution</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External consultants</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other, please state</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Using research to inform key decisions that affect donors

We then asked respondents for their opinions on the value and practicality of audience research through a series of Likert statements. These were constructed based on common objections we have encountered as consultants in this area.

We found:

- 31% agree or strongly agree that it’s difficult to translate audience research into action
- 59% agree or strongly agree that surveys provide reliable insights into people’s behaviour
- 16% agree or strongly agree that surveys create too much work for them
- 10% agree or strongly agree that GDPR prevents them from conducting audience research
- 19% agree or strongly agree that negative opinions from donors reflect badly on them
- 2% agree or strongly agree that money is better spent on wealth screening the database than on conducting audience research
- 15% agree or strongly agree that there is no point conducting audience research because only highly engaged people will participate
- 2% agree or strongly agree that we can learn everything we need to know about our audiences just by analysing our database.

Although there is some scepticism towards the reliability of surveys (particularly among fundraisers), and a sizable minority feel that survey findings are difficult to translate into action, most of the specific barriers to conducting audience research we presented weren’t accepted by development staff in our study.

As practitioners, we know that every programme or activity in a fast-paced development office must provide value, so we asked our research partner from Fowlam to contribute an article about how to get the best possible value from a research project for this report. We agree from personal experience that it can be difficult to champion new audience research when a team has been bitten by impractical or poor-quality research in the past, so it is worth considering her advice when you are planning your next research study.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How strongly do you agree with the following statements about you?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All respondents who agreed or strongly agreed with each statement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It’s difficult to translate audience research into action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surveys provide reliable insights into people’s behaviour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surveys create too much work for us</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GDPR prevents us from conducting audience research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative opinions from donors reflect badly on me</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Money is better spent on wealth screening the database than on conducting audience research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There’s no point conducting audience research because only highly engaged people will participate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We can learn everything we need to about our audiences just by analysing our database</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Next, we presented a series of statements to determine how development staff feel about things such as leadership, pay, and their future in the sector.

Encouragingly, 92% of development staff said they enjoy the work they do, and about two-thirds (67%) said the leadership in their office supports them and their ideas. However, 40% agreed that “senior managers here are more interested in the money we raise than anything else”, only half (51%) agree they’re paid enough for the work they do, and just over two-thirds (68%) feel they have a future in higher education development.

Our qualitative research suggests that having a focus only on the money, or the money above relationships/the overall donor experience, may be having a detrimental effect on employee engagement. When asked about the benefits of a good donor experience, one participant in our depth interviews said, “it makes you enjoy your job more”, whilst another described how it leads to better internal working.

Although further research is required on the link between how an institution treats its donors and how happy and productive staff are at the institution, our hypothesis would be that greater donor focus is likely to equal a more positive working environment, and anyone struggling with staff turnover would do well to consider their donor satisfaction and retention performance.

Whilst 76% of managers feel they have a future in the higher education development sector, only 55% of their more junior colleagues feel the same. If respondents enjoy the work they do (88% of non-managers agreed they do), and senior leadership on balance supports them and their ideas (again, 61% of non-managers agreed with this), then why do so many non-managers feel they don’t have a future in the sector? This finding raises concerns about the longer-term talent pool for the sector, and you can read about Head of Philanthropy Rachel Third’s approach to this issue at Loughborough later in this report.
Our study found that development professionals prefer to improve their skills and/or knowledge by attending conferences, speaking with colleagues or mentors, and undertaking training courses online or in person.

In contrast, only about a third of respondents read books (27%) or research papers (33%) to improve their professional knowledge and/or skills.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Books</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conferences</td>
<td>83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blog posts</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speaking with colleagues or mentors</td>
<td>91%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research reports or papers</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training courses online or in person</td>
<td>77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Podcasts</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other, please state</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None of these</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Only a minority of respondents agreed that “it’s easy to find information about improving the donor experience” (40%) and “I know how to apply information available to me about improving the donor experience” (47%).

Three-quarters (76%) of respondents have never heard of The Commission on the Donor Experience, and less than half (49%) of those who had heard of it said they’d read any of the Commissions’ reports (which amounts to a total of 30 people).

Our findings about how development staff improve their skills and knowledge raises important questions that require further investigation. Is there a knowledge and implementation gap in our sector that needs to be addressed? With so many respondents to the survey saying they have plans to improve the donor experience and are confident they’ll see these implemented, we question whether knowledge and implementation are as much of a barrier as the findings here suggest. It would appear that we’re filling in each other’s gaps in skills and experience as a team, or doing the best we can with the information we can find. We should also be mindful that our industry is small, so if we’re primarily learning from each other does this create a bubble? Where are the new ideas coming from that might disrupt the status quo if we’re mostly talking among ourselves?

We have asked Qualtrics to contribute a piece for this report about what education institutions can learn from companies that have been investigating and improving the customer experience for decades. We’ve also included a section titled “Magical donor experience resources and where to find them” to provide a starting point for those who wish to expand their knowledge and networks in this area.
Your experience as a donor

Of the 256 respondents to our survey who have graduated from a UK higher education institution, 42% have donated to their alma mater. Whilst nearly three quarters (74%) agree they’re always thanked appropriately, only 59% feel the relationship they have with the institution is something they’re very committed to, only 57% know the impact their gift is having, and just 62% are satisfied with how the institution treats them as a donor. Despite this, 71% are likely to continue giving to the institution, suggesting that many donors (even those who work in the higher education development sector) are giving despite how they’re being treated and not because of it.

If this is how UK higher education development staff feel about how institutions are treating them, it raises the question of how those who don’t work in the sector would respond. Do our own donors feel appropriately thanked? Do they feel the relationship they have with their alma mater is something they’re committed to? Do they know the impact their gift is having? Do they feel satisfied with the way their alma mater treats them?

Studying income and donor numbers alone tells us little about this, and if donors are giving in spite of the way they’re treated and not because of it, then we have to wonder about the opportunities we’re missing as a sector.

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Thinking about your donations to the higher education you first graduated from, how strongly do you agree with the following statements?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>All respondents who agreed or strongly agreed with each statement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I am always thanked appropriately for my gift(s)</td>
<td>74%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The relationship I have with this institution is something I am very committed to</td>
<td>59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I know the impact that my gift is having</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am likely to continue to give to this institution</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall, I am satisfied with how this institution treats me as a donor</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Discussion and conclusions

Our qualitative participants all had a clear understanding of the donor experience and its benefits, felt confident they knew what a good donor experience should consist of, and spoke of common agreement among their colleagues about the importance of the donor experience. Nevertheless, a donor-centred philosophy is not being translated fully into a formal strategy as evidenced by the qualitative and quantitative findings overall. We have found that accountability and oversight of the donor experience is lacking, it isn’t commonly being measured, and it is still uncommon to consult donors prior to making decisions that affect them.

Decisions are being made that affect the donor experience without involving donors

Through speaking with and surveying practitioners, we have observed a lack of dialogue with donors when making decisions about how to communicate with them. 45% of those who responded to our survey said their office hadn’t sent a survey to donors in the last 2 years, whilst 59% said their office hadn’t conducted any focus groups with donors over the same period. As the leading way of measuring the donor experience in our sector is donor feedback and surveys, we would expect these percentages to be much higher.

