

Key Features of a Positive Research Culture: A qualitative analysis of award nominations

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Editorial review: This article has been subject to an editorial review process.



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Abstract

The Research Culture Awards were introduced as a way of celebrating people and groups who positively contribute towards enhancing the research environment at the University of Stirling. Colleagues can be nominated anonymously across multiple categories (including leadership, collaboration, mentoring), with nominees receiving their full nomination feedback: both this aspect, and the celebratory awards ceremony, seek to recognise the often-hidden contributions and efforts and create a shared understanding of what good research culture looks like for Stirling. First introduced in 2020, the awards have been held annually and have grown in popularity year on year. Exploring these nominations has allowed for an analysis of the key features of a positive research culture from a person-centric perspective, as felt at local level. The analysis was carried out using a manual frequency analysis of related words and phrases. The overarching results showed that teamwork/collegiality; sharing expertise; good role modelling and good listening skills were the attributes which were most appreciated in colleagues.

Keywords: research environment; recognition; soft skills; hidden contributions, research culture at local level

Introduction

The Royal Society definition says that:

Research culture encompasses the behaviours, values, expectations, attitudes and norms of our research communities. It influences researchers' career paths and determines the way that research is conducted and communicated. (Royal Society, 2023)

It therefore encompasses a broad range of areas and signifies that supporting a healthy and positive research culture comes from having both the right policies, processes, and infrastructure in place, as well as demonstrating leadership, good role modelling and clarity of expectations. These elements together enable engagement and good practice at an individual level.

Research culture encompasses research integrity and importantly the environment in which people work- which can lead to good/positive or poor outcomes. The Research Integrity landscape study (**Metcalfe et al., 2020**) showed that personal integrity, local culture, and good management are key to research integrity, and bullying and harassment has the single biggest negative influence on integrity. That study showed that the top five incentives with the strongest positive perceived impact on integrity are: data sharing policies and requirements; open access publishing; interdisciplinary research; professional development and training opportunities, and research leadership and management. The top five factors with the strongest negative perceived impact are: incidents of bullying and harassment; use of journal impact factors, h-index and other metrics; league tables of institutions; institutional workload models, and how researchers are assessed for promotion during their careers. Many of these incentives depend on processes which can vary from institution to institution or, in some cases within institutions. However, some of these influencing factors are more person centred and for many people the research culture they experience is about local interactions and can be hugely influenced by relationships, behaviour and expectations of their colleagues and line managers.

The Shift Insight (**2024**) report has recently mapped research culture initiatives from across the sector and defined a research culture framework focussed around four sections: How research is managed and undertaken; How research ensures value; How people are supported and How individuals engage with each other. Under these sections 13 elements are identified and under those a series of behaviours.

This behavioural aspect of research culture is essential for the productivity, motivation and long-term success of researchers but is difficult to define and measure. One of the things we have been focussing on in the

University of Stirling is developing a community of practice where we share good practice between researchers and aim to build that supportive community to develop a bottom-up approach to research culture. This happens alongside the policy and processes work, but this paper will focus on what we have learned about how individuals identify and experience positive cultures. The results being presented here therefore focus on the 'How individuals engage with each other' section of the Shift Insight report.

Research Culture Awards

The Awards were first introduced in Stirling in May 2020 with the intention of recognising and valuing those activities and individuals across the institution that support a healthy research culture (**Concordat, 2022**). To recognise a range of roles and career stages nominations be made across six categories: Best activity which enhances Research Culture, Best Research Leadership, Best support from Mentor, Best Collaborator, Best Early Career Researcher and Best support from Professional Services. In the intervening years we have changed the wording from 'best' to 'outstanding' and have added categories for Activity which promotes EDI (2021), and Activity to support Impact (2024). We will also change the Professional Services category wording to Outstanding collaboration 'with' Professional services this year.

The anonymous nomination process typically opens in March with nominators providing details of the name of the person or activity that they are nominating and a short description of how the nominee or activity contributes to a positive environment and has impacted on them and those around them. These nominations usually close in April and key to the process is that all nominees receive their nomination feedback specifying the categories and the wording of the nominations. Importantly, this means that everyone who is nominated is effectively told what they are doing that is valued and why. We then hold a Research Culture awards ceremony as part of our annual Festival of Research in May to celebrate those who have been nominated and those have taken the time to make a nomination. This increases the visibility of efforts and the often hidden contributions and helps to create a collective understanding of what we value at Stirling.

