

Five Adjectives to Convey What Good Research Culture Looks Like: A tool for effective and efficient communication

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Abstract

Research culture has become a growing concern for higher education institutions (HEIs) and the broader UK research community in recent years, highlighting the need for a shared language to cultivate a communal understanding essential for collective approaches to complex challenges. With this in mind, at the University of Warwick, we have devised a concise formulation – the five-adjective summary - 'happy', 'productive', 'creative', 'sound', 'open' - to encapsulate our goals for a positive research culture. This summary can be delivered in one to two minutes to describe what good research looks like, and to introduce most topics covered by research culture. It can also act as a starting point for strategic and deeper discussion, by unpacking each adjective as required. This reflection discusses our streamlined definition of research culture based on the Royal Society's definition, our five-adjective summary of good research culture, the rationale behind its development and underlines the importance of adaptability to navigate changing perceptions of research culture.

Keywords: communication; definition; research culture

Introduction

Research culture has emerged as an issue of great interest to higher education institutions (HEIs) and the wider UK research community in recent years, necessitating concise and effective communication. Various funders and learned societies have published reports that describe issues in the life, careers and working conditions of researchers and concerns with how research is carried out (e.g., **Royal Society 2017, Wellcome Trust, 2020, Russell Group, 2021**). The stakes for UK universities were raised following initial decisions on the upcoming Research Excellence Framework in 2029 (REF 2029) (**Research England et al., 2023**) which explicitly indicated that research culture and the 'People, Culture and Environment' section could have a weighting of 25%, as compared to the 15% weighting of the 'Environment' section in REF2021.

There is considerable discussion among HEIs on how we define research culture. This is a topic that has been highlighted through the Research Culture Enablers Network, where a poll of 70 research enablers with a professional stake in research culture indicated that we need to consolidate existing definitions and identify what is missing from them (**RCEN, 2023**). One often cited definition is by the Royal Society:

...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, 2017: 3).

This is cited also by the initial decisions for REF 2029. Building on the Royal Society's definition, the UKRI-commissioned report on research culture initiatives defines their 'research culture framework' as follows:

The framework identifies the behaviours and values that underpin: How research is managed and undertaken, how research ensures value, how people are supported, how individuals engage with others (Shift Insight, UK Reproducibility Network, & Vitae, 2024: 5).

A clear definition is important for evaluation schemes to compare institutions such as REF2029 or any possible future accreditations, such as Athena SWAN and Vitae's HR Excellence in Research Award. A clear definition is also important for communicating about research culture with various stakeholders, including those adjacent to research in HEIs. To engage their research communities in research culture change, universities need to make it clear to researchers and research enablers (e.g., research managers, technicians) what exactly they want to improve when they say they aim to improve research culture.

An important challenge for universities and other research organisation is therefore *how to communicate the concept of research culture and what good research culture looks like, in a simple way*. Because the concept of research culture is new and encompasses a broad range of complex issues, it is not always clear what it covers and what universities are aiming for. Currently, the concept of research culture is a specialist term, whose meaning is debated by those with specific responsibility for research culture. However, to change research culture, a broader spectrum of members of the research community, including those who currently have little interest in research culture, needs to share the idea of what good research culture looks like.

Five-Adjective Summary of Research Culture

At Warwick, we devised a formulation optimised for concise and effective communication in 2021. We call it five-adjective summary of research culture. We streamlined the Royal Society's (2017) definition, as follows:

Research culture is *behavioural and organisational values and norms* that shape the research community and research practice.

To put it another way, research culture is 'soft infrastructure' for research. Research culture has two aspects: *research community* and *research practice*. We can characterise good research culture with five adjectives:

Our research community is *happy, productive* and *creative*.

Our research practice is *sound* and *open*.

Each adjective packs a broad range of issues. Depending on how much elaboration is needed for a given occasion, one could expand the adjective into more concrete list of issues.

1. *Happy* research community: researchers and research enablers feel fulfilled, can be themselves, have a sense of belonging, have a good work-life balance, and feel secure in their employment and have a clear career vision. They do not experience bullying, harassment and discrimination.
2. *Productive* research community: researchers and research enablers have effective and efficient management and support and have sufficient time and resources to develop and conduct research as a team effectively.
3. *Creative* research community: researchers and research enablers have an intellectually stimulating environment, have interdisciplinary and cross-functional contacts, and have time and opportunity to think outside of the box.

4. *Sound* research practice: research is conducted with a high level of research integrity and ethics and uses valid and reliable methodology.
5. *Open* research practice: researchers working alongside research enablers are transparent about how they conduct their research and share research materials, data, codes with the research community without barriers. Research is reported in open access outlets for maximum timely sharing with others. Research is open to non-researcher stakeholders to allow co-design, co-conduct and co-evaluation of research, which in turn ensures societal impact of research.

This way of summarising research culture is largely in line with findings by recent studies on what people think good research culture is (**Wellcome Trust, 2020**). However, some recent reports suggest dimensions outside of the five-adjective summary. For example, Vitae's Research Culture Framework (**Vitae, 2024**) states that people find it important to conduct research in a sustainable way. Though sustainability can be considered as a part of ethical research, it does not fit with the adjective 'sound' in a straightforward way. Research ethics usually concerns minimising harm to research participants and does not encompass harm to the environment. Clearly, the five-adjective summary needs to evolve with community's changing shared understanding of what research culture is and what good research culture looks like.

The shortest version of the summary can be delivered in one or two minutes. The summary can be expanded into any required length by unpacking the adjectives. The five-adjective summary also has advantage that the audience is likely to remember the key points.

Conclusion

The five-adjective summary developed at the University of Warwick offers a useful tool for communicating the essence of research culture in a concise and accessible manner. However, it is essential to recognise that research culture is a dynamic and evolving concept, shaped by ongoing discussions and initiatives. As our understanding of research culture continues to change, so too must our methods of communication. By fostering a shared language and understanding, we can more effectively engage with members of our research communities to change research culture for the better.

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