Why Do We Need an International Research Culture Conference? Lessons from IRCC23 and future directions

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Abstract

The summer of 2023 saw shifts in the priorities of UK higher education institutions (HEIs). Research funders, learned societies, and early decision documents for the upcoming Research Excellence Framework (REF) cycle advocated for greater emphasis on research culture. This echoed ongoing concerns within the sector regarding leaky pipelines, unhealthy competition, a pervasive reproducibility crisis and an exclusionary research environment, all of which posed threats to the sustainability of research excellence. While many HEIs were individually addressing these shared issues, there was limited consensus on definitions, scope, frameworks, or validated measures for enhancing research culture. Recognising a need for collaboration and coordination, the University of Warwick hosted the inaugural International Research Culture Conference (IRCC23) in September 2023. This reflection delves into the contextual backdrop that prompted the organisation of IRCC23, outlines its objectives, discusses the conference proceedings, and explores potential future directions.

Keywords: research culture; collaboration; international research; networking; partnerships; knowledge exchange

Nair & Kita. Exchanges 2024 11(3), pp. 1-12

1

Introduction

Early REF (Research Excellence Framework) decisions in June 2023 brought greater attention to research culture, suggesting that the weighting of the 'People, Culture and Environment' element might rise to 25%, up from the 15% allocated to the 'Environment' section in the previous cycle. This strong signal was welcomed by many who had been concerned with the sustainability of research excellence within the UK research and innovation ecosystem, especially around issues of retaining talent and promoting research integrity. However, with these decisions came the need for proactive approaches, including ramping up efforts to ensure institutional preparedness for research culture assessment.

The research culture team at Warwick had previously coordinated an internal 'Celebrating Research Culture' event in September 2022, to showcase 20 grassroots projects funded by Research England's Enhancing Research Culture Fund. From this event, we saw that many barriers to improving research culture were deeply rooted in broader research systems, requiring collaboration beyond individual institutions and countries. With no existing platforms to share research culture knowledge at this scale, and as discussions about research culture were evolving into a distinct research topic, we decided to host the International Research Culture Conference, IRCC23.[i] In this reflection, we look at the contextual backdrop of the conference and how we designed activities to meet the needs of the research community in the UK and beyond.

The Imperative to Improve Research Culture

IRCC23 was created in the context of previous and ongoing discussion among influential UK research stakeholders around research culture.

The Royal Society defines research culture as 'the behaviours, values, expectations, attitudes and norms of our research communities'. Despite years of training and investment, many capable researchers had been opting to leave research or had been compelled to withdraw from exclusionary research environments. Work by the Royal Society examining the so-called 'leaky pipeline' had confirmed that individuals marginalised due to disability, socioeconomic background, gender, and ethnicity faced heightened obstacles in progression and were therefore significantly underrepresented in senior roles (**Royal Society, 2012**).

There had also been debate around the prevalence of a 'Publish or Perish' culture (**Van Dalen & Henkins, 2012**). As highlighted by Retraction Watch, some rising stars in academia had built entire careers by introducing fabricated or manipulated results into high-impact journals, contributing to a growing reproducibility crisis (**House of Commons Science, Innovation**

and Technology Committee, 2023). In 2023, a disconcerting record of over 10,000 papers were retracted (**Van Noorden, 2023**). Statistics of this scale brought into question how research excellence was being assessed, and how career progression was awarded. In response to this unhealthy competitive environment, UKRI's CEO, Dame Ottoline Leyser had called for a move away the 'lone genius' model of research towards recognition of diverse contributions (**Financial Times, 2022**).

Another area being championed was researcher wellbeing, which covers the health, satisfaction, and fulfilment experienced by those who conduct research. The Wellcome Trust had been at the forefront of raising awareness of toxic research environments. Only 29% of the 4,000 researchers they surveyed felt secure in pursuing a research career, in part due to fixed-term contracts and job insecurity (**Wellcome Trust, 2020**). Worryingly, nearly two-thirds (61%) had reported witnessing, and 43% had reported experiencing, instances of bullying or harassment.

