

Researching Research Culture: An organisational culture approach

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Abstract

Developing and sustaining a thriving research culture for the long term is vital not only for researchers, but also for our ability to address global challenges. Yet several high-profile reports have highlighted concerns. Whilst sector organisations and universities alike have begun to address these issues, research culture can be a fuzzy concept with uncertainties about how it can be measured and improved. While psychologists have been examining work culture in other sectors for decades, including developing evaluation measures, the underlying dimensions, norms, and behaviours that constitute a positive research culture are less well understood. These studies of organisational culture from industry and healthcare offer opportunities for cross-sector learning. Taking an innovative approach, this Critical Reflection outlines lessons learned from organisational psychology that can be applied to the study of research culture, including understanding its underlying dimensions and enabling mechanisms and studying research culture using surveys. Specifically, key findings from developing and running three research culture surveys in a Scottish university are discussed, along with advice on conducting surveys and overall research best practices involving research culture.

Keywords: research culture; conducting surveys; organisational culture; organisational psychology; cross-sector learning

Introduction

Research and innovation are vital to address the current and future global challenges that we face. Having a supportive working environment and a positive research culture is therefore vital for enabling ongoing and future research to address global challenges. Research culture relates to the values, norms, and behaviours of a research group and may be understood as the ‘way that we do research’ within an organisation, community, or sector (e.g., UK higher education) (**Royal Society, 2018: 3**). Yet high-profile reports have raised significant concerns about research culture both in the UK and internationally. Researchers have described their working environments as competitive and isolating, with increasingly unsustainable workloads (**Association of Research Managers and Administrators (ARMA), 2020; Wellcome Trust, 2020; Vitae Research Culture Landscape Pilot Survey (RCLS), 2025**). There continues to be widespread anxiety and uncertainty about research career stability and progression, especially for early-career researchers, technicians, and professional staff (**Vitae RCLS, 2025**), and this has not been reduced by mounting financial pressure in the UK university sector (**UUK, 2025**).

Research culture has received increased attention as a topic in response to these challenges, with universities expected to demonstrate that they value and promote a positive research culture. This shift can be particularly seen in the context of the UK’s Research Excellence Framework 2029 assessment, with two studies conducted to identify and pilot a set of indicators for the people, culture, and environment components (now re-labelled ‘strategy’, ‘people’ and ‘research environment’). More broadly, large-sector organisations (e.g., **Science Europe; Sapcuriu et al., 2025**) have outlined strategic research culture frameworks, offered financial support (e.g., Research England Enhancing Research Culture Funding), and sought to identify facilitating initiatives (**UKRI Powell et al., 2024**).

Despite this flurry of activity, research culture can be a difficult concept to define, with uncertainties about how it can be measured and what actions can be taken to create tangible, long-term change. In this Critical Reflection, we seek to share insights from the field of psychology, which has been examining organisational culture in other sectors for decades, including developing evaluation measures. This organisational psychological research offers surprisingly rich ground for understanding academic research culture because many of the dynamics that shape laboratories, research groups, and academic departments mirror those found in industrial and healthcare workplaces (e.g., competing demands, high workloads and time pressure, resource constraints, and interdependent team structures). We recognise that research culture can be interpreted in various ways, yet this organisational-culture lens

remains valuable because it is theoretically grounded (e.g., **Schein, 2016**) and prioritises meaningful, sustainable change at institutional levels over individual performance metrics. Despite its relevance to the research community, this approach has not been widely discussed.

Our approach towards understanding and capturing research-culture experiences through the organisational-culture lens originated with an interdisciplinary working group set up in 2021 to support research culture in a Scottish university. We found this broader perspective to be a valuable way of understanding research culture and for devising a measurement instrument (**Roberts et al., 2025**). Based on a presentation at the International Research Culture Conference 2025, we outline what can be learned from organisational psychology and attempt to shed light on the following central questions:

1. What is research culture?
2. What are the underlying dimensions of research culture?
3. How can we research our research culture using surveys?
4. What else can organisational culture studies teach us about research culture?

What is research culture?