Formal research isn’t the only way to understand what our donors want, but our survey also found that more than half (53%) of development professionals speak to 5 or fewer donors in a typical month, with nearly a third (31%) of fundraisers saying the same. It’s a fundraiser’s job to engage with donors, so it’s perhaps unsurprising that non-fundraisers are less likely to speak to donors than their colleagues in fundraising, but if non-fundraisers aren’t speaking to donors as often then how does that influence their decisions, their levels of engagement, and the culture of the development office?

The survey also showed how, compared with their colleagues in fundraising, non-fundraisers feel less in touch with the views of donors and are less likely to challenge decisions that might compromise the donor experience. In our experience, decisions are often made by non-fundraising team members that affect the donor experience in the round, and all team members contribute to a sense of ‘how things are done around here’ through their priorities and actions.

For our qualitative phase participants, picking up the phone to a donor to seek their views was not second nature for them either - donors were rarely consulted upfront on decisions that could negatively affect their experience. In these interviews, development professionals stressed the importance of the donor experience whilst 92% of respondents to the survey said the donor experience is discussed in their office. However, barely two-thirds (65%) say their office is aware of the views of its donors, and fewer still think the office regularly reviews the quality of the donor experience (59%). This indicates a somewhat superficial interest in the donor experience among many institutions.

In the depth interviews we also discovered that major gift fundraisers (fundraisers typically working one-to-one with donors and asking for gifts in excess of £5,000) were the exception when it came to regular dialogue with donors and prospective donors. Whilst we recognise that crucial insight is gained from conversations between major gift fundraisers and their donors, this audience represents a small and

"I think this report highlights many areas which, as a profession, we need to work on. We need more exposure to donors, more feedback mechanisms for them and more accountability established for their experience within our offices. That is the message that I’ll be taking back to my office."

- Andreas Avraam, Research Advisory Board member
unique type of donor, and staff should be mindful that their experiences and views may not be consistent with the larger population who give smaller amounts. On this theme, although multi-year fundraising campaigns are typically marketed to a broad external audience, we found that only a narrow subset of these external audiences are consulted during the planning stages: high-level donors and high-level donor prospects were the two most frequently cited.

"Two things jumped out at me. The first is the importance of identifying someone who is ultimately accountable for donor experience. The second is the value of good quantitative research. It provides insights into your donors but, it also inevitably brings out more questions and to me feels like the start of a journey. For example, if 60% think X - why is that? If we did something different would that percentage change? Do we want it to change? As an organisation it is important to keep asking the right questions."

- Shekinah Griffith, Research Advisory Board member

The quality of the donor experience isn’t routinely being measured

Closely related to the above finding about a lack of dialogue with donors, less than a third (32%) of the respondents to the survey said their office measures the donor experience, and those that do say they mostly use donor feedback and surveys. Every interviewee we spoke with in the qualitative phase stressed the importance of the donor experience, but few of them monitored it regularly as a KPI.

We found that although the donor experience isn’t being measured, income certainly is, and this study raises questions about the priority of the donor experience. We were told during the qualitative phase of our research that income is the most celebrated office KPI, and this interest in money likely originates with senior leadership – indeed, 40% of respondents to our survey agreed that “senior managers here are more interested in the money we raise than anything else”. Our study also highlighted a stark disparity between personal beliefs on the one hand and perceptions of workplace culture on the other: even though 84% of survey respondents agreed that they prioritise the delivery of great donor experiences above hitting income targets, only 42% agreed that the same is true of the wider office where they work.

On the same subject, whilst 59% of development professionals who work in smaller offices agreed with the statement “my office does what’s right by the donor even if it means sacrificing short-term income”, just 40% of staff working in larger offices felt the same way. Is there more pressure to hit targets in larger offices, and is this pressure leading to decisions that don’t necessarily put audiences first? Is something being lost as development offices acquire more staff, and is there more to be learned from “small shops” than we think? This is certainly something to investigate further in future research.

What is clear is that if what gets measured gets managed, this is a concerning finding. Income as a top-level KPI without a measure of the quality of the donor experience to balance it can be misleading: donors may give, at least for a short while, despite the experience they’re getting and not because of it. As several interviewees mentioned, a good donor experience will encourage them to give more, and for longer.

Our sector’s preoccupation with income even appears to dictate our stewardship planning. This can be seen in what many depth interviewees described to us as “giving circles” or stewardship tiers, in which the quality of the donor experience scales according to the value of the gift (with some donors even being encouraged to give slightly more to qualify for the next tier and the benefits that come from doing so). Whilst we understand the need to plan stewardship activities according to the capacity and resources available, acknowledgement and recognition policies such as this are based on the idea that a donor who gives more deserves more, and a donor who gives less hasn’t earned the kind of experiences
offered to others. Is this reinforcing a culture that celebrates money over relationships – and is this a sustainable strategy for our sector?

**Everyone is responsible for the donor experience, but no one is accountable for it**

27% of the respondents to our survey said that no one is ultimately accountable for the donor experience at their institution, and a further 20% said they don’t know if anyone is. When the remaining 54% were asked to identify where that accountability lies, the answers varied from the director of development to the donor relations team to “everyone”.

Our research has shown this outlook to be problematic: several interviewees during the qualitative phase had limited information on the quality of the donor experience, and told us that the donor relations teams are not often given the authority required to challenge poor practices in the wider team.

Hierarchy is a serious concern in this area. 86% of managers agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “I feel comfortable challenging decisions that I think might compromise the donor experience”, but the same was true for just 66% of non-managers. If the less senior members of a development office don’t feel confident speaking up about these issues, there is a danger that decisions are being made about the donor experience with insufficient input from key internal stakeholders.

Sticking with the hierarchical view, 50% of managers agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “my office regularly reviews the quality of the donor experience”, whereas 72% of their colleagues not in management felt the same way. Does this disconnect boil down to a lack of communication between the hierarchies within development offices? Do managers simply not trust that reviews of the donor experience are being done, or are they simply not interested in what is being done by more junior members of staff in this area? Perhaps more junior staff members are reviewing the quality of the donor experience informally, rather than as part of larger projects signed off by management? Whatever the reason, it does raise questions about the relative importance and visibility of this activity across the office.

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**“The critical thing for me is that donor experience ‘review’ is happening on an ad-hoc basis and that there’s a call for a more formal process. Particularly, the call for more resources in order to allow departments to focus on the donor experience whilst continuing to fundraise efficiently. I think that there has to be a longer-term focus on improving the donor experience rather than just on the short-term of income generation.”**

- Eve MacDonald, Research Advisory Board member

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**Most development practitioners are working on improving the donor experience at their institutions, despite a lack of formal structures to facilitate such activity**

The donor experience is a hot topic: 92% of respondents say that the donor experience is something that is discussed regularly in their office.

Overall, the vast majority (85%) of respondents said they have plans to improve the donor experience in the next 12 months, of whom three quarters (76%) think they’ll succeed in implementing such plans. 78% of larger offices say they have such plans in place, whereas 90% of smaller offices say the same, showing perhaps that smaller offices are more agile with making improvements or perhaps are less inclined to feel that audiences are “owned” by any single team – i.e. everyone can plan to contribute to better donor experiences in any given year.

