Values project: University of Essex pilot study report

Knowledge Transfer Partnership

University of Essex & Glowinkowski International Limited

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Compiled by Kali Demes

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Introduction

Knowledge Transfer Partnerships

This summer the University of Essex participated in a pilot study on corporate values for a current Knowledge Transfer Partnership between the University of Essex and Glowinkowski International Limited. This is a non-technical report that introduces the project, its rationale and objectives and presents initial findings from the pilot.

What is a Knowledge Transfer Partnership?

Knowledge Transfer Partnerships (http://www.ktponline.org.uk/) is a national programme funded by Innovate UK (formerly the Technology Strategy Board) that facilitates the transfer of knowledge and skills from the UK Knowledge Base (academic institutions) to industry settings. Across the UK there are over 700 KTPs running at any one time and importantly, each Knowledge Transfer Partnership (KTP) is led by a recent university graduate, known as a KTP Associate.

Innovate UK figures state that for every £1 million spent on KTP projects, the industry partner can expect an average annual increase in profit of £4.24 million before tax, the Knowledge Base can expect an average of 2 research papers to be generated, and the Associate can anticipate increased employability prospects (60% accept a job offer from the industry partner following the completion of the project).

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What is this KTP project about?

Researchers at the University of Essex, in partnership with consultants at Glowinkowski International Limited are exploring values in the corporate realm (see the project team above). More specifically, the challenge that this project aims to tackle is the mismatch between company values (what we say we do) and company actions (what we actually do) and the negative impact that this can have on employee satisfaction and turnover as well as company brand and reputation. While this may be a concern for

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many organisations, it might not be apparent to its leaders how they are failing in this regard. This project plans to address this gap in knowledge and provide a practical means to assess and resolve this mismatch.

How can we assess the value-behaviour gap?

The core objective of this project is to develop a survey based tool that will be used to 'diagnose' or establish how well an organisation is demonstrating values in the workplace. This tool will assess values both at the level of employees ("what is important to me"), and at the level of the wider company ("what does my organisation do"). An associated change management programme will be developed to serve as a model and guide for leaders wishing to alter their company operations to become more in line with the values they wish to embed.

How will the reliability and validity of the tool be assessed?

This tool will be pilot tested in a number of organisations, and assessed and evaluated in terms of both its scientific and practical validity. Following a first round of data collection, each case study will receive feedback on their data and have the opportunity to provide feedback on the tool. This feedback will be used to refine the survey and inform development of the associated change management programme. In a second round of data collection, the tool will be administered once more within each company to assess any change over time and to validate refinements.

What are the implications of this change management programme?

In an increasingly globalised and 'connected' world, in the business sphere accountability and strong core values are more important than ever. Companies behaving more responsibly and consistently in line with these values have the potential to enhance the lives of their employees, the wider community and environment in addition to boosting their organisational performance and revenue. The values tool and associated change management programme aims to provide the means to tackle this crucial corporate challenge.

The University of Essex Pilot Study

The first version of the values survey was trialled at the University of Essex in order to gain an initial impression of the tool's reliability and validity and importantly to see how respondents react to the survey topic and content. This was also an opportunity for the University of Essex itself to gain a sense of how it is perceived by its employees in relation to key values and behaviours in the workplace.

This survey assesses an eighteen value framework developed through this project which is intended to be broadly applicable across multiple sectors. In the University of Essex pilot study, the nine values specified in the University's Strategic Plan are also assessed. Before we present the results of this study, we first provide a brief overview of the development of this framework.

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Research and tool development

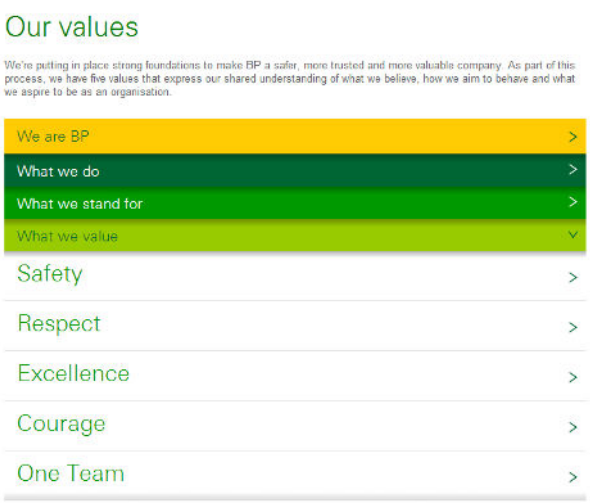
In order to identify the core concepts for our values framework we conducted research across three main sources: academic literature, corporate websites and international principles and guidelines on business and human rights.

Academic research

The academic research focused on a literature review of values in the social sciences. This research goes back to normative accounts of values from the great philosophers of our time including the virtue ethics of Aristotle and Plato that abounded from the 5th through to 15th centuries, and the approaches of deontology (e.g., Immanuel Kant) and consequentialism (e.g., Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill) that became popular in the 18th century. We explored 'quandry ethics' in the moral psychology realm examining issues around prosocial behaviour (e.g., Isen & Levin, 1972) and the psychology of 'Gesellschaft' which has studied how human beings function in society and interact with strangers in terms of helping, harming and cooperative behaviours (e.g., Sanfey et al., 2003). We identified existing values models and theories in psychology, political science and human rights including Haidt and colleagues (2014) moral foundations, Welzel & Inglehart's (2010) work on the World Values Survey and Shalom Schwartz (1992, 2012) circumplex model of universal values.

Corporate websites

In a second strand of research we reviewed the FTSE 100 and FT Global 100 company websites to see how they described their values and corporate responsibility. The majority of these companies had a webpage dedicated to corporate values and/or corporate responsibility in some form. We extracted a list of 733 (non-unique) values across these sites. These are non-unique as there were certain values that were espoused by multiple companies, such as integrity and excellence (see examples below).



