



Senior Research Assistant, Ana-Maria Salai

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Ground-breaking projects celebrated at regional tech awards

Ground-breaking technology projects, led by Northumbria University, have won awards and received a special commendation at an event showcasing the best of the North East's talent.

Northumbria's Dr Biju Issac won the Innovator of the Year category while a Northumbria-led project designed to help vulnerable adults live more independent lives, received a special commendation at the Dynamites Awards 2020. The University also secured the coveted People's Choice Award at the

event, voted for by the region's tech community.

The annual Dynamites Awards celebrate success in the tech sector and showcase innovative and creative projects and teams – from start-up companies to multi-national corporates and from across the public and private sector.

The project, entitled '*Promoting independence through technology-enabled homes*', was developed by experts at Northumbria working in partnership with Home Group and was awarded Highly Commended for Project of the Year (public sector / academic) at the virtual awards ceremony.

Tools including virtual assistants, sensors, apps and off-the-shelf smart devices, such as Amazon Alexa and Google Home, were tested as part of a 'living lab' at Gateshead Innovation Village. The award-winning housing development, created by Home Group, was the base for the 12-month research project examining how digital technologies can assist vulnerable people in different ways.

Professor Lars Erik Holmquist, from [Northumbria University's School of Design](#), led the research project from a technical side; he said: "It has been great to work on a real-world problem – developing technology that could make a vital difference in helping people to live more independently in their own homes.

"To be recognised by our peers in the tech sector is a great endorsement for the project, which was all the more successful as a result of working with Home Group. We developed several innovative solutions that would not have been possible without an external partner; working in collaboration has undoubtedly made our research better and more relevant. Now we're excited to see some of the ideas taken further and implemented in actual homes in the North East, working with Sunderland City Council."

The project, which looked to assist older people, those with mental health needs, and people with learning disabilities and autism spectrum disorder, drew upon expertise from academics in health, design and computer science. Senior Research Assistant, Ana-Maria Salai, constructed technology prototypes and carried out the user studies. By using a real house as the setting, Ana-Marie and the team were able to develop a much deeper understanding of the challenges of current smart home technology. The

frequent and direct interaction with real customers and communities ensured that the results were adapted for their specific needs.

Glenda Cook, Professor of Nursing at Northumbria University, who led the project from a health care perspective, said: “Incredible social impact can be achieved through use of digital technologies that are becoming widely available to everyone and can support independence and improve quality of life. We wanted the project to be very research-focussed and worked closely with our partners to ensure maximum impact for the customer.”

The results will be used to support Home Group’s development of future smart home technology for care and independent living and will also be analysed and shared with the world-wide scientific communities in care tech and smart home research.

Lindsay Courtney, Strategic Lead for Service Design and Practice at Home Group, said: “Home Group’s partnership with Northumbria University has resulted in an exciting research project looking at how digitally enabled homes can support the independence of our customers. It has allowed us to start to identify how digital technology can run alongside our traditional support offer to enable customers to achieve their aspirations and goals and live more independent lives.”

Moving forward, the project team from Northumbria University and Home Group are now working in conjunction with Sunderland City Council to develop a concept called IntraVox – an assistive technology product that uses embedded sensors to send messages to smart speakers, which can then activate devices in the home.

Dave Young, Strategic Change Manager at Sunderland City Council said: “By working collaboratively, we aim to build on the initial phase of the project to develop and prove that the IntraVox prototype is effective. We’re also looking to identify and secure funding to manufacture and produce IntraVox, hopefully here in the North East. Ultimately we’d like to be able to provide this innovative new product to help vulnerable people here in Sunderland.”

For more information about the Dynamites Awards, visit:

<https://www.dynamonortheast.co.uk/events/dynamites-20/>

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