**Although resource is clearly a barrier, culture may be the underlying culprit**

Resourcing comes up again and again in this study, and on the surface it’s holding back well-intentioned staff from doing what’s needed to deliver excellent donor experiences. In the depth interviews, some of the most concerning examples of institutional decision-making negatively affecting donors were due to resourcing being reduced or in short supply. Additional resourcing is also cited by survey
respondents as the number one thing that would help them to provide a better donor experience, and it’s the number one reason why practitioners say the donor experience isn’t being measured.

All of this raises a question: if more resources are needed to provide a better donor experience, then where are current resources allocated?

In our view, a lack of resource may signal a lack of relative priority, particularly in larger offices. If we recall what survey respondents shared about the attitudes of their leadership (40% agreed “senior managers here are more interested in the money we raise than anything else”), and what the qualitative interview participants said is most celebrated in their office (income and donor numbers), we can see how development staff are trying to champion their donors’ needs in the face of persistent income target pressures and senior management myopia.

Quality audience research could offer the sector a quick win

There is not much in the way of attitudinal barriers to overcome in relation to audience research – most of our participants agree that research can add considerable value and is one of the only methods available to measure the donor experience holistically.

What the findings to both the qualitative and quantitative phases of the project show is that entering into dialogue with a range of donors about their experiences is not yet second nature. Should additional resources become available to teams (or priorities shift), we suggest allocating time and effort to regularly calling, surveying or conducting focus groups with a variety of donors as needed throughout the year.

Managers and junior staff often have very different viewpoints in relation to the donor experience

We have already noted several points in the survey where senior and junior development professionals’ responses diverged, but the most notable finding here was that although 76% of managers feel they have a future in the sector, just 55% of junior development staff feel the same - a worrying sign for the sector’s talent pool.

Junior staff were less likely to be involved (or feel involved) in campaign planning, less likely to feel comfortable challenging decisions that may affect the donor experience negatively, and yet more likely to agree that the office is in touch with the views of its donors and to agree that the donor experience is reviewed regularly. We suspect that empowering non-managers to be more actively involved in decisions that affect the quality of the donor experience would greatly improve donor outcomes and staff engagement. With only 3,000 of us estimated to be employed in HE development in the UK, we are a rare bunch, and we must look after our future talent and help them to play a key role in our institutions’ success.

“My key learning from this project is ‘ask your audience’. I really want to support two-way conversations between donors and fundraisers. I want to be able to give donors the thanks and stories they care about, and a great way to do that better is to ask them what they care about, and to make sure that every communication I send keeps the conversation going.”

- Stephanie Miller, Research Advisory Board member

Development professionals’ attitudes and behaviours towards the donor experience is a rich area for further research in our sector

Throughout our research journey we have noted the following areas that could form the basis of further research studies:

- The relationship between staff engagement and a high-quality donor experience or donor-focused culture
- The relationship between the size and/or rate of growth of a development office and the quality of the donor experience
- How we commonly acquire and apply knowledge in our sector and how this affects our willingness and ability to innovate for the benefit of our donors.
Recommendations

We have put together the following recommendations for anyone looking to improve their donor experience this year, particularly those leading teams of development staff. In light of our research, we feel that following this list will assist development leaders to provide optimal conditions for success:

1. Give someone with the time, inclination, and appropriate seniority a chance to ‘own’ the donor experience

Appoint someone with the knowledge and time to oversee all aspects of the donor experience. Give them the floor at all-team and senior team meetings to report on progress and share donor feedback. Given them a budget for research and development and empower them to challenge decisions that may negatively affect the donor experience (either themselves or on behalf of more junior colleagues). Crucially, back them up.

2. Focus on one aspect of the donor experience each quarter

Don’t try to do it all. If you are the person in charge of the donor experience, consider breaking down key ‘stages’ in a typical donor journey and forming a team to describe and improve the current process for the benefit of donors. This could be the process of making an enquiry, making a complaint, making a donation online, updating an address etc. Over the course of two or three years you will have covered most of the donor experience and can start cycling back to continuously improve.

3. Survey your donors to receive regular donor insight

This could be as simple as calling your first-time donors and asking them about what drew them to the cause and how they found the process of making a gift. It can, and should, involve the whole team – there should be no reason why a different team member couldn’t make one phone call each day, and there is no need to call everyone on the list.

Bonus points if you can convince the Vice-Chancellor or President to participate in these calls at least once a month.

4. Every time you make a big decision that affects donors, check you have involved them appropriately

This could involve asking for a copy of the latest survey findings on the subject or picking up the phone to a few recent donors. Or it could mean inviting a donor to a meeting, convening a donor panel or organising a focus group – the depth of the research should be commensurate with the impact the decision could have on donors. Make sure you consider any bias you and your donors may bring – you may need to canvas a wider variety of supporters to have confidence in your decision.

5. Add a ‘donor experience’ KPI to your senior management reports

Even if you can’t measure the quality of the donor experience yet, signal that this is something you’re working towards by including a proximate objective along the lines of ‘convene a donor experience measurement working group’ or ‘commission a research agency for a donor survey’. Make sure this is reported on alongside income KPIs to keep it top-of-mind with staff.

Bonus points for celebrating progress on the donor experience with champagne and all-staff emails from the director.
Part 2: Donor experience resources

How-to information and case studies
Magical donor experiences and where to find them

There is so much available online and in print to support you to improve your donor experience. While there is no substitute for speaking with your audiences, and many of these resources recommend doing so, there is a wealth of information about what to look for, how to approach it and how to measure success.

This is not a definitive list, but we recommend:

**Online**


Some highlights:

- Read about the 12 pillars here: [http://sofii.org/article/the-6ps-a-blueprint-for-transforming-fundraising-for-good](http://sofii.org/article/the-6ps-a-blueprint-for-transforming-fundraising-for-good)
- CDE Project 4 – Thank You and Welcome [http://sofii.org/cde/project-4-thank-you-and-welcome](http://sofii.org/cde/project-4-thank-you-and-welcome)
- CDE Project 5 - The Supporter’s Journey [http://sofii.org/cde/project-5-the-supporters-journey](http://sofii.org/cde/project-5-the-supporters-journey)
- CDE Project 11 – Communications with Individual Donors (i.e. mass communication channels) [http://sofii.org/article/cde-project-11-communication-with-individual-donors](http://sofii.org/article/cde-project-11-communication-with-individual-donors)
- CDE Project 16 – Creating a Distinctive Service Culture [http://sofii.org/article/cde-project-16-creating-a-distinctive-service-culture](http://sofii.org/article/cde-project-16-creating-a-distinctive-service-culture)

