

Natalie Theodoulou – SPRITE+ Network Manager

- Summary of background experience

Following a degree in Chemistry, I started my career as a medicinal chemist at GlaxoSmithKline. During my five years at GSK, I completed my industrial PhD in chemistry and worked on a variety of drug discovery programmes for cancer, respiratory and infectious disease. In addition to the laboratory science, I supervised undergraduate and postgraduate students and worked with researchers from various institutions on academic-industry partnerships and collaborative networks. I took a leading role in the GSK Chemistry community through the organisation of international conferences, training events and academic lecture programmes.

Following my time at GSK, I joined the Faculty and Science and Engineering at the University of Manchester in the research impact team. In this role I supported academics to deliver impact from their research and managed various funding schemes and multidisciplinary research networks.

After about 18 months in research impact, I decided that I wanted to dedicate my time to one large scale project rather than several smaller programmes. The SPRITE+ Network Manger role was the ideal opportunity to apply the skills I'd developed to the delivery of a large-scale, complex programme with multiple partners.

I really enjoy my current role, it's incredibly varied and no two days are the same. The variety offered by this job has allowed me to gain skills in all aspects of research strategy, management, operations as well as finance, contracts and business engagement. I get to work with fantastic people from within and outside the University of Manchester.

- How challenges have been overcome

The greatest challenge SPRITE+ has experienced to date, is the transition to working from home and lockdown as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. As a NetworkPlus, the role of SPRITE+ is to build a community and engagement platform, which is easier said than done when no in person activities are permitted.

From the outset, SPRITE+ had a strong focus on digital engagement, which meant that the team were able to adapt and quickly transition all engagement activities online. We had to think creatively to ensure our online activities were inclusive, engaging and offered non-traditional networking opportunities. Working with our fantastic partners at [KnowInnovation](#), we are able to host sandpits, showcases, poster sessions, and workshops entirely online. Delivering a sandpit online was incredibly challenging, but overall, it was a hugely successful event. Read more about how we did this [here](#).

- Examples of specific career development undertaken (training, mentoring, specific experience)

I'm still early in my career and relatively new to the higher education (HE) sector having spent most of my professional life in industry. When I first joined the University of Manchester, I completed a PGCert in Higher Education, which gave me a fantastic insight into HE and broadened my understanding of the challenges faced by the sector as well as other important topics such as teaching, learning and assessment, widening participation, open knowledge and research practice.

I've completed the PRINCE2 project management course which provided a really useful foundation to a process driven approach to project management. In my day-to-day role, I'm able to adapt the PRINCE2 processes to suit the needs of my programme. Later this year I hope to join the 'Leading at Manchester' course provided by my university to help develop my leadership capability and practices.

- Future plans / aspirations

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The SPRITE+ programme is only half way through its funding period so there is still a lot of work left to do and I'm excited to expand the scope of our activity, especially now we are able to meet in person. I would love to continue with SPRITE+ should we secure additional funding. Further down the line, I see myself in a research strategy/operations role. As a former investigator myself, I have a strong desire to stay close to research and facilitate the best possible work.