Social scientists have been studying workplace culture for decades, recognising that it both reflects and shapes how people think, feel, and behave in the workplace, ultimately influencing organisational performance and success (**Tadesse Bogale & Debela, 2024**). Definitions of organisational culture can vary, but it generally comprises the organisational values that are communicated through norms, artifacts, and observed behavioural patterns that encapsulate the 'way that we do things here' (**Schien, 1992**). Much of the existing literature examines specific applications of organisational culture that are pertinent to a particular challenge, such as innovation culture (**Hogan & Coote, 2014**) or safety culture (**Mearns, Whitaker & Flin, 2001**). Yet organisations contain multiple, co-existing, and overlapping cultures which interact (**Guldenmund, 2000**). Subcultures of a specific aspect can exist at different levels across an organisation, such as in groups, departments/schools, or locations, creating a patchwork of culture. How can this help us to define research culture?

Research culture has been criticised as a difficult concept to define (**Casci & Adams, 2020; Pratt, Margaritis & Coy, 1999; Gadd, 2025**), often meaning different things to different people. In some cases, it may be interpreted as a proxy for research productivity, such as research outputs

and grant capture (see **Brew et al., 2017**). Described as a metaphysical ‘bowl of spaghetti’ (**Bandola-Gill, 2024**), it has been used as an umbrella term, capturing a variety of initiatives.

Confusion around various ‘cultures’ is not new. Safety culture researchers have argued that spending too long on definitional nuances can distract from the broader picture of addressing and maintaining ongoing change (**Cox & Flin, 1998**). The wider literature on culture has also been concerned with conceptual ambiguity between culture and climate (**Guldenmund, 2000**), multi-levels of culture (e.g., team, department, organisation) (**Zohar & Luria, 2005**), and cross-cultural differences (**Fruhen & Flin, 2015**) that do not yet appear to have been considered in relation to research culture.

The Royal Society’s definition, cited in the introduction, is already situated in the broader organisational culture definition (e.g., focus on values, norms). Therefore research culture may be viewed as a subculture of wider organisational culture (**Ion & Castero Cercero, 2017, Roberts et al., 2025**). Schein’s three-level model of culture (**Schein, 1992**), considered to be one of the most influential theoretical frameworks in the study of culture, breaks organisational culture down into component layers of artifacts (visible), espoused values (stated norms), and basic assumptions (hidden, tacit beliefs).

Specifying these values and underlying dimensions may provide a clearer understanding of what research culture is (and is not), as has been done for other aspects of organisational culture (e.g., innovation culture, **Hogan & Coote, 2014**). For example, what are the values that a group, department, or organisation holds in relation to research, and how are these made visible through artifacts such as organisational structures, policies, or buildings/infrastructure? However, the values and underlying dimensions of research culture have not been clearly defined (**Tierney, 2008; Lacatus, 2013**).

What are the underlying dimensions of research culture?

A route to improving organisational culture in general is to identify the key underlying dimensions or topics that facilitate a positive culture as part of a framework or model (**Clarke, 2000**). Dimensions vary across sectors but will typically include factors such as leadership, collaboration/teamwork, communication, and policies and procedures. For example, leadership values, vision, and commitment—expressed through strategic priorities and resource allocation—have been widely identified as foundational to organisational culture across contexts, including in safety culture research where leadership commitment is a core dimension (**Reason 1997; Flin et**

al., 2000). However, when we began to investigate there was limited empirical evidence to indicate what the underlying factors of a good research culture might be (Roberts et al., 2025). More recently, sector frameworks have been published (Sapcuriu et al., 2025; UK REF 2029, 2025), but there continues to be a lack of an accepted model. Consequently, we looked to organisational culture literature, including our own work in relation to organisational innovation culture (Roberts et al., 2021), the clinical learning environment (Roberts et al., 2018), and safety culture (Cox & Flin, 1998; Flin et al., 2006), to provide an initial indication of these factors.

Our examination of relevant sector reports (ARMA, 2020; Royal Society, 2018; Russell Group, 2021; Wellcome Trust 2020; Vitae, 2021), the limited research culture data available (Borders et al, 2018), studies on universities (Puplampu, 2014; Bai et al., 2013), and wider organisational culture literature (Schein, 1992), suggests that research culture dimensions include university and school/department leadership, how research is valued and communicated, collaboration and research support, career development, and research value, as well as research integrity and open research. (For the initial iteration and psychometric analysis of these dimensions see Roberts et al., 2025.)