- Donor Relations Guru blog [https://www.donorrelationsguru.com/blog](https://www.donorrelationsguru.com/blog)
- The Philanthropy Centre’s Learning to say thank you: the role of donor acknowledgments report [https://www.philanthropy-centre.org/learning-to-say-thank-you/](https://www.philanthropy-centre.org/learning-to-say-thank-you/)
- Rogare’s critical fundraising blog [https://criticalfundraising.wordpress.com/](https://criticalfundraising.wordpress.com/)
- Holly Palmer Consulting’s blog [https://hollypalmerconsulting.com/blog/](https://hollypalmerconsulting.com/blog/)
- Alumni Identity blog [https://alumniidentity.com/blog](https://alumniidentity.com/blog)
- Mark Phillips’ blog [http://queerideas.co.uk/](http://queerideas.co.uk/)
- Institute of Fundraising Supporter Experience Special Interest Group [https://www.institute-of-fundraising.org.uk/groups/sig-donor-experience/](https://www.institute-of-fundraising.org.uk/groups/sig-donor-experience/)
- Graduate Guide to Entering Fundraising [https://responsibleraising.blog/2019/04/02/graduate-guide-to-entering-fundraising/](https://responsibleraising.blog/2019/04/02/graduate-guide-to-entering-fundraising/)
- Simon Scriver’s Amazingly ultimate fundraising superstar podcast [https://open.spotify.com/show/0rg4OQBZTHIA9bvpD4ysN](https://open.spotify.com/show/0rg4OQBZTHIA9bvpD4ysN)

The Agitator (DonorVoice) blog [https://agitator.thedonorvoice.com/](https://agitator.thedonorvoice.com/)
Books

- Ken Burnett’s *Relationship Fundraising: A Donor-Based Approach to the Business of Raising Money*
- Adrian Sargeant and Elaine Jay’s *Building Donor Loyalty: The Fundraiser’s Guide to Increasing Lifetime*
- Roger Craver’s *Retention Fundraising: The New Art and Science of Keeping Your Donors for Life*
- Penelope Burk’s *Donor Centred Fundraising: how to hold on to your donors and raise much more money*
- Craig Linton and Paul Stein’s *Donors for Life: a practitioner’s guide to relationship fundraising*
- A more comprehensive reading list has been curated by Lisa Sargent on the SOFI website: [http://sofii.org/article/the-almost-complete-reading-list-for-fundraisers](http://sofii.org/article/the-almost-complete-reading-list-for-fundraisers)

People to follow on social media

- Lisa Sargent [https://twitter.com/lisasargent2](https://twitter.com/lisasargent2)
- Simone Joyaux [https://twitter.com/spjoyaux](https://twitter.com/spjoyaux)
- Tracey Playle [https://twitter.com/tracyplayle](https://twitter.com/tracyplayle)
- Lynne Wester [https://twitter.com/donorguru](https://twitter.com/donorguru)
- Tom Ahern [https://twitter.com/thattomahern](https://twitter.com/thattomahern)
- The Whiny Donor [https://twitter.com/thewhinydonor](https://twitter.com/thewhinydonor)
- Caoileann Appleby [https://twitter.com/qaoileann](https://twitter.com/qaoileann)
- Jim Langley [https://twitter.com/langleyinnovate](https://twitter.com/langleyinnovate)
Making the case for audience research

By Frances Brown, Fowlam

In our extensive experience of working with higher education institutions we have found that while development offices value having conversations with alumni and donors to find out their feelings, opinions and attitudes, there is sometimes a reluctance to carry out larger-scale research using methods such as focus groups, interviews and surveys. The results of the HEDERP research project resoundingly confirm what we have long suspected to be the sources of this reluctance, namely: a lack of resources (time, money and people); lack of knowledge on how to carry out, interpret and action the results of research; and fear that the negative opinions of donors may reflect badly on development staff. Given how beneficial we know research to be, we feel that this negativity reflects a lack of understanding of how research can be fundamental in shaping and transforming alumni and donor offerings from right from their foundation.

The ideal alum is engaged and connected to the institution, an ambassador who is keen to promote the institution and get involved with events and fundraisers. The ideal donor is all this and more – not only are they keen and involved but they also give, regularly and hopefully generously. Some alumni and donors will embody these ideals naturally, regardless of any effort put in by the institution. But for the rest, the institution must put in time and effort to create that sense of engagement and connection.

Many institutions direct that time and effort almost entirely towards communications and events, assuming that if they talk to alumni and donors and provide engagement opportunities for them, that will do the trick. To some extent, this approach works – it is inevitable that if opportunities to connect are available, at least some of the audience will take advantage of them. However, without research, there is a significant danger that at least some of the time, effort and money that goes in these activities is entirely wasted. There is also a danger that no one really understands why some efforts work and some don’t, meaning that the success and failure of different programmes can be very hard to predict or explain.

Creating a true sense of enduring connection and engagement involves building a genuinely two-way relationship with alumni and donors, one that is based on mutual understanding and support. If alumni relations and development teams have little or no real understanding of how their particular alumni and donors think and feel, it is likely that the communications and events that they put out are going to be based around what the institution wants, rather than any real sense of connection or relationship with their audiences. Some of these communications may hit the mark, but many will fall flat – without a real sense of connection there is no reason for alumni or donors to care about what the institution wants. If they are going to give back to their institution either in time or money, they need to feel motivated to do so - they need to feel like they are important to the institution and that what they do will make a difference. Crucially, they need to have a relationship with the institution that they care about.

A genuine relationship requires both parties to understand each other, and it is research that can help institutions to understand their alumni and donors. Well-designed research, carried out sensitively and carefully by experienced researchers, gives rich insight into the thoughts, feeling and attitudes of alumni and donors, allowing the institution to speak to those audiences in a way that makes them feel recognised and heard. Thus, communication becomes less about telling audiences what to think, feel and do and more about reflecting back their own thoughts and feelings in a way that creates a sense of mutual understanding. In this way, audiences start to identify with the messages of the institution, understand and feel invested in the institution’s goals and, ultimately, feel motivated to help achieve those goals, through the giving of time or money. Rather than spending time and effort on convincing audiences again and again to participate and donate, the institution instead spends time nurturing an existing relationship, one that grows and gets stronger over time.

So what of the concerns that lead development offices to be so reluctant to invest in research? Research does take time, money and effort. But, if it is well designed and carried out by experienced researchers, then it is time, money and effort very well spent. In fact, not carrying out research can lead to a far greater waste.
of resources, especially if decisions are being made without any solid reasoning behind them or any clear idea of what impact they will have. Far too often we see development offices make decisions that, though made in good faith, lack an understanding of the impact they will have on donors and alumni. Such decisions can unintentionally destroy years of hard work spent building up goodwill, causing loyal donors to walk away in annoyance and engaged alumni to feel disappointed and unheard. Thorough research that gives a good understanding of your audiences ensures that these disastrous decisions are much less likely to be made – when you know who you’re dealing with, you know how they’ll react and it is far easier to make decisions that benefit and impress your alumni and donors.

Development professionals are right to worry that they don’t have the skills to carry out and interpret research. One thing we will never sway on is our insistence that research is carried out by experienced researchers, with the training and skills to design research that gives reliable, actionable results. The role of development professionals isn’t to act as researchers themselves – it is to work with researchers to shape the goals of the research and to provide the support and information for the research to be carried out successfully. It is then the role of the researchers to interpret the data and to provide clear, practical recommendations based on the results. Research that leads to a lot of pretty graphs but no outcomes is indeed a waste of time and effort – and that is the fault of the researchers, rather than the development office. It is essential to choose research partners whose goal is to move the practice of the development office forward, rather than to provide reams of impressive but useless data.