Colleagues in research management and administration roles working alongside academics were also expressing dissatisfaction, in the context of a perceived 'us vs them' culture, leading the Association of Research Managers and Administrators (ARMA) to call for increased recognition and inclusion of these roles in research (**ARMA, 2020**).

Meanwhile, the Technician Commitment launched by the Gatsby Charitable Foundation and the Science Council in 2017 represented a positive step towards parity of esteem.[ii] This sector-wide initiative aimed to ensure visibility, recognition, career development, and sustainability for technical staff within higher education and research institutions. Through follow-on initiatives including the £5.5M Institute for Technical Skills and Strategy (ITSS) funded by Research England and launched in 2023, technical professional colleagues were now being offered more tailored training and had seen improved opportunities to lead bids and author papers. Institutions such as the University of Liverpool and the University of Warwick were also piloting innovative career pathways for technicians, with comprehensive promotion routes inspired by the existing frameworks available to academic colleagues.

On an international level, research culture initiatives such as DORA, the San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (**American Society for Cell Biology, 2012**), Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment (**Sivertsen & Rushforth, 2022**), and the Researcher Mental Health Observatory (**Kismihók et al., 2022**), underscored the critical significance of collaboration across borders.

Nair & Kita. Exchanges 2024 11(3), pp. 1-12

3

Three Motivations for IRCC23

Because of this background, and combining various aspects of research culture discourse, IRCC23 was designed with the following three objectives:

Fostering coordination and collaboration

Culture is a characteristic of a community and given that the research community spans sectors and international borders, meaningful research culture change must extend beyond a narrow focus on individual UK institutions. Looking beyond the UK, research to address the world's most pressing challenges is inherently international. Therefore, it was crucial to involve global partners in the dialogue to ensure we develop a shared language around research culture, including, for example, the development of more equitable partnerships.

In the context of the UK, we saw a need for a purely collaborative platform as a counterbalance to an existing policy and funding landscape that often encourages research culture activities at a single institution level. For example, REF evaluates HEIs (Higher Education Institutions) individually, with significant implications for funding and reputation. An institution-by-institution approach can also be seen in accreditation schemes and concordats (e.g., Athena SWAN, HR Excellence in Research Award). With regards to research culture specific funding, this had been distributed through competitive application processes, at times restricted to a subset of universities (e.g., Institutional Research Culture Funding from the Wellcome Trust; Enhancing Research Culture Fund from Research England).[iii]

Many barriers to better research culture are intertwined and stubbornly embedded in our research systems, requiring concerted action from key stakeholders to remove them. Beyond HEIs, we recognised the need to reach out to other groups working to improve research culture. For example, we invited Dr Nik Ogryzko from UKRI's People and Talent team to outline their plans for the future of research careers. We also invited Prof Kate Sang, lead of the British Academy and UKRI-funded Equality Diversity Inclusion (EDI) Caucus (EDICa) to talk about the challenges of disabled researchers. EDICa had been set up in January 2023 to gather research evidence as to how best to improve EDI in research and innovation systems. Prof Marcus Munafo presented at IRCC23 as a representative of the UK Reproducibility Network, founded in 2019, to share developments on the network's work to improve reproducibility and reliability of research. Dr Ian Hancox, Director of Research Technology and Technical Strategy at Warwick and co-director of the UK Institute for

Nair & Kita. Exchanges 2024 11(3), pp. 1-12

4

Technical Skills & Strategy also provided an update on progress against the Technician Commitment across the sector.

