

An (Research) Enabler? ‘A Person Who Encourages or Enables Negative or Self-Destructive Behaviour in Another’: Autobiographic reflections

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Abstract

A brief critical reflection on the term ‘Research Enabler’ within the context of the developing UK national agenda to broaden and deepen the collective understanding of research communities and cultures within higher education and whether that is a helpful term to support the development of healthy research cultures. The term ‘Research Enabler’ refers to a broader set of occupational groups beyond research administrators to include academic librarians, IT staff, knowledge exchange professionals, technicians, and estates staff. This paper will reflect on the term from the perspective of a research administrator.

An enabler is a person or thing that makes something possible. However, within taxonomies of addiction the term ‘Enabler’ has more negative connotations as someone who encourages or enables negative or self-destructive behaviour in another. This is not to characterise researchers as addicts and research administrators as negative enablers but to draw attention to the language being used having potential negative and dualistic interpretations for an occupational group who often self-report ambiguity and duality as inherent in their complex roles.

Keywords: research enablers; research administrators; non-academic; research cultures

Introduction

This reflection seeks to critique the recently emerged term of ‘Research Enabler’ (**Research England, 2023**) through the lens of my experience as a research administrator/enabler of over 22 years.

The ostensibly positive and active term ‘Research Enabler’ has emerged in recent years as part of a new taxonomy for a broader recognition of the occupational roles and identities that make up the village of a research community beyond the academic researchers themselves. This has been brought into focus within the British higher education system by the government publication of the ‘R&D People and Culture Strategy’ (2021), the work of the Future Research Assessment Programme (FRAP) and the ‘Initial Decisions and Issues for further consultation from Research England’ (**Ibid**) for the next national research excellence assessment exercise – REF2029.

Embraced by many as a positive development and exemplified by the creation by ARMA (Association of Research Managers and Administrators) of the Research & Innovation Enabler Café Culture Toolkit, the term has grown in popularity in the UK. Networks like the Research Culture Enablers Network and the PRISM network for Professional Research Investment and Strategy Managers and ARMA use the term positively. Any ‘Non-Academic’ working to support research will have experienced some tensions in their role often related to esteem and professional identity and it is not surprising that positive terms are embraced by those supporting research.

As emerging debates and definitions of what constitutes healthy research cultures and who is included, we need to be conscious that ‘Language underpins cultural norms, big and small D discourses that determine, impost and project identity. Unless language is critically analysed then the construct of identity is formed based on biased stereotypes that normalise power dynamics (academic vs non-academic) and perpetuate system injustice’ (**Caldwell, 2023: 1**). If we embrace the term ‘Research Enabler’ we need to reflect on whether this will signify a positive change or perpetuate long-held experience of tensions between occupational groups. There needs to be a conversation around terminology and potentially a co-design of research communities to ensure positive, inclusive, and healthy research cultures become the norm, responding not only to the professional identity needs of researchers but also to those who work as research enablers/facilitators/professionals/research adjacent (s) – rebuilding them through language and practice as a team.

Metaphors

Research administrators sit within and across occupational cultures of innovation, research, and knowledge exchange (for which individual academics and Universities are rewarded) whilst having to enforce and value a culture of control and compliance (for which individual academics and Universities are also awarded) but are seemingly in tension with each other. Academic reflections within existing literature (primarily US based) on the identity of research administrators often wrestle with the dualities and dichotomies inherent within the role – academic vs non-academic, friend vs foe of the academic researcher, freedom vs control. The navigation work research administrators engage in to establish themselves as part of a research community and culture is a constant refrain from those identifying as research administrators - ‘The boundary-crossing, ambiguous, dual-faceted nature of the research administrator role, as described by interviewees, would appear congruent with the concept of liminality, certainly with regard to status-shifting and ambiguity’ (Allen-Collinson, 2006: 275).

Research administrators sit alongside and within research cultures and encourage the outputs of academic freedom whilst often having to enforce a culture of control and compliance. Metaphors for research administrators can echo classical civilisation - ‘Janus Face’, (Hansen et al., 2004), ‘Shield and Protector’ (Larkin, 1982), and ‘Custodians of the Corporate Conscience’ (Gabriele, 1998). Interpreted one way a custodian is a person who has responsibility for taking care of or protecting something, and the use of the metaphor is positive. Interpreted differently a custodian is there to limit freedom or provide custody or guardianship of prisoners or inmates. There is a tension in the metaphor that speaks to the tension within these roles and their place within a research culture.