And finally, the fear that negative opinions may reflect badly on development staff. In our experience alumni and donors rarely express opinions that directly relate to what the development staff are doing – for the most part, what their comments reflect is a genuine desire to engage and a frustration at not being heard rather than any direct complaint about the development office. On reading alumni and donor comments, many development staff understand exactly what they are saying and feel confident that they can rectify the problem – a problem they never knew existed before the research was carried out. It is usually the case that the imagined complaint is far worse than the actual complaint and that getting issues out in the open is a relief, allowing problems to be solved and progress to be made. What often surprises development staff also, is how positive alumni and donors can be, and what a boost it is to hear that their efforts haven’t gone unnoticed. Often, all that’s needed to improve things further are some relatively simple changes (such as making a donation form shorter and less confusing) that would have never been pinpointed without research.

Working without research or regular audience consultation and dialogue is like working in the dark – decisions are based on assumptions and guesses, with the hope that messages resonate with key audiences, especially those ‘ideal’ alumni and donors who are engaged and positive. But those messages could just as easily be missing the mark entirely or even alienating alumni and donors – without research, you just don’t know. Working with good research is like finally switching on the light – not only will it reveal who your ideal alumni and donors are, it will also allow you to understand why they are so engaged and positive. Having this knowledge allows you to not only nurture and retain these positive audiences, but to create the right conditions for the numbers of these audiences to grow. Efforts will no longer be based on hoping and guessing but on knowledge, feedback and evidence. Resources can be properly allocated and targeted, reducing wasted effort and leading to an increased sense of purpose and productivity in the development office.

Our experience has been that when development offices engage in well-designed research, they start to see it not as an added extra but as an essential tool for building their programmes. It is clear from the HEDERP results however, that research is not yet part of the toolkit of many development offices and that development professionals have legitimate concerns about whether research will really benefit them. Our challenge now is to continue to demonstrate the huge difference that research can make to the whole approach a development team takes and to use great research to shape a positive, alumni and donor focused future for the higher education development sector.
Getting personal with The Open University

With over 450,000 graduates to look after and engage, The Open University’s Development team could have every right to be a touch impersonal. With a team of only 8, how would you cope otherwise?

Yet in a recent Fundraising Magazine profile, Jhumar Johnson, the OU’s Director of Development, wrote that her alumni engagement team does not make any distinction based on the size of the gift when it comes to personalising engagement with donors.

At odds with the prevailing ‘stewardship matrix’ approach, this seemed radically donor-focused to us. We’ve advocated tailoring donor communication and recognition in the past based on ‘need’, rather than gift amount, and have encountered push-back, mainly from larger institutions due to the time and resource this is thought to require.

So how is it possible at the OU’s scale? I caught up with Jhumar to find out whether she had any tips for others wishing to create more personalised donor experiences.

“Hire nice people who like people”, Jhumar says.

Yes, she might summarise her method simply, but listening to her speak about her approach, it also has a lot to do with her leadership and the team culture she’s established.

Jhumar comes from a traditional ‘major gifts’ background, although she doesn’t like to call it that. When she worked at the University of Westminster to establish their scholarship programme, that term wasn’t part of her everyday vernacular. She was just busy building what Jhumar describes as “good old fashioned relationship-based partnerships.”

It wasn’t until she left this role that she realised, upon the advice of a recruitment consultant, that a whole fundraising sector, and its jargon, awaited her.

Perhaps the most important reason why Jhumar doesn’t like the term ‘major gifts’, is because it focuses attention on the outcome and not the process of building relationships. Her interest is in the people and their connection to her institution.

This outlook has followed her throughout her career and has caught on with the team at the OU.

When Jhumar joined the OU team originally as a consultant, and then as their Director of Fundraising, she knew exactly where she needed to turn her attention in order to build a successful operation.

“I was conscious that we needed to build the right kind of team. In order to build the right team, you have to address the issues in the team that’s in place first so you’re building on strong foundations.”

This meant ensuring everyone understood what a relationship-focused approach meant, and crucially, making sure that she recruited the right people as the team grew.

Regardless of whether they were working in alumni relations, direct mail fundraising or philanthropy & partnerships, she says her staff needed to be curious, patient and be able to read people.

“Not everyone is cut-out for relationship-based fundraising or building relationships. If you don’t have the right people then you’re always going to struggle.”

What the right people bring is what Jhumar uniquely describes as vigilance.

“We don’t forget how significant and valuable every graduate is to the OU. Every individual and their achievements matter. If we operate on that basis, it means that our vigilance is higher.”

Jhumar expects her team to identify where additional or alternative approaches are needed for different audiences. She wants her team to spot individuals in a mass-mailing list who would value a phone call instead or an additional hand-written note - and she encourages her team to take the time for this activity as a priority.

This expectation doesn’t just apply to the fundraising team. Jhumar leads from the front, often personally responding to those who send letters with their gifts, regardless of the gift size.
She also hand-signs every communication that is sent to their 700 honorary graduates, who now receive around 2 to 3 mailings in the year.

“I just think you’re writing to a group of people who effectively have no affiliation other than having accepted an honour. If you’re going to build a relationship with them then you have to invest in it. And the least I can do is hand-sign something.”

Interestingly, this approach doesn’t stop with the Director of Development. The Vice-Chancellor, Professor Mary Kellett, also shares her outlook.

“The VC is the same. She hand-signs everything we ask her to. She will even see mailings where an electronic signature doesn’t feel right to her and offer to take the letters home to hand sign. In the last 6 months alone, she hand-signed the equivalent of over 1,000 such letters.”

So what does Jhumar have to say to those who question the efficiency of such an approach?

“While process is needed for efficiencies, there is always room for personalisation and for vigilance.

“The reason I can get away with hand-signing letters and writing cards to donors where needed is because the team are close to it. They will ask me to write a note. If you recruit people that genuinely care about people, then personalising is not about a process. It’s because they genuinely have that outlook.”

“If someone writes to us, they will get a response, always. Either from me or from my deputy.”

- Jhumar Johnson, Director of Development at The Open University
Robin Peake is a charity fundraiser who understands that what matters most to donors doesn’t depend on big budgets. When Robin began working as Head of Fundraising and Communications at Innovista, a small Christian charity equipping leaders and teams to change their communities, he paid a fact-finding visit to a much larger charity. To his surprise they told him they were trying to behave more like a small charity, and this was a key moment for him: he realised Innovista could compete by being small.

In 2017 Robin and the team at Innovista used their smartphones to create personalised one-take videos for 88 of their most loyal supporters. Whether they were a large Trust or an individual giving £10 a month, these loyal supporters were thanked in a personal way that resonated with them: “You guys at Innovista are just the best at making your supporters feel valued”, one supporter wrote back. At the National Fundraising Awards the following year, Innovista won the inaugural award for Best Donor Experience for this.