BP (oil and gas)

Tate & Lyle (food)

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International guidelines

In a third area of research we examined international codes of conduct with regards to business and human rights. For example, we reviewed the Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (2011) and the United Nations Global Compact (2012) which outlines ten principles in the areas of human rights, labour, the environment and anti-corruption.

Developing the framework

Through this research we wanted to establish a values model that specifies a limited number of core values that are relevant in an organisational context and importantly are applicable across all sectors. With this in mind, we collated all of the value terminology gathered through the research and examined word frequencies. Using the NVivo 10 software, a list of 855 unique words was yielded as summarised in the word cloud, with word size indicating relative frequency.

While each word was unique, many were synonyms and semantically related words (e.g., quality and excellence) or different forms of the same word (e.g., innovate and innovation). From this list we manually generated clusters of related terms to identify and establish the core value concepts represented in this word list. Greater emphasis was placed on the most frequent words in the list such as *integrity* and *environment* which were among the most widely cited values. This method plus much discussion among the project team, led to the development of an eighteen value model representing six core or principal values.

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The framework

The framework for the values tool specifies six core values: innovation, collaboration, excellence, accountability, integrity and respect. Each of these values is characterised by three sub-values understood to be key defining indicators of the core value. These are categorised as follows:

- **Innovation:** knowledge, novelty, adaptability
- **Collaboration:** teamwork, inclusion, relationships
- **Excellence:** performance, improvement, recognition
- **Accountability:** thought, transparency, responsibility
- **Integrity:** ethics, trust, authenticity
- **Respect:** environment, community, people

Tool construction

The values tool was developed to provide a means to assess, in an organisational setting, the presence of the six core values specified in our framework and each of their three defining components. We developed a series of items to serve as indicators of these, to be rated on a scale from very little to very much across two key dimensions: *"to what extent does my organisation show?"* (shown dimension) and second *"how important is to me that my organisation shows?"* (personal importance).

As well as assessing the presence of the core values of our framework, the tool can also be used to assess values that are explicitly stated by an organisation. In the University of Essex pilot study, participants were also asked to evaluate the nine values explicitly endorsed by the University, as listed in their Strategic Plan, these are: excellence, academic freedom, integrity, community, inclusivity, innovation, global outlook, partnership and accountability.

Altogether this tool allows us to identify mismatches between the values that an organisation espouses and the values it demonstrates, as well as the mismatch between organisational and employee values.

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University of Essex pilot study

Participants and procedure

Employees at the University of Essex were invited to participate in this pilot study via a staff information e-mail list. This email contained a brief description of the project along with a web link to the survey, hosted on Qualitrics. In total 254 staff members responded to the survey, of which 144 completed the survey in full and 110 partially completed, stopping part way through or not completing the demographics section at the end. Altogether 151 participants completed all of the values items in the survey. Of those completing the demographics section, 60% of respondents were female and the average age of participants was 33.06 years (*Standard Deviation* = 12.08).

Scale reliability

Before analysing the data we first examined the reliability of each of the eighteen value scales in terms of their internal consistency. Four items were used to assess each construct, to be ultimately combined into a single score. If participants respond similarly to each item within a scale set, we can assume that the items are assessing a common concept. Cronbach's alpha is a statistic which tells us the degree to which responses are consistent across related items, with a score above .7 indicating good internal consistency (see Table 1).

All of the values have high reliability, with all but one being above the .8 level and many above .9. Interestingly, when combining scores from all scales together to create a single index, internal consistency is also high (for both the *shown* and *importance* dimensions, both α = .96) which suggests that there is a higher level variable of which each of these values is an indicator. We will call this variable 'values-driven'.

Table 1. Internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha) for each of the eighteen values, based on four items per value for each part of the questionnaire (shown and importance).

	shown	importance		shown	importance
Innovation			*Accountability*		
knowledge	.78	.87	thought	.84	.92
novelty	.91	.89	transparency	.84	.91
improvement	.90	.93	responsibility	.90	.93
Collaboration			*Integrity*		
teamwork	.90	.92	ethics	.92	.92
Inclusion	.84	.90	trust	.92	.96
relationships	.86	.88	authenticity	.89	.93
Excellence			*Respect*		
performance	.87	.90	environment	.90	.94
development	.93	.91	community	.91	.93
recognition	.91	.93	people	.93	.93

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Shown values versus value importance

We began exploring the data by first comparing the *shown* and *importance* dimensions on the overall 'values-driven' score (see Figure 1). Across all values the *importance* that respondents placed on the University of Essex showing these values (*Mean* = 4.10, *Standard Deviation* = .83) was significantly higher than the degree to which they perceived them to be actually *shown* (*Mean* = 2.88, *Standard Deviation* = .77), $t(158) = -17.27$, $p < .001$. Respondents on average perceive the University of Essex to be moderately showing or demonstrating certain values but rate their importance above this level.

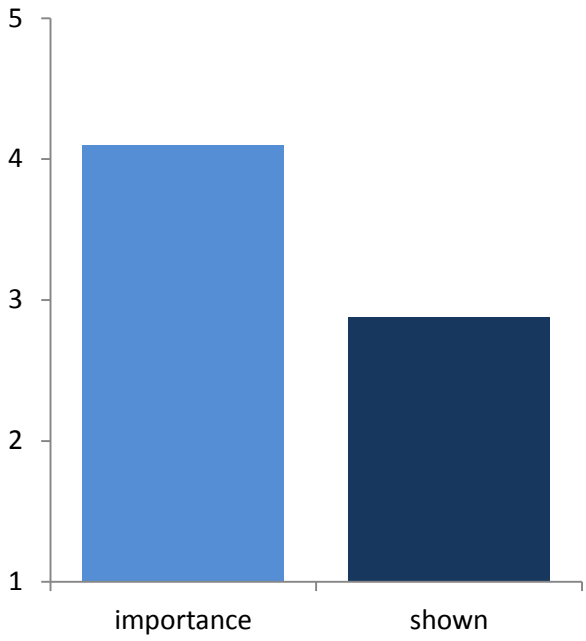

Figure 1. Level of importance versus level at which values are shown at the University.

