

# The National Centre for Research Culture at the University of Warwick: Vision and current activities

Sotaro Kita<sup>1</sup>, Victoria Strudwick<sup>2</sup>, Marie Sams<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Psychology, University of Warwick, UK; <sup>2</sup>Institute of Advanced Study, University of Warwick, Coventry, UK; <sup>3</sup>National Centre for Research Culture, University of Warwick, Coventry, UK

Correspondence: <sup>1</sup>[s.kita@warwick.ac.uk](mailto:s.kita@warwick.ac.uk), <sup>2</sup>[Victoria.Strudwick@warwick.ac.uk](mailto:Victoria.Strudwick@warwick.ac.uk), <sup>3</sup>[Marie.Sams@Warwick.ac.uk](mailto:Marie.Sams@Warwick.ac.uk)

ORCID: <sup>1</sup>[0000-0002-0088-3654](https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0088-3654), <sup>3</sup>[0009-0004-1480-5608](https://orcid.org/0009-0004-1480-5608)

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## Abstract

*In recognition of the need for collaboration to effectively address recognised research culture challenges, the University of Warwick established the National Centre for Research Culture in 2023. The Centre aims to bring together organisations and individuals involved in the funding, regulation, production and dissemination of research to share ideas and best practice, coordinate our collective effort, and serve as a long-term, stable hub for knowledge curation, training and innovative research into research culture. This paper describes the background to the establishment of the National Centre for Research Culture, the initial structure of and vision for the Centre, and the activities carried out in its first 18 months of operation.*

**Keywords:** research culture, conference, seminar, training, positive action

## Introduction

In the UK's research and innovation sector, research culture is a prominent issue. Reports have evidenced challenges in research including unhealthy competition, a lack of diversity, bullying and harassment, job insecurity, and challenges with reproducibility of research (**BEIS, 2021; Wellcome Trust, 2020**). These challenges have led to a need for universities, funding bodies, industry partners and other stakeholders to co-create solutions to improve research culture for everyone involved in research, both now and for future generations of the research community.

The National Centre for Research Culture (NCRC) was established at the University of Warwick in response to these challenges, with the aim of working together with UK research funding bodies, universities, networks, research organisations, and other stakeholders to coordinate our collective efforts - seeking synergy and sharing best practice across the sector, with a sustained focus on improving research culture.

This article outlines how the National Centre came about, its initial vision and objectives, and the activities it organised in its first one and half years.

## Brief History of the National Centre for Research Culture (NCRC)

Prof. Caroline Meyer (Pro Vice Chancellor for Research) first conceived the idea to create a national collaboration hub for research culture work at the University of Warwick in the second half of 2022. Sotaro Kita (then Academic Director for Research Culture) presented the rough initial idea to the University Executive Board in October 2022 as a part of the University's overall research culture strategy. Prof. Meyer and Kita shaped the current form of the Centre by December 2022. The design of the National Centre was underpinned by Warwick's understanding of key components of research culture (**Kita, 2024**). The Centre was launched in July 2023 with Kita (then Deputy Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Research) as the Director. Two foundational appointments were made in February 2024 (Head of NCRC, Dr. Marie Sams; Head of Research Culture Partnerships, Victoria Strudwick). A research assistant (Sophie Fletcher) was appointed in March 2024, and an administrative officer (Adele Kenny) in August 2024. The National Centre works closely with members of Warwick's Research and Impact Services unit (Dr. Rika Nair, Research Culture Manager; Carole Harris, Associate Director, Research Culture, Governance and Compliance).

The first advisory board meeting took place in September 2024, with external advisors (Prof. Marcus Munafò, Associate Chair and co-founder of the UK Reproducibility Network (UKRN) and Pro-Vice-Chancellor for

Research Culture at the University of Bristol; Dr. Yolana Pringle, Head of Policy and Advocacy at Vitae; Dr. Ken Emond, Head of Research at British Academy; Prof. Kate Sang, Director of the UKRI and British Academy-funded EDI Caucus at Heriot Watt University; Dr. Steven Hill, Director of Research at Research England; and an Early Career Researcher representative, Dr. Amy Godfrey, University of Warwick).

### **The Vision for the NCRC**

Why do we need a National Centre? Any community produces culture, and the research community in academia is global, spanning across institutions in the UK and beyond. Thus, one institution cannot effectively improve research culture. Concerted effort by the whole sector is necessary. Thus, coordination and collaboration across institutions are essential. However, the effort to improve research culture in UK higher education has been fragmented: universities often carry out various short-term projects with little coordination. Duplication of effort is inevitable, since there is no clear mechanism to share good practice across the sector. Sustained, substantial efforts such as the UKRN (part-funded by Research England), the UK Institute for Technical Skills & Strategy (a technician empowerment project, funded by Research England), and the UKRI British-Academy-funded EDI Caucus are making important contributions (**The UK Reproducibility Network, 2025; UK Institute for Technical Skills & Strategy, 2025; EDICa, 2025**). However, these do not cover the full range of research culture issues, and they exist in isolation. It is crucial we seek synergy across these initiatives and broaden the scope of activities. The National Centre works with these organisations, UK research funding bodies and universities, to coordinate our collective effort, and serve as a long-term, stable hub for knowledge curation, training and innovative research into research culture.

The core aim of the National Centre is to improve research culture across the UK research sector through coordination, collaboration and sharing of relevant knowledge and good practice. There are four objectives.