Curating evidence-based best practice

To enable meaningful change, research culture activities must be grounded in evidence. We aimed to create a forum where practitioners and academic researchers who work on research culture could share experiences and receive feedback. Another important related issue is how research culture work is often not documented in a way that is optimal for evaluation or for preserving ideas for future users. Webpages and documents describing research culture work rarely have any permanent identification system and are therefore unlikely to remain discoverable. Hence, we needed a good archival record of what was presented in the conference, which is why we reached out to the journal *Exchanges* to host this article, within a first of its kind 'Special Issue on Research Culture'.[iv]

Platforming grassroots ideas

Our understanding of who contributes to research excellence is evolving. For instance, there are calls to improve the inclusion of technical professional colleagues, aligned with the Technician Commitment, and research managers and administrators, in the context of EU projects such as Research Management (RM) Roadmap (**HETFA, 2023**) and Career Acknowledgement for Research (Managers) Delivering for the European Area (CARDEA) (**Spigarelli et al., 2022**). Until recently, research culture discourse had been spearheaded by larger funders and senior research leaders; however, grassroots ideas and engagement are essential in culture change. In designing the sessions for the conference, we sought to ensure research culture discussion incorporated traditionally less powerful voices, including those of postgraduate researchers, early career researchers and research enablers.

International Research Culture Conference (IRCC) 2023

This first International Research Culture Conference took place at the University of Warwick on the 25th of September 2023. It was organised by the National Centre for Research Culture (NCRC), which the University of Warwick launched in July 2023.[v] Following an open call for abstracts, the organising committee selected talks that were grouped into sessions across a broad range of topics, including 'fostering more inclusive research environments', 'empowering PGRs and early career researchers (ECRs)', 'establishing equitable research partnerships', 'improving recognition of diverse contributions', 'measuring research culture', and 'promoting research integrity'. It was attended by 150 colleagues in person plus 250 participants online, with attendees from 13 countries represented among the delegates. The participants included academics, research managers,

Nair & Kita. Exchanges 2024 11(3), pp. 1-12

5

research technical professionals, postgraduate researchers (PGRs), postdocs and funder representatives (**see Appendix**).

Proceedings of the conference (including this article) were collected in the journal, *Exchanges: The Interdisciplinary Research Journal*, published by the Institute of Advanced Study at the University of Warwick. It is an archival journal, which provides Digital Object Identifiers (DOI) for their articles. As it is a Diamond open access journal, free to publish and free to read for all, this ensures that proceedings articles can be read by a broad range of readers, including future researchers and practitioners.

Outcomes & Next Steps

As was raised in discussion among plenary delegates at the conference, we recognised the need to facilitate discourse between now and the next event, anticipated for 16 September 2024. To plug this gap, we launched the Research Culture Enablers Network (RCEN). In response to changes in the sector forecasting a growing role for research culture, there has been a drive to create or expand research culture enabling teams, encompassing roles such as 'Heads of Research Culture' or 'Research Culture Managers'. RCEN aims to build on this momentum and unite motivated colleagues with a professional stake in research culture to gather critical mass around priority areas. RCEN is rapidly growing, counting over 165 colleagues (as of February 2024) responsible for supporting research culture initiatives at 76 institutions. Working together, RCEN members are encouraged to be mobilised to respond more strategically to upcoming opportunities to shape the future of research culture for the better. RCEN is also curating a list of top research culture priorities to highlight cornerstone issues. Currently most pressing identified challenges for RCEN members include: Research leadership, psychological safety in research, and responsible research culture metrics.

With IRCC23, our inaugural attempt aimed to bring clarity to the intricate and uneven terrain of research culture. The conference succeeded in creating a collegiate environment where in-person delegates could share best practice and develop their ideas. Although encouraged by the robust engagement we encountered, revealing a demand for such initiatives, we are committed to refining aspects, such as our engagement of online participants, for IRCC24, which will be taking place on 16th September 2024.