To provide some clarity around the distribution of responses across the 1-5 rating scale, participants 'values-driven' scores at both the *shown* and *importance* levels are plotted as histograms. At the *shown* level (Figure 2 – dark blue bars) the responses are distributed normally across the scale. This means that the largest proportion of participants responded around the mid-point of the scale with fewer responding at the extreme ends.

While a normal distribution is attractive from a statistical point of view, practically speaking this distribution means that the University has room to improve in terms of demonstrating values more consistently in the workplace. Something that we will explore, but cannot yet at this early stage, is how the University of Essex compares to other institutions or organisations along this *shown* dimension.

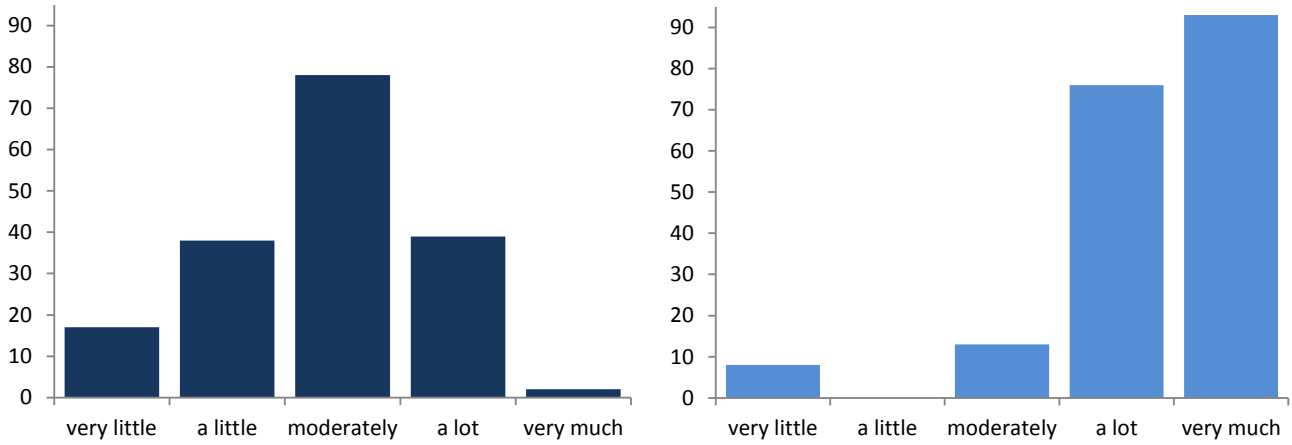

Figure 2.Distribution of participants responding at different levels on the shown and importance scales

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As we employ this tool in other organisations we will build up a database of responses that can be used for this purpose.

At the *importance* level (Figure 2 - light blue bars) the distribution of responses is quite different from the *shown* level, with greater numbers of participants using the upper end of the scale (a lot and very much) and fewer using the mid and lower points (very little to moderately), called a negatively skewed distribution. This distribution suggests that it is very important to the employee body, or at least those that responded to this survey, that the University of Essex demonstrates values in the workplace.

In the next analysis we examined the *shown* and *importance* dimensions for each of the eighteen values individually (Figure 3). For each value the *importance* rating (light bars) is consistently higher than the *shown* rating (dark bars). However there is variability within each level, such that some values are rated as being more important than others and some values are rated as being shown more than others.

Another way to study the data is to examine the size of the discrepancy or mismatch between the *shown* and *importance* dimensions for each value. In Figure 4, for illustration purposes the data from Figure 3 is re-presented but ordered according to the size of the discrepancy between the two levels, with the largest discrepancy on the left, through to the smallest on the right. Interestingly, the discrepancy between *shown* and *importance* is greatest for the most important value (trust) and smallest for the least important value (environment). Other big discrepancies are found for responsibility and recognition values and smaller discrepancies for community and performance values. Mid-level discrepancies were found for people and thought.