When we consider the term ‘Enabler’ as a metaphor for research administrators we can again perceive a duality that is inherent in the role. The term ‘Research Enabler’ refers to a broader set of occupational groups including research administrators to include academic librarians, IT staff (and on reflection most of any University community, including students are ‘Research Enablers’). An enabler is, through one lens, a person or thing that makes something possible. Through another lens and in popular understanding of and taxonomies of addiction it has more negative connotations as someone who encourages or enables negative or self-destructive behaviour in another. ‘The ongoing well-meaning assistance is destructive to the addicts who, shielded by enablers from the negative consequences of their acts, continue in a dangerous downward spiral. When individuals are enabling, they believe that because they can help, they should support and that anything else is unkind. Enablers hold

themselves responsible for fixing a problem that they (usually) cannot heal. They convince themselves that the enabled will self-destruct if they stop intervening and without compassion if they let that happen, even responsible for it happening (Von Bergen, & Bressler 2020: 14). This is not to characterise researchers as addicts and research administrators as negative enablers but to draw attention to the language being used having dual interpretations for an occupational group who often self-reports ambiguity and duality as inherent in their complex roles. If we need a metaphor to try and conceive the experience of research support roles is 'Research Enabler' an entirely positive development?

The term 'enabler' if taken negatively within a taxonomy of addiction may imply that research support professionals are passive, lack agency beyond being responsive to untimely demands, fixing issues which involve cleaning up after another person's mess, performing activities that the other person should do for themselves, coming to the rescue of the other and frequently feeling emotionally drained or exhausted. This creates an unhealthy culture of dependency rather than one of empowerment and support and can lead to disrespect and resentment between different (professional) families.

To address the negative role of enabling the 'enabler' needs to move both parties to a healthier place and understand that continuing to do the same things will prolong unhealthy behaviours. Investing time to reflect and unpick the relationship between research professionals and researchers within academic institutions will be of long-term benefit to the individuals and institution. Devising solutions can be obtained through open and transparent conversations, the co-creation of boundaries, confidence to let others see and feel the consequence of their actions, effective accountability mechanisms and a reduction of individuals taking on the fire-fighting role which may be of short-term benefit (and make the enabler feel needed) but ultimately incentivises healthy behaviours and in turn healthy cultures.

Autobiographic Reflection

I have worked as a research and knowledge exchange administrator since 2001 working within three very different Universities within the UK in several professional service roles that have enabled research. These roles have been broad and included support for research funding, governance, postgraduate research, knowledge exchange, entrepreneurship, and innovation. I have served and supported established, older, newer, and quite distinctive research communities within and across disciplines.

All these complex roles have necessitated an ability to ensure high levels of compliance with external regulations and policy guidance. The sector has moved on from the Research Assessment Exercise (I was an Assistant panel secretary for RAE 2008 in the criteria setting stage) to the Research Excellence Framework (REF) and the Knowledge Exchange Framework (KEF), from Graduate Schools to Doctoral Colleges, from Regional Development Agencies to Local Economic Partnerships (LEPS). I have worked within research and knowledge exchange support role throughout these changes.

I have held institutional responsibility for strategies, policies and guidance for research, postgraduate research, and knowledge exchange without being employed as an academic researcher. Throughout this career I have not felt a full member of a research community but as an invisible supporting role trying to fix a high volume of small administrative and technical issues. Engaging authentically with academic staff to build trust whilst enforcing institutional objectives (despite academic frustrations with processes not experienced as enabling) has placed me regularly in spaces of tensions which have not felt part of a healthy research culture. Rather than challenge the underpinning causes of this difficult symbiotic relationship I have been part of maintaining a status quo and accepted and therefore enabled negative and destructive behaviours.

If 'Research Enabler' is to be embedded as part of the lexicon of research cultures where a broad set of occupational roles are recognised as integral to healthy research cultures, then we need to go beyond tweaks in language and have a collective conversation about how to co-design research communities, cultures, and language to the benefit of all internal and external stakeholders. The users and beneficiaries of research will benefit, and we will strengthen our collective impact if we address this aspect of research culture development thoughtfully and with intent to change.

Conclusion

The emerging term of 'Research Enabler' has given me pause for thought on my role as a long serving research administrator within higher education and spurred me to review where this new term may sit in terms of existing metaphors and reflections on these occupational roles. My conclusion is that ultimately this term is reductionist and does not adequately support an understanding of the complexity and duality inherent within the complex roles that research administrators and managers perform. The development of this term may be a helpful red flag and warning to those leading on the development of research cultures to avoid. Leaders should seek terms that reflect more positively the genuinely

supportive and empowering position these complex roles should occupy - valued as fundamental to a healthy research culture and community.

For this term to be a positive development we would need to ensure it does not perpetuate a status quo where the relationship between different occupational roles within research communities is not fundamentally addressed. There is a clear opportunity for change as we reflect collectively on healthy research cultures but one that could be missed if not included in institutional Research and People strategies.

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