Our next practical steps involve identifying voices currently missing from the conversation, which includes greater representation of stakeholders beyond UK HEIs, such as independent researchers, funding bodies, learned societies and industry. We will also be looking to increase the visibility and engagement of research partners outside of the UK. To support this, we

have grown our National Centre for Research Culture team to include our Head of Research Culture Partnerships, who will work to strengthen new relationships and incorporate diverse voices from cross-sectoral and international perspectives.

In the spirit of collaboration, we welcome engagement and invite readers to get in touch with the authors to co-create an exciting and inclusive program for IRCC24.

Although her background is in medical research (Microbiology PhD), Rika has since translated her experience to supporting different disciplines and all stages of the research project cycle. Rika supports institutional research culture priorities at Warwick, including Enhancing Research Culture projects and working groups to tackle key challenges. Rika is also Network Lead of the Research Culture Enablers Network, which unites over colleagues based in research culture teams to work collaboratively and strategically on shared issues. She also promotes research culture opportunities and best practice through the Linkedin group, Research Culture Knowledge Exchange.

Kita's main area of responsibility as Deputy PVC is research culture; he is Director of the National Centre for Research Culture and Chair of Warwick's Research Culture Forum. Kita is a member of the university's Race Equality Task Force and designed the Warwick PATHWAY programme to facilitate research careers for black students and researchers. Kita is a Professor of Psychology of Language. He studied engineering at the University of Tokyo and completed his PhD in psychology and linguistics at the University of Chicago. He has since worked in the Netherlands and in the UK, at Bristol, Birmingham and Warwick.

Nair & Kita. Exchanges 2024 11(3), pp. 1-12

7

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Van Noorden, R. More than 10,000 research papers were retracted in 2023 - a new record. Nature. Dec; 624(7992):479-481 (2023)

Thornhill, J. Ottoline Leyser of UK Research and Innovation: 'If someone disagrees with you, that is a fabulous thing' Financial Times. July (2022)

Wellcome Trust and Shift Learning. What researchers think about the culture they work in. Wellcome Trust (2020)

Appendix: International Research Culture Conference 2023 (IRCC23) - Programme

Keynote Speakers

Professor Caroline Meyer, University of Warwick: Working together to set the standard for research culture.

Dr Nikolay Ogryzko, UKRI: Supporting people and teams.

Dr Ian Hancox, University of Warwick: The sector progress catalysed by the Technician Commitment.

Professor Kate Sang, Heriot Watt University: Navigating the choppy waters of academia: the experiences of disabled and neurodivergent academics.

Nair & Kita. Exchanges 2024 11(3), pp. 1-12

8

Sessions

Towards a more inclusive Research Culture

Professor Carola Boehm, Staffordshire University: EDI, whiteness and researcher careers.

Amanda Chukwudozie and Chris Sims, University of Nottingham: A decolonising approach to policy impact: lessons for Research Culture.

Dr Katie Nicoll Baines & Dr Sara Shinton, Future Leaders Fellows Development Network: It doesn't just happen - embedding equality, diversity & inclusion into leadership development.

Kulbir Shergill, University of Warwick: INspire programme at Warwick.

Empowering PGRs and ECRs

Dr Fiona Fisher, University of Warwick: Developing the next generation through effective postdoctoral training programmes.

Professor Jane Bryan, University of Warwick and Dr Deborah Cunninghame-Graham, Kings College London: Building, maintaining, and repairing relationships between postgraduate researchers (PGRs) and supervisors.

Yiduo Wang, University of Warwick and Ya He, University of Sheffield: Enhance academic progression: A critical reflection on the impact of training opportunities on post-graduate researchers' development.

Dr Frane Vusio, University of Warwick: Should researcher development programmes be involved in mental health literacy of postgraduate researchers' mental health and wellbeing?

Collaborative Research Culture

Dr Taochen Zhou, Harry Moriarty, Professor Lynda Pratt, Professor Lucy Donaldson, University of Nottingham: The language surrounding achievement, teams, and individuals within a research community.