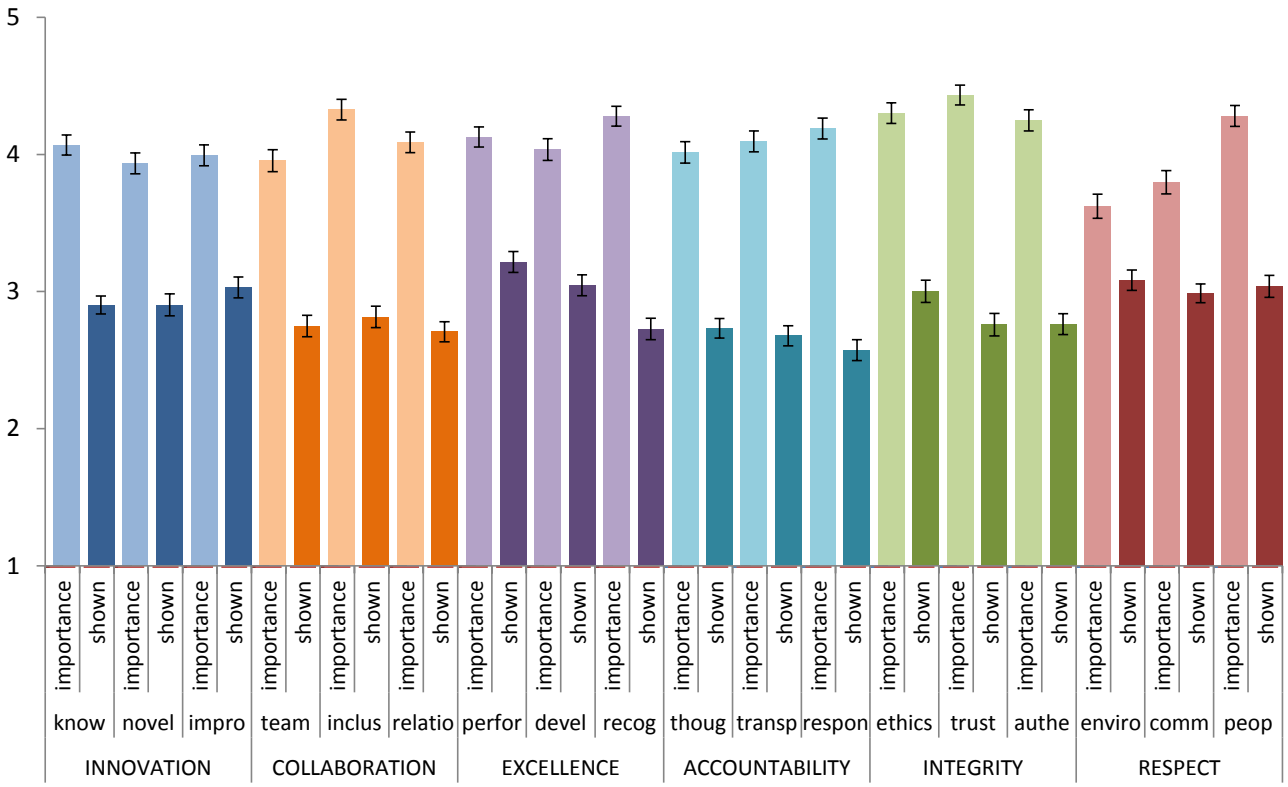

Figure 3. Level of importance versus level at which values are shown at the University for all values.

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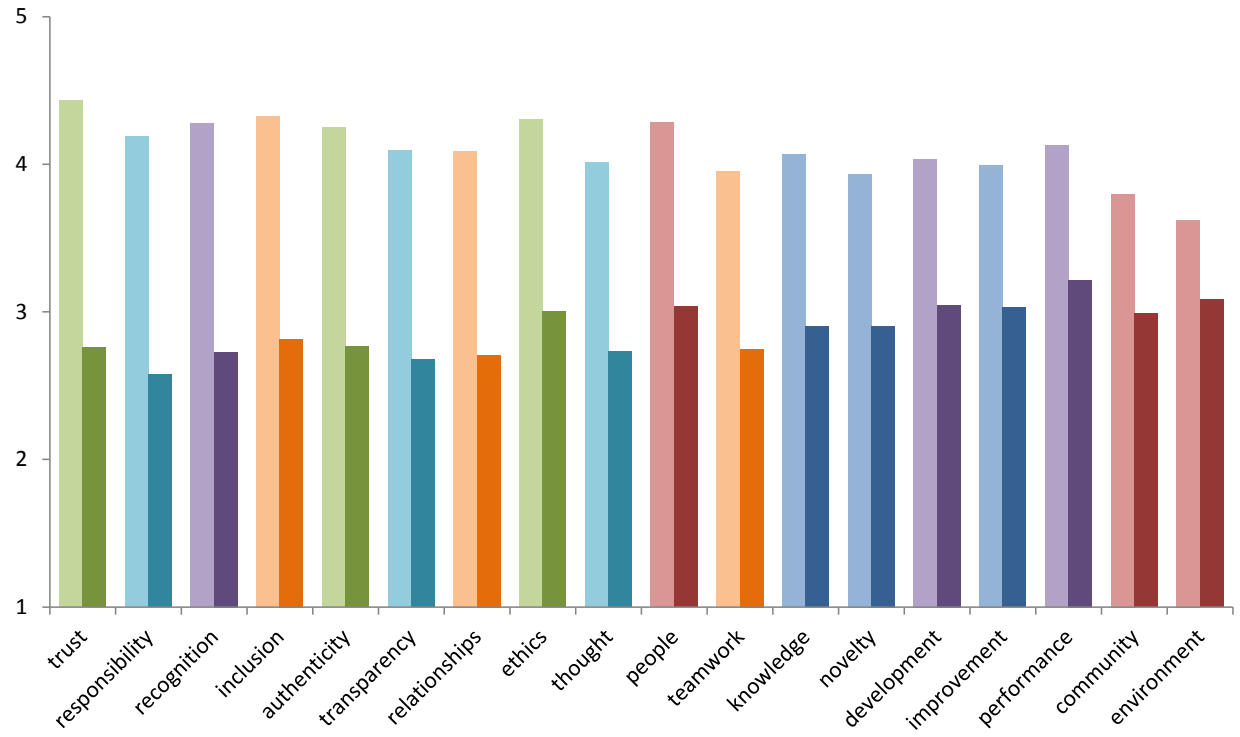

Figure 4. Level of importance (light shaded bar) versus level at which values are shown (dark shaded bar) at the University of Essex for all eighteen values, ordered by shown-importance discrepancies.

Following inspection of the eighteen values individually, we then combined values scores according to their categorisation with each of the six core values and present this data in a radar chart (Figure 5).