As part of the award ceremony, we also share quotes from nominations and highlight some of the common themes emerging from each category to help encourage reflection on what is considered good culture and how this may be adopted or replicated elsewhere. All nominees receive a certificate and an e-badge which says they have been nominated to add to their email signature.

This qualitative analysis allows us to understand what the key features are that people recognise as fostering a good local research culture.

Method

The method used was to manually identify similar wording, phrasing, and concepts (e.g. meaning) within each category of nominations for each year. These related phrases were then grouped into themes to find the most frequent. After identifying the most frequent themes within each category, a further review was conducted to establish commonality across categories and across years to identify overarching themes. The criterion used to establish the five overarching features of good research culture was that each theme had to be present across multiple nomination categories (at least half). Once we had the results for each year we looked to see if these changed over time or were consistent.

Results

The overarching results that come from our analysis of over 800 nominations over the 4 iterations of the Awards identify the following five features of a good research culture.

- **Teamwork/Collegiality:** activities and actions that supported collaboration and helped develop teams and communities are valued. Interpersonal skills: Kindness, good humour and the ability to make time to see people (despite busy diaries) came up across several categories so the human/ empathetic/ social aspects of our interactions are really important to people.
- **Expertise:** sharing experience, knowledge, insights and networks and being able to see the bigger picture
- **Good listening skills:** valuing the person and their skills, supporting them in their development. Both formal and informal mentoring was important across all categories and many nominated in the ECR category were also recognised for their mentoring skills. The ability to listen and give space was prized among mentors.
- **Role modelling:** good role models emerged from across career stages, highlighting traits such as leadership, tact, adaptivity and inspirational.

These general results are useful, but the academic environment has undergone significant changes over the last few years, particularly around the impact that covid has had on interactions between staff. We can look at more current perspectives and, in more detail, if we consider the nominations for individual categories in the 2023 nominations.

We focus on four categories which represent different career stages and interaction types (**Table 1**):

Table 1: Themes Emerging from Nominations by Career Stage/Interaction Type

<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Themes Emerging from Leadership Nominations</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creates trust and safety • Values the person and their skills, supporting them in their development • Generous with their time • Inclusive • Offers support when needed and steps back when not fair and addresses issues as they arise • Provides clear guidance
<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Themes Emerging from Collaborator Nominations</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Generous with ideas, knowledge and contributions • Appetite to learn from others • Respectful of others • Values team members • Reliable • Collegiality
<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Themes Emerging from Mentor Nominations</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accessible • Inspirational through words and action • Shares, guides and supports
<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Themes Emerging from ECR nominations</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Excellent at making connections • Embraces learning • Adaptable • Collegial style of working • Supportive of more junior colleagues • Shares expertise

Undoubtedly there is a commonality of features across categories namely: generosity in terms of time and knowledge, inclusivity, collegiality and encouraging a sense of value and belonging. The awards indicate that features characterising a positive research culture have also remained constant over time, with only a slight shift seen, not surprisingly, during the pandemic where features focused on connectedness and pastoral care in 2021 & 2022 awards' nominations (regular meetings, informal check-ins, quiz nights and cake!)

Having said that, one interesting thing to note is that there is a difference in language between the different categories. For example, good leaders are seen to provide the right environment through being fair and inclusive, valuing people - but knowing when to step in and when not. On the other hand, ECRs both embrace learning and share expertise, as do collaborators so those relationships are seen as more two-way interactions.

Reflection

The Research culture awards nominations have allowed us to shine a light on some of the key features that are appreciated in colleagues and line managers. We are however cognisant that some behaviours can be very time consuming and/or require an investment in professional development to build self-awareness, emotional intelligence and enhance communication/relationship skills. Ensuring people have the appetite and capacity for this can be challenging.

We also recognise that there are issues with the awards process, we quickly realised that having 'winners' would immediately be counterproductive, so we namecheck everyone who has been nominated and identify a group of 'Highly commended' nominees (those who have been nominated multiple times and/or across multiple categories). Other considerations include i) the potential for competition in an area where collaboration is essential; ii) nominations are only as good as the form of words chosen by the nominator and the quality of the nomination is not necessarily proportional to the quality of the nominee and as such can be difficult to assess and compare: iii) some may feel left out, discouraged and/or demotivated if they are not nominated despite doing a lot of effort and good work in these areas purely because the people who should recognise them do not take part in the nominating process.