- Objective 1. To build an inclusive community of practice through collaboration, curation of knowledge and best practice.
- Objective 2. To develop and implement sector-wide research culture initiatives.
- Objective 3. To facilitate empirical research and quality reviews into research culture.
- Objective 4. To develop sector-wide training on research culture.

## Activities of the NCRC

In its first 18 months, the National Centre carried out the following activities to achieve its objectives.

### *Objective 1. Building a community of practice.*

We organise the annual International Research Culture Conference. This is a forum where people share their research and practice regarding research culture. The inaugural meeting took place in September 2023 (**Nair & Kita, 2024**) and the second one in September 2024 (**Sams et al, 2025**). About 300 participants (both in-person and online) took part in the 2023 conference, and around 500 in the 2024 iteration.

We run an online seminar series, Research Culture Conversations. Speakers from different institutions share their work. Between June 2023 and February 2024, five seminars took place. The topics included supporting technical careers; doctoral and post-doctoral wellbeing, diversifying leadership, and destigmatising failure and bullying and harassment.

We run social media communities via LinkedIn. This includes a Research Culture Knowledge Exchange (approx. 1000 members), and an NCRC page (approx. 1700 followers as of February 2025). These platforms are used to rapidly share research culture-related information (e.g., reports, meetings, seminars, articles, etc.,).

We run a Research Culture Enablers Network. This is a group for professional service and academic staff who work on research culture in various institutions. They organise both in-person and virtual meetings to share knowledge. There were over 300 members as of February 2025.

### *Objective 2. Develop and implement research culture initiatives*

We launched an innovative positive action intervention, the *Warwick PATHWAY programme*, in November 2024, to address the underrepresentation of Black academics in UK universities and research institutes (**Strudwick & Kita, 2025**). We are in the process of creating a network of similar positive action programmes to support Black researchers across the sector, *UK PATHWAY Network*, to share good practice, encourage institutions to create new positive action programmes for Black researchers, and create synergy.

*Objective 3. Facilitating empirical research and quality reviews into research culture*

As a part of the National Centre, we have an academic research centre, 'DEAR Centre' (*Centre for Doctoral Education and Academia Research*). This is led by Prof. Emily Henderson and Dr. James Burford in Department of Education Studies. This centre conducts research on various aspects of research culture.

We publish *the proceedings of the International Research Culture Conference* in an open access journal, *Exchanges*. The proceedings allow us to share knowledge and good practice across space and time. Those who could not attend the conference, future researchers, and practitioners can learn about the work presented at the conference. The proceedings for the 2023 conference featured 31 articles (**Johnson, 2024**).

We conducted a systematic scoping review on the wellbeing of Early Career Researchers (PhD students, postdocs, and research assistants) (**Fletcher et al., in preparation**). We reviewed 86 articles in the literature to identify factors that are associated with the wellbeing of ECRs.

*Objective 4. Sector-wide training*

We are in the initial stages of developing a national career development programme for mid-career Black academics, in collaboration with Dr. Francis Awolowo at Sheffield Hallam University.

*Evolving NCRC*

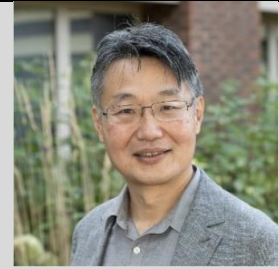
This article describes NCRC as it was in September 2024. NCRC continues to evolve, as it needs to adapt to new internal and external situations. Importantly, Kita stepped down from the Directorship in October 2025, and Prof. Kirstie Haywood was appointed as Director in January 2025. This has led to further development of the Centre. For example, the vision and objectives for NCRC were updated to reflect greater focus on its role in convening and sharing best practice across the sector.<sup>i</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The National Centre for Research Culture, established in July 2023, aims to improve research culture of the UK HE and research sector. It will achieve this through facilitating coordination, sharing and collaboration among institutions. Such concerted effort is necessary to improve the culture of UK research community.

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Kita is Professor of Psychology of Language at the University of Warwick. He is a former member of the Research Executive at Warwick (2021-2024) and a former Deputy Pro Vice Chancellor (2023-2024) and was responsible for research culture. He was the founding Director of National Centre for Research Culture (2023-2024). He also designed the Warwick PATHWAY programme to facilitate research careers for Black students and researchers. He obtained a PhD in psychology and linguistics at the University of Chicago. He has since worked in the Netherlands and in the UK (University of Bristol, University of Birmingham, and University of Warwick).



Vicky is Head of Research Culture Partnerships within the National Centre for Research Culture (NCRC) at Warwick and leads on developing partnerships and collaborations with universities, research organisations, industry, funders and publishers in the UK and beyond. Specific projects within her portfolio include leadership of the Warwick PATHWAY Programme, a pilot multi-level positive action programme for Black researcher career development. With substantial experience of enabling international research collaboration, she has a keen interest in bringing together voices from different national, disciplinary and organisational contexts to enhance global research culture.



Marie has 24+ years' experience in higher education, in professional service and teaching roles and has worked on international projects aimed at improving higher education experience. With a Doctorate in supporting women into leadership in higher education, she is passionate about culture change and making environments more inclusive. She is the Head of the National Centre for Research Culture, and leads on management of the Centre, including the NCRC roadmap, raising the visibility of research culture, and the International Research Culture conference. She has facilitated work in identifying institutional problem statements and shaped recommendations for improving wellbeing of early career researchers.



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**Endnotes**

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<sup>ii</sup> For more details, see: <https://warwick.ac.uk/research/ncrc/>