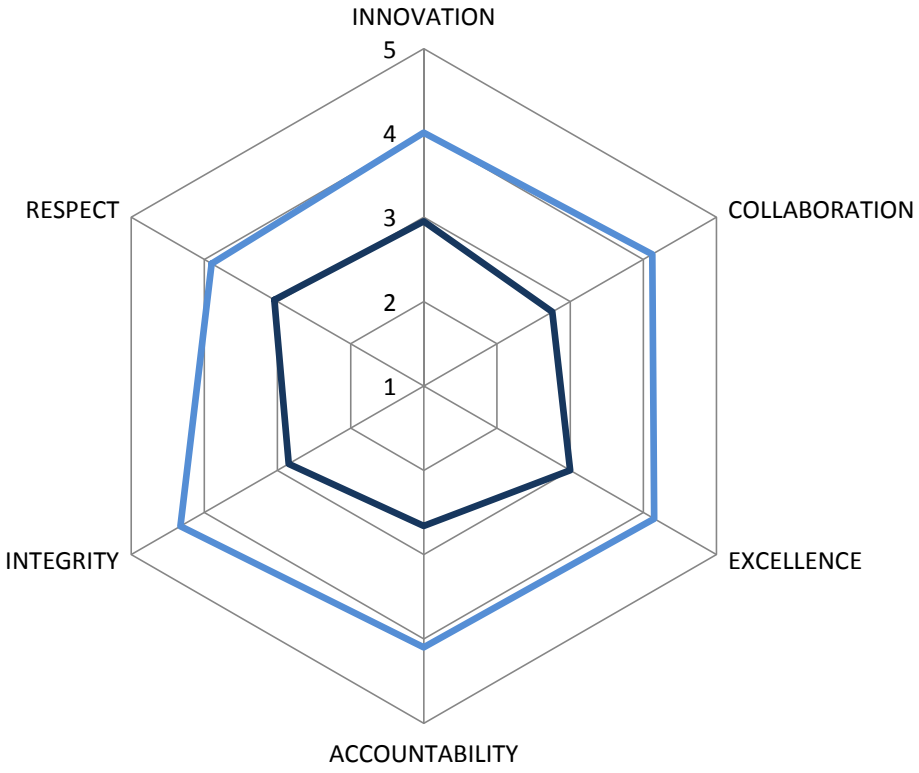

Figure 5. Level of importance versus level at which values are shown for the six core values.

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The dark blue line represents the level at which participants perceived each value to be *shown* by the University of Essex and the light blue line represents the level at which participants perceive it to be *important* that the University of Essex shows each value. The more the line extends to the edge of the chart the greater the endorsement of that value. In this figure it is clear to see where the larger and smaller discrepancies lie. Accountability and integrity have the largest mismatch between shown and importance, while respect and innovation have the smallest discrepancies.

The University of Essex values

In addition to assessing the level of values *shown* and the *importance* of the eighteen values from our framework we also assessed the University of Essex's own nine values as described in their Strategic Plan. First of all, as a supplementary question in the survey we asked participants to indicate how familiar they were with these nine values, from not knowing that they existed, through to being able to name all nine (see Figure 6). Of those who responded to this question (*n* = 148) 22% did not know that these values existed, 15% knew they existed but did not know what they were, 47% knew what some of them were and finally 16% knew all of them. These frequencies suggest that more than half of the employee body may not be fully aware of these nine values and what they mean to the University of Essex.

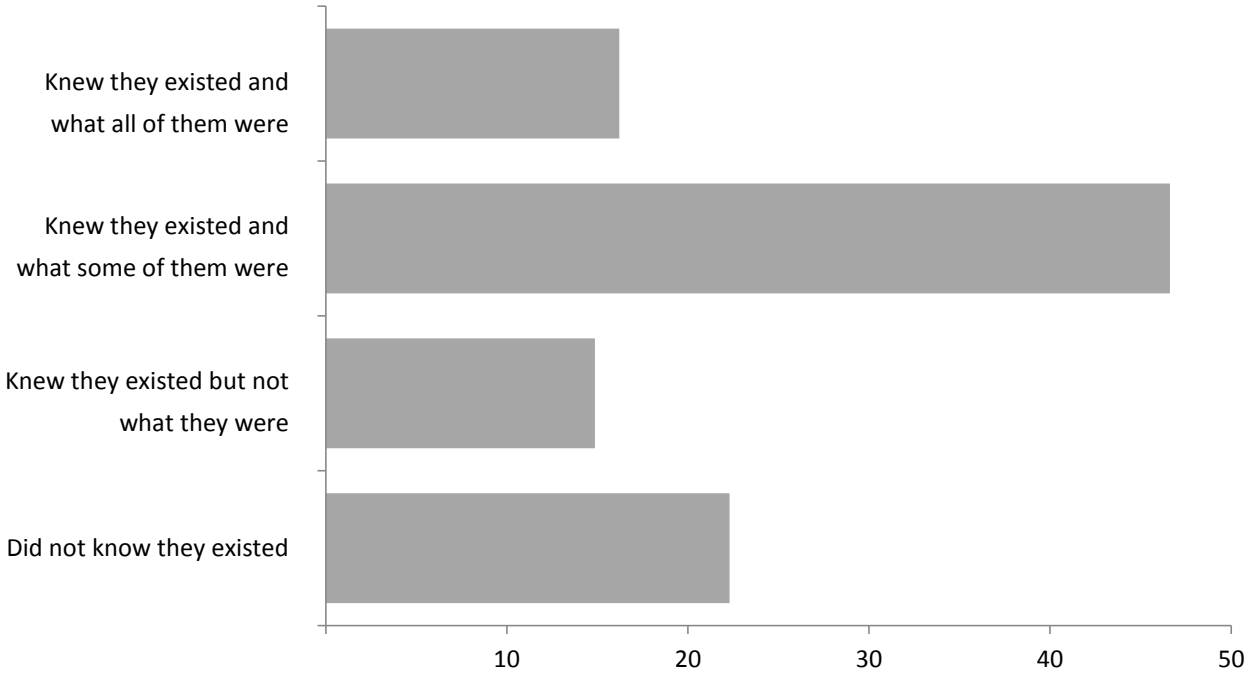

Figure 6. Proportion (%) of respondents familiar with the University of Essex's nine values to varying degrees.