Leadership provides the foundation of a positive research culture. It reflects the extent to which a university, school, or department value research, communicating how research fits into the university's overall strategy and vision and its commitment to researchers and their work. This includes how multiple competing demands are balanced, such as research, teaching, administration, and commercial activities. What we celebrate tells us about what is important. As such, how researchers are recognised and rewarded, including actively celebrating their successes, is a key dimension of research culture. The way that researchers and their contributions to research are perceived to be valued (or not) by an organisation is a powerful underlying dimension of research culture.

Research is not often viewed as a 'team sport', but collaboration between colleagues, including both researchers and professional support staff, is vital to its success. Components include the degree to which respondents feel supported by colleagues and peers, such as having access to mentorship or advice. Conversely there may be instances of an 'us versus them' culture between academics and professional support staff (ARMA, 2020).

The research context and the wider organisational environment that facilitates research will play a key role in influencing the strength of organisational research culture. Research context covers university policies and procedures relating to research, support during grant

application processes, workload allocations, the balance between teaching and research, and opportunities for career development. Recognising that career pathways in research can be highly uncertain (**Wellcome Trust, 2020; Vitae RCLS, 2025**), a positive research culture will actively encourage the discussion and provide resources for personal and professional development, allocating time for staff to undertake Continuous Professional Development (CPD) activities. It is essential that attainable career paths are created for those who wish to pursue a research career and for there to be roles for these people to move into (**Vitae, 2025**).

Methodology

Organisational culture surveys are recognised as a valuable method for understanding employee perceptions, behaviours, and the unwritten rules of their workplace (**Schein, 2010**). This approach has been beneficial for addressing a range of challenges across sectors such as in healthcare (**Agnew et al, 2013; Nieva & Sorra, 2004**), business (**Dobni et al., 2009**), transport (**Naevestad et al., 2018**) and the public sector (**Denison et al., 2014**).

The use of culture surveys varies depending on context and purpose, but data are typically collected at regular intervals (for example, every two to three years) to track change and the effectiveness of interventions, identifying any areas for improvement, and may even be collected as part of licence to operate (for example, in the nuclear power industry) (**IAEA, 2017**). Surveys may include benchmarking performance by comparing organisations' results. Examining these dimensions through questionnaires can be an effective route to making organisational culture more visible.

In a research culture context, large-scale questionnaires have been used to capture a wide range of researchers' experiences (**Wellcome Trust, 2020; Vitae RCLS, 2025**) as well as to examine challenges for specific groups, such as early-career researchers in Australia (**Christian et al., 2021**), undergraduate students (**Spronken-Smith; Mirosa & Darrou, 2014**), and principal investigators in the UK (**Acton et al., 2019**) or in specific geographic areas like the Philippines (**Salazar-Clemenra & Almonte-Acosta, 2007**). Questionnaires have also been used to examine research impact (**Solans-Domenech et al., 2019**) and research integrity (**Martinson et al., 2013**). Sector organisations like Vitae CEDARS and a handful of individual universities, such as the University of Glasgow (**2019**), have also begun to develop research culture surveys.

How can we research research culture using surveys?

In response to a paucity of validated questionnaires that capture the key research culture dimensions described above, we developed and piloted a research culture survey in 2021 (**Roberts et al., 2025**). Whilst intended only as a pilot study, its value for tracking change and identifying routes to strengthen research culture quickly became apparent. A 70 percent response rate from research-active academics indicated an appetite for change and a willingness to engage in an open conversation about research culture and how to improve it. Senior leadership at Robert Gordon University committed to running this survey every two years, so it was repeated in 2023 and 2025.

The surveys were refined in response to feedback from our research community but have had a consistent structure. The question set contains basic demographic information such as school/department name, whether part-time/full-time, and role type (e.g., academic, professional support staff, postgraduate research student), followed by questions about respondents' perception of the overall research culture in their institution using a 1—5 rating scale. Participants were asked to write down three words that best describe their current research culture, which were later used to create illustrative word clouds. The main body of the survey featured forty to forty-five questions based on eleven eventual research culture dimensions.