Professor Margaret Low, Dr Phil Jemmett, Caroline Cannon, WMG, University of Warwick: STEM Connections.

Dr Craig Carnegie, Naomi Ogunkola, University of Warwick: Developing the University of Warwick's Research Culture: Evaluating a department's approach to work experience programs and enabling staff development to enhance the delivery through internal funding sources.

Professor Jemina Napier, Dr Fiona Armstrong, Catalina Bastidas, Heriot-Watt University: Empowering a global community through co-production of a global research and enterprise culture".

Inclusive recognition

Yvonne Budden, Dr Sam Cole and Professor Noortje Marres, University of Warwick: Research Culture and Research Assessment: a workshop on the principles of the Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment (CoARA) agreement.

Dr Sarah Bennett, University of Warwick: Research Culture: A technician's perspective at the University of Warwick.

Stef Thorne, London College of Fashion, University Arts London: An (research) enabler? A person who encourages or enables negative or self-destructive behaviour in another?

Measuring Research Culture

Maria Prince, Professor Ann Campbell Ulster University, Digital Science: Data-driven insights for a holistic understanding of the researcher's journey.

Dr Shareefa Fadhel, Dr Gaynor Miller and, Professor Cat Davies, University of Leeds: Identifying metrics for assessing Research Culture.

Professor Candy Rowe, Newcastle University and Professor Karin Wahl-Jorgensen, Cardiff University: How to do a research culture survey.

Dr Hannah Griffin-James, Independent Researcher: Inclusion and quantitative surveys.

Promoting a Research Culture of Integrity

Dr Stuart RF King, eLife: Preprints mean peer review can be reimagined as it should always have been.

Dr Aidan P Thompson, University of Warwick: The moral imperative to developing research culture: Advocating for caught, taught and sought approaches.

Dr Christiane Wetzel, Ina Frenzel, Sarah Wendt, BIH QUEST Center for Responsible Research at Universitätsmedizin Berlin, Germany: Transfer of training on responsible research and open science into everyday research practice.

Dr Lesley Uttley, Louise Falzon, Christopher Carroll, Daniel Quintana, Paul Montgomery, Matthew Page, David Moher, University of Sheffield, UK; University of Oslo, Norway; University of Birmingham, UK; Monash University, Australia; University of Ottawa, Canada: Research Culture's role in contributing to research waste: Lessons from systematic reviewlution.

Nair & Kita. Exchanges 2024 11(3), pp. 1-12

10

Institutional Research Culture Initiatives

Dr Sarah Callaghan, Dr Monica Palmero Fernandez, Kathryn Dally, Jackie Thompson, Dr Tanita Casci, Dr Laura Fortunato, Professor Susanna-Assunta Sansone, University of Oxford: Putting research practice at the heart of research excellence at the University of Oxford.

Dr Nicola Simcock, Helen Gray, Newcastle University: Engaging with our researcher community: putting our money where our mouth is.

Professor Rachel L Cowen, Sarah Williams, Maria Marsh, Di Zhang, Professor Michael Dixon, University of Manchester: Working towards an inclusive research culture through EDI education, engagement and empowerment of researchers.

Professor Kirstie Haywood, Adele Kenny, University of Warwick: Enhancing Warwick Medical School's (WMS) Research Culture through co-production and active community engagement.

Researcher and Research Enabler Development

Ruth Norris and Charlotte Stockton-Powdrell, University of Manchester: Enhancing Research Culture through an interdisciplinary team research training and development programme pilot.

Dr Sahar Khodabakhsh, Christin Hoffmann, Sarah Sauchelli Toran, Gogyu Shi, Alexandra Mitchell, School for Policy Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences and Law, University of Bristol: A novel approach to peer-support for academic researchers and enhance research culture.

Sandy Sparks and Dr Ian Hancox, MI TALENT, University of Warwick and University of Nottingham: Leadership development for technicians – prepare, support and develop technical leaders for now and the future.

Endnotes

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