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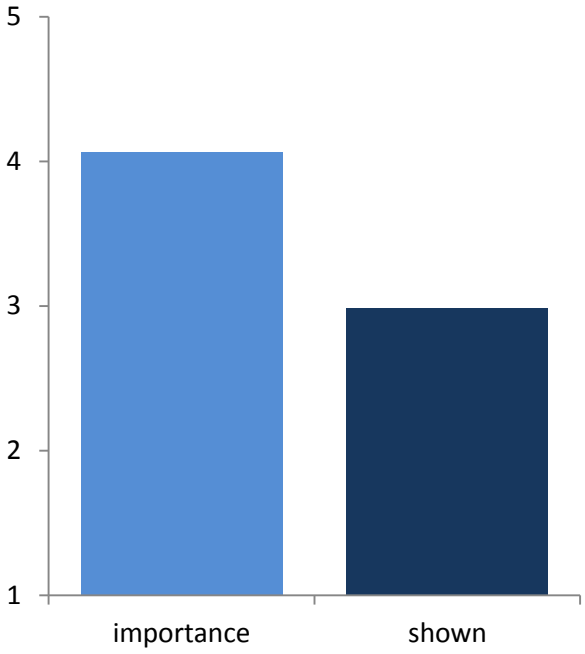
Shown values versus value importance



Across the nine values of the University of Essex we compared responses at the *importance* and *shown* level (Figure 7). Across all nine values the same pattern as was found for the eighteen values model was replicated. The perception seems to be that the University of Essex's values are being moderately *shown* (*Mean* = 2.99, *Standard Deviation* = .07), but the extent to which they are perceived to be *important* (*Mean* = 4.06, *Standard Deviation* = .08), is significantly higher, $t(148) = -12.51$, $p < .001$. When we look at the data for each of the nine values, once again, a similar pattern emerges as for our values model. Of the nine values, those rated as most *important* were rated to be the least *shown* (Figure 8).

Figure 7. Level of importance versus level at which the University of Essex's values are shown.

Accountability and integrity had the largest discrepancies between the *shown* and *importance* levels, while global outlook and partnership had the smallest. This contrast is all the more stark when viewed in a radar chart (see Figure 9) and reflects what we found for our eighteen values model, that integrity and accountability are the most discrepant values when comparing across levels.

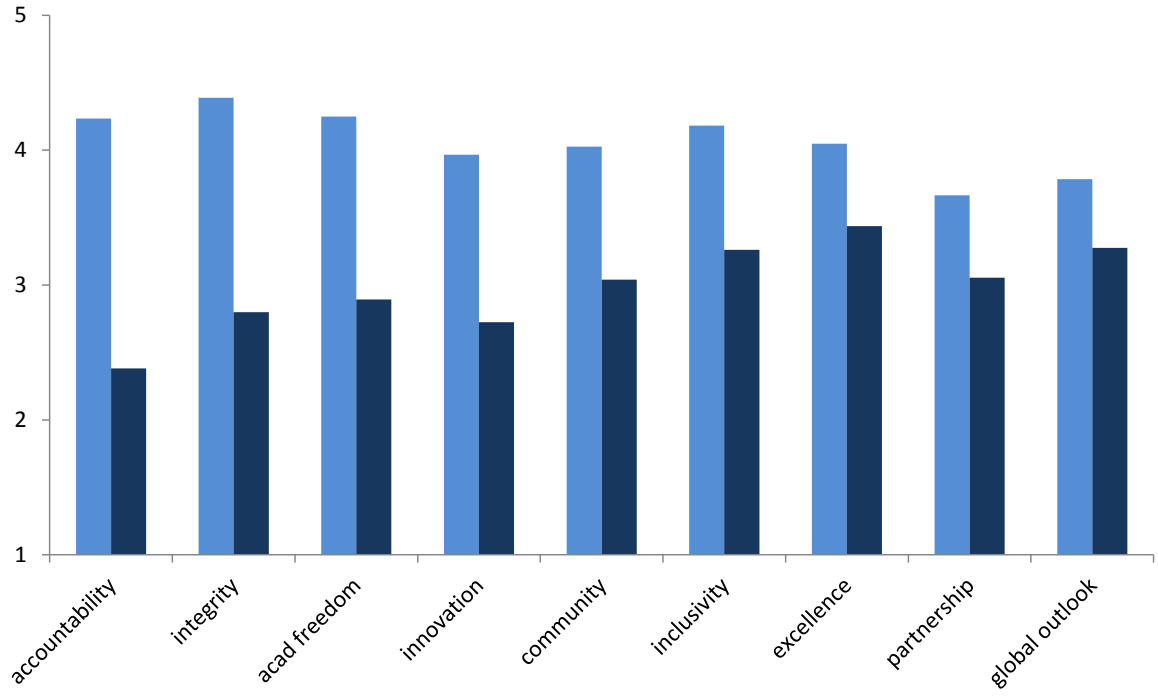


Figure 8. Level of importance (light blue bar) versus level at which values are shown (dark blue bar) for the nine University of Essex values.

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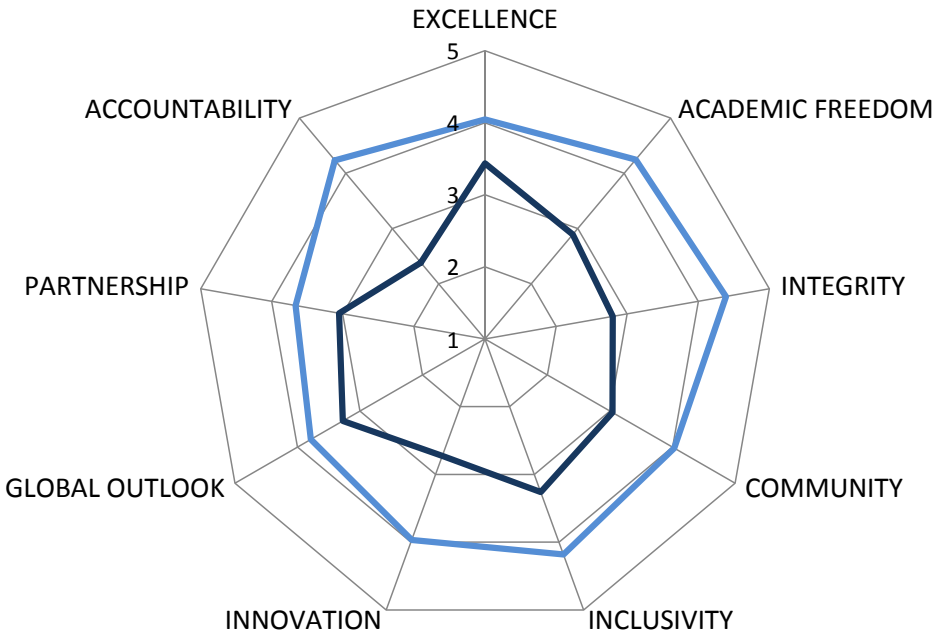

Figure 9. Level of importance versus level at which values are shown for the nine University of Essex values.