Robin’s fundraising philosophy is simple: look after your visible supporters before you go chasing after invisible supporters. He contends that retention is a viable strategy for income growth, but too many charities look first to acquisition because they tend to see retention as a cost rather than an investment. At Innovista he put this philosophy into practice, and it worked: over four years income doubled to more than £600,000 despite no significant increase to the mailing file.

The key to understanding the income growth lies in another statistic: an individual donor retention rate of 79%. Robin relentlessly focused on keeping existing donors by keeping it personal, handwriting every thank-you card in such a way that supporters were made to feel that Innovista knew them. And he was prompt about it too, ensuring that the donor was thanked within 48 hours of giving by asking for an alert about every donation at the same time as the Finance team – that way, banking didn’t take precedence over thanking.

Naysayers might argue it’s easy to personalise things in this way when you’re dealing with fewer than a thousand donors, but you can’t possibly scale it. If the achievements of Robin and the team at Innovista don’t convince you, we can only highlight this wisdom sourced via The Agitator (and quoted by Robin on Twitter): “Large organisations say they have too many supporters to give them the personal time they deserve. Small organisations say they don’t have the money. Every excuse is bogus and serves only to justify not changing the organization’s comfortable status quo.”
Alumni & donor engagement: 8 lessons from the CX world

By Daniel Saunders, Qualtrics

Customer experience describes the sum total of someone’s interactions with a brand - from the moment they become aware of the company, to purchasing a product or service, to post-purchase service. Of course, there have always been customers, and those customers have always had some kind of ‘experience’ of a brand. But it’s up for debate when CX as a discipline really emerged - you could point to the mid-90s when the Internet took off, or perhaps the early-2000s when many new CX software vendors emerged (including Qualtrics).

However, in the last 6-7 years, things have got really serious. Today, most large organisations are hiring people with CX in their job title, and some have whole teams dedicated to it. A few even have Chief Experience Officers on their executive teams, like Mastercard.

And it’s from these companies and their use of CX that alumni and donor engagement teams can learn a lot. Here are just 8 lessons and key actions:

1. Think of an alumnus’ journey after they leave your institution

CX professionals talk about ‘customer journeys’ - in other words, the path a customer takes during an interaction with a brand.

Every alumnus goes on a journey from the moment they graduate to their later life. And at each point in that journey, they’ll want to engage with their former school for different reasons. It’s important therefore to map that journey out and understand the key moments - for example, first jobs, career development, starting a family.

You’ll also want to create different alumnus profiles, so you can segment your approach for different kinds of alumni. For example, some alumni will get a great job right out of university; others may not start their career in the next decade.

Key action: Map out alumnus journeys & create user personas to shape your offer

2. Gather feedback at every point in the alumni journey

How do you know how you’re doing if you don’t ask? You should ask for feedback on everything you’re currently doing to engage alumni, and ask what else you could be doing. This enables you to see your current strengths and weaknesses, and also where there might be gaps in your approach.

And don’t be tricked into thinking all experience data (X-data) comes from surveys. You can also gather crucial insights from things like online reviews, social media, alumni gatherings, or just anecdotes shared at events. Plug it all back into one platform to conduct smarter analysis.

Key action: Ask for feedback at every touchpoint; and don’t just rely on surveys

3. Focus on the moments that matter most to alumni

To paraphrase a famous saying, “You can’t please all of the alumni, all of the time”. You have a limited budget and only a certain amount of time to get things done - so it’s all about prioritising those things that your alumni really want and that have the biggest impact on their engagement.

For example, if running an alumni event costs a lot, but doesn’t deliver your expected ROI, then maybe it’s not worth it. Especially if you see that a personalised email newsletter, with content sourced from departments around the university, has much higher engagement and is driving more donations.

Key action: Prioritise 2-3 things that will have the biggest impact on engagement

4. Connect experience data to operational data

Many organisations have an abundance of operational data, which tells you the “what”. It includes things like sales and customer
numbers, or where sales are highest. Experience data tells you why things are happening - why certain customers shop with you, and why sales might be higher in some places.

In alumni engagement, it means looking at alumni demographics, event attendance and donation levels, alongside people’s views on their former university and why they either do or don’t donate. This gives you a much better idea of why things are happening and what you need to do to improve.

Key action: Look at all of your data sets alongside each other

5. Help everyone to play their part

The companies winning at CX make customer-centricity a priority for absolutely everyone in their organisation - from finance to front-line staff. A company can’t make CX the sole responsibility of a central team, as that team won’t be standing in front of a customer at a checkout counter, or invoicing them for work.

Applying this lesson to higher education, you need champions for good alumni engagement around your university. For example, you need your faculty on board so that they give you great content for alumni engagement activities. You need your digital team onside for any plans you might have for intranets or social media cross-promotion. And they all need to see the value of alumni engagement for them.

Key action: Run training sessions and workshops with all key stakeholders

6. Make sure you turn insights into actions

The best way of winning over stakeholders is showing results. You do that by collecting feedback, analysing it, taking action, then measuring the effects - at which point the cycle starts again and you need to review what you’re doing again.

It’s important to set up a process for getting data in and then turning it into real actions.

Key action: Empower someone or create a team to be responsible for implementing new ideas

7. Survey your alumni regularly (and don’t be afraid to do so)

A lot of companies aren’t comfortable surveying their customers too often, but research we conducted into how often employees would like to be surveyed suggested every 3 months was the most popular frequency, which is a benchmark you could look to.

Also interesting is that in CX, you might survey customers once every year or 6 months to gauge their overall satisfaction, but supplement that with in-the-moment surveys following other types of interaction. For example, you might ask people what they thought of an alumni event the day after, or what they think of an alumni newsletter after its first month of emails.

Key action: Survey alumni at least every year - it could be as often as every 3-6 months

8. Close the loop with dissatisfied alumni

When a brand ‘closes the loop’, it means they’ve contacted an unhappy customer to find out how they can turn the situation around. With real-time data, this can happen while the issue is still ongoing, or soon after.

For higher education institutions, think about how you close the loop with a) alumni who are dissatisfied with their university, and b) those who have given negative feedback on some aspect of the alumni experience. Perhaps look at creating a distinct alumnus persona for the former.

Key action: Identify where there are opportunities to turn your detractors into promoters

See how you can manage the alumni experience with Qualtrics. Book a demo with us today.
One of the key findings of this report is that just 55% of non-managerial staff working in UK higher education development feel they have a future in the sector, compared to 76% of their colleagues in management.

Rachel Third, the Head of Philanthropy at Loughborough University, has a theory about that. “People fall into fundraising”, she says. “It’s not an intentional choice.” Rachel thinks that many development staff enter the sector without a clear career path, and so it shouldn’t come as a surprise that they find it hard to imagine remaining in the sector long term.

Anyone who works in development knows that high staff turnover is damaging to fostering strong relationships with supporters, so at Loughborough they’re doing things differently to address this. Rachel hires staff for ‘fit’ and not experience, and that’s because as a leader, she’s decided to cultivate a pool of fundraisers in the same way that she might cultivate a donor pool: she invests in the long term - and with a little trust and patience it pays off.

When Loughborough goes out to hire a fundraiser, the job description doesn’t just detail what it expects from the candidate - it also explains what the candidate can expect from working at Loughborough.

