Networking

Networking is something most people do naturally without even realising it: the act of forming, developing and maintaining meaningful relationships to the mutual advantage of all involved.

Therefore, to get the most out of networking, keep the following advice in mind:

When you meet someone new, think how you can help them. Initially this may just be asking questions, listening and being interested in what they tell you but later you might be able to contribute more.

Sometimes people will help you more than you help them, for instance, when a colleague acts as your mentor. Consider how you might be able to help in return, or whether you could mentor someone else yourself.

Don't underestimate what you have to share. For instance, passing on relevant information to a senior colleague with similar interests to you may help them remember you. Just because they are more senior doesn't mean they will have already come across that information.

Why network?

Networking can play an important role in helping you advance your career or make your current job easier. It can help you:

- Build a support network

- Find mentors who can offer advice and be sounding boards for your ideas
- Open up opportunities for sharing resources
- Find collaborators for projects
- Uncover un-advertised career opportunities
- Build connections that can provide information/advice about potential learning or job opportunities
- Open up numerous other opportunities to be introduced to mutual contacts

Networking skills

Networking is a skill that you can develop and practice just like any other skill. How you develop your networking skills depends very much on the personal attributes you have – your character and particular strengths and weaknesses.

Sacha Chua, author of The Shy Connector, is a great example of someone who has recognised their strengths and weakness and developed their networking skills accordingly; even those who do not identify as 'shy' might find her blog and slideshows useful.

Whilst it is important that you develop a networking style of your own, there are also some basic steps which everyone can use in order to get their networking off to a good start. In the video, Getting People to Like You, networking trainer Will Kintish suggests remembering the acronym SHINE

when you meet a new person:

    Smile

    Handshake

    I = Eye (make eye contact!)

    Names (listen and remember their name)

    Engage/Enthuse

You might not always feel it is comfortable or appropriate to shake hands—it is a question of personal style and/or culture. Handshakes, like suits and business cards, are less common in universities than in business.

The networking lessons of business can, however, help in HE. The **'elevator pitch'** – a phrase coined to describe how one can effectively answer the question 'Tell me about your business' in the duration of an elevator ride – can be useful for university colleagues too. 'Where' or 'What area do you work in?' is a common opening at training events or other meetings between colleagues.

Before attending an event, jot down some specific objectives: exactly who or how many people do you want to meet? What information are you hoping to gain? What would you like to share? Is there anyone attending the event you could contact in advance and arrange to meet? Should you take business cards or CV copies?

After a networking event, make notes on who you met and what they told you. Annotate and file any business cards you were given and follow up with a 'nice to meet you' message to help them remember you.

Networking online

Linkedin is growing as a networking tool for people in higher education as well as those in many other sectors. Joining linked in groups can help you find new contacts and information, for instance the AUA's group.

Blogs – Whether you want to read a blog, write your own or join in the discussion in the comments, blogs can be useful places to connect. Try 'Registrarism' by University of Nottingham's Registrar Paul Greatrix and Jobs.ac.uk and The Guardian's HE blogs.

Twitter is a 'microblogging' tool often used by professionals to share interesting articles, links or engage in 140 character discussions. Start with @UniLeedsStaff

Facebook – if you use it, make the most of people you have on Facebook. Old contacts might come in handy, although be careful of what you share on Facebook if using it for professional and personal reasons.

Maintaining your network

Keep your networks alive! Once you have made some contacts, don't waste them. Here are a few ideas about how to maintain your network:

Follow up with any articles or resources you mentioned to them.

Make a date to meet or call your new contact so that you can talk more about your mutual interest, potential collaboration or opportunity.

Keep in touch – even if you don't need your new contact at the present time, drop them a line every few months so that they will still remember you when you do need them.

Ask for introductions and introduce them to people you know

Thank you – thank contacts who offered advice and update them with your progress, even if you decide not to pursue what you discussed with them.