Values and demographics

The main objective of the values tool is to assess the extent to which values are demonstrated in an organisation and how important these values are to employees. From an academic perspective we are also interested in the relationship between endorsement of these values and individual differences. In the survey we therefore invited participants to provide some demographic information including age, gender and religiosity for this purpose. Previous research suggests that there are generational and gender differences in values, so including demographics in the pilot study provides us with an opportunity to test whether such effects emerge when assessing values with this new tool.

Table 2. Correlations between demographics and the six core values at the shown and importance level.

		age	male	current affairs	religious	spiritual
INNOVATION	shown	-.24**	-.20*	-.02	.08	-.03
	importance	-.27**	-.23**	.24**	-.01	.06
COLLABORATION	shown	-.26**	-.18*	.03	.09	-.03
	importance	-.27**	-.30**	.26**	-.03	.18*
EXCELLENCE	shown	-.18*	-.22**	.02	.07	-.03
	importance	-.34**	-.32**	.19*	-.03	.12
ACCOUNTABILITY	shown	-.29**	-.18**	-.02	.10	-.02
	importance	-.18*	-.21*	.29**	-.03	.13
INTEGRITY	shown	-.26**	-.16	.02	.11	-.03
	importance	-.28**	-.24**	.23**	-.04	.16*
RESPECT	shown	-.23*	-.25**	.14	.08	.07
	importance	-.25**	-.34**	.37**	-.09	.19**

Note. ** = $p < .01$, * $p < .05$

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Correlations between the six core values of our framework and select demographic variables are presented in Table 2. Age was found to be significantly associated with all of the values and at both the *shown* and *importance* levels. With increasing age, the perception that values are being shown decreased (see Figure 10), as did personal importance around values being shown.

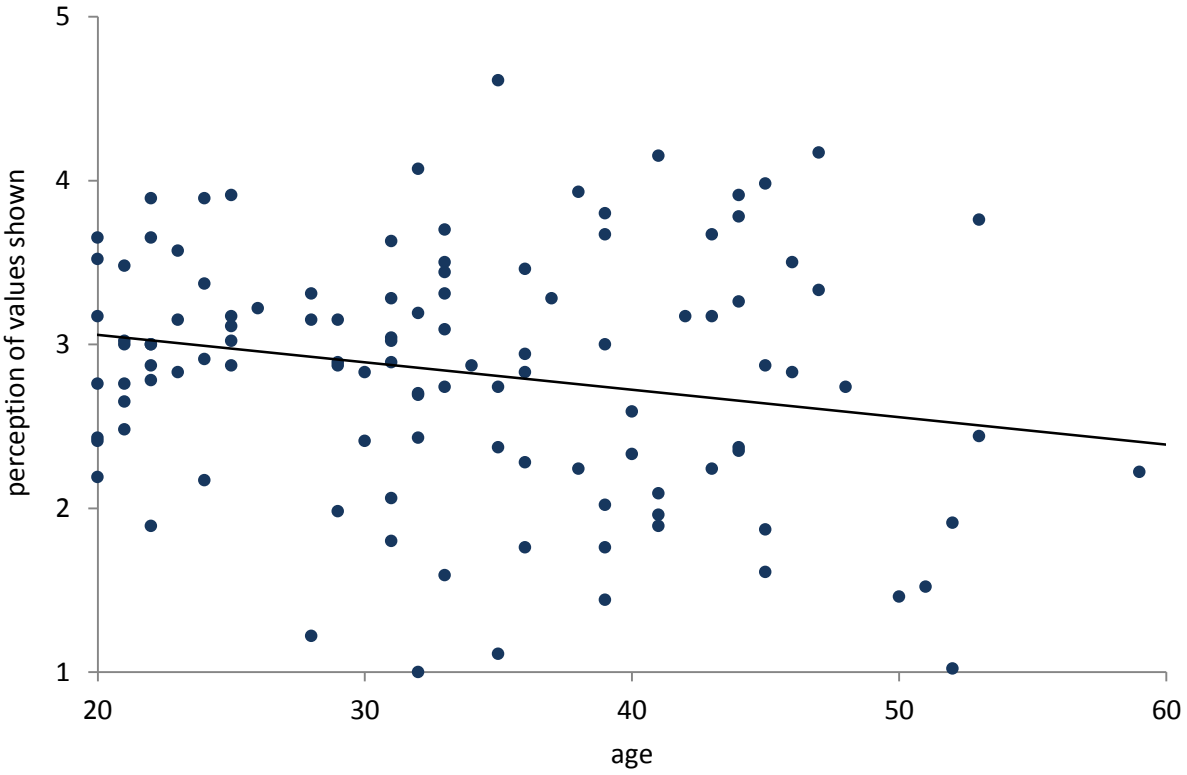

Figure 10. Scatter plot of correlation between age and perception of values (overall) being shown.

A gender difference was also found across the values, with male participants tending to give lower endorsements overall than female participants at both the *shown* and *importance* levels (see Figure 11).