In addition to the ongoing training that comes from great management, mentoring, and coaching, the budding fundraisers at Loughborough can expect to undergo a formal programme of training delivered by the Institute of Fundraising that culminates in a Certificate in Fundraising.

If you think that sounds good, Rachel now guarantees even more than this to her new fundraising hires, because upon earning their qualification and hitting their targets and objectives, entry-level fundraisers are automatically promoted to a ‘manager’-level role as part of the conditions of their contract.

This is why Rachel believes the talent pipeline at Loughborough is so robust: anyone entering the fundraising profession at Loughborough has the first four years of their fundraising career mapped out for them. “There needs to be a long-term career plan so people can see where they’re going next”, says Rachel.

As much as this strategy benefits the fundraisers of tomorrow, it’s a boon to Loughborough too: before implementing the scheme and promoting its benefits in job ads Rachel found herself shortlisting from a candidate pool that she could count on one hand. These days she’s reviewing up to 40 applicants per role, but it’s no bother. “This scheme allows us to create our ideal candidates” she explains.

The future is now bright for fundraising at Loughborough, but setting up new schemes like this do take determination. Rachel is happy to help anyone wanting to implement something similar at their institution. “It took some persuading, but the results speak for themselves. I’d share my experience with anyone wanting to address the fundraising talent shortage and make a difference to the sector.”
Part 3: About us

The HE Donor Experience Research Project Team
Our Research Advisory Board

Holly Palmer, Director of Holly Palmer Consulting

Holly has delivered several qualitative and quantitative alumni and supporter research studies for schools and universities and has particular expertise in focus group moderation, survey design and qualitative analysis.

Holly began her education fundraising career in donor relations at The University of Auckland and later led the University of Nottingham development team’s strategic planning and project management function. She is now the Director of Development at St Cuthbert’s College in Auckland.

Holly regularly presents at sector conferences on topics including how to create a relationship fundraising culture, how to improve donor retention and how to design a meaningful alumni research study.

Lee Durbin, Research & Insight Officer at Omri Insight Ltd

Lee is a fundraiser and storyteller who makes the message behind the numbers memorable. He has worked with universities and charities for most of his career, using his statistical wizardry and data visualisations for social good.

Lee has particular expertise in Raiser’s Edge, Alteryx and Tableau software and is the architect behind our trademark interactive ‘survey explorers’ that bring client survey results to life. But don’t let his technical expertise fool you! Lee regularly engages with industry issues, trends and debates, contributing to research and think-pieces on fundraising ethics, strategy, regulation and innovation.

Andreas Avraam, Fundraiser and World Traveller

Until he set off on his worldwide travel adventure, Andreas was the Legacy Officer at King’s College London. He has over five years’ experience in frontline higher education fundraising. He earned his stripes as a fundraiser while working as a student caller at Warwick University. Being a student is a time of great self-discovery, and he quickly fell in love with making a difference.

While it was as a student caller that Andreas learnt how important donations are, it’s as a legacy officer that he came to value donor relationships, stewardship and experience.
Kurstin Finch Gnehm, Head of Individual Giving and Legacies at the Royal Academy of Music

Kurstin Finch Gnehm is the Head of Individual Giving and Legacies at the Royal Academy of Music. Previously, she served as Regular Giving Manager for Imperial College London, where her team won a CASE Award and the 2016 London Marathon award for most money raised per charity runner. She has also worked in regular giving at the University of Aberdeen and the University of St Andrews.

Kurstin started her fundraising career at Linfield College in the United States and holds degrees from Linfield College, Oregon State University and the University of Iowa, where she taught gender studies classes. She serves on the Learning & Development Committee at the Institute of Fundraising and is co-chairing the 2018 CASE Regular Giving Conference and the fundraising track at the CASE Annual Conference in August.

Shekinah Griffith, Regular Giving and Communications at the University of Nottingham

Shekinah has always had a heart for people, understanding what makes them tick and delivering products and services they want to engage with. She also has a love for business, identifying opportunities and developing creative solutions to meet objectives. After leaving school she focused on marketing, business and psychology. She fondly remembers a lecturer saying, ‘the one thing businesses often forget is that they are targeting people, real people with emotions, dislikes and interests.’ That lecture stayed with her and has shaped how she approaches problems in the community and in business. When developing solutions she always considers both sides; what does the organisation want from the target audience and, just as importantly, what does the target audience want from the organisation. One-sided relationships don’t often last, that’s why Shekinah believes understanding both perspectives is important before taking action.

Stephanie Miller, Development Manager, Annual Giving at the University of Otago

Stephanie is a regular giving fundraiser whose obsession with data led her to her previous role of Operations and Supporter Engagement Manager at Edinburgh Napier University. She’s now firmly back into frontline fundraising with Otago, and has moved her family to New Zealand to be part of the University’s highly successful development team.

Stephanie’s a regular on the CASE scene, known for her practical and engaging sessions and is generous in sharing her experience, though not before 10 a.m. and at least two coffees. Stephanie is a proud alumna of Loyola University Chicago and the University of Aberdeen.
Eve MacDonald, Regular Giving Fundraising

Inspired by her experience as a widening access student and a desire to ensure support continued to be available, Eve began her career as a CASE Graduate Trainee at the University of Edinburgh and Edinburgh Napier University. The Traineeship provided a holistic experience of Development but Eve quickly discovered a love for the mix of science and creativity involved in Annual Fund fundraising.

After a year as Alumni Relations Officer at the Edinburgh Academy, Eve joined Heriot-Watt University to manage their Regular Giving programme. In this role she has been given the opportunity to develop and introduce new concepts across a range of platforms.

Alex Hyde-Parker, Partner at Alveo Consulting

Alex’s digital expertise and practical approach to problem solving have been proven over the last ten years at the Universities of Manchester and Edinburgh where, as Deputy Director of Development Services and Director of Services respectively, he delivered programmes of change to modernise and streamline fundraising and supporter engagement.

Alex’s approach is to build and develop effective teams, with the right skills and support to deliver digital solutions to improve business and make data-driven decisions to drive fundraising and engagement.

Alex is a trustee of Roald Dahl’s Marvellous Children’s Charity, developing his experience of charity governance and helping them to rethink their fundraising strategy. He was co-chair of the inaugural CASE Development Services in 2013 and continued as Chair until 2015 and regularly presents for CASE in Europe and Africa.

Rachel Third, Head of Philanthropy at Loughborough University

Rachel is Head of Philanthropy at Loughborough University, leading the award-winning team responsible for all fundraising, thanking and follow-up. She has a background in major gift fundraising with individuals and has previously enjoyed roles at King’s College London, University of Nottingham and Nottingham Trent University. She is passionate about shared learning and supporting others across the sector, so volunteers with CASE Europe and sits on the Fundraising Committee at her alma mater, Regent’s Park College in Oxford. She has been published in the Journal of Education Advancement & Marketing and her team recently picked up Gold in the Best Alumni, Development or Fundraising initiative at the HEIST awards for their dementia research appeal. Outside of fundraising she spends her time as a community volunteer in her village, jogging and walking her Labrador puppy (favourite place being the Peak District!).