Having reflected on the wider organisational culture literature, we included psychological safety (**Edmondson, 1999**) as part of the research context dimension in later iterations of our survey project. This relates to the extent to which people feel safe challenging the current research culture without fear of retribution (**Edmondson, 1999**) and is essential for research and innovation to flourish (**Edmondson & Mogelof, 2006**). We also asked questions regarding the degree to which respondents felt supported by colleagues and peers (for example, through access to mentorship or informal advice) or whether they experienced instances of an 'us versus them' culture between academics and professional support staff (**ARMA, 2020**).

We also provided the opportunity to share open feedback and research activities. To support rigour and engender a sense of trust, all survey data was collected using the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)-compliant online platform JISC Online Surveys, with each survey running for approximately eight weeks. Later analysed using the statistical package (SPSS), the results were communicated at different levels and venues, from in-depth executive reports to informal 'town hall'-style meetings (see below).

How to Conduct a Research Culture Survey

In this section, we share what we have learned (so far) about how to measure research culture using a university research culture survey.

Design

- The survey needs to be as anonymous as possible and easy and quick to complete, preferably in ten to fifteen minutes. Although including demographic questions (e.g., role type, level of experience, gender) may provide useful comparative data, we have found that this understandably increases participants' concerns regarding identifiability, particularly when surveying small groups or schools.
- Who participates matters. Our 2021 survey was intended as a pilot study, and as such only research-active academics (self-selected) were invited. Whilst a purely practical choice, this may have inadvertently sent the wrong message about inclusivity. In response to feedback, the next survey was aimed at all staff and postgraduate research students, thereby communicating that those in a wide range of roles contribute to research culture. However, we have found it is still useful to be able to distinguish between staff engaged in research and those for whom it is not officially part of their role.
- Questionnaire items and design are likely to require small tweaks and flexes as the needs of the surveys adjust over time, but it is important to keep the core topics and content the same to allow for longitudinal tracking.
- Allowing space for open feedback, including suggestions on how to improve research culture at the university, school or department level, has been invaluable. It also provides the opportunity for participants to safely vent their frustrations.

Communication

- For a survey to be successful, people need to know about it. Leadership and key research culture stakeholders need to publicise surveys, communicating their importance. Practically, this means senior leadership need to actively communicate launch dates and deadlines for response, and encourage participation at all levels. Having a communication plan built into the project helps.
- Survey results need to be efficiently communicated to the research community to foster a sense of transparentness and openness (even if the results are discouraging). If possible, a 'town hall' type presentation with the whole research community, including an introduction and commentary from senior leadership, may foster a sense of ownership.

- Sometimes non-participation in a survey is a response itself. This can be where it may be useful to distinguish between the response rates of active researchers and staff not principally involved in research.

Next steps

Surveys alone won't improve research culture. They capture a snapshot of staff and research students' experiences, providing invaluable information on areas for improvement, but action needs to be taken to address issues raised. To illustrate the value of doing research culture surveys, institutional leaders need to clearly and frequently link survey results to subsequent actions. For example, in our own institutions:

- We increased the 'chatter' about research in monthly staff communications and set up a research festival and a series of awards to celebrate research activity and contributions.
- The university invested in research and innovation centres, which bring together researchers with similar interests at different career stages to encourage collaboration.
- When survey feedback suggested there was a lack of development opportunities for mid-career researchers, we set up a specialised 'flourish' programme specifically targeting this cohort.

Having strategies to foster a positive research culture is an important element of creating a healthy working environment. However, we all know that having these on paper does not equate to their implementation, nor are they always effective when they are. As the business adage goes, culture eats strategy for breakfast.

Conclusion

Our experiences of applying organisational culture psychology approaches to our research-culture journey, including the development of surveys, illustrate the value of interdisciplinary learning. We believe there may be other concepts and approaches from organisational psychology that are relevant for fostering sustainable, positive research cultures. We have summarised three approaches that have been valuable in other domains, offering an opportunity for cross-sector sharing.

What can organisational culture studies teach us about research culture?