Further, prior to data collection we hypothesised that there would be a relationship between individual's values endorsements and their degree of interest in current affairs. Current affairs were defined as events going on in the local community, nationally and around the world. We created a measure to assess this 'outward looking' tendency and did indeed find an association between interest in current affairs and the degree to which respondents thought it was *important* to them that the University of Essex shows certain values. This association was significant across all six core values at the *importance* level but interestingly did not distinguish participants at the *shown* level.

Finally, due to the historical association between religion and values in general, we also wanted to explore whether participants identifying as religious differed from those who identified as non-religious in terms of their values endorsements.

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Figure 11. Level of importance versus level at which values are shown for the six core values by gender.

Interestingly, we did not find any significant association between religiosity and values endorsement at either level. However, participants who identified as being spiritual were found to have rated collaboration, integrity and respect as being more important to them than those not identifying as spiritual. Interestingly, this effect was not present at the shown level (see Figure 12).

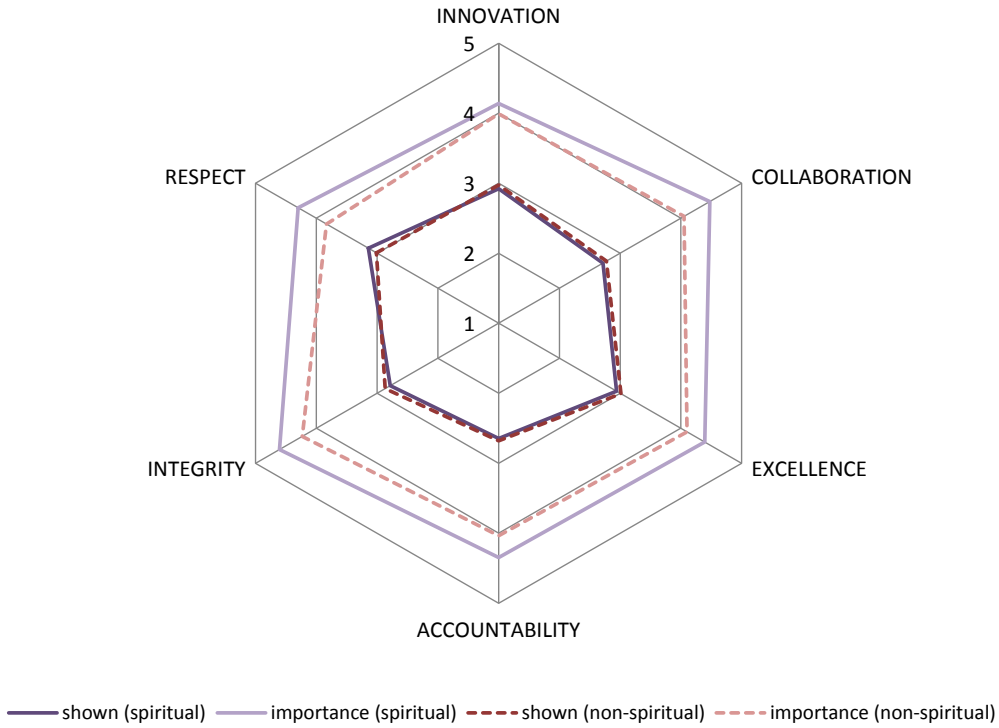

Figure 12. Level of importance versus level shown for the six core values by spirituality.

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Reactions to the survey

At the end of the values survey respondents were invited to leave comments about its content and/or topic. Being in the development phase, this feedback has proved highly valuable in guiding revisions to the tool.

In particular, the framing of the tool was revealed to be somewhat ambiguous, which suggests to us that the purpose and drive behind the survey could have been more clearly stated in its introduction. Values play an important underlying role in human thoughts, feelings and behaviour and it is evident from the reactions to this survey that people feel passionately about values and their role in the workplace. In the revised version of the tool we will include more context and information in the introduction in order to clarify the motivations and agenda behind the survey, what it aims to achieve and how the results will be used. Additionally, feedback was received on the wording of some of the items and instructions, such that we now know what words require clearer definition, alteration or substitution.

We have discussed these comments with a focus group and have re-written and revised various aspects of the tool in line with these. We believe that incorporating this feedback has improved the overall quality and clarity of the survey.

Summary

There are two main outcomes from this pilot study. First of all, this has been an excellent opportunity for us, the KTP project team, to get some initial reactions to the tool and a sense of people's thoughts on the issue of values in the workplace. Second, from the perspective of the University of Essex, the results of this survey provide an interesting insight into employees' perceptions of the University in relation to values.

While the sample from whom the data was collected is small relative to the full staff population and so may not be representative of the larger staff body, the results do suggest that there may be some concerns in the University of Essex around integrity and accountability values. While these values are listed in the Strategic Plan as being central to the University moving forward, the results highlight that some staff think that the University could be doing more to demonstrate these values in practise.

Next steps

In the next phase of this project we will pilot the survey in a large organisation in the energy sector. This presents a fantastic opportunity to test the tool in a completely different organisation from the University of Essex and specifically in a sector that receives a lot of attention with regards to values and corporate responsibility. Data from this study will inform any further refinements to the tool and will feed in to the development of a change management programme to be used alongside the tool once finalised.

As part of this change management program we will develop a number of strategies and activities that can be used to help close the gap between demonstrated values in an organisation and the importance of those values to employees. We would encourage any staff at the University of Essex to share their

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thoughts on and experiences of values in the workplace as we progress in to this next phase of the project.

Concluding remarks

Leaders and managers have a pivotal role to play in closing the value-behaviour gap and sustainable change certainly cannot happen without them. However, it is also crucial to recognise that every individual employee has the power to effect change, if only in some small way. If we were to each endeavour to more consistently demonstrate behaviours in line with our values, then positive change is inevitable. This will take time and may not be easy but it is the responsibility of each and every individual to strive to 'live' their values.

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Any questions, thoughts or comments?

If you have questions about this research or any thoughts or comments you would like to share on this topic I would really like to hear from you. Please get in touch with me, Kali, by email at the following address: kademe@essex.ac.uk

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