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Paul Tyack, Associate Director and Head of Institutional Philanthropy at the University of York

Paul studied music at the University of York and has worked in fundraising and development for over 18 years. In his current position as Associate Director and Head of Institutional Philanthropy at the University of York, he leads the university’s philanthropic engagement with companies, trusts and foundations, raising substantial funding for large scale and highly ambitious capital, research and student focussed projects. He has a successful track of major gift, corporate and foundation philanthropy and before working at York, was Head of Development for the Anne Frank Trust UK and Development Manager at Shoreditch Trust, Family Rights Group and Barnardo’s. He is a trustee and volunteer at York CVS and the Kohima Museum Trust.

Sophie Duncan-Shepherd, Fundraiser turned Student

Sophie was a fundraiser, once. Now she’s a student again at the age of 30-something, making her the only one in her classes who remembers the original iPod. Before she gave it all up to sit in lecture halls and write essays instead of appeals, she worked for almost ten years in regular giving at St Andrews, Aberdeen and Dundee universities. She misses working with teams of student callers; somehow group essays and presentations aren’t quite as much fun.

Sophie started her PhD in October 2018 and is researching consumer vulnerability in the context of LGBT identity at Strathclyde Business School in Glasgow. She is a graduate of Abertay University, and has also graduated with an MSc from the University of Strathclyde.
Qualtrics makes software to help turn customers into fans, products into obsessions, employees into ambassadors and brands into icons. Qualtrics is the platform that the world’s most iconic companies use to close experience gaps and deliver breakthrough results. The Experience Management Platform™ makes it simple for any organisation to collect, understand, and take action on experience data (X-data)—the beliefs, emotions, and sentiments of customers and employees.

Therese Morley - Senior Account Executive

Therese is a Senior Account Executive at Qualtrics and is passionate about empowering universities to engage and understand their alumni by capturing meaningful, actionable insights at each touchpoint. Given her academic background in Psychology and Statistics, Therese is proud to work for Qualtrics whose goal is to make sophisticated research as accessible and engaging as possible. Since starting her role in Qualtrics in 2015, Therese has seen Qualtrics become the platform of choice for 95% of top 100 UK universities and over 100,000 university users in the UK and she is looking forward to seeing several more universities transform how they engage alumni through Qualtrics.

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About Fowlam Ltd - our prize-draw sponsor

Fowlam is a Nottingham-based research consultancy. Our highly experienced core team works with a range of specialist associates who are leaders in their field to deliver top-quality research, insight, advice and training.

Foghlaím (‘fowlam’) is the Irish word for ‘to learn.’ We work with you to understand the unique needs of your organisation and we use evidence-based methods to collect solid, reliable data on what will benefit your organisation most. We then use that data and our skills in user experience (UX), customer experience (CX), psychology, communications, design, human factors and education to develop solutions that will help your organisation to achieve its goals.

We work with universities to design in-depth, bespoke qualitative and quantitative research that delivers detailed, practical insights into their relationship with alumni and donors. We use the insights of our research to provide evidence-based recommendations on how to nurture and improve these relationships over time through communications, events, programmes and journeys that chime with and reflect the needs and attitudes of donors and alumni. Our focus is on giving universities the information and tools they need to design and shape authentic, effective engagement with their audiences.

Frances Brown - Chief Executive Officer, Fowlam

Frances has a first class degree in psychology and a postgraduate qualification in education. She has carried out complex psychological research with the University of Bristol and Trinity College Dublin and has extensive expertise in user experience research. Since setting up Fowlam Ltd in 2016 she has worked with the University of Nottingham on the development of mobile apps to support large-scale events, has carried out user research for LEGO and Yoop, alumni research for University College Cork, and has worked with Holly Palmer Consulting Ltd on alumni research for Balliol College Oxford and Birkbeck, University of London.

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Part 4: Appendices

Useful information
Appendix 1: Margin of error

361 individuals responded to our survey, 317 of whom indicated that they spend most of their time working in the UK higher education development sector. Of these higher education development professionals, 289 completed at least part of the survey proper (meaning they answered the first post-classification question), and 252 of these individuals completed the entire survey proper (meaning they answered the question on The Commission on the Donor Experience). Throughout, we have indicated the volume of responses.

When we report that a certain percent of participants expressed a certain view, there is a margin of error to keep in mind. For example, when we say that 40% of participants agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “senior managers here are more interested in the money we raise than anything else”, this is indicated as being based on a sample size of 252 and the margin of error at the 95% level is therefore ±6%. In other words, there is a 95% probability that between 34% and 46% of UK higher education development professionals agree or strongly agree with this statement.

The margin of error also comes into play when comparing divisions of the sample against each other. For example, we see that 76% of UK higher education development professionals in management positions agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “I feel that I have a future in higher education development” with a 7% margin of error, meaning there is a 95% probability that between 69% and 83% of UK higher education development professionals in management positions agree with this statement. Given that 55% of their colleagues not in management positions agreed or strongly agreed with this statement with a margin of error of 10%, this is therefore a statistically significant difference because its upper limit at the 95% confidence level (65%) is less than the lower limit of the management group (69%).

Appendix 2: Sample size and composition

It is difficult to estimate the current number of higher education development professionals, let alone how such a number is distributed among the different institution types, office sizes, roles, levels of experience, and levels of seniority that constitute the sector. Consequently, we were unable to weight our data based on the classification questions we posed to ensure it didn’t over-represent certain points of view. In striving to be transparent about these shortcomings, our commentary at the start of the report discusses the composition of our sample at length, noting how Russell Group institutions are potentially over-represented.

As noted above, 252 higher education development professionals completed the survey in its entirety, and we’ve described the margin of error incurred by a sample of this size. The researchers and the Advisory Board went to great lengths to ensure as many different sorts of practitioners as possible completed our survey, and in striving to be as transparent as possible our commentary at the start of the report outlines our promotional strategy and the barriers we faced. As a comparison, a survey about the donor experience conducted by the Institute of Fundraising in 2018 received 325 responses (you can download it here).

Although the sample size itself is sufficient to draw meaningful conclusions (keeping in mind the modest margin of error), the question of whether or not it accurately represents the wider population of UK higher education development professionals is harder to answer – we only hope that our commentary and the interactive nature of our survey explorer compensates for any perceived obstacles on this front.

Whilst participation rates have little bearing on the reliability of the findings, which only require a representative sample of a size that reduces the margin of error satisfactorily, we were nevertheless interested to determine this as a means of gauging interest in this sort of research within the sector. Taking the latest Ross-CASE survey results as our guide, we estimate that approximately 3,000 individuals currently work in the UK higher education sector, meaning that around 10% of the sector’s workforce responded to our survey.
Appendix 3: Online survey questionnaire

Download a full copy of the survey questionnaire at www.hedonorexperience.com.

The survey results can be found in the interactive survey explorer at bit.ly/hedonorexperience

The survey data (excluding the free-text questions in order to preserve the anonymity of our participants) can be found at https://github.com/lddurbin/HEDERP
Thank you for being part of something special!

Please send any feedback or questions to lee@hollypalmerconsulting.com.
Follow us on Twitter: @lddurbin and @hollypalmer86