Rooted in safety research, examining error reporting and learning in hospital teams (**Edmondson, 1998**), the concept of *psychological safety* mentioned in our earlier survey question example has received significant attention across a wide range of sectors as a route to creating effective

teams and a supportive working environment. Again, this relates to the extent to which people feel able to speak openly, raise concerns, and share ideas without fear of embarrassment, rejection, or other negative consequences (**Edmondson, 1998, 2018**). Evidence indicates that it is fundamental for successful learning and innovation (**Edmondson & Lei, 2014**). Consequently, it should be a pillar of research activity. Questioning, critiquing, and pushing the boundaries of knowledge, as well as maintaining research integrity and coping with significant uncertainty, are all conditions of research culture, conditions in which psychological safety is crucial. It translates into more open discussion of, and subsequent learning from, our failures (whether in experiments or funding applications) and the improved ability to challenge colleagues when necessary, including in matters of research integrity. Fostering psychological safety may include role-modelling openness and fallibility (**Nembhard and Edmondson, 2006**), encouraging contributions from a wide range of perspectives, including explicitly valuing alternative views (**Edmondson & Lei, 2014**), and looking at how leaders respond to bad news, errors, or concerns (**Carmelli et al., 2009**).

Research on '*just culture*' has grown into a substantial interdisciplinary field, especially across safety-critical sectors such as healthcare, aviation, and nuclear energy (**Reason, 1998; Dekker, 2009**). A just culture is an organisational climate where people feel able to report errors, near misses, and concerns without fear of unfair blame, while still recognising individual accountability (**Dekker, 2009**). This approach argues that, generally, errors and mistakes are shaped by organisational conditions rather than by individual failings, but that staff are accountable for their actions under their own control (**Dekker, 2018**). Elements of a just culture have already been identified as important for facilitating research integrity and academic governance (**European Commission, 2020**). Promoting psychological safety, encourages open discussion of errors or failures, fostering learning and accountability. Balancing accountability and learning may be valuable for addressing complex research integrity issues, such as speaking up about questionable research practices, ethical failures, or reproducibility issues (**Armond et al., 2024**).

Finally, as mentioned earlier, decades of research consistently illustrate that leaders are the primary driver of creating and maintaining organisational culture (**Schein, 2010**). Acting as role models, they demonstrate acceptable behaviours and communicate organisational values, attitudes, and norms. Do leaders model accountability (e.g., admitting their own errors) or allow negative or poor behaviour to persist by 'turning a blind eye'? How do they respond to mistakes or conflict (**Groysberg et al., 2018**)? We typically think of leaders in executive or senior management positions. Yet local leaders—team leaders, heads of

individual departments or disciplines, principal investigators on studies, or even informal group leaders—can also influence perceptions, behaviours, and local, unit cultures (**Zohar & Luria, 2005**). These leaders have the potential to create micro-research cultures (for better or for worse).

How leaders respond to the inherent competing demands of an organisation will also influence the organisational culture, as illustrated in Competing Values Framework. Ignoring competing demands by focusing only on one can lead to stagnation and organisational failure. This is particularly pertinent in higher education, as HE institutions face increasingly competing demands and organisational tensions, such as research excellence versus teaching quality, academic autonomy versus managerial accountability, and staff wellbeing versus productivity pressures (**Leisyte & Dee, 2012; Jayman et al., 2022**).

Despite the importance of leadership in shaping research culture, it is typically not included as a primary dimension in research culture frameworks (**Sapcuriu et al., 2025; UK REF PCE Pilot framework, 2025**). What leaders pay attention to, talk about, or allocate resources to signals an organisation's values and priorities. These values and behaviours will become more powerful and have a longer lasting impact than official strategies or policies. Thus, whilst strategies, procedures, and policies play an important role in the working environment, it is the organisational research culture that ultimately drives behaviours. Leadership across the sector have the power to make a significant difference by clearly signalling the value of research culture and the people that make it happen.

Growing and maintaining a positive research culture is vital in order to address global challenges. A healthy research culture is a fundamental prerequisite to achieving high-quality, impactful research that could help solve the pressing crises humanity currently faces. Through our research on research culture, situated in organisational psychology research in other sectors such as industry and healthcare, we have learned that change is most likely to be successful when participants believe in it, not seeing it as simply a box-checking exercise. Our approach to applying an organisational culture lens has been valuable to understand what is meant by research culture, how we can start to capture different experiences of it, and how we go forward in making long-term, positive change to it. We hope that colleagues find these lessons valuable to their own departments and organisations. Everyone has their role to play in establishing good research culture.

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