The awards have evolved over time with more nominators and nominees each year as more colleagues engage with the number of nominations growing from 125 (89 individuals) in the first round to over 280 (173 individuals) last year (from a total research active staff population of around 580). We assume that this increase in participation signifies that colleagues see value in this collective celebration and explicit naming of standards. We have also found that the same people are often nominated in more than one category year on year. To recognise a more diverse range of people and to ensure the same people are not highly commended each year, we introduced a 'Hall of fame' in the latest awards to continue to value our core role models while leaving space for the recognition of a wider pool of efforts and contributions.

Building on the awards, we have identified research culture champions to support our community of practice. This network is made up mostly of research culture nominees who are frequently nominated in the awards but also individuals who are known to have done good work in a particular area e.g. PGR support. Champions are chosen from all five faculties and different career stages. Here the word champion plays two roles, firstly we want them to 'champion' research culture within their own teams and to share good practice with colleagues through our monthly Research Culture Conversations. They are also good role models and so champions in that

sense- although we also need to avoid the idea that some people are better than others at research culture. The Research Culture Conversations are meetings that both researchers and enablers of research are invited to and the theme for discussion is shared in advance, for insights and input via a dedicated MS Teams channel. The Conversations usually comprise a brief scene setting talk which is recorded and shared afterwards, followed by an unrecorded open conversation. Research Culture Conversations have included sessions on:

- What does a healthy research culture look like?
- What does a successful researcher look like?
- What does good leadership look like?
- What does a supportive environment look like?
- What does an inclusive environment look like?

These conversations and open communication help shape our institutional focus on areas where we can further enhance research culture; we have been working to improve research support, the recognition of research efforts and time for research and professional development. The results of these conversations have fed into our new University Research and Innovation strategy and into our Concordat for Researcher Development 2023-2026 action plan. Whilst our Culture, Employment and Development of Academic Researchers Survey (**CEDARS**) results show some clear areas for improvement, we were also delighted that our 2023 results showed that 86% of respondents were either active or interested research culture so we need to make sure we harness that energy and enthusiasm. However, this is 86% of the 30% of research active staff who responded to the CEDARs survey, and it is likely that those who are engaged in research culture are also the ones more likely to fill in the CEDARs survey. So, although this gives a minimum number involved in research culture, we still have work to do to increase engagement with our community of practice.

In the long run we would like to be in a position where these awards are no longer needed because the types of behaviour which support a healthy research culture are included explicitly in the promotions process and we are more open in letting colleagues know they are valued on a day-to-day basis.

Conclusion

Research culture is obviously broader and more complex than the ideas highlighted in these nominations but being able to deliver on some of these aspects of culture on a local level will certainly enhance research culture and work alongside policy and procedures.

As our research culture work has evolved, we have been developing ways to amplify the good practice that we see.

Rachel Norman is Institutional Dean for Research Engagement and Performance and the academic lead on Research Culture at the University of Stirling. She is a mathematician who works on interdisciplinary projects and is Professor of Food Security and Sustainability. Rachel has been in the Dean role for 5 years and initiated the Research Culture awards in her first year. She has since been working with colleagues recognising and sharing good practice in research culture in order to embed it within our research practice at Stirling.



Claire Bradley is Researcher Development Officer responsible for the development of staff facing training and coordinates a range of researcher development activities, such as the Stirling Crucible, the annual Festival of Research and wider research culture initiatives, all aimed at cascading effective practice and developing the capabilities of research staff across all career stages and faculties. Claire provides key support to the work of the Research Environment Group for the co-ordination of the Concordat to Support Career Development of Researchers action plan, the HR Excellence in Research award submission and the Culture, Employment and Development in Academic Research Survey.



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To cite this article:

Norman, R., & Bradley, C., 2024. Key Features of a Positive Research Culture: A Qualitative analysis of award nominations. *Exchanges: The Interdisciplinary Research Journal*, 11(3), 39-47. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.31273/eirj.v11i3.1531>.